

Earthing Cosmology – Making sacred places

Sacred Skies

Bernadette Brady



PRIFYSGOL CYMRU
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
UNIVERSITY OF WALES
Trinity Saint David



What is a sacred place?

A sacred place/landscape is a location, or a geographical area, imbued with cultural significance by a community.

Its significance arises from the association of landscape/skyscape features with historical or mythical events which suggest the presence of the divine.

The divine then becomes accessible to humans **in that place** through ritual or pilgrimage. Structures are built to 'house' that divine energy.

The interplay of place, history, and cultural identity forms the narrative framework of a sacred landscape and or a sacred place.



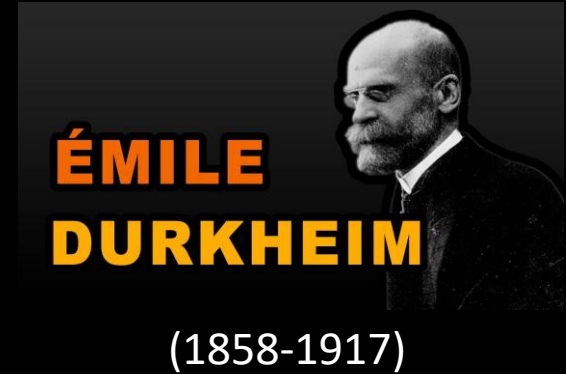
Stonehenge, UK

A Sacred Place

A sacred place is a place that the wider community must accept as sacred.

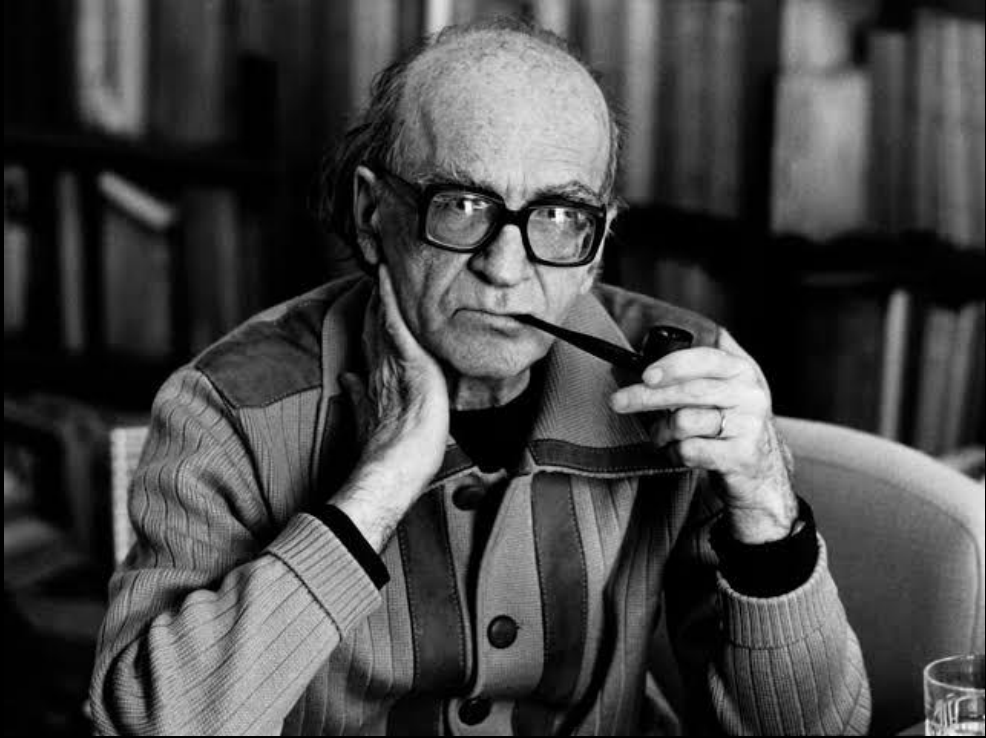
- Once accepted, it is set apart from daily life.
- It contains a threshold, a doorway, a gate that separates the profane from the sacred.
- Access is limited to either special times or just to special people.
- People must honour the sacredness by preparing in the appropriate manner to enter the sacred place.

According to Durkheim, failure of a community to comply to these rules dilutes or destroys the sacredness of the site.



Durkheim, Émile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Translated by Karen E. Fields. New York: Free Press, 1995 [1912].

The other view on sacredness



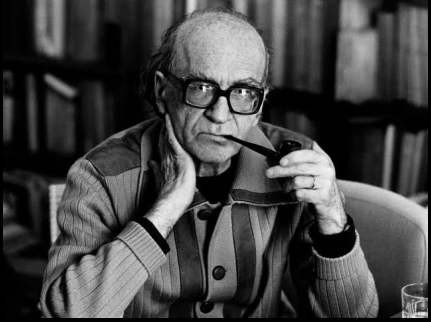
Mircea Eliade

(1907-1986)

Eliade argued that:

‘For religious man, space is not homogeneous; he experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others’

Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane, the Nature of Religion*. Translated by Willard R. Trask. London: Harcourt, Inc., [1957] 1987.p.20



Mircea Eliade

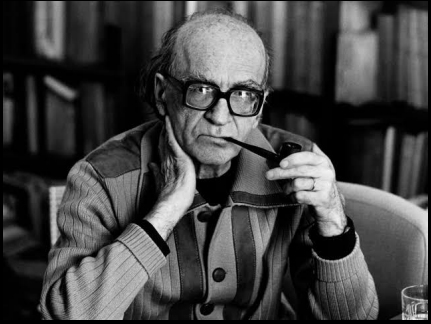
A different view of sacredness

These 'breaks' or interruptions he defined as a **hierophany**: from the Greek *hiero*- 'sacred' and *phainein* 'to show'.

A hierophany is a manifestation or eruption of the sacred.

The role of a hierophany...

'For it is the break effected in space that allows the world to be constituted because it reveals the fixed point, the central axis for all future orientations.'



Mircea Eliade

A different view of sacredness

These 'breaks' or interruptions draw on the idea of a **hierophany**: from the Greek *hiero-* 'sacred' and *phainein* 'to show'.

A hierophany is a manifestation or eruption of the sacred.

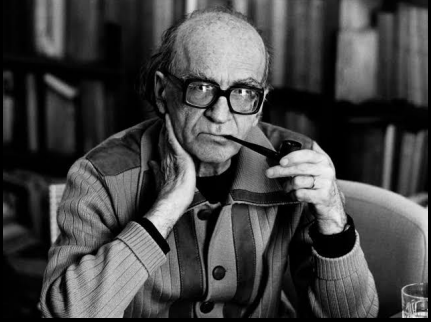
He expanded this idea to discuss the role of a hierophany

'When the sacred manifests itself in any hierophany, there are also revelations of the absolute reality, as opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse.'

Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane, the Nature of Religion*. Translated by Willard R. Trask. London: Harcourt, Inc., [1957] 1987.p.21



Lourdes, France – a hierophany of the Virgin Mary



Mircea Eliade

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Sacredness place is a place built to hold an hierophany



Lourdes, France – a hierophany of the Virgin Mary



Different cultures will express the containment or 'housing' of a hierophany in different ways.





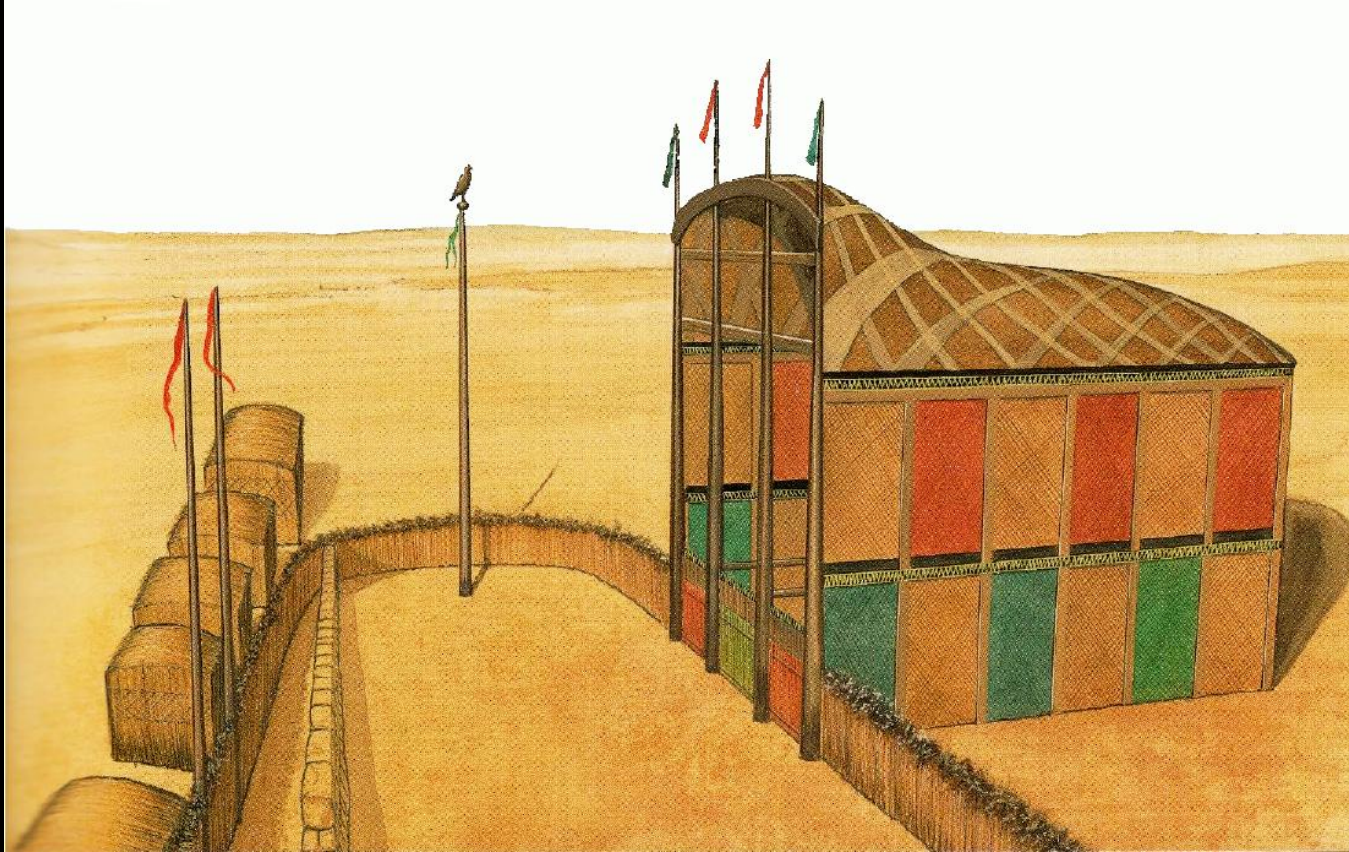
Egyptian Spatial Thinking and Landscapes

The Egyptians were fundamentally spatial in their thinking, both in land and in the sky.

Places held a cosmological/theological function.

- The desert **was** chaos, *isfet*, it was the maker of chaos, held chaos and offered chaos.
- The valley **was** order, *maat*, it was not considered to be ordered it was instead the source of order, the source of harmony.

The temple and the gods

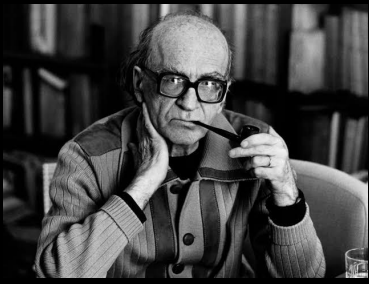


Wilkinson made the point that a temple's location was in the god's place, **a place already sacred**.

He argued that the temple did not make a place sacred; instead, it enabled a way for humanity to engage with the god.

Wilkinson, Richard H. *The Complete Temples of Ancient Egypt*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2000.

Reconstruction of Hierakonpolis – the earliest known Egyptian temple.



Mircea Eliade

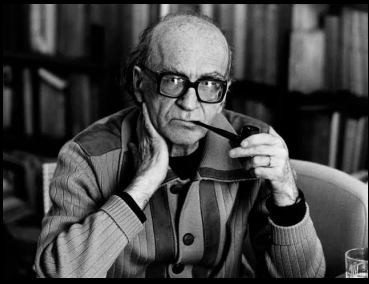
The Role of Sacred Place



Seti I Temple Abydos

‘The threshold that separates the two spaces (sacred and profane) also indicates the distance between two modes of being, the profane and the religious. The threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds – and at the same time **the paradoxical place where those two worlds communicate, where the passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible**’

Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane, the Nature of Religion*. Translated by Willard R. Trask. London: Harcourt, Inc., [1957] 1987.p.21



Mircea Eliade

The Role of the Temple was the meeting point of the sacred and profane – the King with the gods.



Seti I Temple Abydos



Medinet Habu

The Ogdoad:
Water
Invisibility
Infinity
Darkness

The Small Temple is
the place of a
hierophany of Amun



Thinking through Place

For the Egyptians, place has a voice, place as agency. The temple is the bridge that enables human engagement with the voice of place.



To become aware of the power place is central to encountering sacred places and how they engage with the sky.

Amiria J. M. Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell considered an object, not as a part of a culture, but 'as they present themselves'.

Amiria J. M. Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell, *Thinking through Things : Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically* (London: Routledge, 2007), p.2.



How did the Egyptians engage
with the hierophany?



The pathways of the Sacred



People in mountainous or even just hilly landscapes need to move around the peaks (often viewed as divine) to travel. Culturally, they tend to adopt a circular shape to the sacred.





The Egyptians were people of the valley – a riverine landscape, where one moved up or down the river.



This linear path also matched the movement of a divine sky, with its straight-line movement of the sun and stars... This gave the Egyptians the shape of the sacred.



The Straight Line as Sacred – the way of the divine



Once a landscape produced a hierophany, the Egyptians honored it, amplified it, or expressed it in straight lines.

Movement is Sacred - Festivals are about the gods moving, like the river they moved!

Egyptian sacred landscape are shaped by straight lines.

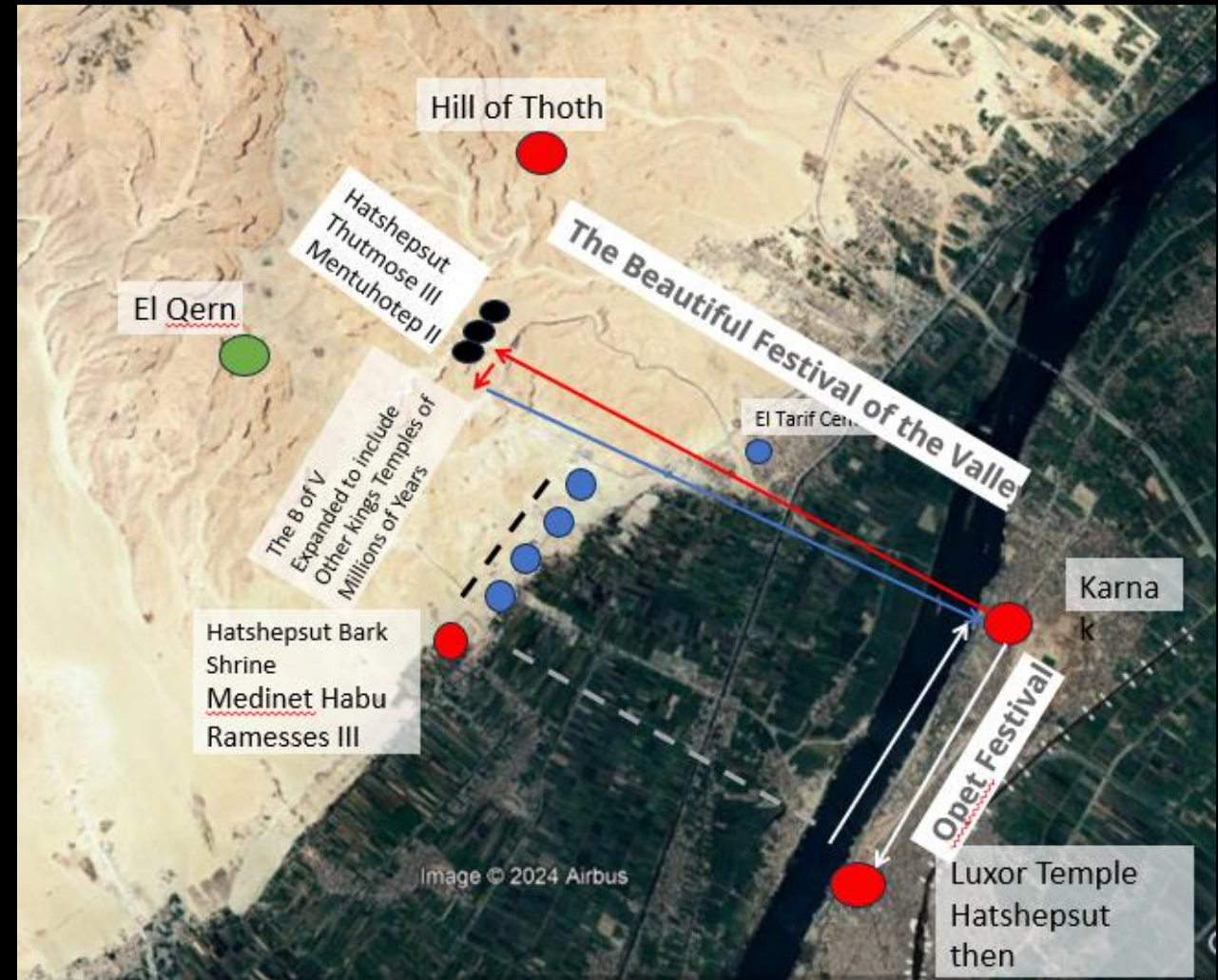
The gods in the heavens moved in straight lines thus such movement enhanced sacredness.

- From the living to the dead – East to West
- From the cultivation to the desert – East to West
- Up the river – North to South
- Down the river – South to North



The Straight Line as Sacred

Once a landscape produced a hierophany the Egyptians honoured it or amplified it, or expressed it in straight lines.



Festivals did not circumnavigate a landscape.

The Egyptians did not conduct festivals where they circumambulated a sacred object or place.

Medinet Habu
Opposite Luxor Temple



Stretching the Cord

I take the pole and grasp the handle of the mallet; I grasp the cord with Seshat.

I turn my gaze according to the movement of the stars and move it to Meskhetiu .

The God of time-keeping (Thoth) is standing next to his merkhet.

I establish the 4 corners of your temple.

[Excerpt from the Temple of Horus at Edfu.]



Sacred Skies shaping sacred places, sacred journeys