

## LANDSCAPES: BETWEEN LAND-USE AND INVISIBLE STARTING HYPOTHESIS

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We suggest that the early manipulation and use of landscapes and the appreciation of these practices were part of the economic and political development involved in inter-group relations in prehistory. It is stressed that people showed an increased interest in political activities: long- and short-distance communication and exchange, feasts, alliance building, sharing rituals, establishment of sacred places as markers on the terrain, etc. We suppose that some people had increased access to valuables and resources, and different groups could operate, on a regular basis, within large social networks through communication and exchange. People would be interested in producing more, which implies an increased demand for accumulation of wealth and power. The possible means for achieving such goals would be competitive public display, alliance building and construction and maintenance of group identity through common metaphors and exchange of gifts.

Such a uni-linear developmental social model would organize the archaeological record in a predictable material world, increasingly complex in terms of organization and technologies. The archaeological record, however, shows extreme diversity and variation in terms of technologies, materials, values, and perceptions of human practices. Local diversity and discontinuous variation challenge any claim for universality. A conventional perspective makes people the only active agents that change, cultivate and use landscapes. Yet, a detailed examination of human-local environment interactions suggests that the active agents are twofold: people and the landscapes they live in. The landscapes, as an ever-changing environment within which people move and build their material, social and spiritual worlds, constantly change, readjust, and influence people's decisions, attitudes and the appreciation of human activities.

### 1 - Working hypothesis

Emphasis on the social perspective towards local environment would better reveal the new human-landscape relations. Family and social interactions stress the importance of kin/group identity as participating in land-use and its changes. As people change their surroundings the ever-changing landscapes also influence human perceptions, actions and images. Thus the life experience of a given person is imagined as a steep hill that has to be climbed up. Enduring pains and overcoming difficulties of such a journey is not unconnected with pleasing the invisible forces. It is meant to remind the living of their obligations towards other people and to invite them to improve their moral actions, in order to avoid human and natural disasters inflicted by the invisible forces that punish the misdeeds of humans. Families and lineages mark their sacred places (most of them situated high on the local terrain) where they meet on a regular (annual) basis to improve the relations between themselves and their relations with other families, groups, etc. by worshipping the invisible forces. Every individual standing on such a high ground sacred place can see and imagine all the cycles of work, growth, and death that constitute his/her entire life. Landscape turn out to be the basic principle that organizes the vision of the world. It never appears in an clear and coherent way. It is rather a social universe that structures itself through individual, collective and public expressions. This is also a world intimately confined between personal experiences and collective mythologies. People change their environment but they are also capable of changing the constitutive categories that stay beyond their everyday rational logic. The world becomes known and accepted as it is imagined through imaginative plays fed by the senses, based on the language of the body-environment interactions and always appears ready with adaptive responses. Landscapes and the sacred places dispersed within it initiate and end cycles of universal understandings of the world that are never a simple reduction of rational models.

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They present themselves as an integral totality available at any situation. For example, this complex world is reflected in the name 'Gornishte' the name of a village in the Pre-Balkan Mountains, Vratsa district, in northern Bulgaria. The name appears in the Ottoman registers from 16th century and the village probably existed before the Ottoman invasion. There are traces of Neolithic, Eneolithic and Medieval settlements (excavations by Bogdan Nikolov, Vratsa Archaeological Museum). The word 'Gornishte' does not simply mean 'upper', 'high from the ground', etc. This is in fact a compound notion that means a broken (hilly) terrain with a spring. The name itself turns out to be a communicative medium that immediately conveys the patterns of land-use and the kind of environment of the settlements. It is the 'visiting card' of the villagers. Thus 'toponyms' codify the patterns of land-use in different localities. The physical boundaries within the terrain were constantly being marked and imagined. This acts as a major organizing principle of the magic boundaries set between the domesticated and the wild worlds (Hodder 1990). For example, people start and end cycles of domestic production: crop yields, woodwork, textile weaving, etc. and they deliberately place particular instruments and objects at certain places inside and outside their houses, yards, etc with the belief that they protect themselves and their work from evil forces. Landscapes become highly organized by nesting one into another as smaller spaces with a structured deposition of artefacts and objects. This spatial structuration is not governed by arbitrary human decisions taken in response to simple occasions, but rather belong to long-term, consistent behaviour accompanied by subjective experience of people Being-in-the-world. Thus human and physical boundaries within the landscape remain not fixed but fluctuate constantly from physical to human worlds and vice versa. They form a dynamic setting, within which human actions take place (Chapman 1997). Topology, not typology of artefacts, becomes more important for understanding the past human behaviour. Economic and practical reasons are not enough for the analysis of technical cycles when situated as a distribution of knowledge, skills, beliefs, etc. within the wider field of humanized landscapes. We need another set of analytical tools that can help the understanding their complex position between human and natural worlds.

## 2 - Analytical background

It is possible to make a distinction between three aspects of human - landscape interaction.

- Landscapes as natural monuments - stable points of reference of human experience.
- Landscapes as dynamic settings of human

interactions

-Changing landscapes and changing human relations

The notion of landscape as a natural monument is rich in assertions and ideas about the uniqueness of a given natural area that has the potential to link social relations with prominent geographical features. In the eastern Balkans landscapes are dynamic in view of the frequent landslides, tectonic movements, etc. Within a human life span a person can experience a substantial change in the physical environment: disappearance of a hill, movement of a hill or a field, appearance or disappearance of a spring, river, lake, etc. The stable landscape features can be measured in social terms and become conceptualized into social interaction. Such stable points of reference can be perceived even nowadays as somewhat mystified places that enhance human experience in everyday life.

The notion of landscapes as dynamic settings of human interactions brings various technological cycles nested together within different natural and artificial surroundings. They are perceived as intersections of homologous group relations and identifications. For example, the rich early Neolithic pottery decoration integrates the various technological and biological cycles set against the curved landscape of the body of the vessel. The vividness of the images underlines the homologous expressions of the mostly private domain constituted by complex gender and group identities.

The third notion expresses the continuous change of landscapes through various physical and climatic processes. So do human relations through negotiation or conflicts. In the early Neolithic long blades may have been symbols of the 'repair' of valuable composite tools and through their 'exotic' appearance and easy mode of fragmentation they may have expressed partial, enchained ties with close and distant communities. The travel itself of long blades over long distances initiates and ends cycles of debt and enchainment between remote communities. Thus the technological and perceptual cycles of human experience make the natural and artificial landscapes sources of inspiration for ancestrally based common metaphors of communication.

On this theoretical background it is possible to compare the general patterns of land-use and the invisible human relations situated within the landscape.

## 3 - Land-use

The archaeological record does not provide enough evidence for land-use practices during the Neolithic. What we know for sure is that people with their fieldwork influenced the natural environment and

changed the spectrum of paleo-vegetation. Further, we may guess that people used the most fertile alluvial lands near the tell and open-air sites. This inevitably means tensions over the use of lands raised between different houses (households), kin and lineage groups. Crop yields must have been collected, stored for a long (year-round) period of time, and in part exchanged with close and distant communities for other goods and services. The overall amount of hunting must have decreased considerably. The importance of male dominated activities must have shifted into other areas as alliance building, supply with valuable objects and materials. Fertility must have been an important notion for maintenance of female ideology, but men transgressed into it by its dramatization. Fertility must have been helped by distant and 'exotic' materials and artefacts extracted through mystified work. Special artefacts (long blades) had to be made by high-craft techniques. All these 'exotic' materials and artefacts had to be exchanged, brought into the settlements, and had to take an active role in extraction of maximum crop yields. The naturalization of 'exotic' into local production cycles was done through "monumentalization" of artificial and natural landscapes. The "high-ground", the "hidden" fertility into the earth that had to be worked by special artefacts (sickle inserts) made of 'exotic' imported materials could have helped extraction of the maximum crop yield. Male ideology and gender tensions entered the private domain - the decoration with phallus and vulva motifs on painted pottery from the Cavdar tell, Bulgaria (НИКОЛОВ 2002: 37) made clear the dynamic relations between sexes. And it is the gender tensions that influence to a larger extent the patterns of change of the material record of prehistoric communities.

#### 4 - The invisible

The landscape forms imagined by people incorporate within the local community's knowledge the information about distant lands, communities, and their land-use. It is a ritualization of the way of getting known the remote 'other' by the symbolic match and mismatch of landscape forms and patterns of land-use. This makes human-local environment interactions more dynamic and moves their boundaries to the limits of the knowledge and experience shared among the community. Prominent landscape forms, such as high hills, rivers, springs, plains etc. through the sacred places scattered on them, and through the narratives and special names given to them create vivid images that easily cross the boundaries of local knowledge, embodied skills and experience. This self-sustained, vivid imagery of local people enhances their ability to learn more from the knowledge and experience coming from neighbouring and distant communities.

Landscapes turn from solid, unchangeable forms into something dynamic and liminal that acts as an open door that channels both ways the flow of human knowledge, skills, and beliefs. The liminality of land forms is better visible in some cave sites (Grotta dell Orso, Trieste karst area, Italy) (Montagnari Kokelj 2003) and cave paintings (the Magura cave, north-western Bulgaria) where male ideology seems to dominate in the archaeological contexts. The contact with the world of dead is a convenient ground for ancestralization of claims for male domination. It is not by chance that in some caves (Grotta dell Orso), there is a strong presence of 'special' artefacts, such as a leaf-point, an axe and long blades that are made out of long-distance, 'exotic' raw materials. The communication with the realm of dead gives mystified knowledge and empowers claims for male domination, which otherwise cannot be sustained in the social context of a given tell-site. In the latter contexts balances of power are reached through strict denial of any visible expression of signs of symbolic 'power', 'prestige' and personal 'wealth' (Tsonev in press).

#### 5 - Conclusions

If social relations were articulated through gift-giving, long distance exchange networks create a potential for maintenance of the social web. In this complex network, there should exist points that keep up (initiate and end) the symbolic cycles of gift-giving. Tells and multi-layered sites can do exactly this. They need to make widely known, valuable and attractive their crop production and that of the surrounding communities. The perception of an active long-distance communication network requires a corresponding symbolic constitution of harmonized metaphors that enable people to imagine and act upon a common ground of negotiation and exchange. High-quality flints and long blades in their relation to artificial and natural landscape features seem to take on exactly that symbolic role. At the level of everyday activities they serve common economic practices such as the repair of sickles, threshing boards, and other composite tools; on the symbolic level, they facilitate the perception of these practices and help to maintain the circulation of gifts, services, and the social reproduction of entire communities. Thus the match and mismatch of landscape metaphors can differentiate the supply with "special" materials and artefacts made out of them. Landscapes where a single tell dominates attract longer blades and greater quantity of imported high-quality flints (the example of tells in Thrace). In the case of merging landscapes (north-central Bulgaria), flints show a limited variety of local and meso-local flints, while extra-local high-quality ones occur rarely.

So far, archaeological evidence provides good

examples of naturalization of 'special' and 'exotic' into local notion of fertility in the contexts of tell and open-air Neolithic sites. One of the ways of male transgression into the notion of fertility that is naturally connected with women is through a dramatization of landscape forms. The match and mismatch of landscapes and patterns of land-use create vivid images that enhance the ways of getting to know neighbouring and distant communities. 'Special' artefacts (long blades) made of long-distance 'exotic' materials symbolically help the extraction (as sickle inserts, and other tools) of maximum crop yields and make it widely known and attractive for exchange with close and distant communities. The symbolic investment in "maximum" benefit sustains permanent claims for male domination in areas where women traditionally had well-defined social positions. Emphasizing the control imposed on long-distance communication and exchange networks that supply communities with 'special' artefacts made of 'exotic' materials supposes the male transgression into traditional female domains. This is also achieved through seeking contexts that lie beyond the social model of tell-dwelling where, as a rule, existed strong denial of presence of signs of 'power', 'prestige' and personal 'wealth', such as arrowheads, microlithic points, stone balls, stone scepters, etc. Some cave dwellings as stable points of reference in the landscape and imagined as marking borderlines between the realm of living and that of dead seem to take on exactly that role. They became settled by male symbols: arrowheads, leaf-points, axes, and paintings that mystify and justify claims for male domination.

Thus landscapes take a very important position

between land-use and the invisible in the constitution of late prehistoric societies. As the dynamic and vivid imagery of getting to know the remote 'other' and as a means of facilitating teaching and learning human knowledge, experience, and embodied skills they enter one of the most natural divisions of human society - the gender relations and gender tensions. All these make material culture dynamic and diversify the contexts in which gender relations express themselves.

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