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Being in the woodlands: archaeological sensibility and landscapes as naturecultures

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Introduction

Archaeology is—as is often suggested—the discipline of things. To be more precise, archaeology studies things in the landscapes. Field research is a constitutive element of archaeological practice. It is a foundation upon which a certain archaeological sensibility is developed. Experiencing the landscape is thus an inherent part of practicing archaeology as such.

In what follows, I shortly discuss and present one of the many possible archaeological understandings of landscapes. These reflections rely on the observations and experiences which have been collected in the course of a research grant entitled *Between Memory and Oblivion: Archaeology and 20th Century's Military Heritage in the Woodlands* (*Między pamięcią a zapomnieniem: archeologia a XX-wieczne dziedzictwo militarne na terenach zalesionych*). Three aspects of landscapes are highlighted. First, landscapes are multitemporal. Second, they can be understood as assemblages of human and non-human beings. Lastly, landscapes are—as Donna Haraway would have put it—naturecultures. Finally, this paper is a call for critical cultural landscape studies as a multidisciplinary field of scientific inquiry.

Landscape does not exist: multitemporal landscapes

Following an overview of the recent research within the so-called landscape archaeology and, more generally, landscape studies, one thing is particularly worth highlighting. Paradoxically, one could say that landscape as such does not exist as a static, ahistorical and objective background of human action. Quite the opposite, landscape is a dynamic, historical and subjective context of human and non-human interactions. For this very reason, throughout this short paper, I will employ the word 'landscapes' rather than 'landscape'.

There are many branches of archaeology. One usually refers to Palaeolithic archaeology, Neolithic archaeology, Bronze Age archaeology, Iron Age archaeology and so on. It is time which seems to define archaeology and its focus area. Accordingly, Neolithic archaeology studies Neolithic landscapes and material culture dating from that period. In the same vein, Bronze Age archaeology studies Bronze Age landscapes and material culture originating from that period etc. However, things are much more complex here than it would appear at first sight. The key point to make is that matter and time become interwoven in and through archaeological practice. Due to the materiality of things, trees, lakes, mountains, cities, buildings, motorways etc., landscapes cannot be contained and categorized within a single and homogeneous age, era, epoch, or millennium. As the French archaeologist Laurent Olivier (2013, 169-170) insightfully suggests:

> In regard to material things (which constitute all the material of archaeology), the present is nothing but the joining of all the pasts that coexist physically in the present moment. After all, though prehistoric cut-stone tools were originally produced some tens of thousands of years ago, the fact remains that it is *in the present* that we find them: *here, in our present, now*. Indeed, it is because of their condition of being *covered over* in this present (Are they *in situ*? Or are they displaced, complete, or fragmentary?) that we will be able to say anything about them. Material production—of what archaeological remains are a part—possess an essential quality of their own, which they do not share with the events of history: they remain, they last as long as the material of which they are made. They insinuate themselves into all the presents that come after them; long after they have ceased to be used, they continue to *be*.

That is to say, landscapes consist in different kinds of materials which *continue to be through times*. Landscapes are messy. They are not so much temporal as multitemporal. And this makes them a difficult field for academic reflection and experience. How can we capture, document and narrate this multi-temporality? This is a question that archaeologists have been asking very often in recent times. Indeed, there is no one proper and right answer. Nonetheless, from an archaeological point of view, the multi-temporality of landscapes can be considered one of the most important contributions of archaeology to the multi-layered discourse of landscape studies.

The project I have been conducting recently is concerned, in brief, with the archaeological value of 20th-century military heritage in the woodlands. I analyse and document examples of World War I and World War II heritage using e.g. remote sensing technologies (e.g. LiDAR) (Fig. 1). Nonetheless, an important part of the project is field research during which I attempt to effect photographic documentation of previously discovered trenches, dug-outs, shelters etc. which have survived in the woodlands until the present day.

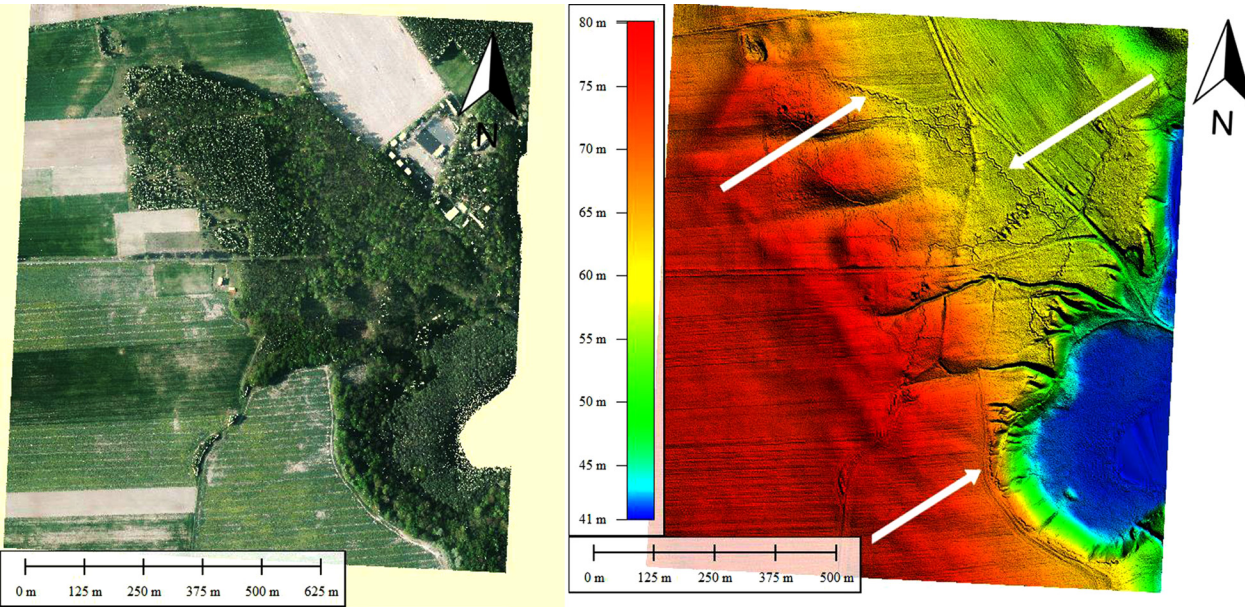

Fig. 1.
Forest landscapes visualized on LiDAR derivatives: a system of trenches dating to the World War II.
Prepared by M. Kostyrko.

Although the project has precise aims, this does not mean that I focus only on the military heritage. When I am in the woodlands and look for e.g. a World War II trench, I also see and document other kinds of heritage present there; other elements of the local landscapes. World War II trenches and shelters are part of local woodland landscapes as much as e.g. the remains of a house (Fig. 2) or a ruined barn (Fig. 3). World War II landscapes have archaeological value. The same must be said about the more recent elements of the landscapes.

A World War II trench, the remains of a house probably built during the 1950s or 1960s, a wooden barn which continues to exist as I write down these very words—all of this is a part of archaeological (material) landscapes.

Contemporary archaeology has nothing to do with *archaīos*. It is not the study of the old and ancient. Contrary to what the general public and even academic communities think, archaeology studies the remains of the past in the present. At the most elementary level, it is a present and future-oriented practice. Since it analyses and reflects on what very often proves to be the most banal, obvious, rusted, decayed, broken and forgotten fragments of material culture and landscapes as such, this kind of archaeology might be, in my opinion, a valuable contribution to the interdisciplinary field of landscape studies.

Landscapes cannot be conceived as abstract ideas. They have solid, material dimensions. And these material dimensions of landscapes are the main object of archaeological reflection and field research.

Fig. 2.
Bricks, cans, rubber tire, stones, moss—remains of a house documented during field research.
Photograph by author.

Fig. 3.
A ruined barn is a part of multitemporal woodland landscapes.
Photograph by author.

Cultural nature: landscapes as assemblages of human and non-human beings

Culture—nature has been one of the divisions that make archaeology viable as an academic discipline in the first place. Archaeology—according to this logic—is the study of the human past. That said, an archaeological record consists of—in simple terms—artefacts (e.g. weapons, jewellery, vessels) and eco facts (e.g. remains of plants, animal bones). Once again, recent archaeological research calls this division into question. The cultural and the natural usually contribute jointly to making landscapes. In other words, attempts are made to offer a more symmetrical understanding of the mutual constitution of human and non-human beings in the landscapes, to use the nomenclature employed by Bruno Latour. Alternatively, drawing on Donna Haraway, we live in naturecultures.

Instead of dividing the landscapes into elements belonging separately to Culture and Nature, we should do our best to pinpoint the complexity of these relations. Something similar has been recently claimed by the Australian archaeologist Rodney Harrison (2015, 27) regarding heritage:

> Over the past few decades, many of the things we have previously taken as "given" in relation to heritage have shifted and fundamentally changed. Where once we were able to imagine that the idea of heritage and the most appropriate ways of managing it might be universal phenomena embodied in various "Western" charters and conventions, various challenges have demolished the idea of heritage as singular and unanimous. Similarly, the idea of natural and cultural heritage as separate domains, representing different forms of value and embodying a broader Cartesian dualism through an insistence on the separation of nature and culture, body and mind, practice and thought, tangible and intangible, has also emerged as untenable.

This is precisely what I have found fascinating during field research.

One of the sites surveyed during the research is a terrain of a former POW camp in Czersk. The site functioned during the First World War. Today, the best-preserved part of the camp is a cemetery where dead soldiers were buried. Metaphorically speaking, the cemetery is a form of forest consisting of crosses made of concrete and pines that grow among and on the graves (Fig. 4). It is a kind of natural and cultural forest. During the research I was approached by a local regionalist who complained about the situation. According to him, the pines destroy the graves and their roots destroy the skeletons. In short, in his opinion they should be cut down as soon as possible. This is, however, a one-sided perspective and a simplification. No doubt, the pines are destroying the graves and the soldiers' remains. However, from a different point of view, the pines and the graves with skeletons become metaphorically and materially one entity. Fig. 4 presents and documents

Fig. 4.
Symmetry: integrated heritage. A pine growing upon a prisoner of war's grave.
Photograph by author.

the moment of becoming one; when nature and culture constitute unique landscapes and heritages. This is an example of symmetry, of integrated landscapes. Neither nature nor culture should take precedence in our reflection on landscapes (and heritages). Finally, the cemetery is a case study of landscapes as assemblages of human and non-human beings. Moss, pines, dry leaves, ivy and the soil are inherent parts of the cemetery; something allegedly created by human beings for human beings.

The Czersk cemetery is just one example of symmetry between Nature and Culture. Other sites of my interest are World War II landscapes around Chycina, a small village in western Poland. The landscapes consist of kilometres of trenches,

machine gun nests located in the woodlands, among other things (see Fig. 1). The central elements of the local landscapes include the ruins of two huge bunkers built by the Germans during the 1930s (Fig. 5). Both are evocative examples of our World War II heritage and a part of the unique military landscapes of the last global conflict. After the war, both bunkers were blown up by the Polish Army. The main contemporary narrative about sites like these is fuelled by nostalgic attachment to the past. Consequently, contemporary ruins of the bunkers are nothing more than a pale shadow of the monumental past. Once again, this is a simplification that does not consider the fluidity and historicity of landscapes. Frankly speaking, during the visit to the site, I was deeply affected by its aura, as Walter Benjamin would have put it. It can be said that the ruins are an example of the creative force of the natural and the cultural. It is as if they were—let me use this oxymoron—*cultural rocks* (fossils). Fragments of reinforced concrete plus trees, moss and dry leaves create a unique assemblage of human and non-human creativity. What might appear to be devastated landscapes from one point of view can be conceived as valuable and affective landscapes from another. In other words, devastated landscapes have their own unique values. The natural usually adds something relevant to the cultural. This is another crucial aspect of archaeological sensibility with respect to landscapes.

Fig. 5.
Cultural rocks: the ruins of a German Panzerwerk 814.
Photograph by author.

That is to say, for the last few decades archaeologists have been reducing material culture to its meaning and function. This approach has been changing recently in front of our eyes. Following the so-called ontological turn, some researchers claim that archaeology usually domesticates and sanitizes things in their own independent being, so to speak. In short, they have their own material properties that cannot be pared down to a simple meaning and function. Questions which arise here are as follows: what about the *materiality* of material culture? What about the *materiality* of landscapes?

These questions have had certain practical implications in the course of my field research. When walking around and through trenches, bomb craters, dug-outs,

shelters and machine gun nests hidden in the woodlands, sometimes I encounter material items. The latter are a kind of material memory related to the history and archaeology of each site. During the last field survey I came across the artefact presented in Fig. 6. The shard is a fragment of a glass inkpot. This specimen of material culture is a typical object found by archaeologists during excavations on the sites of erstwhile POW camps from both World War I and II.

In my opinion, care and respect for the materiality of things and landscapes mean that the artefact was to be left where it had been found. I only took pictures of it. The soil (the natural) and the artefact (the cultural), which was probably used by an anonymous prisoner of war, create a unique assemblage of human and non-human beings. The soil is the ground on which soldiers lived during the long days, months and years of imprisonment, and where most of them eventually lost their lives. To take the artefact, clean it from the soil and exhibit it in a museum display cabinet would effectively mean to obliterate an important quality and affective dimension of this assemblage.

Fig. 6.
A fragment of glass inkpot discovered during field research in the woodlands.
Photograph by the author.

Conclusions: beyond the Noah complex

Critical cultural landscape studies must be aware of their own historical and cultural roots. That is to say, they cannot be preoccupied with the issues of how best to preserve and manage local landscapes. Cultural landscapes studies are concerned solely with the most efficacious means of saving the past for the future (Fig. 7). This attitude was described—somewhat ironically—as the Noah complex of the contemporary society by the French architectural and urban historian Françoise Choay.

Fig. 7.
Landscapes are under constant transformation: very poorly preserved trenches dating to World War II.
Photograph by author.

This by no means suggests that one should look for a coherent paradigm of cultural landscape studies. They should be rather a discourse full of diverse and—why not?—opposing perspectives and approaches. The archaeological view of landscapes is slightly different from the perspectives adopted in cultural anthropology. Similarly: a philosophical understanding should differ from a historical approach to the subject. A diversity of approaches and research questions would be an advantage of critical cultural landscape studies.

To sum up, from an archaeological point of view, three aspects of landscapes have been recently extensively developed. First, landscapes are multitemporal. Second, they are assemblages of human and non-human beings. Lastly, landscapes are "naturecultures". Accordingly, archaeology can contribute to a multidisciplinary reflection of landscapes by addressing e.g. the affective qualities of landscapes, the connections between Nature and Culture in making landscapes, the aura of landscapes and, last but not least, the material realities of landscapes.

Acknowledgments

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