Sacred Nature & Structuring the Sacred: 
Constructing and Re-Writing Sacred Landscapes in the Ancient Near East

The aim of this session is to analyse the links between landscape and ‘religiosity’, developing a dialectic framework that explores sacred landscapes in the Near East in a dynamic, holistic, contextual and historical perspective. A diachronic view allows us to study how landscapes were ‘re-written’, adapted and re-defined in the course of time to suit new cultural, political and religious understandings. There are many natural features that could acquire sacred meaning in human history, like rocks, mountains, caves, lakes and rivers. A sacred site does not need to be manmade and many concepts of a sacred and/or animate landscape can survive over time, being re-interpreted by successive societies, cultures and religions. From generation to generation, people might experience their landscapes differently, while elites might validate their role in society by ‘the accomplishment of supernatural sanctions’ (Webster 1976: 815), resulting in some of the colossal investments in monumentalising many sacred sites during certain periods. We also have to consider the human impact: not just manipulating natural sacred sites and shaping sacred landscapes through economic, agricultural, political or legal frameworks, but also creating an alternative (wo)manmade, seemingly ‘non-natural’ landscape. But are cult centres at the heart of a perfectly astronomically aligned street-grid really ‘non-natural’ or do they not also reflect a natural, cosmological order.

In this view, landscape might be considered and defined as the ensemble of physical and cultural features, connected to each other, which shape the character and the form of a territory (cf. Cambi Terrenato 1994; Cambi 2003; Farinetti 2012). Within the tradition of anthropological, archaeological and historical studies, the term ‘landscape’ is related to human presence and activity in a territory that could often change and transform its space for example by building, cultivating etc. (activities able to modify the aspect of a natural space). According to such a view, the landscape might be considered as the geographic space where human activities (and past human events, histories and narratives) take place, interacting with the environment. Text is another term, which is often used to mean the territory as container of the traces of the past. We therefore need to understand how landscape was written and re-written in the course of time. Studying the ancient landscapes in the Near East, we should consider not only the archaeological remains, but also the ancient views and codification of the space in the literary, epigraphic and artistic sources, which enable us to reconstruct how, for example, Egyptians, Greeks and Romans – in a diachronic perspective –perceived their natural environment: landscape might also be understood as the image of the space a given culture has constructed.

In the words of Hubert Cancik (1985/1986: 251), we can understand a sacred landscape as ‘a constellation of natural phenomena constituted as a meaningful system by means of artificial and religious signs, by telling names or etiological stories fixed to certain places, and by rituals which actualize the space’. This definition also relates to cities where geological and natural elements, like hills and rivers, are connected with monuments (temples, altars etc.), which testify the human devotion as well as the presence of the gods and their favour for the city. Overall, a sacred landscape is a territory, in which is sacred spaces confer to the
landscape a specific holiness, insuring the divine protection for the whole community. According to local mythical traditions, which explain why a given place must be considered holy, such places are often viewed, for example, as the place in which a god is born, has shown his power by an apparition (e.g., ἐπιφάνεια), etc. Furthermore, natural elements, such as rivers and mountains, might be considered as personified gods or as places standing under the personal protection of divine beings, such as nymphs and satyrs.

This conference session aims at providing a better insight into how in different areas and periods of the ancient world, sacred spaces of a landscape were created, defined and re-defined, as well as how a give culture construct its cultural identity by defining the sacred landscape. The following questions are offered as initial suggestions for the focuses and topics of papers in this session:

1. What material evidence allows us to identify sacred spaces in any given territory, and how can we reconstruct a sacred landscape in which natural and/or manmade features were endowed with religious meaning?
2. How did different cultures see the relationship between natural elements, human constructions and the ‘supernatural’ world (deities, myths, cosmos, etc.)?
3. How was the environment changed or manipulated to construct a sacred landscape?
4. How did new cultural understandings or the aftermath of conquest or migration change and transform the local sacred landscape?
5. How do ‘acculturation’ processes, like ‘Hellenisation’ or forms of interpretatio religiosa, result in changes to the sacred landscape?
6. How can the sacred landscape be used to express forms of cultural or religious ‘resistance’ against foreign domination?

Each lecture is 20 minutes long, followed by 10 minute discussion.

Confirmed speakers (Titles to be confirmed):

- Gian Franco, Chiai (Berlin): Roman Phrygia
- Orietta, Cordovana (Aarhus): Roman Africa
- Daniele, Salvodi (Berlin): Egyptology
- Zinn, Katharina (Lampeter): Egyptology
- Haeussler, Ralph (Lampeter): Hittite / Anatolian sacred landscapes
- Waiting for reply from a number of colleagues, e.g. Ted Kaizer (Durham), etc.

References:

Cambi, F. - Terrenato, N. 1994: Introduzione all’archeologia dei paesaggi, Roma