Handbook of Landscape Archaeology

Bruno David, Julian Thomas

Thinking of Landscape Archaeology in Africa’s Later Prehistory: Always Something New

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Rod McIntosh
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There is always something new out of Africa. (Pliny the Elder 1949, *Natural History*)

In the spirit of Pliny the Elder’s hoary chestnut, African researchers and their expatriate colleagues have tended to dismiss as irrelevant much of the sequential research typologies (in particular the notion that research and understanding progress sequentially from survey and site discovery to environmental interpretation to symbolic concerns) and adaptationist or functional explanations so prevalent in much English language archaeology. Although such approaches have their own logic, one located in local and national philosophical and social agendas, Africa has always taken a different path: it has always been its own master. Many landscape archaeologists here have thus entered into data and interpretative fields that remain largely unexplored elsewhere, not so much because of differences in archaeological records but differences in the way things are understood to operate in the world.

It is all the more unfortunate, then, that the astonishing African archaeological record remains, for the most part, unknown by most researchers beyond the continent. After all, the identification of archaeological sites for purposes of what are often thinly disguised functional or environmental explanations, triumphantly evolving into the symbolic (cf. Ashmore and Knapp 1999: 2), more often speak to abstract theorizing that has little to do with historical circumstances, trends, or social understandings and more to do with contemporary power struggles within the discipline. However, it is worth reiterating that most Africanists believe that the literature coming from Africa is largely neglected internationally, because the African literature deeply challenges various established positions of the systemic schools (including environmental adaptationist models).

Africanists tend to deem such debates as irrelevant to their more insistent need to document what’s on the ground before it is effaced by rapid development. But what really is new from Africa is a willingness to conceive of landscapes as layered social and symbolic—and physical—transformations, as holistic, deep-time fields of multiple perceptions, as well as reciprocal exploitations, arenas where peoples co-adapt and co-evolve. It is these more socially inspired forms of landscape archaeology that Africanists usually favor. Unlike most “middle-range-research” thinking, whereby method is tailored for the retrieval of general principles or laws usually concerned with environmental adaptation, in Africa symbolic interests are not seen as handmaiden to evolutionary and adaptationist perspectives but stand as key dimensions of social behavior. Granted, this stance is in common with other recent
innovations in archaeological thinking elsewhere, such as Indigenous critiques in Australia (e.g., see David and Thomas, this volume) and a concern for the spiritual dimensions of life (e.g., see also McNiven, this volume), some of these innovations being at least partly inspired by African research.

However, I suggest that two attitudes toward archaeological research have influenced African archaeology to a significant degree. I refer to these as the “Tyranny of Hot Spots” and the “Handmaidens’ Tragedy,” the former indicating the way that statements about Africa signaled colonialist attitudes about the commentators as much as they reflected on Africa’s past, and the latter referring in particular to the attribution of impressive African cultural developments to external origins by early writers. I examine each in detail below.

“Tyranny of Hot Spots”

The idea of an African history, as opposed to one based on external sources, barely predated Independence from Western colonial powers, essentially coming into its own as a discipline in the mid-1960s. Well into the 1970s, many archaeologists focused on “hot spots” mentioned in Arab or European sources. I use this term to mean individual points in the landscape so important to these external authors that they merited mention (when all others were ignored), often telling us more about the outsider’s interests in, or prejudices about, Africa, rather than about events and processes happening locally (Knapp and Ashmore 1999: 2).

Often archaeologists or other commentators were content simply to locate the archaeological sites referenced by these early writers. For example, after all the research at Koumbi Saleh in Mauritania, we still have only those north-African-like ruins presumed to have been the capital of the Ghana Kingdom. Driving research at Koumbi Saleh was a conviction that these ruins must be the remains of the capital of the Ghana Kingdom (a state so early that it was believed bad to be derived from elsewhere [Mauny 1961, 1970; Robert and Robert 1972]). Arguably, the most famous site south of the Sahara, Great Zimbabwe, is still better known both in the public imagination and to professionals in isolation, abstracted, as it were, from its immediate hinterland (but see Pikirayi 2001). In addition, the Egyptian Predynastic was until recently conceptualized as a series of discontinuous points, be they necropoli (such as Naqada and Abydos, sources of seriated ceramic cultures) or remains of deeply disturbed settlements (Hierakonpolis or Buto). Our view of the pre-Pharaonic landscape has been

“The Handmaidens’ Tragedy”

If not focused on such discontinuous archaeological “hot spots” as “Great Zimbabwe” or Koumbi Saleh, archaeologists historically often investigated a tableaux of sites (sometimes with their surrounding resources) deemed important to an historical developmental or evolutionary logic external to the continent. Classically, projects designed to locate named sites and the trade networks linking them were handmaiden to historical explanations that (at least implicitly) reaffirmed the presumed cultural passivity (and “unchanging” ethos) of the continent.

Since West Africa was obviously shaken from its Iron Age slumber by mediaeval Arabs who established a line of trade entrepots immediately south of the Sahara, it followed that archaeologists had to look for those caravan colonies. Archaeologists read the names and some details of this trade in the mediaeval Arabic geographies of, for example, al-Bakri or Ibn Battuta, and then went into the Sahara to find the places so mentioned. Were the Mauritanian ruins of Tegdaoust indeed the Awaghost of the chroniclers al-Bakri and Ibn Battuta’s (Couq 1975; Levzioni and Hopkins 1981)? Details of contacts with Indigenous peoples were irrelevant to archaeologists of this ilk, who could scarcely fathom that cultural interactions could go both ways. Similarly, the East African Swahili zone was obviously a seaward-looking outlier of the vibrant Indian Ocean interaction sphere for many early Africanist archaeologists. Kilwa and other Swahili cities were seen not as bubbling cauldrons of cultural hybrid vigor (as they are now), but as backwaters (e.g., Chittick 1965, 1975).

This (mis)conception of African regions as developmental backwaters extends even to the Classical African Mediterranean littoral. There is still virtually no interest in, for example, Carthaginian relations with the free or servile Berbers of the hinterland, nor much investigation of the client-peoples’ craft production (e.g., iron) or Saharan exchange relations that underpinned Carthage’s might.

Always Something Novel

Reaction against the racialism lurking just beneath the “Tyranny of Hot Spots” and the “Handmaidens’ Tragedy” may, in fact, be the reason for Africanists’ insistence on leapfrogging the second stage in the standard investigative and explanatory sequence beginning with (1) site identification, followed by (2) functional or environmental explanations, and
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Thinking of Landscape Archaeology in Africa’s Later Prehistory

One example is the ongoing Asmara Plateau research, jointly conducted by the Universities of Asmara and Florida (Schmidt and Curtis n.d. [2007]). Intensive archaeological coverage of the highlands west of Eritrea’s capital has begun to correct a general neglect of the Horn of Africa. Taking the perspective that this region was not just a passive provider of goods and peoples to more brilliant classical (especially Hellenistic) and “late antique” civilizations across the Red Sea, this survey supports the idea of a social basin of interacting, competing polities of a very innovative stripe across the northern Horn, Arabian Peninsula and northeastern Africa—think multiple polities birthed by, not separated by, the Red Sea. Here, a “political economy” approach (although that term does the novelty of the interpretation a disservice) is adopted by one of the pioneers of a gendered and symbolic view of landscape, Peter Schmidt, who decades ago brought what was at the time a controversial ideological perspective to the Tanzanian iron-producing landscape (Schmidt 1983, 1997).

Part of that landscape is now understood to be not an isolated hinterland but a productive interior critical to the emergence of the Swahili world. Once basic survey (and then detailed excavations, as at Shanga and on Pemba Island) addressed the relationship of the aforementioned Swahili coastal “civilization” as much a product of local and regional integration and exchanges as of “radiance” from across the Indian Ocean (Chami 1998; Horton 1996; LaViolette 2004). Now East African archaeologists have joined with Indian colleagues to look at the equally partnered relationships linking landscapes on both sides of the Indian Ocean—pioneering study of premodern globalization stripped of its heretofore (Western) presumptions of asymmetries.

Even African landscape studies taking predominantly an “environmental” focus generally are hardly deterministic or adaptationist in approach. Three classic cases illustrate this more integrated ecological thrust (a fourth, the Middle Niger is discussed below). On the one hand, the UNESCO Libyan Valley Surveys (Barker et al. 1996a, 1996b; Barker and Gilbertson 2000) document in fine ecological detail the failure of Romano-Libyan (and later) farming in the Tripolitanian presedent. However, this was a long and complex story that involved not only technological (successes and) failures but also long-term changes in attitudes toward the land, which contributed to the once lush landscapes within the Roman limes becoming today’s inhospitable, degraded desert. Similarly, intensive prehistoric and biophysical surveys along the southern margins of the Chad Basin exquisitely detail the interplay of climate change and human occupation along the southern margin of that vast lake (Gronenborn 1998; Krings and Platte 2004). Here, linked ethnographic and ethnohistorical studies suggest the long-term local perspectives on change (including abrupt climate change) that underpin the region’s complex ethnic relations. Finally, the vast southern African grassland belt, from Namibia through Botswana and the Limpopo Valley of South Africa and Zimbabwe (and into Mozambique), continues to be the focus of a coordinated fine-resolution climatic and settlement investigation (Huffman 1996; Leslie and Maggs 2000; Manyanga, Pikirayi, and Ndoro, 2000; Pikirayi 2001). Particularly along the Limpopo Corridor, an integrated approach to the climate and human exploitation of the local environment and interest in symbolic landscapes has come to contribute significantly to debates about (a) the production anthropogenic or “natural” of the vast southern African grasslands, (b) the appearance of a really extensive polities (antecedent to and including Great Zimbabwe and its southern contemporaries; Huffman 2000), and (c) the origins of ethnohistoric perceptions of climate change (such as, but not limited to, persistent associations of rainmaking rituals and
The last three examples—the Tripolitanian psedodesert, the southern Lake Chad Basin, and the Limpopo Corridor—all contribute to the broader “anthropocene” debate (namely, that human land use has had a far longer, far more dramatic effect on climate change than previously appreciated; McIntosh and Tainter 2006; Ruddiman 2003). At the same time, these three examples demonstrate why any profound approach to long-term landscape change must necessarily factor in changing “perceptions” of reasons for changes to the physical environment (an approach generally known as historical ecology; for example, more fully developed in McIntosh, Tainter, and McIntosh 2000).

**Conjoining the Symbolic and Biophysical Conceptions of the Landscape**

I end with three cases, very different in scale but parallel in their insistence that there should be no separation of the symbolic or the ideological from the functional (political or economic or subsistence), or from the biophysical conception of the landscape, as African researchers have been pounding over the last few years. One of the early and most cohesive studies of multi-ethnic, pluri-specialist (and often refugia) landscapes is that of the Mandara Mountains in northeast Nigeria and Cameroon (David and Sterner 1999; MacEachern 2002; Sterner 1998). Although at one level an analysis of exchange, interaction and production specialization in a “marginal” zone, the researchers have experimented with an explicitly “symbolic reservoir” perspective on land use and land conception. Multiple interacting peoples share differentially in a fluid reservoir of beliefs and symbols (about themselves, one another, and the land) that allows rules of peaceful interaction as well as separation (leading to ethnogenesis: historical genesis of different peoples, with their own self-definition and critical defining of ethnic characteristics) to be invented, maintained, and perpetuated in a state of creative flux.

On a vastly larger scale is the recent reassessment of impulses to complexity, leading eventually to unification (by This/Abydos) as early as 3250 B.C., during the later Predynastic of Upper Egypt. No longer seen as a backwater, Darnell (n.d.[a] and n.d.[b]) and colleagues (see Friedman 2002; Hendrickx and Friedman 2004; Wilkinson 1999) look to trade and cultural connections between the Upper Nile Valley, the oasis landscapes of the Western Desert, and lower Nubia (and probably unitary ethos—expansive, opportunistic, sporting a desert worldview of solar cycles, totemic animals, and deep-time symbols of power. This reservoir of symbols and concepts, etched in the desert landscape, historically was subsequently appropriated and manipulated by the emerging elites of Hierakonopolis, This/Abydos, and Naqada in a drama of political consolidation, alliances, exploitation of mineral and agricultural wealth, and invention of traditions of (eventual) kingship (Wilkinson 1999). What a very different dynamic of antecedents to Pharaonic civilization than that current among Egyptologists even a decade ago.

Finally, since the early 1980s, R. McIntosh (1998, 2005) and S. McIntosh (1999a, 1999b) have taken a similarly broad approach to the landscape archaeology of the vast (170,000 km²) Middle Niger of Mali. Abrupt climate change, a mosaic of landforms, the complementary productive potential of the Middle Niger’s several basins all were certainly important factors encouraging of a *self*-littered urban landscape rivaling that of Mesopotamia. But, as years of excavation and survey progressed, it became very clear that a materialist, functional explanation for the pluri-ethnic settlement and land-use practices and beliefs (of these specialists with an elaborate template of reciprocity) could be understood only by reference to the rich ethnohistorical literature concerning Mande (local Indigenous) beliefs about the landscape as a network of sociopolitical and moral obligations. For the peoples of the Middle Niger, an occult fabric of causation is spread out over a highly stressful, unpredictable biophysical landscape (McIntosh 2005). To try to understand the ancient landscape while ignoring this conceptual framework of deep-time beliefs about causation of change in the world would be as futile as would be a modern Mande person’s attempts to navigate her or his world without the guideposts of always-changing but deeply rooted understandings of *nyama*, the moral power of, among other things, landscape.

**Landscapes of Causation**

What I hope has become evident in this too-short survey is that, on the one hand, Africist understandably resent any inference that basic, “exploratory” surveys need to go through a stage of environmental-adaptationist explanation to render the archaeological record meaningful. On the other hand, Africanist researchers also resent the notion that landscape archaeologies that focus more on the symbolic are somehow lesser, somehow more
What makes African archaeology most significant to Africanists is how the archaeological record can inform us about the African past, in all its diversity, and without automatically assuming that all impressive innovation comes from the outside. Without discovering the continent’s innovations, Africa’s past will forever be considered a shadow of, or even worse, derivative of, the brilliant pasts of other lands. Lacking space, I have not even mentioned the imperfectly known but truly astonishing fields of earthen tumuli and megaliths in Senegal and Gambia (McIntosh and McIntosh 1993) or the world’s largest ancient engineering landscape—the urban wall-and-ditch complexes of southwestern Nigeria (Darling 1998); or the exquisitely detailed tracing of the seasonal exploitation of Late Stone Age peoples in the western Cape of South Africa, anchored on changing coastal exploitations chronicled in John Parkington’s (1999) excavations at Eland’s Bay Cave. However, the African
contribution to a rethinking of landscape archaeology is perhaps best showcased by those studies such as the last three presented here that integrate the functional with a symbolic treatment. Not the static "ideational" or "symbolic" treatment of landscapes as adopted by adaptationist archaeologies; or even the "moral" ethnographic landscapes of, for example, Basso (1984; Feld and Basso 1996), but rather all of these wrapped together in a deep-time treatment of those ever-changing social practices that give long-term trajectories to cultural systems.

As evident in the Mandara, Upper Nile Predynastic, and Middle Niger cases, such a holistic approach to landscape archaeology allows people to "make sense" of their environment, certainly, but especially to "make sense" of all interacting agencies of causation—biophysical, human, and supernatural—today and in the times of the ancestors. To speak of African "landscapes of causation" is perhaps not going too far—the term summarizes the synergistic logic of settlements and the "reasons" for changing resources and perceptions of landform opportunities, and it provides hints to archaeologists of local and socially constructed logics as to why things happen.

References


