

Is the seashore an opening into the sacred? Exploring liminality of the littoral

by Grace Cassar

This paper inquires how the animate seashore may be considered to be an opening where the sacred is made manifest, as suggested in Mircea Eliade's theory of the irruption of the sacred. Through the selected examples, this exploration will examine how ancient Mediterranean societies interpreted and expressed their concept of liminality as contextualized within their cultural and metaphoric view of the land-, sea- and skyscapes. Moreover, by engaging with the new understanding of animism, this analysis argues how the mutating littoral, through a sensory engagement, unfolds into a birthing space for experiential interchanges wrought in natural, human and divine realms.

Background

The present essay aims at investigating whether the seashore, animate and in perpetual motion, as an embodiment of the liminal, may be considered to be an opening where sacred space is revealed, thus centring the argument mainly on Mircea Eliade's theory of 'the irruption of the sacred'¹. In seeking to understanding the relationship between *homo religiosus* and the landscape, and the interplay between the shore and the sea, insights into the ritual aspects of the liminoid concept will also be included so as to illustrate the significance of sacred symbolism that prehistoric communities and ancient maritime societies bestowed upon the sea. While bearing in mind that the overarching question is whether sacred space is a human construct, this essay will highlight the Maltese landscape, home to the monumental megalithic buildings raised during the Temple Period between the fourth and third millennium BCE, and the topography of these temple sites vis-à-vis their proximity to coastal areas.² Hence, the essay rests upon theoretical and interpretative models drawn from a variety of disciplines, such as anthropology, phenomenology, religion and archaeology; by employing a holistic approach, the evidence aims to bring to the fore the presence of the manifestation of sacred space between the amorphous interface of land and sea.

¹ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959), p. 63.

² Reuben Grima, 'An Iconography of Insularity: A Cosmological Interpretation of some Images and Spaces in the Late Neolithic Temples of Malta', *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*, 12 (2009), 48-65. [hereafter: Grima, 'Late Neolithic Malta'].

Explaining the sacred

“How much of the earth is sacred space?” someone asked a traditional Indian. “All” came the reply.³ In their exploration of sacred space of Native American Indians, Donald Hughes and Jim Swan’s account on the statement made by Chief Seattle and their beliefs and perceptions on earth, the message is unequivocally powerful: ‘Mother Earth is a living being, sacred in all her parts’. Similarly, almost two and a half millennia earlier, the Greek philosopher Plato (c. 424-348 BCE), described the cosmos as ‘a Living creature endowed with soul and reason owing to the providence of God’ in one of his theoretical masterpieces *Timaeus*.⁴ An elaborately wrought explanation of the dialectic of the Sacred and the Profane’ is given by the historian of religions and mythologist Mircea Eliade, whose phenomenological interpretative model this essay is chiefly based upon.⁵ In his in-depth analysis of the engagement of sacred space and *homo religiosus*, Eliade, equipped with an exclusive body of vocabulary, introduced and construed a ‘thick description’, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) later coined⁶, whereby the symbolical demarcating nature of thresholds, such as doors and gates, acting as liminal boundaries, endow space with a non-homogenous essence, where the physical demarcation separating and ‘indicat[ing] the distance between the two modes of being, the profane and the religious’, gives birth to the ‘symbolic point of passage’ into an ‘hierophany’, the revelation of the sacred.⁷ This communicative opening into the interior of sacred space is further described as the ‘irruption of the sacred’ where the ‘break-through from plane to plane’ implies the cosmogonic moment where reality is revealed and ‘a world is founded’.⁸ Eliade’s sequence of ‘religious conceptions’ grounds its centre upon the communication with heaven through which the ‘navel of the earth’, also known as *axis mundi* is expressed for it is through the centre that ‘orientation’ is made possible;⁹ Eliade’s ‘centre of the world’ can be symbolically embodied in many a varied way, natural or man-made, such as a tree, a pillar, a sanctuary, a

³ J. Donald Hughes and Jim Swan, 'How Much of the Earth is Sacred Space?', *Environmental History Review*, 10 (1986), 247-260.

⁴ Plato., Fowler, Harold North,, Lamb, W. R. M., Bury, Robert Gregg, *Plato*, (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press H. Heinemann, 1926), 30B.

⁵ Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, pp. 21-65.

⁶ Clifford Geertz, 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture', *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science*, (1994), 213-231.

⁷ Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, p. 24-26.

⁸ Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, p. 30.

⁹ Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, p. 63.

city, or 'the shepherd's yurt'¹⁰, where the horizontal encounters the vertical, and 'the gods descend to earth and man can symbolically ascend to heaven'.¹¹

As was pointed out in the introduction to this paper, the objective of this essay proposes to employ Eliade's interpretative model in order to analogously incorporate it in view of the liminality of boundaries; it is suggested that the symbolic nature of the physical body of the littoral as a religious conception and cosmological image' can be explained as representing 'the centre' as 'precisely the place where a break in plane occurs, where space becomes sacred'.¹² Relevant to this discussion is the precise meaning of the word 'littoral' originating from the Latin *litus* (plural *litora*), the *region* (my emphasis) lying along a shore of a lake, sea or ocean.¹³ The fluid spatial dimension of the seashore, therefore, 'fraught with religious meaning' is hereby proposed to be synonymous to a symbolic interpretation of the *liminal*, a word whose etymological roots are found in the Latin *limen*, signifying 'threshold', a passageway that acts as a doorway for the 'irruption of the sacred'.

In support of the above, the seminal work of academics Anthony Thorley and Celia M. Gunn' have yielded a vast body of data through which an operational definition of sacred site has been devised, namely, 'a sacred site is a place in the landscape, occasionally over or under water, which is especially revered by people, culture or cultural group as a focus for spiritual belief and practice and likely religious observance'.¹⁴

Tools of interpretation

The first decade of the twentieth century witnessed the pioneering ideas of anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957) whose universalist theory of the *rites de passage* provided an interpretative tool towards an extensive analysis of the concepts of liminality.¹⁵ This theoretical model of the transitional, coined 'betwixt and between'¹⁶ by Victor Turner who further elaborated on van Gennep's theory of classifications of rites, the French anthropologist emphasised how rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation are passages denoting intermediate stages, whether human, agrarian, seasonal or cosmic; significantly,

¹⁰ Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, p. 65.

¹¹ Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, pp. 24, 26.

¹² Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, pp.37, 45.

¹³ Judy Pearsall, *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), p. 1474.

¹⁴ Anthony Thorley and Celia M. Gunn, 'Sacred Sites: An Overview', *A Report for the Gaia Foundation*, (2008), p. 76.

¹⁵ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*. (London: Routledge & Paul, 1960).

¹⁶ Victor W. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 63.

during the transiting process from one world to another, these passages involve shedding one identity so as to attain another.¹⁷ In unisons, therefore, the interpretative theories of both van Gennep's and Eliade, albeit stemming from different disciplinary backgrounds, illustrate affinities in so much as both offer an explanation for the liminal as *that* region of the shoreline where sacred space is channelled via the physical and magical convergence of land and sea thus embodying a symbolic gateway enabling the journey 'from one cosmic region to another'.¹⁸

Correspondingly to Van Gennep's study, the profound analysis of the philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945) on mythical forms, space and time underscored the significance of 'transition from one mythical-religious sphere to another [which] involves rites of passage which must be carefully observed'.¹⁹ Moreover, Cassirer strengthened van Gennep's argument and illustrated the metaphoric nature of a zone when equating it to the hallowing nature of walls which delineate a 'specific zone [...] from other zones'²⁰; relevant to this case, as will be discussed shortly, is the Latin word *temenos*, 'a sacred enclosure or precinct surrounding or adjacent to a temple', from the Greek stem of *temnein*, as found in *templum*, meaning 'cut off'.²¹

Funerary Geography

In support towards the aim of this essay, where coastal regions become entry-zones into the realm of the sacred, it is now necessary to consider how the embarked-body of water, as archaeologist Christopher Carr clarified, 'provid[es] a framework for expressing' the social, philosophical-religious worldviews that form part of the collective identity of societies²²; and in this particular argument, ancient maritime societies and their 'funerary geography'.²³ Following in-depth investigations on the rituals for the dead in the Phoenician funerary landscape, between the sixth and tenth century BCE, archaeologists Nicholas Vella and Anthony J. Frendo inferred that 'the sea becomes a constituent of Phoenician

¹⁷ Arnold van Gennep, pp. 2, 4, 7-9.

¹⁸ Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, pp. 36-37.

¹⁹ ¹⁹ Ernst Cassirer, 'The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Vol. 2, Mythical Thought, Trans. Ralph Manheim', (1955), p. 104.

²⁰ Cassirer, *Symbolic Forms*, pp. 99-100.

²¹ Judy Pearsall, p.1474.

²² Christopher Carr, 'Mortuary Practices: Their Social, Philosophical-Religious, Circumstantial, and Physical Determinants', *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, 2 (1995), 105-200, pp.105-106, 112.

²³ AJ Frendo, A. de Trafford and NC Vella, *Water Journeys of the Dead: A Glimpse into Phoenician and Punic Eschatology*, Atti Del V Congresso Internazionale Di Studi Fenici E Punic. Marsala-Palermo, 2-8 Ottobre 2000, (2005), p. 427.

sacred cosmology; underworld and overworld are continuous for the sea was the boundary that had to be crossed by the living ferrying the dead to their eternal abode, as the excavations conducted at the cemeteries located on the mainland, opposite the offshore islands at Tyre (Lebanon) and Cádiz (Spain), among others, have revealed.²⁴ Ancient Egyptian and Levantine literature is replete with narratives concerning the ubiquitous journey undertaken by the dead crossing boundaries across the liminal realms;²⁵ analogously, the eighth century CE Anglo-Saxon funerary epic *Beowulf* anchors its opening and ending to the ceremonial ship burials and the sea unto which they are bestowed.²⁶

Following the multidisciplinary approach of maritime archaeology, through Jonathan Adams's fresh interpretation, the boat is now being contemplated as an 'ideology afloat'.²⁷ Altogether therefore, as evidenced by the prime examples of death rituals pertaining to ancient seafaring societies, the sea, whether entered and crossed metaphorically or literally, pregnant with social, symbolic and spiritual meaning, voices and embodies the attributes of the sacred via the opening platform of the liminal littoral.

The Maltese Archipelago

In his revolutionary phenomenological approach towards landscape, archaeologist Christopher Tilley, by incorporating other disciplines in his interpretative model, steeped into the places and spaces explored the material culture in the landscape and discovered it was embedded with a language of powerful metaphor.²⁸ This innovative model of interpretation compares with that of archaeologist Reuben Grima who, in his study on some of the megalithic architectural structures of the Late Neolithic (c. 3400-2500 BCE) of the Maltese Islands, shifted his emphasis to the relationship between the monumental sites and their landscape setting (plate 1).²⁹ Geographically, the Maltese archipelago is situated in the liminal of the Mediterranean Sea, almost equidistantly between Sicily and North Africa, and after the Spanish Balearics to the West, qualify as the

²⁴ Anthony J. Frendo and Nicholas C. Vella, 'Les Îles Phéniciennes Du Milieu De La Mer', *Les Dossiers D'Archéologie*, (2001), 46-55. [p. 8 from the English translation as supplied by Nicholas C. Vella].

²⁵ James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, (Princeton Univ., 1969), p.32.

²⁶ James P. Delgado, *Encyclopedia of Underwater and Maritime Archaeology* (London: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 377.

²⁷ Jonathan Adams, 'Ships and Boats as Archaeological Source Material', *World Archaeology*, 32 (2001), 292-310, p. 300.

²⁸ Tilley and Bennet, *The Materiality of Stone*, p. 86.

²⁹ Grima, *Late Neolithic Temples*, p.48.

second most remote island groups of the Mediterranean.³⁰ Previously to Grima, the archaeologist Anthony Pace had observed that the chosen landscape setting for the prehistoric temples reveals that most of monuments on Malta ‘are located within easy distance of the coast, or else in strategic locations close to main valleys that also lead down to the sea’; more significantly, Pace highlighted that littorals ‘act as natural frontier zones linking an island’s interior with maritime resources and the external world’ (plate 2).³¹ Significantly, therefore, it appears that not only does the terrain located on the island’s periphery contain the megalithic structures, but more importantly that the over-arching interpretation of these coastal zones is that these structures lie at the intersection between the inner and the outer domains. Like Thorley and Gunn’s core definition of a sacred site, as mentioned earlier, this implies that the coastal zones pertaining to the Maltese prehistoric monuments were recipient of ritual practice endowed with sacred essence; in like manner to an *axis mundi*, the littoral is a sacred space.³² Such conclusions towards the explanation of the connection between spirituality and space have been consolidated in the embracive work of theologian Belden Lane whose major contributions brought forward four instrumental tools with which he equips *homo religiosus* so as to ‘clarify the elusive character of sacred space’.³³ The following universal principles are: a) sacred place is not chosen, it



Plate 1. Mnajdra South Temple

³⁰ Malone, Caroline, Barber, Geraldine, Ashley, Steven, *Mortuary Customs in Prehistoric Malta: Excavations at the Brochtorff Circle at Xaghra (1987-94)* (Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2009), p. 17.

³¹ Anthony Pace and others, *Maltese Prehistoric Art, 5000-2500 BC.* (Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 2002), . p. 5.

³² Thorley and Gunn, *Sacred Sites*, pp. 35-36.

³³ Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred : Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), pp. 19-20.

chooses; b) sacred place is ordinary place, ritually made extraordinary; c) sacred place can be trod upon without being entered; d) the impulse of sacred place is both centripetal and centrifugal, local and universal.

Another extensive investigation which reflects the relevant themes pertaining to this discussion is that which was conducted by anthropogeographer Ellen Churchill Semple (1863-1932), who in 1926 recorded one hundred and seventy-five promontory temples, including the twenty headlands deemed sacred by the ancients.³⁴ The implication of such a collection of data is



Plate 2. Mnajdra South Temple

indeed a powerful indication of the religious significance of the liminal coastal regions of the Ancient Mediterranean; these shrines and cave-sanctuaries communicated their importance to the ancient seafaring rituals as reflected in their geographical distribution, stretching across the tip of the Sinai peninsula in the Egyptian Red Sea to the western-most edges of Cape Finisterre in Portugal.³⁵ (plate 3).

³⁴ Ellen Churchill Semple, 'The Templed Promontories of the Ancient Mediterranean', *Geographical Review*, 17 (1927), 353-386. pp. 355, 386.

³⁵ Semple, 'The Templed Promontories', pp. 355, 386.

Landscapes and the Art of Narrative

As mentioned earlier, Christopher Tilley's innovative model of interpreting



Plate 3. The Poseidon temple on Cape Sunium (Cape Colonna). (From J.B.Lechevalier: *Recueil des cartes, plans, vues et médailles, pour servir au voyage de la Troade*, Paris, 1802.)

the landscape now forms part of a growing body of academic literature debating its cognitive expression. In recent decades the academic concern relating to humankind's relationship to their environment has been on the increase, and the multi and interdisciplinary approaches reflect the holistic approaches that are being employed, as voiced in the work of anthropologist Tim Ingold,³⁶ and maritime archaeologist Christer Westerdahl, to name a few.³⁷ Correspondingly, in the study of monuments, prehistorian Richard Bradley³⁸ built his argument on the

³⁶ Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000).

³⁷ Christer Westerdahl, 'Maritime Cosmology and Archaeology', *Deutsches Schifffahrtsarchiv*, 28 (2006), 7-54.

³⁸ Richard Bradley, *The Past in Prehistoric Societies* (Routledge, 2002), p. 85.

relevance of the etymology of the word 'monument', which derives from Latin *monere*, meaning 'to remind'.³⁹ In his treatise on the past in prehistoric societies, he pointed out how 'monuments lead double lives' in so much as when their construction takes place, they are 'directed towards the future'.⁴⁰

Indeed, the last few decades have yielded several innovative interpretative models with which to explain the prehistoric landscape, nonetheless, the Maltese archipelago's insularity and idiosyncrasy of its temple structures are still being debated in the academic arena.⁴¹ Amongst the most important contributions brought forward by archaeologists are those presented by scholar John Robb.⁴² In his treatise on the prehistoric Maltese Islands, he favoured the notion of this boundary-defined island community that is consciously and actively committed to a deliberate 'construction of insularity', with the aim of 'fashioning [local] identities';⁴³ the other theory is that of archaeologist Cyprian Broodbank, who claimed that the local population culturally constructed their insularity which in turn reflected 'a domain of active social contention and manipulation', ringed within a sea whose 'role can vary from that of insulator to hyper conductor'.⁴⁴

Light – An Experiential Perspective

In accordance with the above arguments, it is not unimportant to consider the vital importance of the major role that light plays in the life of *homo religiosus*. In her explorative journey on the role of light and sacred landscapes, geographer Barbara Weightman (1939-2012) stated that 'the phenomenon of light clarifies sacred space [for] it is expressed and understood in religions and belief systems in innumerable ways (plate 4)'.⁴⁵ In a parallel fashion, in his powerful book 'Being Alive', Ingold explained that it is through the experience of light that 'the relation between visual perception and the weather' comes alive, thus creating an opportunity 'to be caught up in the substantial flows and aerial fluxes' which he called 'the *weather-world*' (plate 5).⁴⁶ Light, therefore, as masterfully expressed in

³⁹ Pearsall, *Oxford English Dictionary*, p. 924.

⁴⁰ Bradley, *The Past*, p. 82.

⁴¹ Grima, 'Late Neolithic Malta', p. 48.

⁴² John Robb, 'Island Identities: Ritual, Travel and the Creation of Difference in Neolithic Malta', *European Journal of Archaeology*, 4 (2001), 175-202, pp. 177, 192, 195-196.

⁴³ Robb, 'Island Identities', pp. 177, 192, 195-196

⁴⁴ Cyprian Broodbank, *An Island Archaeology of the Early Cyclades* (Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.17.

⁴⁵ Barbara A. Weightman, 'Sacred Landscapes and the Phenomenon of Light', *Geographical Review*, (1996), 59-71.

⁴⁶ Tim Ingold, *Being Alive Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, (London; New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 96.

Abbot Suger's twelfth century St Denis, is that most vital ingredient; as pointed out by Ingold, 'though we do not see light, we do see *in* light' (plate 6).⁴⁷ As a result, the experience of the sacred space of the liminal littoral entails standing between the elements: earth, air, water, and fire in the sky, namely what Ingold called 'that multisensory experience of being out in the open'.⁴⁸ Mediated through the human 'experiential perspective', as suggested by geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, 'man's uniqueness lies in his special capacity for thought and reflection'⁴⁹ in combination with the 'participation by the discerning eye and mind'.⁵⁰ Through a similar experience of the indented coastal regions, the Maltese littoral, like all the shorelines framing the land, is an everlasting source of interconnectedness, a liminal stepping zone into the sacred, where the encounter with the world, following the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), 'is a philosophy which puts essences back into existence [...] endowing that contact with a philosophical status.'⁵¹ Like an Impressionist painter bathed in Ingold's



Plate 4

weather-world, resolved on channelling a moment, Merleau-Ponty viewed and absorbed, and while engrossed in his surroundings, interacted and experienced

⁴⁷ Ingold, *Being Alive*, p. 96.

⁴⁸ Tim Ingold, 'Comments on Christopher Tilley: The Materiality of Stone: Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology. Oxford: Berg, 2004', *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, 38 (2005), 122-129, p. 122.

⁴⁹ Yi-Fu Tuan, 'Humanistic Geography', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 66 (1976), 266-276, p. 267.

⁵⁰ Tuan, 'An Experiential Perspective', p. 161.

⁵¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London; New York: Routledge, 1962), in */z-wcorg/*. p. vii.

them through the instrument of perception, his body (plate 7).⁵² This dynamic experience of the senses with the mind can thus be linked to the 'indigenous lifeworld' ethnographically known as animism.⁵³ Anthropologists such as Fiona Bowie,⁵⁴ Freya Mathews,⁵⁵ Tim Ingold⁵⁶ argued that humankind resorts to and interrelates with the surroundings 'as biological and social beings';⁵⁷ similarly,



Plate 5

Mathews and Ingold have coined the terms 'web of ties' and 'web of life' where the world is 'forever on the verge of the actual';⁵⁸ analogously to the dynamic littoral, it is the 'meshwork of interwoven lines'.⁵⁹ Moreover, these views on animism are also shared by philosopher and ethnographer David Abram who recognized animistic sensitivity as bi-directional, namely, that 'not only are we

⁵² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics* (Northwestern Univ Press, 1964), pp. 159-190.

⁵³ Ingold, *Being Alive*, p. 63.

⁵⁴ Fiona Bowie, *The Anthropology of Religion: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p 107.

⁵⁵ Freya Mathews, *The Ecological Self*, (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 1.

⁵⁶ Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁵⁷ Fiona Bowie, *Anthropology of Religion*, p. 107.

⁵⁸ Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*, p. 11.

⁵⁹ Ingold, *Being Alive*, p. 63.

sentient beings observing the sensible 'outside' but that we are also sensible



Plate 6

beings observed by the sentient world out there (plate 8).⁶⁰

To conclude, therefore, aided with the theoretical tools of various disciplines, this paper has attempted to show how, to *homo religiosus*, the topography of the seashore is a spatiotemporal intersection which is pregnant with religious, cosmological, social and ecological symbolism, a fluid plane where the sacred is revealed and experienced. As also attested by the mortuary rituals of past maritime societies and the topographic features that mark the contours of the Maltese Islands' coastal areas, the traditions and ideologies of maritime societies of past, present and future entwine. Through the presented corpus of data, the evidence provided has thus shown that the liminality of the littoral indeed fulfils the criteria for the embodiment of sacred space, for the liminal seashore is a multidimensional edge where the creation of a passage into the sacred comes into being.

⁶⁰ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (Random House Digital, Inc., 1997), p. 38.



Plate 7

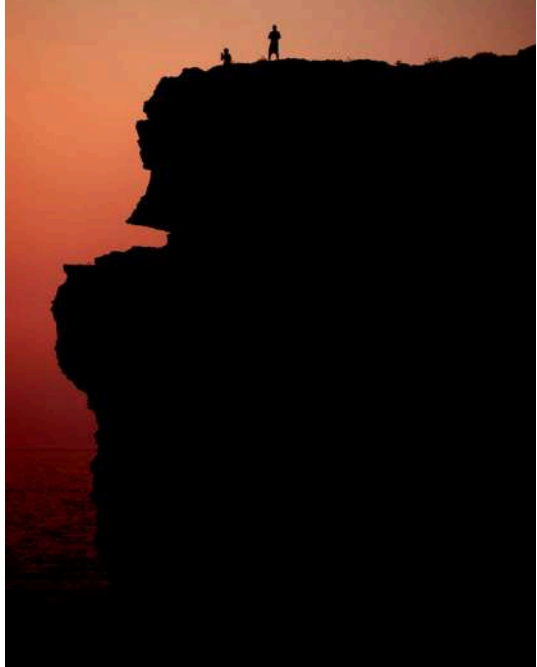


Plate 8

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