

The Sacred Geography papers and their methodologies

by *Bernadette Brady*

The seven papers in this special edition of Spica have been selected from the Sacred Geography MA module, by Anthony Thorley and myself for their diversity of methodology and subject matter. Hence as a collection they may contribute towards an academic understanding of the nature of sacred geography. The papers ask questions concerning the nature of the sacredness of a place or landscape. At its heart these questions are focused on the idea of sacredness, whether it is contained in the place itself, implying that the place holds agency, or whether the sacredness is allocated by humanity. This is largely an exploration of the views of Mircea Eliade, who argued that sacredness is a feature of place, and those of Émile Durkheim, who stressed humanity's role in attributing sacredness.¹ Four of these papers use a phenomenological approach to explore this question; the other remaining papers use different methodologies.

In considering the phenomenological papers, Chris Layser stepped into the shoes of a young Mayan initiate by following what a Mayan shaman would have done as he paddled along a sacred river that lead to the depth of a cave. The particular cave is Barton Creek Cave, Cayo District, Belize, which has cultural evidence of such Mayan activity. Layser aimed to gain an appreciation of the ancient Mayan use of caves as sacred places. He struggled, however, to bridge the gap between his own world and that of the ancient Mayan. It was not until he drew closer to the cave exit at the end of his journey when, still in his canoe, the value of phenomenology came to the fore and he found his perspective shifting, enabled him to sense something he had never noticed before.

In contrast to the dark caves of the Mayan cosmology, Stevi Gaydon focused on the role of art and its capacity to attribute sacredness in an art gallery. Gaydon followed Belden Lane's approach to a place by considering the

¹ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion*, (San Diego: Harcourt & Brace, 1957) p.26; Emile Durkheim, Maurice *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, (New York: The Free Press, 1995 [1912]) p. 441.

multi-layered dimensions of ontological, cultural, and phenomenological information around a site.² Lane's argument is that all of these dimensions influence our sense of place and they cannot be split apart from each other. Gaydon visited three works of art all located at different times in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern, London. This journey gave her insights into the different roles taken by the artist and the observer and found that somewhere between these two points of view, sacredness was generated.

Two of the papers utilised Maurice Merleau-Ponty's argument that the human body is an instrument of mediation that can be used to feel and explore a place or landscape.³ These papers thus took the research approach of extraordinary anthropology which engages with embodied knowledge.⁴ Anya Marco, an experienced meditator, used her own body as an instrument for measuring the impact that place had on her meditation. Marco wanted to sense how place changed her normal meditation equanimity. This approach was similar to that taken by Madeleine Marchand, who gave an insider view of mediumship when she visited places already identified by Blanche Merz, another medium, as sites of high spiritual activity. Marchand's experiences in these places confirmed for her that a place holds agency. Both Marco's and Marchand's work push the edge of sacred geography as both chose not to explore sacredness per se but rather the power within a landscape that can affect an individual. Their views are framed within their own spiritual beliefs but show the reader a particularly personal view of sacredness, one which cannot be generalised, yet nevertheless is a powerful part of the human experience of place.

In turning to the other papers Caroline Ormrod looked at multiple threads woven together to form the sacred – humanity, place, art, history, and ritual. Ormrod considered how the instillation *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red and the Tower of London* created sacredness generated from the cultural need for ritual and remembrance. She noted the contested nature of the place as commercial interests clashed with the desire for respect, a feature of sacredness. She did her research from the distance of Canada and revealed how the sacred geographer

² Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2002 [1988]), p.45

³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, (Routledge 2002: London), p. 380.

⁴ See, Goulet, Jean-Guy, and Bruce G. Miller. *Extraordinary Anthropology : Transformations in the Field*. Lincoln, US ; London: University of Nebraska Press, 2007.

can successfully achieve virtual research, as long as he or she accepts the limitations.

Oral history was the subject of Natalie Niblett's paper. She returned to the Welsh mountains of her childhood and went seeking the stories of the landscape that were told to her by her father. Her methodology was very much in keeping with that of Alan Garner who used his own family's oral histories as an aid to archaeological work.⁵ Niblett, however, used these stories to reflect the nature of the sacred mountain, both for herself as well as for the community around The Skirrid, Ysgryd Fawr, near Abergavenny in country Monmouthshire, Wales. She concluded that the mountain's sacredness was local, rather than national, yet the size of the domain of the sacredness did not distract from its local appreciation. The final paper, although not the last in the order of this special edition, is that of Mai Lootah who presented historical research to indicate how sacredness once allocated can be a powerful agent in the science of cartography. Her work focused on the mystical need for someone raised in Islam to direct oneself to a sacred place, Makkah, and the intellectual struggle in locating the *qibla*, the direction of that sacred place, for any place on the globe. In this regard Lootah shows another dimension to the sacred geographer, that of researching the historical trails left by sacred places.

It can be argued that a subject can be defined in part by the methodologies employed in its study. In the case of these eight papers, the methodologies are largely anthropological, varying from ethnography, phenomenology, and the embodied knowledge that extraordinary anthropology embraces. In contrast, however, the sacred geographer can also be a researcher of current or historical texts and thus never tread upon sacred soil. With the researchers locating themselves near or far, all of these papers are focused on the sacredness encountered when humanity engages with a site. Whether one creates the other is a shifting argument. Nevertheless, this fluid nature implies it is the union itself which creates the sacredness, at least from the human perspective.

⁵ Garner, Alan. "Oral History and Applied Archaeology in East Cheshire." In *The Voice That Thunders : Essay and Lectures*, 65-79. London: Harvill, 1997.