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Accessing the Past as Landscape: The Danish Bog Bodies and Modern Memory

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Accessing the Past as Landscape: The Danish Bog Bodies and Modern Memory

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The idea of “place-making” in anthropology has been extensively applied to culturally created landscapes. Landscape archaeologists view establishing ritual spaces, building monuments, establishing ritual spaces, organizing settlements and cities, and navigating geographic space as activities that create meaningful cultural landscapes. A landscape, after all, is “an entity that exists by virtue of its being perceived, experienced, and contextualized by people” (Knapp and Ashmore 1999: 1). A place - physical or imaginary - must be seen or imagined before becoming culturally relevant. It must then be explained, and transformed (physically or ideologically). Once these requirements are fulfilled, a place becomes a locus of cultural significance; ideals, morals, traditions, and identity, are all embodied in the space. In its most basic form, the transmission of these meanings occurs through storytelling. In Keith Basso’s words, “place-making... does not require special sensibilities or cultivated skills. It is a common response to common curiosities - what happened here? who was involved? what was it like? why should it matter? and anyone can be a place-maker who has the inclination” (Basso 1996: 5).

With this acknowledgement, it should not be surprising that anthropologists and historians are themselves place-makers. Claims for a “more objective approach” aside, they ask the same questions that Basso attributes to ethnographically standard place-making. Indeed, Basso admits the validity of place-making as a form of history: “place-making is a way of constructing history itself... Building and sharing place-worlds, in other words, is not only a means of reviving former times but also of *revising* them” (Basso 1996: 6). Archaeologists, by recovering artifacts and imagining how they may have affected daily life, are place-making at the excavation site. They create new meaning and new ideas, and tell a story about that place. Museums, taking this story, contribute to the recently revised (not “new,” as the site has always been experienced and interpreted by *someone*) “place-world” by creating exhibits - which are, of course, new, meaningful places in themselves. Next, a visitor to the museum, or a reader of historical interpretation, experiences the site, drawing their own conclusions and making their own place. All of these activities are contributions to the site’s “life history” - the continuous use, reinterpretation, re

purposing, and re-defining of the site (Holtorf 1998). Methods of historical presentation and museum exhibits, then, are themselves culturally meaningful sites of understanding. Physical sites are recast as settings of a story connecting the past to the present. Indeed, the past itself becomes a created place, a site that is navigable and ultimately accessible.

This article will investigate variations on place-making involving the museum presentation of the well-preserved bodies of Danish bog sites. While any museum site holds the potential for such a critical analysis, bog bodies have a unique role in the narrative nature of place-making: they are individuals who *experienced* the story being told (assuming, of course, that the story is “true”). They are, in essence, characters in the created story of the “place-world.” Well-preserved bodies are fully recognizable as humans, with recognizably human faces and, sometimes, discernible facial hair. They seem almost ready to tell the story of the past themselves. By telling these individuals’ stories, museum exhibits and visitors alike imagine and create place in a seemingly more real way: by imagining individuals’ lives, they transform the past into a relatable and accessible place where other humans acted, thought, and made meaning. The past landscape can, after all, have no significance if no one was there to experience it.

In displaying the past, museums present two forms of landscapes. The first is rooted in a single physical place (such as the bog at Tollund village, Denmark). This is a *remembered landscape*. Museums, archaeologists, museum visitors, and others make place by telling the story of life at this site, either at a single historical moment (the time when Tollund Man was sacrificed) or as it changed over time (the site’s “life history”). The second is a broader, less-defined landscape of the past as a conglomerate, made up of many remembered landscapes. This is a kind of *memoryscape*, a place transcending time and physical reality, but still drawing meaning from specific locales and events. The desire to access this memoryscape is exemplified by connections drawn between the various Iron Age Danish bog bodies, who together tell the story of sacrifice over a 1300-year period (Silkeborg Museum 2012). While the physical landscape undoubtedly changed throughout the Iron Age, the era itself is a landscape, a place modern individuals can experience in its (perceived) entirety by touring a museum. In the examples of Tollund Man, Grauballe Man, and other Danish bog people, these landscapes are created, utilized, and interpreted to create varying meanings. In the stories of these places, museums and visitors find (or

create) traditions and morals, a sense of nationality and community, continuity with the past, and new ways to make sense of the present.

Overview: The Bog People and Landscapes

This paper will reference two specific bog people: Tollund Man and Grauballe Man. While the exhibits and interpretations of these men's lives vary, all participate in "making place," in the form of remembered landscapes and broader memoryscapes. Stuart MacLean explains this process of landscape transformation:

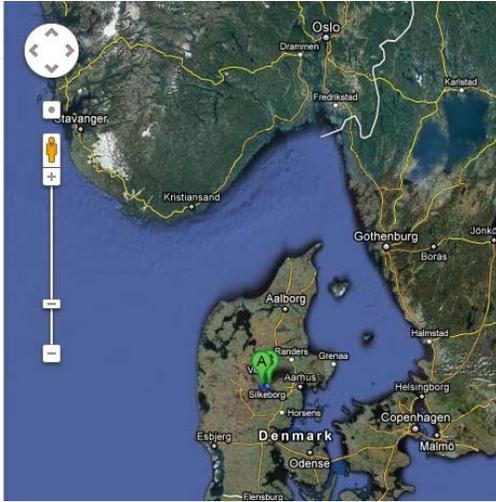
Interpretations of the past generated from the excavation and analysis of bog bodies and other finds are, in turn, projected back onto the landscapes from which the finds in question were first retrieved, these same landscapes being re-imagined in the present as onetime sacred spaces and sites of ritual sacrifice... In this sense collective memory is indissolubly linked to transformation ... (think, for example, of archaeological scholarship's rediscovery of bog landscapes as ritual and sacrificial spaces) (MacLean 2008: 306).

In all cases, museums ask Keith Basso's fundamental question - "What happened here?" While the stories told in response to this question can reflect a nationalized "official" history (mandated by the authority of the museum), museum visitors and others often create their own imagined views of the past and place. Both versions are forms of place-making; more than representing the "truth" of the past, they reflect the ideas and values of the story-teller.

Tollund Man: Tollund Man was discovered in May 1950, in Tollund village, Jutland Peninsula, Denmark by a family cutting peat for fuel. He was so well preserved that the family who found him called the police, believing him to be a recent murder victim. The braided cord around his neck suggested he had been killed by garroting. When he was buried, he was positioned neatly on his side, suggesting that he had been the victim of ritual sacrifice (a murder victim would not have been buried with such deference). Carbon-14 analysis dated his death to 400-300 BC. Tollund Man is now on exhibit at Silkeborg Museum, just nine miles from the site of his discovery (see Fig. 1) (Glob 1965: 18-20; Silkeborg Museum 2012).

Grauballe Man: Grauballe Man was discovered in April 1952, by another group of peat cutters in Nebelgård Fen, a village near Grauballe in Jutland. His throat had been cut, which that he, like Tollund Man, had been killed as a ritual sacrifice. Carbon dating placed his death at around 290 BC. He is now

part of an exhibit at Mosegård Museum, 30 miles from Nebelgård (see Fig. 2) (Glob 1965: 37-41; Mosegård Museum 2012).



1) Distance from Tollund village to Silkeborg Museum; 2) Distance from Nebelgård Fen to Mosegård Museum. In both images “A” represents the bog, while “B” represents the museum (images from Google Maps).

Place-making in Danish Museums: Tollund Man and Grauballe Man

The idea of a “remembered landscape” is not new to Denmark. In many cases, Danish museums are in fact closely related to the site from which the displayed artifacts came: they may be located directly on-site, or focus on the history of a nearby location. Mosegård Museum at Aarhus (the current home of Grauballe Man), for example, claims that many of its exhibits are based on local history. The museum’s “well-preserved manor house environment and natural surroundings, which include [the] Ancient Path with reconstructed prehistoric houses and tomb monuments,” portrayed as part of the “natural” landscape, contributes to the creation of a remembered landscape (Mosegård Museum 2012). Likewise, while Aarhus is 30 miles from Nebelgård Fen, the museum recreates and recasts the ritual significance of the bog landscape in a permanent exhibit entitled “Grauballe Man and the Magic of the Bog” (Mosegård Museum 2012). Despite a slight distance from the “real” site, these exhibits are rooted in a physical location, suggesting that visitors to the museum have seen and experienced a true representation of a past landscape. Rather than a piecemeal conception of “Iron Age life,” the bog exhibit provides a physical example of a site at which life played out; if the visitors had any inclination, they could easily drive 30 miles west from the museum to see the exact site where Grauballe Man was sacrificed and

(presumably) lived. However, as sociologist Erik Cohen explains, such recreations of the past “increasingly become part of the physical, historical or cultural environment—they become ‘naturalized,’ [which blurs] the distinction between ‘natural’ and ‘contrived’ [landscapes],” and natural and recreated pasts (Kelleher 2004:8). While visitors may not see the actual landscape, they can still view the memory of that place in the museum.

Mosegård’s sister museums also follow this pattern. At the Odder Museum, visitors tour the “coherent cultural environment of the historic Otter Water and Steam Mill,” supposedly viewing life as it occurred on the site. At the Viking Ship Museum, visitors walk down a flight of stairs with years painted in decreasing order, literally leading them *into* the past (Mosegård Museum 2012). Keith Basso’s description of Western Apache place-making as “a form of narrative art, a type of historical theater in which ‘pastness’ of the past is summarily stripped away and long-elapsed events are made to unfold as if before one’s eyes” (Basso 1996: 33) is relevant here. Although Danish museums do not speak of the past in the present tense, as Basso observed of Apache stories, these Danish exhibits still actively strip away “pastness.” The superimposition of past and present effectively casts the past as an accessible, physical space. By blurring the distinction between past and present into a coherent story of continuity, allowing visitors to physically experience the landscape of the past.

The Tollund Man exhibit at the Silkeborg Museum is an excellent example of such continuity. The museum focuses on the history of the Silkeborg region, from prehistory to modern industrial development. Deeply concerned with local heritage, the museum promotes conservation archaeology, publishing a pamphlet entitled “Do You Have a Mound in Your Backyard?” to educate the public in preserving the ancient past (Silkeborg Museum 2012). While both industry and daily life threatens such sites (Tollund Man, after all, was discovered because of the local and traditional practice of peat-cutting), the museum emphasizes the importance of the landscape in forming Danish identity. The museum’s Tollund Man website (a complex site including pages on the body’s discovery and analysis, Iron Age life and ritual, and connections to other bog bodies) provides very detailed investigations life in Iron Age villages in and around Silkeborg. The website claims, “Over the years many excavations have been completed in the area surrounding Silkeborg where the Tollund Man was discovered[,] and they seem to show that the villages were placed just as close to each other as they are today - the villages of the Iron Age were

probably their ancient predecessors" (Silkeborg Museum 212). Here, once again, stories about the past landscape are presented with stories of more recent times: a visitor familiar with the local villages will be able to clearly envision the villages of the Iron Age and see village agricultural life played out in the past similarly to its appearance in the present, seemingly with no break in continuity. Located just nine miles from the Tollund bog, the museum is very much a part of the historical landscape. Tollund Man, in his own exhibit, tells the story of "what happened here" just a short distance from his burial place. In this story, the bog has *always* been part of Danish life; in what Holtorf calls its "life history," the bog was a site of agriculture and ritual sacrifice, then a site of peat cutting, and, finally, a site of collective memory and heritage.

This story, describing the present as a direct result of the past, full of similarities despite differences in ritual, is thus a distinctly nationalistic version of place-making. As Ruth VanDyke notes, "social memory is often used to create the appearance of a seamless whole, naturalizing or legitimizing authority" (Van Dyke 2004: 414). Depicting modern farmers as the direct descendents of the farmers of Tollund Man's lifetime, the museum uses the physical landscape to legitimize the current location and organization of villages, suggesting that this is how Denmark "should" be organized. Tied to the land for thousands of years, such stories unite the modern Danish population with a shared history, further legitimizing the country's existence despite changes in industry and globalization. This creates an "imagined community" of the Danish population: the bog is part of a "political landscape... constituted in the places that draw together the imagined civil community, a perceptual dimension of space in which built forms elicit affective responses that galvanize memories and emotions central to the experience of political belonging" (Smith 2003:8). Laying claim to this national history, the Mosegård Museum website does not have an English translation, while the Silkeborg Museum's English translation is rough and at times awkward.³ Although English is a common language in Denmark, these websites effectively block entrance to the "Danish" landscape, showing preference toward those within the imagined community (those inhabitants of Denmark who speak Danish). This limited access to the past further strengthens the idea of a community to whom the past belongs. In this framework, Tollund Man and Grauballe Man are former members of this community, who have been re-created to extend this identity across time and

³ All quotes from the Mosegård Museum have been auto-translated by Google Chrome.

space, in a “memoryscape” encompassing both the Iron Age and the present, and not only the history of the individual bogs, but of the entire country.

Appropriating the Past: Seamus Heaney’s Bog Poems and the Danish Bog People

In a study of nostalgia and artifact preservation in Northern Ireland, Ray Cashman proposed that people preserve relics of the past in order to “control” the changes from past to present:

Unable to slow the pace of change but unwilling to passively float with the tides of change, people nonetheless claim their right to at least evaluate change in retrospect, to discern true loss (such as a decline in neighborly cooperation) ... Nostalgic practices such as amateur preservation work can be seen, then, as a reclamation of individual agency... Nostalgic practices do not offer people the power to literally arrest change, but they do offer them the temporal perspective necessary to become critics of change, and more or less willing participants. (Cashman 2006: 146).

As Danish museums demonstrate, preservation of the past does indeed provide a sense of continuity into the present, limiting the perceived extent of changes in the landscape. While the previous section discussed this perception as deliberately created by the museum (as a mechanism for producing a “national history”), it is also evident that the people who visit museums tell their own stories about the past. Although anthropologists have critiqued museum-created pasts as valuing profit more than “true” history (Kelleher 2004; Gable and Handler 1996), their theory overlooks the fact that museum visitors certainly have their own reasons for viewing, imagining, and interpreting the past. They do of course pay to visit museums, and are presented with the “official,” created version of the past, but they certainly do not always take that version at face value. Museum visitors are place-makers as well, telling their own stories about the past based on the artifacts they see – and while museums may try to nationalize or standardize their history, they cannot prevent individuals from “appropriating” the landscape of the past and making their own meaning.

As has been shown, Danish museums do not intend for bog bodies to be symbols of *humanity’s* past; rather, they are symbols of an imagined community of Danish people that has (supposedly) existed for thousands of years. However, bog bodies, as recognizable faces from the past, become symbols for outsiders as well. The Northern Irish poet Seamus Heaney is a notable example, reinterpreting the Danish bogs’ significance through his “Bog Poems.” Holtorf’s work on with German megaliths has proven that monuments and landscapes are never culturally “dead” – they are constantly reused, whether for their original purposes or new (Holtorf 1998). Heaney, therefore, is simply adding to the site’s “life

history,” using the landscape to create meaning and find answers to Basso’s questions: what happened here, and why should it matter?

In the case of the poem “Kinship,” Heaney’s created meaning is one of identity. By visiting the bog’s physical landscape and imagining stories, he gains a sense connection to the past and to the Tollund Man (“the strangled victim”):

Kinned by hieroglyphic
Peat on a spreadfield
To the strangled victim,
The love-nest in the bracken,

I step through origins
Like a dog turning
Its memories of wilderness
On the kitchen mat...

I love this turf-face,
Its black incisions,
The cooped secrets
Of process and ritual (Heaney 1975: 40).

Walking through the physical landscape of the bog (any bog, really; Northern Ireland, Heaney’s home country, has its fair share of bogs as well) allows Heaney to walk through the past (“I step through the origins”) and imagine former life (“the cooped secrets/ of process and ritual”). Here, the entirety of humanity’s past becomes a landscape: regardless of geographic and temporal separation, present-day Heaney and Iron Age Tollund Man are part of a single history created during Heaney’s walks through the bog. As Anthony Purdy, a literary critic of Heaney’s work, notes, “Far more important than either the Iron-Age world of the bog people or the modern world of their archaeological reappearance is the very particular way the bodies mediate the relationship between the two.” (Purdy 2002: 94). Here, as with the imagined continuity of Danish villages in Silkeborg, past and present landscapes are superimposed, creating a remembered landscape that emphasizes its “life history.”

Purdy’s critique of the use of bog people in Heaney’s poems is remarkably similar to Basso’s idea of place-making. Drawing on Bakhtin’s literary criticism, Purdy argues that an “artifact in an archaeological excavation is ‘the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied,’ where ‘time becomes, in effect, palpable and visible’” (Purdy 2002: 93). As in Basso’s argument, creating and examining an artifact’s narrative (or, by extension, the landscape of its discovery’s narrative), the place-maker strips away “pastness,” making “long-elapsed events... unfold as if before one’s eyes” (Basso

1996: 33). Purdy calls Tollund Man a “mnemotope” in these narratives: “a chronotopic motif manifesting the presence of the past” (Purdy 2002: 93). As in Danish museums, bog people in Heaney’s work are recognizable individuals who experienced the past, beings through which Heaney and others can enter and explore the entire imagined landscape of the past.

Heaney’s fascination with bogs may be partly connected to Cashman’s observations of Northern Irish nostalgia: because of the numerous artifacts found in Irish bogs, he has called the bog “a landscape that remembered everything that happened to it” (quoted in Purdy 2002: 95). This is supported by his poem “Kinship,” in which he claims to “love this turf-face,/ Its black incisions,/ The cooped secrets/Of process and ritual” (Heaney 1975: 40). However, many of his bog poems have deeper significance, connecting Iron Age sacrifices to modern violence surrounding Irish nationalism. In these, he uses the landscape to tell a “true” story that, in his view, illuminates and explains present conflict. In his poem “The Tollund Man,” for instance, he expresses his desire to visit the bog at Tollund: “Some day I will go to Aarhus/ To see his peat-brown head.../ In the flat country near by/ Where they dug him out.../ I will stand a long time” (Heaney 1996: 62). Here, he believes, he could “consecrate the cauldron bog/ Our holy ground and pray/ Him to make germinate/ The scattered, ambushed/ Flesh of labourers” killed in the Irish Civil War of the 1920s (Heaney 1998: 63; Purdy 2002: 96). Just as Tollund Man was sacrificed in the Iron Age, Heaney sees his dead countrymen as victims of sacrifice. The Danish bog, therefore, is as Irish (“Our holy ground”) as it is Danish. While Heaney creates a “memoryscape” linking both distant and recent past, the physical landscape holds significance in its story. By visiting the bog, Heaney hopes to gain a better understanding of the recent (and continuing) political turmoil:

Something of his sad freedom
As he rode the tumbrel
Should come to me, driving,
Saying the names

Tollund, Grauballe, Nebelgard,
Watching the pointing hands
Of country people,
Not knowing their tongue.

Out here in Jutland
In the old man-killing parishes
I will feel lost,
Unhappy and at home (Heaney 1998: 63).

Despite the language barrier, Heaney imagines he will feel at home in the Danish bogs. Even saying the names of the bogs will conjure up for Heaney images of the bog people's histories. As Keith Basso notes, the "evocative power of place-names" allow individuals to "register claims about their own moral worth... and... to produce a beneficial form of heightened self-awareness" (Basso 1996: 80-81). This claim is evidently as true for Heaney as it was for the Western Apache who Basso was writing about.

Here, therefore, Heaney reclaims a landscape that is not "his own" and tells a story about it, "evoking... entire worlds of meaning" (Basso 1996: 5). He did, in fact, visit the Tollund Man exhibit in 1973, writing an excerpt of the poem in the Silkeborg Museum's guestbook. Again showing preference for a *national* history, the museum's website includes a page for the poem – but, while English is widely spoken in Denmark, a Danish translation is provided before the English original (Silkeborg Museum 2012). Thus, in its "life history," the Tollund bog has undergone constant transformation, from a site of ritual, to a site of peat cutting, a site of national history, a site reclaimed for Irish significance, and, once again, a site reclaimed for Denmark.

Conclusions

In his definition of place-making, Keith Basso noted, "remembering is often the basis for imagining." Place-making, therefore, is not necessarily a truthful act. Its primary importance, instead, lies in its use to make sense of the modern world. As the Danish examples show, a site's history can be cast as nationalist or trans-national, nostalgic or violent. The choice to portray either version, of course, reveals a great deal about the story-teller.

The Danish examples are certainly not the only methods of museum place-making. While the Silkeborg Museum, located almost on-site, attempts to draw parallels between past and present villages, other museums may not follow this example. The British Museum's famous bog body, Lindow Man, was moved almost 200 miles from his discovery site, and belongs only to a larger exhibit on Iron-Age Britain. The museum has uprooted him from the physical landscape, drawing a hard line *between* past and present, showing a strong desire to downplay any continuity with the past, and certainly eliminating any sense of British identity with his era (British Museum 2012). The Danish examples, therefore, are only a few potential methods of viewing the past. Yet the fact that there are other examples only illustrates the larger point: all museums and archaeological exhibits have a story to tell, and it is never without bias. For

all their interest in portraying the past as objectively as possible, archaeologists and historians must answer the same questions as a culture telling the history of the monuments of its ancestors. The stories archaeologists and museums tell about the past are potentially fascinating in their own right; the fact that archaeologists exist at all is, of course, part of a cultural preference for telling stories about places. Remembering the landscape in narrative form is thus an act of perceiving, creating, and imagining, for archaeologists and poets alike.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Anthropology and University of New Hampshire.

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