
Reading the Ephemera of Caithness

Essay by Dimitra Ntzani and John Barber

In the northeastern Scottish county of Caithness, local volunteers are taught to *read the landscape*.¹ During a public engagement program led by AOC archaeologists,² members of the local community are introduced to archaeological practices and are asked to unravel the *time depth* of slight but extensive archaeological remains, also known as *ephemera*. The reading metaphor, frequently present in archaeological discourse, is employed by the designers of the workshop to inspire the participants' creative interaction with the ephemera.³ The metaphor has also been employed to interpret the function of recollection in memory literature;⁴ it presupposed the interpretation of memory as a form of *writing/inscribing* upon a soft or waxed surfaced. The paper examines how the writing and reading metaphors influence people's engagement with landscape elements of their cultural heritage.

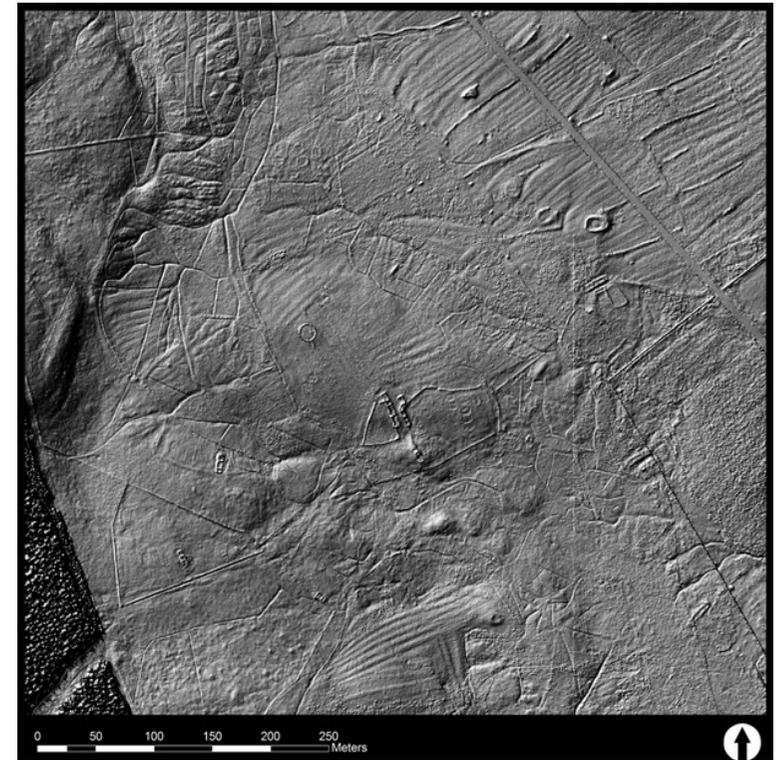
During the AOC workshops, the memory metaphor supports two kinds of reading, the distanced reading of the expert and the embedded sensory-rich reading of the expert + apprentice team. Archaeologists look for shapes of interest upon LiDAR topographies⁵ that resemble archaeological formations. These are later parsed in the field by teams of archaeologists and local participants. While the use of the reading metaphor exposes the archaeological intention for non-invasive interaction with archaeological elements, it also triggers the inscription of new traces. AOC workshops forge new connections between the local population and the fragmented remains and inspire new cultural practices embedded in the moorlands of Caithness.

The Caithness landscape is here presented as an infinite database of memory traces. The paper draws a thread between the memory metaphor of the "mystic writing pad"⁶ and the archaeologically overwritten landscape of Caithness. It presupposes that the locus of metaphor is thought not language⁷ and it examines emerging cultural practices by the means of ethnography. The paper unravels the spatial qualities of the readings of the expert and of the novice and it points out how the metaphor enhances and constrains locals' interaction with the ephemera.

The mnemonic apparatus of the mystic writing pad

Archaeology and psychoanalysis share an interest in the reconstruction of the past. Archaeology seeks to reconstruct a spatial and textual narrative, the host of collective memory, while psychoanalysis aims to construct a personal narrative, the host of personal memory. The two memory disciplines often employ similar metaphors while at least one of them was employed as a metaphorical frame for the other.⁸

Wax slates or tablets, core components of ancient inscribing devices, prevail in memory's metaphorical discourse. These mnemonic apparatus can be traced in Plato's Dialogue *Theaetetus*,⁹ in the Aristotelian discourse on Memory and Reminiscence,¹⁰ in Cicero's *De Oratore*¹¹ and in various handbooks on mnemotechniques.¹² The era of typography weakens their appeal but one may still track their presence in Descartes¹³ or even Shakespeare's discourse.¹⁴ The metaphor of the wax tablet makes its grand return in the beginning of the 20th century in Sigmund Freud's writings. This time, it has developed layers and each layer preserves imprints of distinct qualities. Freud's mystic writing pad consists of three surfaces; the upper celluloid surface that prevents direct contact of the perceived object with the actual



A palimpsestic landscape of settlement and agricultural remains near Broubster, Caithness.
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memory slate, the intermediate wax-paper surface that temporarily preserves the new traces and renders them visible and the lower solid wax slab that preserves all impressions long term.

The wide use of the writing/reading metaphor exposes a number of popular presuppositions on memory, which were severely questioned during the 20th century by new approaches in psychology and by cognition theories.¹⁵ Up to that point, memory was mainly discussed as storage of imprints and it evolved in three sequential stages: the writing or the engraving of memory traces, the storage of the acquired traces and their reading as part of a recollection process. It also entailed an action of detachment. During the first stage, the framing of the engraved form was considered an essential act of perception. The framed traces had initially a delineated shape whose reading became the centre of psychoanalysis. But, the more a trace was read, the less faithful to its initial formation it became. Memory traces were stored upon the waxed slate in chronological sequence. Accordingly, memory would be explored in depth; recent traces would reside on the surface and older ones underneath.

Reading the ephemera of Caithness

A wind-farm development at Burn of Whilk was granted planning permission on the condition that it would "...include measures to improve public access to the Hill of Shebster and Cnoc Freicedain scheduled ancient monuments..."¹⁶ Funding a local community engagement program was one of the planning requirements. AOC archaeology was commissioned to design and execute the program.

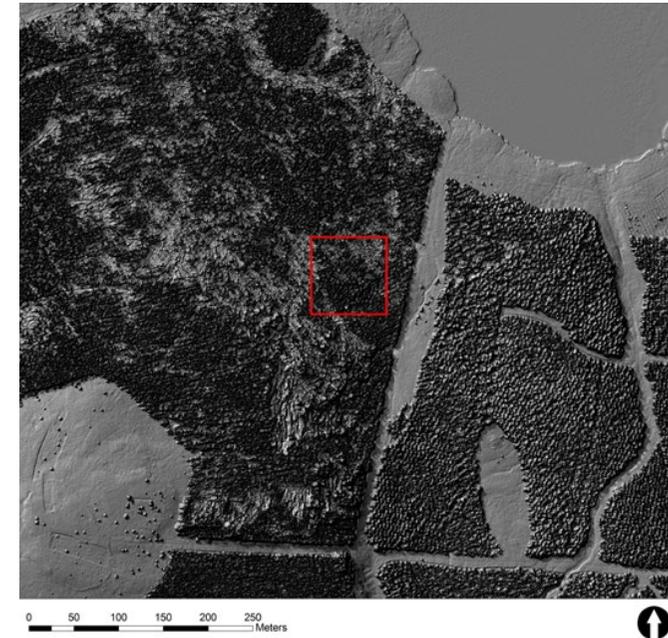
The word *ephemera* has a 5th century BC Greek origin. It initially described short-lived insects, a drug that brought death in a day or a plant that sprung up and died within a day. Today it is used to describe any object or action that has a short life span, or that is of no lasting value.¹⁷ The archaeological *ephemera* are obscure, fragmented and scattered traces of past human activity. While monuments, which constitute the subject matter of archaeology and architectural history, tend to represent only a few percent of human activity, the ephemera arise from the land management activities of common people. The ephemera can be the last imprints of previously present spatial formations (e.g. penannular imprints of Bronze Age huts). They may be the remnants of archaeological interest that have not been identified before in this area (e.g. henges in Caithness), or archaeological sites whose recording, excavation or preservation has not been a priority (e.g. remains of agricultural activities like enclosure or tillage). In Caithness, the *ephemera* survive from the Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages through to the Post-Medieval periods, constantly transformed by successive interventions and always subject to the erosion of time, the encroachment of peat and to current land management or amenity practices.¹⁸ Taking into consideration their long lasting presence, their characterization as ephemera seems to reflect the persistence of their forms and functions and not their "life span."

AOC public engagement practices are organized as outdoor didactic performances, as group-research tasks. The participants identify and record their sites of interest and improvise on their historic interpretation and significance. Volunteers are actively involved in all archaeological practices up to the point that the completed records and the retrieved artefacts leave for AOC conservation lab or for museum storage. The public and outdoor character of this cultural practice then ceases.

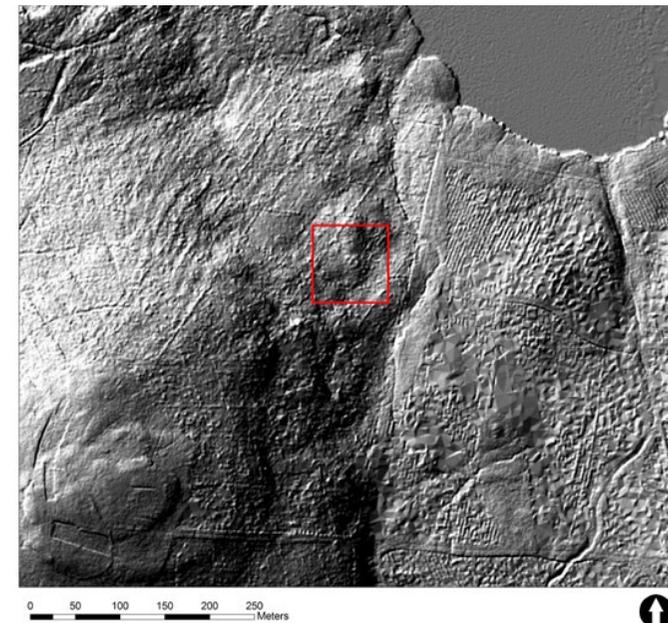
The readings of the expert

Digital information technologies facilitate AOC's public archaeological explorations. Possible sites of interest are initially identified from LiDAR scans. "LiDAR stands for 'Light Detection And Ranging', and is a means of surveying large areas of terrain from the air... The survey data can be sampled and 'cleaned', to remove vegetation and buildings, providing what is known as a 'bare earth' model of the survey area. This can be used to help identify archaeological sites without the distraction of bushes and trees growing around archaeological sites."¹⁹

Through the use of appropriate software, LiDAR scans uncover traces buried in the deeper recesses of the landscape, what soil processes, vegetation overgrowth, harsh winds and human activity rendered invisible. LiDAR also reveals sites of interest in areas to which human access is rare or difficult.²⁰ It supports the identification of traces that lie hidden. LiDAR technologies support a distant reading of the ephemera and they presuppose that the reader is well acquainted with the old spatial languages. They are instruments of landscape analysis, of the archaeological interrogation of process.



Unprocessed LiDAR image of an afforested area south of Loch Calder, Caithness
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Bare earth model of landscape shown in figure 3 revealing a settlement site (in red square) and many preforrest traces © AOC Archaeology Group

The reading of the apprentice

Navigation in the field is achieved with GPS devices and hard copies of the area's map or through the use of specially designed software installed on iPads that merge map and LiDAR data. While in the field, the participants have the choice to amend their pre-designed route, by constantly comparing the rich-sensory input of their navigation with the data-output of the digital maps. The participants along with AOC archaeologists navigate through time and space in a field with an infinite number of traces.

Interestingly, the identification of these sites *in situ* presupposes a working knowledge of the local vegetation, of qualities of soil, of geological formations, of local history and social customs. Apparently, the "upper layers" that the project-software has uplifted to unravel the ephemera play a key role during their identification while in the field. During the exploration of the ephemera, the experts seek a higher point to sit on, for a new kind of aerial view that would allow them to observe the general shape of the dismantled signs, while the novice struggles to keep hands on. The readings of the expert are sensory deductive and the readings of the novice are prosthetic.

Having located the *ephemera*, the participants are then challenged to explore their surroundings and settings. They frame the area of interest, delineate the site's current and previous forms and unravel its *time depth*. They also investigate possible functions, ways of construction and causes of erosion. The site is then recorded by means of sketching and photography in augmentation of a written description. The *reading the landscape* practice evolves as a highly kinetic group activity, embedded in the site of interest.



Permanent traces: Participants walking along an irrigation dam, looking for hut circle imprints © AOC Archaeology Group

Under the spell of the metaphor

Caithness landscapes are palimpsests of traces representing quotidian human interventions. Sequentially overwritten traces form a spatial riddle that the workshop aims to record and to resolve. Figuring out which traces were first engraved and how many times they've been attuned to later demands is a Sisyphean task. Old traces seem to attract new ones, while the latter take advantage of the positions and the formations of the old ones e.g. a quarryface transforms into one wall of a shepherd's shelter. Just like a deep carving on the lower waxed Freudian slate may divert the hand from its route and affect the shape of new engravings, old traces work as an actively modifying context for the newly inscribed ones.

The mystic writing pad metaphor hosts three kinds of memory traces: the intangible traces of the celluloid layer (the layer that permits the recording of the movement), the temporary traces on the waxed paper (the layer that renders the signs visible) and the permanent traces on the wax slate (the deeper layer of the unconscious infinite storage). During the AOC workshop, experts aim for the readings of persistent traces, carved on the *unconscious* of the land. The apprentices, on the other hand, struggle to establish a tactile relation with the upper layer; they search for the haptic relation that the celluloid layer eliminated.

As noted, the *reading* metaphor is employed to serve the design and the execution of a non-invasive archaeological workshop. The metaphor discourages the addition of new traces and up to a point it serves its goal successfully. But, to reassemble the fragmented pieces, the expert and the apprentice create new traces, some of temporal and intangible character (traces that emerge during the recording practices), and some of permanent and irreversible character (traces that emerge during the excavation practices). Freud suggests that the engravings that rest on the two upper layers of his mnemonic apparatus are rendered visible only for as long as these layers remain in contact with the lower storage area. Once they become detached, the temporarily stored information disappears. To render the traces visible, the team needs to establish an intermediate layer of temporary traces between the silent past and the enquiring present. The participants track down previously recorded landmarks and use them as a geometrical reference to assign coordinates to the ephemera. A Cartesian interpretation of the ephemera produces a virtual grid, which consists of tangible and intangible, temporal or permanent, mobile or immobile landmarks. Trekking paths, metal fences, irrigation ditches and geological ridges are some of the tangible elements used to establish the grid. The latter is aligned and signified through the use of mobile elements e.g. metric rods and tapes, the participant's bodies (participants are used as temporal landmarks and as short-term recording devices of the incoming information). The overall practice produces an intermediate layer, which temporarily reveals geometrical analogies, dismantled shapes and metric relations.

Archaeological and museological approaches have been struggling for more than two centuries to establish a protective celluloid layer upon significant cultural inscriptions. Conservation techniques, showcases, barriers and CCTV cameras are some of the practices that support the detachment of the significant cultural elements from the erosional aspects of everyday life. Freud suggests that the detachment of the two upper layers from the lower third one is an essential



Temporal traces: Sequential frames from video recording, during the setting of a grid © AOC Archaeology Group

mnemonic act; it prepares the upper layers for new inscriptions and it signifies the storage of memory traces to the deeper areas of our unconscious.²¹ In Caithness, detachment works as the essential lapse of time between what is perceived and what is already stored. It establishes an essential inertia for the constantly transforming present to leave a clear mark. AOC archaeologists acknowledge the essential character of the detachment but they also acknowledge that each reading has an immediate effect on the *ephemera*. AOC rephrases the controversial enquiry regarding the invasive or non-invasive interaction with elements of cultural heritage: If every spatial reading is inevitably a form of inscription, what kind of inscriptions would we like to leave behind? Would these traces inspire a creative engagement? AOC works directly on the gap that the detachment left behind, on the void that temporarily hosts both the past and the present.



Handing over the writing pad of Caithness © AOC Archaeology Group

In conclusion

Memory literature that makes use of the *writing* and *reading* metaphors, often refers to a popular enquiry; Do the encoded signs of written discourse support or weaken memory? In the Platonic Dialogue *Phaedrus*, Socrates refers to an Egyptian myth that sums up a relevant debate between two Egyptian gods, Theuth and Thamus. In the myth Theuth is the inventor of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and alphabet and Thamus is the ruler of Egypt. Theuth praises the benefits of the written signs to Thamus and suggests that they will "...make the Egyptians wiser and give them better memories." By contrast Thamus believes that the alphabet will "...create forgetfulness in the learners' souls... they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves."²²

During the *readings* of the Caithness *ephemera*, the persistent enquiry is rephrased: Do these fragmented traces support memory as a collective embedded practice or they weaken it? To answer the question, one should take into consideration the particular qualities of the *ephemera*. The latter are not the delineated signs

of an ancient and well-studied language. They are inherently resistant to immediate readings and any attempt to syllabize their engravings ends with a question mark. Severely altered or dismantled, they spread out in the vast fields of Caithness as half-stated enquiries rather than as well-hidden answers. These obscure traces work more successfully as memory triggers than as memory deposits.

In the frame of AOC's workshops, the ephemera present significant advantages compared to *coherently read* monuments. Their enquiring character and their possible connection to everyday folk activities adds engaging value to them. The workshop's participatory and public character restores a sense of trust, which is commonly absent from people's interaction with musealized cultural elements. Moreover, a sense of apprenticeship is added to cultural educational programs. Finally, the ephemera work as evidence of the fallacies of history and archaeology. The readings of the ephemera in Caithness do not support the re-collection of a well-preserved memory deposit. They re-enact the creative qualities of an embedded and embodied collective memory; they put the mystic writing pad of Caithness back in the hands of the locals and in use.

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- 12 William Shakespeare, Ann Thompson, and Neil Taylor, *Hamlet, The Arden Shakespeare* (London: Thomson, 2006), pp. xxii, 613 pages.
- 13 Frances Amelia Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Pimlico, 1992).

ENDNOTES

- 1 Words or phrases used metaphorically by the AOC archaeologists and local participants during the public engagement programs are presented in italics at first appearance.
- 2 <http://www.aocarchaeology.com/Baillie/new/>
- 3 "The soil is an historical document which like a written record, must be deciphered, translated and interpreted before it can be used" Philip Barker, *Techniques of Archaeological Excavation*, Third edition. edn (London: Batsford, 1993). P.13
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- 7 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1980).
- 8 Freud frequently used archaeology as a prominent metaphor for his psychoanalysis. See Sigmund Freud and others, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud / Vol.2, Studies on Hysteria: 1893-1895 / Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud*, (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1955).
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- 11 Marcus Tullius Cicero, E. W. Sutton, and H. Rackham, *De Oratore*, (London: Heinemann, 1942).
- 12 Frances Amelia Yates, *The Art of Memory*, (Pimlico, 1992).
- 13 "I do not posit any other difference between the soul and the ideas than that between a piece of wax and the diverse impressions it can receive" (Letter to Mesland May 2, 1644) quote from D. F. Krell, 'On the Verge of Remembering, a Discussion of Casey, Edward, S. Remembering, a Phenomenological Study', *Research in Phenomenology*, 19 (1989). P.56-74
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- 16 <http://community.caithness.org/article.php?id=3716>
- 17 In OED one may read that the word also stands for "Printed matter of no lasting value except to collectors, as tickets, posters, greetings cards, etc." Source: "ephemeron, n." <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/63212?p=emailAcktDibJ56Sgl&d=63212>>.
- 18 John Barber, *Guidelines for the Preservation of Areas of Rig and Furrow in Scotland Edinburgh*, (STAR: UK, 2001)
- 19 <http://www.aocarchaeology.com/Baillie/new/what-is-lidar/>
- 20 In Scotland, the ephemera abound at higher altitudes and latitudes than the main spread of current population.
- 21 Freud suggests that this detachment "...lies on the origin of the concept of time." Freud and others pp. 212
- 22 Plato and Robin Waterfield, *Phaedrus*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).