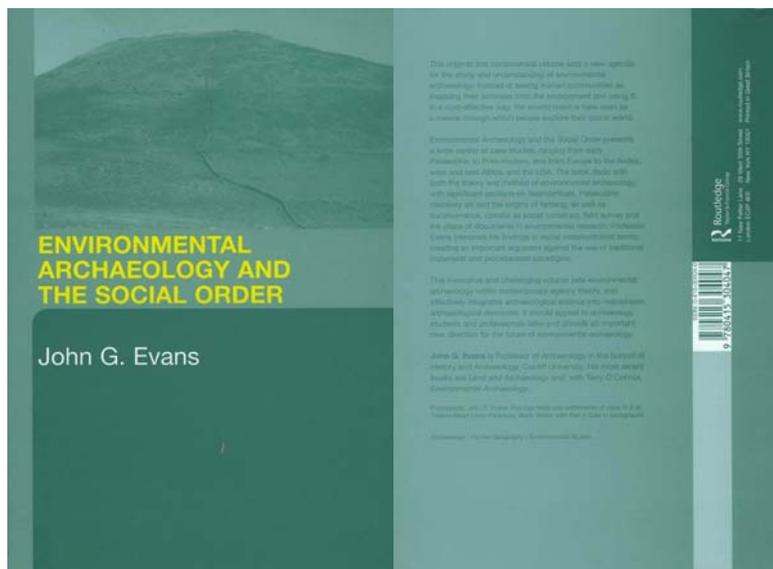


**Evans, J.G. 2003. Environmental archaeology and the social order. – London/New York, Routledge**

Book review by C.C. Bakels



‘Environmental archaeology and the social order’ by John G. Evans is a surprising book. Its aims and contents are announced in the first sentence of the preface: “This book shows how environmental archaeology can be studied from the point of view of human social relationships”. This point of view is displayed in ten chapters, followed by a chapter 'conclusions'. Every chapter ends, too, with conclusions, presented as short statements. This was a happy notion, because each chapter displays so many ideas and case-studies that the average reader can easily lose the thread of the story. It is a book to be studied carefully.

The first chapter deals with the history of environmental archaeology. The author remarks that archaeology has gone 'social' in the past twenty-five years. Archaeology has also started to socialize the landscape. Environmental archaeology creates data in order to reconstruct past environments, but environments were (and are) used only after they had/have been established in the social domain.

Chapter two is called ‘Sociality and environment’. It deals with human interactions and social relations. Environment is ‘the setting’. To socialize within a wholly social medium is difficult and some sort of interface with the physical world is necessary.

Chapter three introduces a word, which keeps recurring in the book: ‘texture’. The heading of the chapter is ‘Textures help a person think’. The author states that the experience of textures beneath our feet, for instance, is rarely acknowledged as a medium of social agency. Commonly soil surfaces are considered in terms of agriculture, but it is inconceivable that there is no relevance beyond that of sheer materiality or function. One of the conclusions of this chapter is that textures are enhanced and can be monumentalized through the use of pottery, stones, bones and deliberate soil movement. In the next chapter some of the ideas about texture are placed in a special setting, the chalk lands of southern Britain.

Chapter five concerns climate. Much about climate is data, yet climate itself is an abstraction, a physical measure of an abstract idea. It is a texture of experience, quite the opposite of soil texture, but still texture. According to the author palaeoclimatologists fail to understand this when they talk about ‘proxy’ evidence for climate. There is no other sort of evidence.

Chapter six treats surveys in temperate and Mediterranean countries. Scale and context are discussed and one of the conclusions is that pottery sherds were used in the social domain. Chapter seven shortens texture to text. It is about documents and inscriptions. No justification is supposed to be needed for including a section on texts in a book on texture. Many monuments and ancient writings are inscriptions and thus textured. Still, this is not the best chapter of the volume. What to think of one of the conclusions at the end: “Context is important in understanding the ways texts and inscriptions were used, whether as individual monuments, in the walls of a church or as a document in a cartulary. Text enhances meaning and itself is better understood in context”.

Transhumance is the subject of the next chapter and deals with the several types of moving animals around. One of the aims is to understand how transhumance plays a part in social life. How the transient coming together of people in associations, which go beyond every day community life, affects learning and future states of being. The European Alps, southeast Italy, ancient Greece, Bolivia and Wales provide the case-studies.

The topic of chapter nine, hunting and death in Neanderthal Europe, provides the reader with an exploration of what it is to be a human or another species. Landscapes of hunting strategies and mortuary practices, together with the bones themselves, allowed the development of socialities at a variety of scales.

The final chapter before the general conclusions deals with the origins of farming in southwest Asia. The author recalls that Braudel saw social interactions as most relevant in small-scale events, physical environmental ones in the long duration, but that he did not theorise the way these two kinds of influences were linked. This chapter is meant to provide a means of exploring this problem, and through a fundamental stage of human history. It is an intriguing text, which even discusses the sociality and emotions of plants.

As I said before, this is a surprising book. It reflects the ideas and passions of an eminent environmental archaeologist. Though, in his final conclusions he states that environmental archaeology cannot be considered as archaeology. If so, can an environmental archaeologist exist in a purely academic sense? It is no light reading, but it is a good platform for starting discussions. The text is accompanied by illustrations, which are adequate, but not too well reproduced.

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