Researching monumental spaces in late prehistoric societies: New perspectives for landscape research in the Russian Altai

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ABSTRACT

In this article we present a preliminary study discussing new perspectives for future research and interpretation of the Bronze and Iron Age monuments and monumental landscapes in terms of their social dynamic in these early complex societies. Archaeological landscape research in the last decades is characterized by a significant paradigmatic separation, resulting in often one-dimensional treatments of landscapes. Using certain concepts developed by Henri Lefebvre and Martina Löw, we address social landscape as a three-dimensional *social space*, which enabled us to integrate multiple approaches. This triadic framework is discussed using a case study which focuses on data of the Karakol and Yustyd valley in the Russian Altai. Our study shows that the general transitions in the use and structure of monuments during the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age can be variously interpreted. These interpretations are not necessarily exclusive but may each reflect a partial rendition of the triadic model of social space, or *monumental space*.

1. Introduction

The archaeological record of Central Asia has shown an immense wealth in monumental features still present in the current landscapes and has contributed significantly to research on social complexity in late prehistoric societies (Hanks and Linduff, 2009). The research presented here focuses on the monumental landscapes of the Russian Altai in Central Asia. Nearly two decades of research has led to the acquisition of a substantial dataset on the archaeological and monumental landscapes in this region (Bourgeois et al., 2007, 2014; Bourgeois and Gheyle, 2008; Gheyle, 2009). A landscape approach was used from the onset and future research will continue to do so. Nonetheless, the last decades have produced a range of approaches for the investigation of archaeological landscapes in general and monumental landscapes in specific (Anschuetz et al., 2001; Ashmore, 2004). These approaches vary in their theoretical or philosophical background and often represent complementary perspectives. Many of these approaches often addressed social landscapes from a predominant single perspective, primarily reflecting specific theoretical traditions (Ashmore, 2004, 255; Johnson, 2010; Knapp and Ashmore, 1999, 4). In this preliminary study we try to establish a conceptual framework, based on sociological theory, which integrates multiple perspectives to investigate social landscapes and the role of monumental architecture in a multi-dimensional approach, including material, socio-political and symbolic perspectives.

To achieve this, the work of Lefèbvre (1991) and Löw (2001) on social space is used as a basis. Lefèbvre's theory on *the production of space* is used as a multidimensional model of social space. This Lefebvrian approach is added with the work on social space which allows for the integration of space in social theory such as structuration and practice. First, a brief summary is given from the most relevant approaches in prehistoric landscape research, with a specific focus on the use of monuments. This is followed by a section on the proposed conceptual framework and the theories of Lefèbvre and Löw on which it is founded. In the third section a case study from the Russian Altai is presented. This case study deals with a specific selection of the monumental record in this region, both geographically, chronologically and typologically. The forth section then details how these data and information from the previous case study can be interpreted within the outlined framework. Different approaches, each with its specific opportunities, will be outlined and their dynamic as components of the framework will be explored. Finally, in the concluding section, the validity and suitability of this framework will be evaluated and future objectives will be outlined.

1.1. Interpreting monumental landscapes

The range of approaches developed in landscape archaeology in recent decades is often simplistically dichotomized between processualist and post-processualist archaeologies (Ashmore, 2004, 256). The

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main difference is the foundation in positivist philosophies and focus on material elements in landscape research for the processual school, and postmodern philosophies and focus on ideational elements in landscape research for the postprocessual school (Johnson, 2010). Landscape research in the processual tradition generally focuses on human adaptation, such as economic factors and subsistence (Wilkinson, 2006; Rossignol, 1992). Studies on settlement patterns and settlement systems are characteristic for this. Post-processual landscape approaches are characterized by a humanistic approach, focussing on society, politics, ideology, symbolism, and are influenced by theory in cultural geography, anthropology and sociology (Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988; Thomas, 1996, 2001). The distinction between abstract *space* and meaningful *place* (Low and Lawrence-Zuniga, 2003), together with concepts such as *dwelling*, which describe routinized bodily experience of landscape (Ingold, 1993), are pivotal concept from anthropological theory adopted in prehistoric landscape research. The debate between both traditions in landscape archaeology is best known for the conflict it inspired. However, it did inspire researchers to broaden their intellectual horizons beyond the traditional borders (Anschuetz et al., 2001, 175; Knapp, 1996, 151).

When turning to monumental landscapes specifically, the contribution is most significant in the wake of post-processualism. Prehistoric monuments are addressed as primary components within *ritual landscapes*, focussing on the experiential and symbolical aspects of monumental architecture (see Barrett, 1990; Bradley, 1998, 2000; Thomas, 1993). This has led to a focussing of the research scope of monumental architecture to these *new topics* of ritual and symbols in prehistoric landscapes (Blake, 2004, 236). Phenomenological approaches, most notably explored by Tilley (1994), are the most famous application of this. It declares the primacy of *experience* and *agency* in the interpretation of prehistoric monumental landscapes. It has, however, received much criticism for its lack of methodological rigor (Flemming, 2006) and for theoretical problems that arise in interpreting experience of prehistoric people (Thomas, 2001). In economic approaches focussing on subsistence and the human-environment relation, monumental architecture is often investigated in the context of settlement ecology (Anschuetz et al., 2001, 177). Monumental architecture specifically, and ritual or social components of society in general are investigated in function of this economic approach. More recently, a renewed appreciation of political approaches, among others, to monumental landscapes is being explored (Smith, 2003, 2011). As Smith notes, this approach does not address political formation as static categories or typologies, but rather investigates the assertion of authority and subjects in practice and the identification of communities. Regarding monumental landscapes, research topics such as communal events, feasting and monument building are investigated in respect to their effect on the creation and maintenance of political authority (Smith, 2011, 420–421). Recently, Artursson et al. (2016) used a combined political economic approach to investigate the prehistoric monumental landscapes of Early Neolithic Scandinavia. Here, the role of communal events requiring surplus production, such as feasting and monument building, is regarded in respect to emergent regional authorities (Artursson et al., 2016, 2).

2. Lefèbvre and Löw in prehistoric archaeology

The application of Lefèbvre or Löw is not novel in the study of prehistoric landscapes (Blake, 2004). The theoretical concepts of Lefèbvre are used either as a general study on territoriality (Lowry, 2008), or as a typology – based on the *triad* (see below) - of separated ritual functions within the context of a Marxist analysis (Weaver, 2012). Löw's spatial theory has been used in studies on identity (Hofman, 2013) and power construction (Maran et al., 2006) through monumentality. What binds these applications of Lefèbvre and Löw, is that they address spatiality or social space as a general background framework. The authors use the work of Lefèbvre and Löw on social space primarily as a

background framework. One exception is Weaver's study. Here, however, the work of Lefèbvre is utilized primarily as a frame for a Marxist classification of Neolithic monuments. So even though Lefèbvre and Löw's research has been influential for prehistoric landscape architecture, no one has treated the *spatiality* of monumental landscapes as the primary research subject. They have mainly considered it a trait of monumental architecture. The holistic framework we wish to develop will, in contrast, focus on the spatiality. Consequently, the work of Lefèbvre and Löw will occupy a *central* position in our conceptual framework, instead of solely providing a general definition or concept of social space.

This paper leaves no room for a detailed overview of the theory on the production of space, but its core concept is most important in respect to the topic of this paper. The conceptual *triad,* which stands at the conceptual core of this theory, describes three interconnected dimensions (or processes) involved in the production of space (Lefèbvre, 1991, 39). Each element of the triad has a double signification, which is the result of a double approach originating in phenomenological theory and language theory (Schmid, 2008, 29). This triad consists of *spatial practice, representation of space, space of representation* (Lefèbvre, 1991, 38). The first dimension involves the physical, material elements of space. The second is the dimension of mental spaces, geographical knowledge and planning. The third dimension is the symbolic aspect of space, the signification that is attributed to material elements of space. This dimension can be compared with the *place* vs. *space* concept in anthropological theory and shares a theoretical foundation in phenomenology (Schmid, 2008). This conceptual triad is not only characterized by its components but also by the connecting relationships. The components are dialectically interlinked into a whole (Schmid, 2008, 40–41). This *Lefebvrian* dialectic relies on the absence of a *synthesis* and a dynamic twofold *negation* of each dimension. This means that the components of the triad are of equal value, and more importantly, inextricably linked (Lefèbvre, 2004, 12). Contemporary research (Schmid, 2008; Goonwardena, 2011) points out that the latter was often neglected in post-modern interpretations, most notably in Soja's (1996) concept of *Thirdworld*. Lefèbvre thus provides a theoretical framework for the *analysis* of the processes that result in the production of space.

The theory on the production of space proved to be influential, and inspired further research in spatial theory. One example is the constitution of space, as described by Löw (2001, 2006). She developed a novel *action-theoretical* approach based on a relational model of space, which affirms the role of *individual action*, an aspect overlooked by the structure-theoretical approach, such as Lefèbvre. Löw's theory integrates *space* in general social theory on social practice (Bourdieu, 1977) and, especially, structuration (Giddens, 1984). Löw's *duality of space* is a reference and adaptation to Giddens' *duality of structure and agency* and structuration theory. *Duality*, according to Giddens, expresses the mutual conditionality of action and structure in the constitution of space. As a result, Giddens' views on time and space as boundary conditions are revised. Space is not an external condition of societal structure but is itself an integral part of societal structure, a *spatial structure* (Löw, 2006, 38). Following this, spatial structures can lead to institutionalization of spaces (Löw, 2001). *Routinization*, as described by Giddens', explains the creation of spatial institutions through their continuous reproduction by agents (Löw, 2006, 36–38).

The outlined triad of Lefèbvre functions as a model for the constitution of social space, composed of a dynamic between material, conceptual and ideational dimensions. For the following case study, social landscape is regarded as this three-dimensional social space, attributing multidimensionality as an *a priori*. The social landscape, according to this view, resonates through the multiple facets of society (e.g. material, economic, political, symbolic) (Hodder, 2004, 36) without attributing primacy to any specific aspect. Following this model, each dimension or process can only possess meaning in relation to the triad (Lefèbvre, 2004; Schmid, 2008, 33). From this conceptual