

***ECSLAND Circles, European cultures and sacred landscapes:
a transfrontier and cross-mind cooperation***

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1. The EUCEL Initiative: European Culture expressed in Landscapes

EUCEL, European Culture expressed in Landscapes, is an initiative of CCLP, the Cambridge Centre for Landscape and People. CCLP has been established under the University of Cambridge, UK, with the mission to integrate cultural and spiritual values into landscape and nature conservation. The EUCEL Initiative comprises three projects: EUCALAND, European Culture expressed in Agricultural Landscapes; ESLAND, European Culture expressed in Island Landscapes; and ECSLAND, European Culture expressed in Sacred Landscapes.

EUCALAND, developed in 2007-2009 and co-funded by the Culture Programme of the European Commission, is a multidisciplinary research project carried out in 13 countries, with 15 partners and a total of 40 organisations involved. It considers European agricultural landscapes as expressions of a common cultural heritage, and shows the pressure that this heritage is now under, due to new developments and agricultural practices. Guidelines for future landscape planning and policies have been produced, together with a glossary, a conference, a book, a travelling exhibition and other outputs, among which the EUCALAND Network.

ESLAND, developed in 2011-2013 and co-funded by the same Culture Programme of the European Commission, has been carried out in six countries, with eight partners and the involvement of 33 organisations. Set up to improve the consideration of cultural heritage in European island landscapes, the project aims to promote an interdisciplinary approach to landscape research and stimulate discussion, in order to work towards a common methodology for island landscape history, classification, identity, scenario, e-tools and dissemination. ESLAND has been successful in raising awareness about the unique identity and values that European islands have for both islanders and mainland communities. The ESLAND Programme comprises a project (ESLAND), a summer school (SUMESLAND), a conference, a travelling exhibition, two books and other outputs.

ECSLAND, European Culture expressed in Sacred Landscapes, completes the EUCEL trilogy. It has also been co-funded by the Culture Programme of the European Commission, and developed in 2013-2015. The project is carried out in five countries, involving 12 partners and 20 organisations. With European landscape, cultural heritage and identity as the central issues of the EUCEL initiative, the ECSLAND Project set out to explore the links between sacred landscape and cultural heritage, as well as to identify the unique values they have for European citizens.

2. The ECSLAND Programme

The ECSLAND Network is the ultimate result of the ECSLAND Project. It endeavours to continue in the future the discussions initiated at both local and European levels by the Project.

The ECSLAND Project and the ECSLAND Network are part of the ECSLAND Programme of CCLP. The Programme seeks to improve consideration of sacred landscape and to foster community participation, in order to help safeguard these precious sites with their natural, spiritual and cultural values.

The Programme, via its Project and Network, counts several outputs, including a conference, a book, a website (www.ecslandproject.eu), a travelling exhibition. Yet above all it sets up the foundations for research methodology on European sacred landscapes. A few of these outcomes are illustrated below.

3. The ECSLAND Project

The ECSLAND Project has the specific aim of stimulating policy-makers to work towards the preservation and conservation of sacred landscapes, and their tangible and intangible cultural heritage, for the benefit of future generations.

Six research groups have been formed to achieve the above goals:

- Sacred Landscape History
- Sacred Landscape Character
- Sacred Landscape Identity
- Sacred Landscape Archaeology and Architecture
- ECSLAND Network
- Sacred Landscape Dissemination

The first four groups have carried out the ECSLAND research illustrated in parts 7 and 8, while explanation of research groups on Network and Dissemination follows here.

4. The ECSLAND Network

Key objectives at the heart of the ECSLAND Programme are to promote interreligious, intergenerational and intercultural dialogue between European people. A Spiritual Circle has been established to support the first dialogue, a Young Circle to support the second, and a Governance Circle to support the third.

Project Partners, Spiritual Circle, Young Circle, Governance Circle and European Organisations form the ECSLAND Network.

In particular, the Spiritual Circle has been set up to provide a platform for religious representatives to debate on the concept of sacredness, to share their concerns about sacred landscape management, and to exchange ideas with regard to the protection and accessibility of sacred sites.

Intergenerational dialogue has been promoted through the creation of a Young Circle of graduate students and young researchers across the different countries of the project, gathering together during the project field trips and at the conference.

Two groups help to complete a further objective of the project, i.e. stimulating intercultural dialogue: the Governance Circle and the European Organisations. The Governance Circle consists of local and international authorities involved in the project topics, while the European Organisations group is composed of the European institutions attached to the project but outside the beneficiary partners.

Though the Network, these Circles, Partners and European Organisations will carry out the methods advanced during the project, and will join forces to keep the dialogue and research into sacred landscape alive.

5. Disseminating sacred landscapes

A core part of the project has been the dissemination of ideas, methods and results. In this context, discussions with local stakeholders, governmental organisations and spiritual communities has been fundamental.

Therefore, a sixth group on the dissemination of the topics and research on sacred landscapes has been organised within the ECSLAND partnership. This group aimed at not only communicating events, progress and results, but also impacting future decision-making on European sacred landscapes.

The group has worked in close cooperation with the ECSLAND Network, to develop discussion throughout the project. However, the discussion begun during the project will continue in the future through the Network, thus fostering future development and cooperation beyond the life of the project.

In doing so, the project endeavours to make a significant contribution to the implementation of the European Landscape Convention and other international policies, for the future sustainable development of these fragile landscapes.

6. Promoting dialogue

The ECSLAND Conference organised in Sassari in April 2015 was decisive in facilitating discussion on European sacred landscapes and cultural heritage. The conference presented the results of the ECSLAND Project, with new research methods on the history, characterisation, identity and the archaeology-architecture of sacred landscapes. In addition, several case studies of different European sacred sites were described.

Besides this, the conference brought together leading academics, scientists, policy-makers and religious representatives. A highlight of the conference was indeed the Spiritual Circle discussion between different religious representatives, who conveyed to the audience their views of sacredness and on sacred landscapes with their presentations, preceding the discussion of the Spiritual Circle.

Another innovative conference event was the Young Circle, where graduate students from the University of Sassari presented their own in-depth studies of Sardinian sacred landscapes.

The ECSLAND Conference was a tribute to Professor Oliver Rackham, a guiding hand of the EUCEL Initiative, and the inspiring leader of the three research groups on Landscape History in the EUCALAND, ESLAND and ECSLAND Projects.

7. Developing research

7.1 Sacred Landscape History

The sacred landscapes of Europe are a fundamental part of our heritage. The aim of the first research group on Sacred Landscape History of the ECSLAND Project has been to produce a methodology for describing the evolution of European sacred landscapes, pointing out their historical features and processes. For the case studies of this working group, the question of human intervention has been considered, with the impact of secular activities over time on the sacredness of a place and its landscape.

7.2 Sacred Landscape Character

The study of sacred landscapes as cultural heritage involves identity and cultural values for people, and thus can be researched employing landscape cultural character assessment. The second research group on Sacred Landscape Character of the ECSLAND Project has accordingly applied innovative assessment methods to analyse the distinctive character of European sacred landscapes and to assess their unique legacy.

7.3 Sacred Landscape Identity

Adopting an interdisciplinary approach to the study of sacred landscape values has been the focus of the third research group on Sacred Landscape Identity of the ECSLAND Project. This group has endeavoured to understand the intangible value of sacred landscapes in order to stimulate discussion and raise awareness about European cultural heritage and identity. To succeed in this task, the group fostered more interaction with local communities, guardians of their landscape.

7.4 Sacred Landscape Archaeology and Architecture

The objective of the fourth research group on Sacred Landscape Archaeology and Architecture of the ECSLAND Project has been to study the archaeological and architectural characters of sacred landscapes in Europe. This group has collected, documented and evaluated material on archaeological sites and architecture connected to sacred landscapes.

8. Exploring sacred landscapes

8.1 England, UK

The research by the group on Sacred Landscape History of the ECSLAND Project has looked at two very different sacred landscapes in the UK: Stonehenge, one of the most famous prehistoric monuments in the world, and Little Gidding, considered a holy place since the seventeenth century, though little known outside the UK.

Stonehenge is surrounded by one of the world's largest concentrations of Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments, most of which appear to be ritual, including tombs. These have been held to make it a classic example of a sacred landscape: an area of England that was set apart from the rest of the country by having such a huge density of ritual sites.

Little Gidding, in a secluded and remote part of the English countryside in Huntingdonshire, was the location chosen by a London businessman, Nicholas Ferrar, to set up, with his extended family, the first Anglican Community in the seventeenth century. The traditional ritual here is in the form of the annual Little Gidding Pilgrimage, a five-mile walk through the local landscape during which the pilgrims pray and meditate.

8.2 Arrábida, Portugal

The assessment carried out by the research group on Sacred Landscape Character of the ECSLAND Project has been conducted in the area of Arrábida.

Arrábida Hill is located within a natural park on the northern shore of the Sado River Estuary, south of Lisbon, Portugal. Overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, the slopes of the Arrábida Chain are covered with the most characteristic vegetation of the region: the Mediterranean maquis, a product of a particularly mild climate tempered by the Atlantic. It is a fascinating natural region of Mediterranean influence, and remains almost untouched in its natural equilibrium. This particular landscape has attracted different cultures and religions for contemplation and spiritual renewal since at least Phoenician times, right up until the present day.

Through the project questionnaire, put to respondents within the local communities in the sacred landscape of Arrábida, the group evaluated people's perceptions with regard to present and past values, current threats and landscape management, and with an eye to future conservation. The results outlined the attributes of the landscape, how they contribute to its cultural character and bestow its sense of sacredness.

8.3 Latium, Italy

In order to trace the identity of sacred sites, the ancient town of Sutri has been chosen as case study of the research group on Sacred Landscape Identity of the ECSLAND Project. Sutri, located in the region of Latium, about 50 km from Rome, Italy, retains a multi-layered cultural and historical heritage. Key issues examined are the different influences that made this landscape sacred; how perceptions of sacredness have changed over time; and whether the area of Sutri can still be considered sacred today.

After reviewing existing material on Sutri's cultural heritage, questionnaires were drawn up and presented to people in the local community. Mind maps have been produced with areas closely linked to each individual's sense of identifying with the place and cultural heritage. The final analysis focussed on people's perceptions of the tangible and intangible landscape characters.

The research, finally, has called for the improvement of the current level of maintenance of the site and its natural surroundings, as well as for clear conservation and preservation policies.

8.4 Sardinia, Italy

Two case studies in Sardinia have been selected by the group on Sacred Landscape Archaeology and Architecture of the ECSLAND Project. The first focuses on a landscape with prehistoric and medieval elements: the Nuragic sacred settlement of Janna 'e Pruna e Su Notante, and two churches dedicated to Santa Caterina and Sant'Elene. The second, in the central-western part of the island, involves landscapes with ancient traditions, some of which are still practised today.

The second case study, in the area of Marghine-Montiferru, is remarkable for its landscape and number of sacred sites that have experienced multiple layering and re-appropriation over thousands of years. The area includes Tamuli, with its nuraghe, village and necropolis; a second Nuragic site, with the small church of Saint Anthony Mount set atop ancient volcanic rock and surrounded by thick forest; and a third suggestive site with the medieval church of Saint Leonardo and the seven sacred fountains.

The researchers involved in the project have used archaeological methods to reconstruct the history of the site and study cultural artefacts in the landscape. Data has been collected and landscape analysis has been undertaken and documented using photographs and GIS, allowing the research group to formulate hypotheses about ancient landscapes.

9. Conclusions

The ECSLAND Project was set up in a spirit of cooperation between the partners. However, this spirit travelled not only beyond frontiers, but also beyond minds. The ECSLAND Network, indeed, is an example not only of transfrontier cooperation, but also of cross-cultural partnership. Project and Network serve to stimulate intercultural, interreligious and intergenerational dialogue on European sacred landscapes during and beyond the life of the project.

Starting from the premise that European sacred landscapes are the reflection of the relationship that humankind has forged with the natural and built environment since the beginning of time, they create a unique biocultural diversity, and moreover shape spiritual identity and cultural heritage.

The project has outlined how these fragile ecological and cultural systems can be threatened by uncontrolled development and use. Actions at a local level and at a European level are necessary to safeguard these precious landscapes for future generations. This is why central to the project has been the implementation of European strategies such as the European Landscape Convention, through the production of material on European sacred landscapes and cultural heritage, as a tool for strategic planning and action.