

# The Ephemeral Inscriptions of Caithness

Dimitra Ntzani & John Barber

University of Edinburgh & AOC Archaeology Group

**The *reading* and *writing* metaphor:**

- in memory literature,
- in archaeological discourse,
- in the public engagement programs of AOC Archaeology Group in Caithness the metaphor inspires:
  - new forms of interaction with the *ephemera* and
  - new forms of inhabitation of the northern landscapes
- in this paper the metaphor is a tool for exploring the engaging qualities of ephemeral archaeological traces.

The paper draws a thread between

**the Freudian memory metaphor of the “mystic writing pad” and  
the archaeologically overwritten landscapes of Caithness.**





“...the locus of metaphor is thought, not language,  
metaphor is a major and indispensable part of our ordinary, conventional way of  
conceptualizing the world, and  
our everyday behavior reflects our metaphorical understanding of experience...”  
Metaphor and Thought, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 1979).pp.204

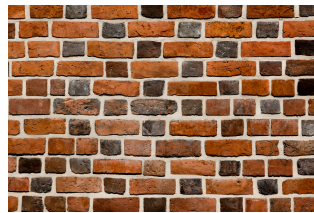
### **Archaeology**

aims to (re)construct a spatial narrative that  
supports collective memory.  
(Lowenthal, 1985)

### **Psychoanalysis**

aims to (re)construct a discursive narrative that  
supports personal memory.  
(Freud, 1974)

The two memory disciplines often employ similar metaphors  
e.g. the construction metaphor, the surgery metaphor, the reading metaphor



**...and they develop conceptual frames, theories, methodologies  
with similar qualities.**

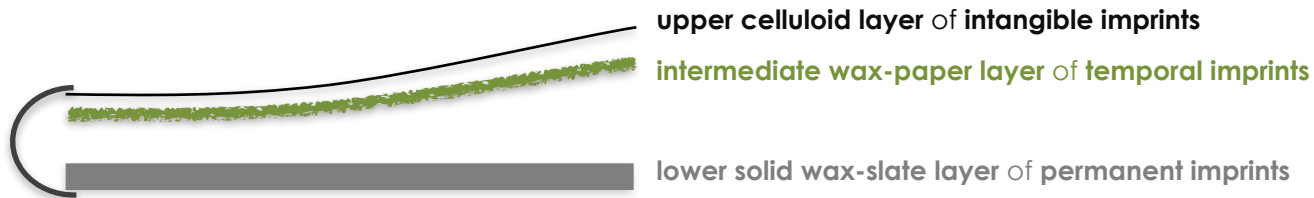


Freud's mystic writing pad consists of three layers:

A.the **upper celluloid layer** that prevents direct contact of perceived elements with the layers beneath it; the receptacle of **intangible imprints**,

B.the **intermediate wax-paper layer** that receives **temporary imprints** and renders them visible and

C.the **lower wax slate layer**, the infinite storage of **permanent imprints**.



**Presuppositions on memory supported by the reading metaphor:**

- A. memory is mainly discussed as a storage of imprints,
- B. memory evolves in three sequential stages: the writing of memory traces, the storing of the recently acquired traces and their reading as part of a recollection process,
- C. the framing of engraved forms represent the essential act of perception,
- D. the passage from inscribing to storing is interrupted by an act of detachment,
- E. memory traces are stored upon the passive waxed slate in chronological sequence,
- F. every storage layer is unique because of inherent and acquired qualities,
- G. permanent traces have initially a delineated shape but the more a trace is read, the less faithful to its initial formation it becomes.



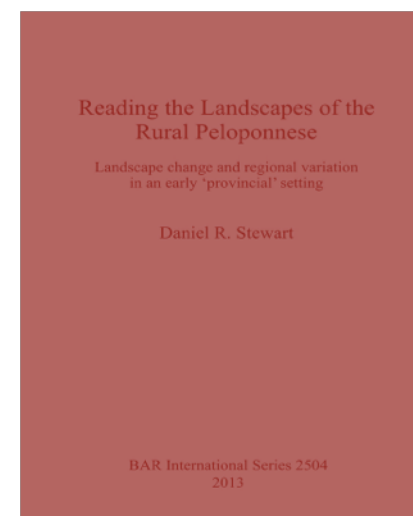


“**The soil is an historical document** which, like **a written record**, must be deciphered, **translated** and interpreted before it can be used... Every archaeological site ...**can be read** by a skilled excavator, but it is destroyed by the very process which enables us **to read it.**”

Philip Barker, *Techniques of Archaeological Excavation*, Third edition. (London: Batsford, 1993).P.13

“The use the famous phrase, **the landscape is a palimpsest** – that is, as in a well-lived life, everything that has happened to it, is etched upon its face to various degrees. If we disentangled the thousands of **markings**, like a wall, which carries **generations of graffiti**, then we should be able to **read its history**. We are not just finding sites, not even just making a map – we are compiling a sequence in time”

Martin Carver, *Archaeological Investigation*, Second edition, (London and New York, 2009) p.64







The Ephemeral Inscriptions of Caithness  
Dimitra Ntzani & John Barber

The Landscapes of Caithness



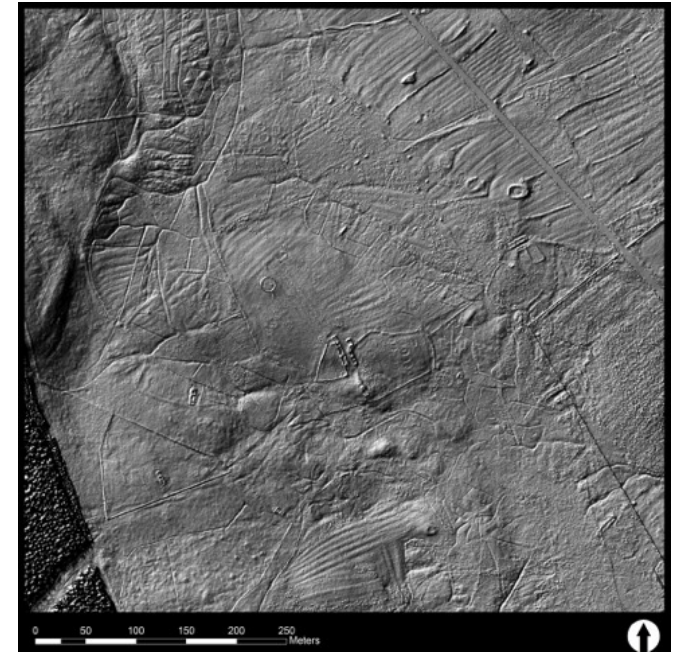


**The archaeological *ephemera* are obscure and fragmented traces of past human activity.**

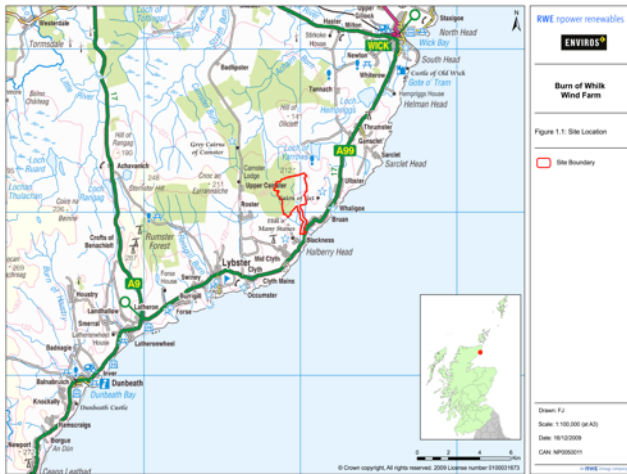
They can be the imprints of previously present spatial formations, archaeological ruins that have not been identified before in the area or archaeological sites whose recording, excavation or preservation has not been a priority.





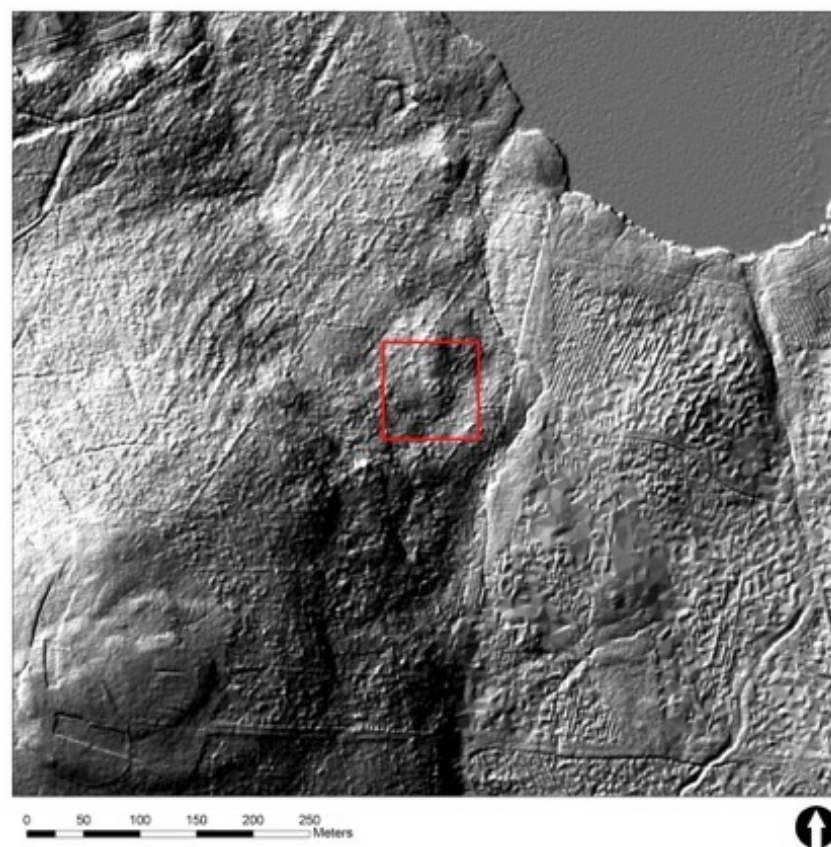
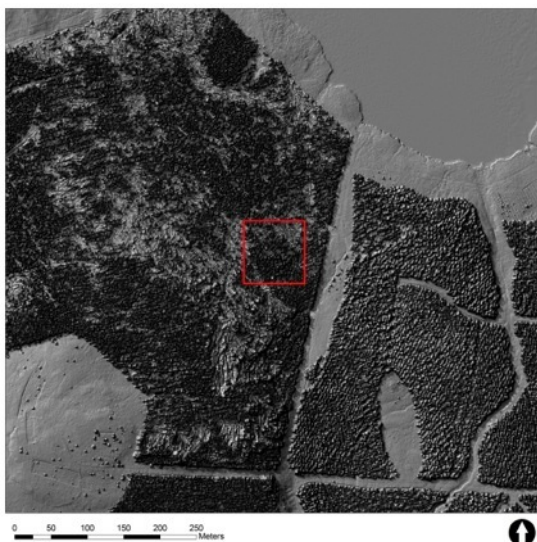


(Copyright AOC Archaeology Group)



<http://www.rwe.com/web/cms/en/281248/rwe-innogy/sites/wind-onshore/united-kingdom/in-development/burn-of-whilk/>





DL. Google-earth image of an afforested area south of Loch Calder, UL. Unprocessed LiDAR image of an afforested area south of Loch Calder, Caithness. (Copyright AOC Archaeology Group)  
UR. Bare earth model of landscape revealing a settlement site (in red square) and many preforrest traces. (Copyright AOC Archaeology Group)







Abandoned quarry face

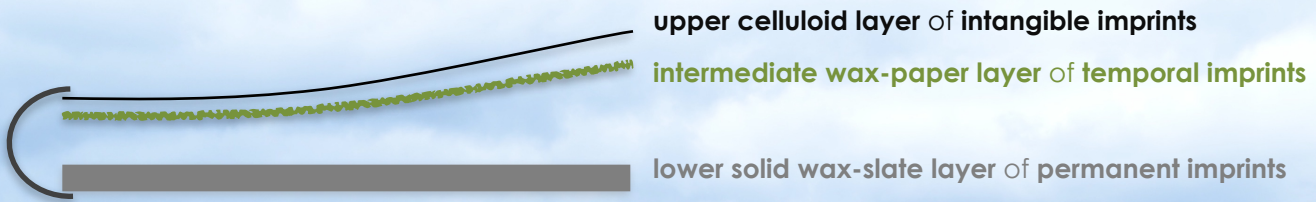


Abandoned medieval farm house



Stone fence





**The reading metaphor highlights**

The need for the deductive celluloid layer.  
The need for the detachment of the two upper layers from the lower third.





Walkover survey of possible penannular imprints of Bronze Age huts in Yarrows lake



Excavating possible neolithic enclosure near Warehouse Hill chambered cairns

**The need for a deductive celluloid layer:**

As the team confronts a sensory rich environment, it establishes a deductive membrane that allows only specific elements to be engraved.







To render the ephemeral traces visible, the team establishes an intermediate layer between the silent past and the enquiring present.



“The god Thamus was the king of the whole country of Egypt;...To him came Theuth and showed his inventions, desiring that the other Egyptians might be allowed to have the benefit of them...

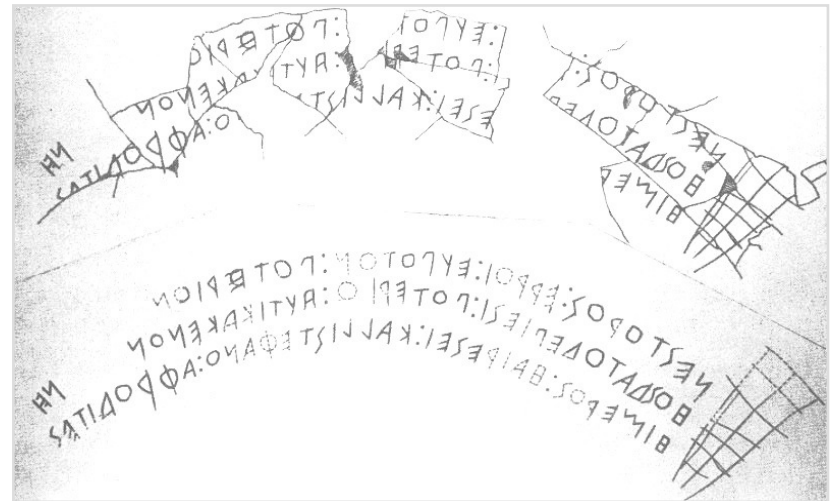
**But when they came to letters, This, said Theuth, will make the Egyptians wiser and give them better memories; it is a specific both for the memory and for the wit.**

**Thamus replied:** O most ingenious Theuth, the parent or inventor of an art is not always the best judge of the utility or inutility of his own inventions to the users of them...

**For this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves...**

**“.... I cannot help feeling, Phaedrus, that writing is unfortunately like painting; for the creations of the painter have the attitude of life, and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence.”**

Plato and Robin Waterfield, *Phaedrus*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)









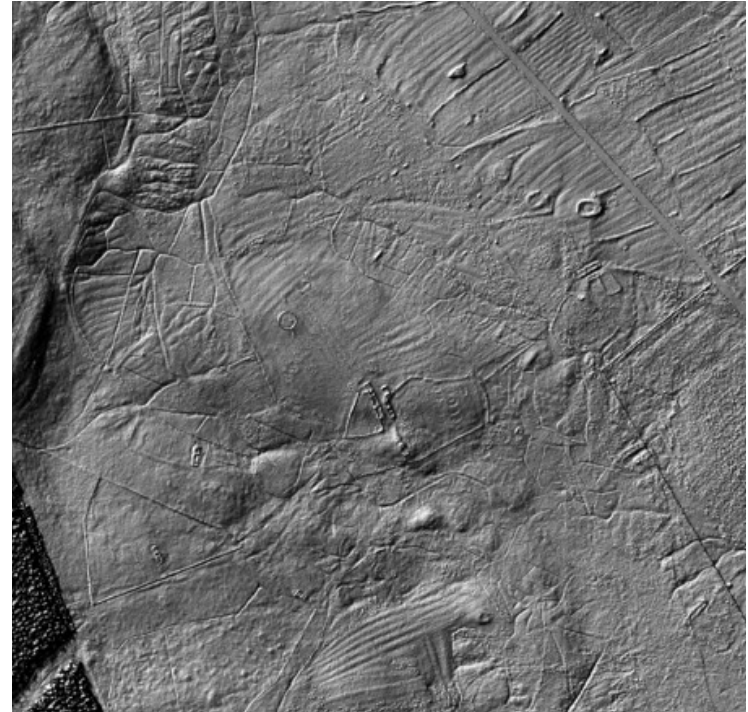
## UNESCO's "Organically Evolved" Relict Landscapes

Organically Evolved Landscapes "result from an initial social, economic, administrative, and/or religious imperative and have developed their present forms by association with and in response to their natural environment.

Organically evolved "Relict" or "Continuing"  
Landscapes

A Relict Landscape is a "fossil landscape where the evolutionary process came to an end at some time in the past, either abruptly or over a period. Its significant distinguishing features are, however, still visible in material form"

<http://www.worldheritagesite.org/tag.php?id=728>





# The Ephemeral Inscriptions of Caithness

Dimitra Ntzani & John Barber  
University of Edinburgh & AOC Archaeology Group