



Sacred Landscapes and Ritual Offerings

Time Required: 30-40 minutes | Age range: 10+

Background:

In this activity you will learn about the archaeology of sacred landscapes and discover examples from across the world.

Since the dawn of time, humans have been drawn to important features in the natural world around them. Caves, mountains, and rivers were all thought of as awe-inspiring spaces in which humans could meet the gods that shaped the world around them. It is in these places that humans moulded the natural world to create sanctuaries on mountain tops and imagine the underworld in caves. To explain natural events such as floods, sunrise/sunset and the seasons, aspects of nature were personified as gods and given a mythology to explain their origins. This appears across civilisations.

In archaeology, the study of sacred landscapes traces what humans left behind to reconstruct religious experiences in the past. In physical terms, this means looking at the remains of temples or shrines to understand how people of the past interacted with the natural world. This also involves understanding the way humans designed the sacred experience in significant locations within the landscape. Some of the most iconic examples of this come from monumental terraces in ancient Mesopotamia and temples constructed on the tops of mountains in Greece.



Temple of Apollo at Delphi, 4th century BC. Set high in Mount Parnassus against a striking landscape overlooking the valley of Phocis, this was the site of Apollo's famous oracle. Notably, Apollo was also linked with the sun as well as music, poetry, healing and prophecy.
Image source: Wikimedia Commons | Skyring



Indian diya (lamp) floating on the water. Many diya offerings happen from the ghats of Varanasi, a series of stone steps on the western banks of the river Ganga, in the evening. This is a good example of how offerings can still be linked to nature to this day.

These sites often have multiple versions on the same spot, which points to just how long the awe-inspiring natural setting was considered sacred. Constructions within the landscape became the focus for worship, including the offering of ritual objects, and a space for communities to gather together and ask the gods to protect them from nature's whims. Even today, traces of this habit continue where modern religions focus some worship around natural locations.



**Young
Archaeologists'
Club**

Did you know?

Archaeologists use a range of scientific methods to identify traces of structures in the landscape, even if there is nothing left on the surface! By using a combination of aerial photographs to identify crop marks or parch marks, and survey equipment such as ground-penetrating radar (GPR) and LiDAR, archaeologists are able to identify the remains of towns, forts and farmings structures beneath the ground!



Crop marks visible during the summer which indicated traces of round, pre-historic burial mounds and other structures within an ancient necropolis located in France. Can you spot the doorways?

Image credit: WikimediaCommons cliché J. Dassié

Introduction:

In this activity you will create a token made from natural materials from your surrounding landscape to 'dedicate' back to the land.

To honour the gods that oversaw the nature around them, humans have always made offerings to thank nature gods for fertility and prosperity or to appease them if they have been angered. In the past, natural events such as thunderstorms and flooding were interpreted in many cultures as the anger of the local gods. Without modern technology, humans were much more at risk from extreme weather events. The examples below reflect ways in which humans across the world interacted with their local landscape in a desire to understand and rationalise the world around them.



Herakles wrestling the river Acheloos. The physical river is located in Western Greece, 220 km long, and was one of the most powerful and navigable rivers in antiquity. Attic red-figure column-krater, c. 450 BC.

Case Study One:

In the ancient world, rivers were often linked to the protection of children as a natural result of their life-giving waters. Rivers were thanked at coming of age ceremonies for protecting a child up to adulthood, or given offerings to ask for children or successful crops. The deification of rivers in particular is a phenomenon that appears across the known world, and is something that links humanity together. Rivers were often imagined as half-bull half-man creatures that represented their power and mystical nature.

Case Study Two:

The Greek goddess Persephone was worshipped in certain caves across Greece. In mythology, Persephone lived with Hades in the Underworld for half of the year and was allowed to return home to see her mother, the goddess Demeter, for the other half of the year. In her joy, Demeter was said to bloom flowers across the world and ripen crops. This mythology explained the annual transitions of the seasons. At Eleusis, women brought tokens of their worship to the cave which was said to be the entrance to the underworld, especially pomegranates, in order to ask Persephone for fertility. To this day, people visiting the site can find flowers and small fruits dedicated at the goddess' cave.



Terracotta pomegranate, originally painted red. 7th-6th century BC.
Image credit: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin



Inka ruins on Pilko Kaina, on Isla del Sol, Lake Titicaca, Bolivia.

Image credit: Wikimedia Commons | Steve Bennett

Case Study Three:

The Inka Empire of South America worshipped a complex system of nature gods. Mountains themselves (wak'as) were also sacred to the Inka, with the Apu (mountain spirit, meaning 'great lord') of the most important mountains receiving sacrifices. Lake Titicaca, one of the highest altitude lakes in the world, was a highly sacred site for the Inka, said to be the birthplace of the Sun God (Inti) and the ritual platforms surrounding the lake were designed to align with solstice sunsets. Within the lake is an underwater reef, the Khoa reef, where stone boxes containing miniature figurines of gold, silver and rare shells were submerged as ritual offerings. These were high value items given as tributes to the gods, and were just one of the types of offerings considered vital for appeasing the nature gods, influencing weather and ensuring the success of crops.



Variety of Inka ritual offerings. Objects like these have been found dedicated at mountain tops, the coast and other significant natural features at the limits of the Inka empire. These were part of the ceremony of capac hucha ("royal obligation") in Quechua, which marked natural events like a drought or transitions between Inka rulers.

Image credit: Metropolitan Museum of Art

Did you know?

Underwater archaeology is another valuable method which allows divers to investigate archaeological sites which have been submerged, flooded, or fallen into the sea by coastal erosion. Many important discoveries such as shipwrecks are found this way!



How do these case studies demonstrate the theme of a sacred landscape?
Where does nature play a part in worship?

Sadly, many of the offerings have not survived in the archaeological record, as they were often temporary, perishable materials including food. However, we know of temples and festivals used to worship aspects of nature, ritual offerings are well-evidenced in ancient texts and art, and traces of this practice often remain in modern traditions or folklore.

Activity: Creating your own ritual offering

About:

In this activity you will create your own ritual offering inspired by the information given above, using natural materials foraged from the local area.

You will need:

- An interesting-shaped twig/stick as your base
- A variety of natural, biodegradable materials such as: feathers, pebbles, flowers (ideally foraged from the local area)
- An assortment of feathers, wood-beads, or other left-over craft items made from natural materials
- Twine from natural fibres (jute, cotton, hemp, flax)
- Glue
- Scissors



Top Tips!

Make sure all of the items you are using are biodegradable and made of natural materials. This helps to safeguard nature for the future and protects wildlife from harm.

If you are foraging your materials, be selective. Make sure not to take too much of anything, and leave behind plenty for everyone else to enjoy.





Method:

1. Locate your natural materials from a nearby park or garden. Allow yourself to be open minded and inspired by anything that takes your interest. Does it have an unusual shape? Is the colour especially vibrant?

2. Take your chosen stick and tidy up any offshoots, leaves or extra branches with your scissors. You want to strip it down to its basic shape, leaving enough room to attach your embellishments.

3. Cut lengths of twine to tie your embellishments onto the branch, or use glue to make it more secure

4. Admire your hand-made offering inspired by your local landscape!



Activity: 'Dedicating' Your Offering

About:

In this activity you will take part in a phenomenon that has been happening for thousands of years by dedicating something to nature.

Method:

Option One

1. Choose a space in nature that feels special to you, somewhere that holds good memories or you think is beautiful.

2. Bring your ritual offering from the previous activity with you and take a trusted adult along.

3. Place your offering somewhere out of sight, for example under a bed of leaves by a hedge or between the roots of a tree.



4. As you make your 'ritual offering' take a moment to close your eyes and soak in the nature around you.

What do you hear? What do you smell?

Take a moment to breathe with the nature around you and consider how people of the past may have seen it, and how the natural world is relatively unchanging.

Option Two

1. Gather pens and pencils, or whatever medium of your choice. Set up a clear workspace and cover any surfaces.

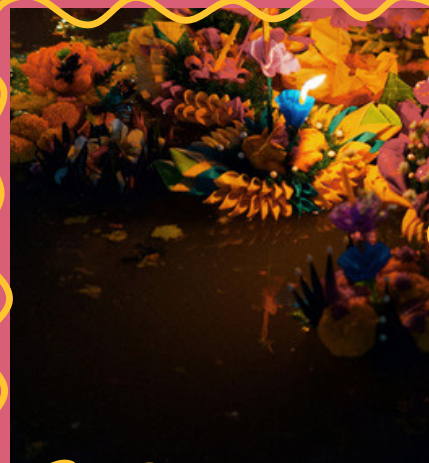
2. Use the background information as inspiration for the type of natural setting that would be most suitable for your ritual offering from the previous activity. **What kind of shrine would suit a dedication to a mountain god? A sun god? A river god? And, more importantly, who is your ritual offering for?**

3. Start drawing your shrine

When you 'dedicate' your token, imagine yourself taking part in this long human tradition of thanking nature for its life-giving force and everything it does to sustain us.



Pongal is a four-day harvest festival in South India. It thanks the Sun God and nature's forces for a good rice crop



Loy Krathong, or Thailand's Festival of Lights, is an annual celebration that honors the Water Goddess Phra Mae Khongkha

Glossary:

Crop Marks – Variations in crop colour, height or ripening caused by archaeological features buried deep beneath the ground, best seen from the air.

Deification – The act of making someone or something – such as a human, animal or concept – into a god, elevating the subject to divine status.

Perishable – Something likely to rot, spoil or decay over time.

Personification – When an inanimate object or abstract idea is given human form, characteristics, emotions or behaviour in order to bring it to life. In the ancient world, this happened often to create a relatable god out of something that did not have an easily understandable form, such as thunder, rivers, winds. This gave humans an image to direct their worship towards.

Phenomenon – Widespread events, behaviours, or trends. When referring to natural phenomena, this means events in nature that can be observed and now explained by modern science, such as aurora, rainbows, eclipses, earthquakes and tides. In the past, these events sometimes caused awe or even fear and were instead explained by origin stories related to gods and powerful beings.

Ritual – A repeated, structured sequence of actions or behaviours with symbolic meaning that often take place during a ceremony with religious significance.

Sanctuary – A sacred or holy place, often where humans carefully craft the religious experience so that they can encounter the divine.

Shrine – A holy or sacred space dedicated to a specific god or group of related gods which acts as a focal point of worship. For nature gods, these shrines are often located in naturally-occurring spaces such as caves.

Tribute – An act or offering given to represent deeply felt praise, honour or allegiance given to a deity.

Resources

- Find out how cropmarks form and what they might represent: [The Formation of Cropmarks](#)
- Find out more about Inca offerings in Lake Titicaca: [Centuries-old Inca offering discovered in sacred lake](#)
- More about the Lake Titicaca Archaeological expedition: [Secrets of Lake Titicaca: Archaeological expedition uncovers pre-Columbian heritage](#)
- Follow Aristonike, an Oracle-in-training in Delphi: [a day in the life of the Oracle of Delphi - Mark Robinson](#)

