Wetlands and Ritual Deposits during the Neolithic

A Local Study in a Micro-environment of a Macro-phenomenon

BY LARS LARSSON

Abstract

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Recent discourse on the relationship between society and landscape has shown that interpretation should not be attempted solely through consideration of artificial monuments; it also needs to involve the natural landscapes. The role of wetlands as a place of contact with the spiritual world was clearly important during the Neolithic. In order to obtain a more detailed and hopefully more holistic understanding of votive deposition in Neolithic society, an area in the southernmost part of Sweden was chosen for further study. The area contains a complex range of landscape features, the understanding of which is fundamental to the analysis of wetland depositions. The landscape is mainly undulating and the wetlands are usually rather small in size. Field survey along with information gained from several farm collections means that the find locations of a considerable number of archaeological deposits are now known. From the perspective of the Neolithic period, almost every wetland was used for some form of votive deposition. In certain respects, the cosmology related to wetland offerings was active throughout most of the Neolithic, and also in later periods. Some wetlands appear to have been imbued with ideas of a sacred character over many centuries, and in some cases millennia. Votive depositions within the hummocky landscape are usually rather small-scale, with the more substantial depositions being found in the larger wetlands on the plain. This might indicate that wetlands in different kinds of landscapes could have special importance in the metaphysical world.
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One sees great things from the valley; only small things from the peak.
G. K. Chesterton 1911.

Introduction

Prehistoric societies can be scrutinized from many different perspectives. To analyse them using a historical-geographical approach, with the landscape as a functioning, active agent, has been shown to provide an important contribution to their understanding (Bradley 1993, 2000; Barrett 1994; Topping 1997; Edmonds 1999). This approach emanates from the potential of humans to understand the landscape they are living in. However, the landscape might be theorized in many different ways, and such an approach therefore

challenges our capacity to understand past societies, with their rules and ideas far distant from those of modern "civilization".

If society and landscape are studied from a long chronological perspective, it is of primary importance to view these entities as both dynamic and interactive. For example, farming practices during recent millennia have had a major effect on both social structures and natural landscapes, and one therefore needs to consider that the preconditions for studying past societies might change considerably, particularly due to processes acting since the Neolithic. This is especially the case with respect to those archaeological remains deposited in extinct wetlands that are related to the ritual activities of Neolithic societies. A taphonomic reconstruction (Benes & Zvelebil 1999, 75) is important for understanding how the remains of different behaviours expressed in the landscape by a society have been deposited but also distorted.

Recent discourse on the relationship between society and landscape has shown that interpretation should not be attempted solely through consideration of artificial monuments; it also needs to involve the natural landscapes (Bradley 2000). Societies with monuments such as barrows, megalithic tombs, causewayed enclosures and henges are obviously stimulating to investigate because of the amount of available information. We might talk about a "Wessex syndrome" (i.e. the over-emphasis by prehistorians on this region's monuments), but what happens outside such cultural regions? How did past peoples express their world-view? In marginal regions, the symbols may be less impressive, but their identification is still important if we are to attempt to understand a Neolithic society. In fact, less obvious symbolism may be of even greater importance than monuments, as this might represent the fundamental expression of social interaction. If one believes that societies with monuments are the reaction to specific stress conditions caused by a concentration of people and resources, societies at a stage without developed monumentality might well give valuable insights into the rationale or preconditions under which monuments are subsequently introduced.

The development and reduction of wetlands

Wetland finds and sites play a very important role in prehistoric research in southern Scandinavia in general, and from the Stone Age in particular (fig. 1). The importance of wetlands as a resource for information on prehistory is due to the large number of water basins, from large lakes to small kettle holes, formed during the deglaciation of southern Scandinavia.

Most of the lakes in southernmost Sweden were prone to eutrophic conditions and rapid infilling with organic material during the earlier Holocene. Due to the nature of the bedrock and overlying glacial deposits, the preservation of organic material in wetlands varies. A considerable number of lakes were

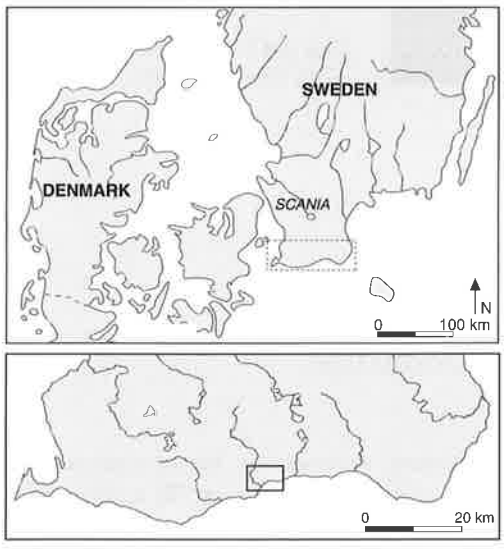

Fig. 1. The southern part of Scandinavia and the southern part of Scania with the research area specially marked.

substantially filled with organic material and became bogs during the Atlantic period. In the Sub-Boreal period, which corresponds to the start of the Neolithic, many bogs dried out and were covered with forest. At the start of the Sub-Atlantic period, which marks the transition between the Bronze Age and the Iron Age, there was increased precipitation, which resulted in the development of raised bogs. In many cases these eco-systems developed on top of the former wetlands (von Post & Granlund 1926); ponds and small lakes were once again partly filled with water, even those which had been relatively dry for millennia. However, this description of wetland transformation is obviously very generalized, and wetland development was dependent upon a range of local factors such as topography, hydrology and catchment size. Even wetlands in the same landblock will therefore have the potential to exhibit diverging developmental histories.

Population expansion and early forest clearance caused fuel shortages, and from the late eighteenth century peat cutting was introduced on a large scale (Kristiansen 1974, 1985).

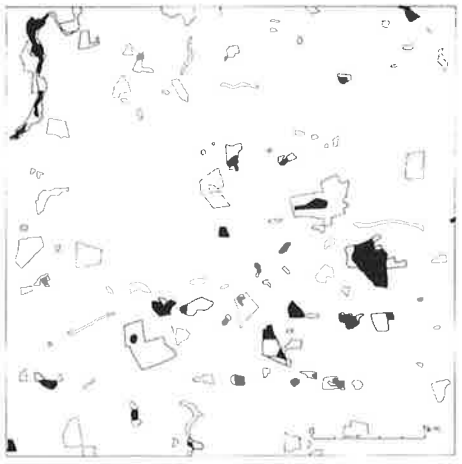

Fig. 2. An area within Västra Nöbbelöv parish (part of the research area) showing changes of semi-natural grassland mostly equal to former wetlands (after Bengtsson-Lindsjö et al. 1991).

In order to gain more arable land, many wetlands were also drained, a process that started in the second half of the nineteenth century and is still occurring today. This process has consequently caused a radical change in the extent of the wetland landscape (Bengtsson-Lindsjö *et al.* 1991) (fig. 2).

With the availability of cartographic sources, which are extremely rich by international standards, we can gain a good idea of the extent of wetlands during the period immediately preceding the large-scale drainage endeavours of the last 150 years. Obviously this picture does not agree entirely with conditions prevailing in the Stone Age, but the difference was probably not very great. If we compare the situation in the late eighteenth century, when our map sources are particularly numerous and detailed, we see that very few wetlands have survived in today's landscape.

A study of a small river catchment in the western part of Scania (southernmost Sweden) shows that in the early nineteenth century, wetland covered 29% of the drainage system (Wolf 1956). In the 1950s the wetland area was reduced to about 3%, and today the figure is even lower. The wetlands that have survived are the lakes, as their drainage would have been more difficult and economically unviable.

Depositions of artefacts in bogs were recognized during peat digging in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and some constitute the oldest finds in museum collections (Nielsen 1985). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a large number of artefacts were retrieved in southern Sweden. During the two world wars and shortly afterwards, peat cutting was intensive. In the late 1940s most of the cutting was carried out manually, which meant that artefacts and sites were easily recognized. Today peat cutting is of a minor extent and totally mechanized. Finds are rarely made except by archaeologists who are responsible for surveying those areas where sites have been found previously, or where the

environment indicates a reasonable chance of finding prehistoric sites (Larsson 1998, 1999). Because of intensive drainage, most of the Neolithic finds are made during ploughing in former wetlands.

The widespread drainage has had far-reaching consequences for prehistoric remains in wetlands. In the 1980s and 1990s, Scania was the subject of a total area survey, during which it became evident that a large majority of all the Stone Age objects discovered in the last two decades were found in wetlands, or exhibit an yellow to brown moss patina that indicates that they were deposited in former wetlands. Earlier finds in museum collections were to a large extent found in elevated areas beyond the wetlands, and consequently these lack a moss patina. They are thus most probably the remnants of burials either disturbed or destroyed by arable activities.

Wetland deposits

Most of the finds from most bogs have a state of preservation which clearly indicates that they are not the remains from settlement areas or ordinary domestic refuse contexts. Among the numerous finds from the Mesolithic, some occur in a combination and location which makes it very plausible that they derive from activity of a ritual nature (Larsson 1978a, 1999). Some of the Mesolithic finds exhibit considerable similarities to Neolithic votive contexts (Larsson 1978b). They had been stored in a container, but were broken before they were deposited, so this context rules out the interpretation of the deposit as a cache for future use (Karsten 2001).

The role of wetlands as a place of contact with the spiritual world was clearly important during the Neolithic. A study of the find contexts of more than 600 Neolithic hoards in Denmark has shown that 80% were found in former wetlands (Nielsen 1985). The Danish study is based on depositions which included two or more flint or stone objects, but a large number of single artefacts have also been found in wetland contexts (Karsten 1994). Additionally, in a study of depositional contexts in Scania, about 370 hoards have been identified, and the proportion found in wetlands is similar to the figure for Denmark (Karsten 1994). Again, however, in addition to the hoards, there are more than 900 single finds recorded.

Peat cutting and drainage have uncovered a large number of objects, mainly of flint but also of bone, antler and amber. The most common category of find is flint axes, and while in most cases the deposition seems to be an isolated expression of a votive ritual, in some instances a number of artefacts were deposited within a limited area over a period of time, often amounting to hundreds of years.

A case study

The information obtained from museum collections as well as surveys provides a general overview of deposition practices during the Stone Age. In order to obtain a more detailed and hopefully more holistic understanding of votive deposition in Neolithic society, an area in the southernmost part of Sweden was chosen for further study, including the neighbourhood of the author's residence in southern Scania. The area contains a complex range of landscape features, the understanding of which is fundamental to the analysis of wetland depositions. The landscape is mainly undulating and consists of clay, with a high lime content, that almost reaches the coastline and is delimited on both sides by sandy plains (fig. 3). The sandy coastal area, at some points just a couple of hundred metres wide, is a glaciofluvial formation from the end of deglaciation (fig. 3). Due to the nature of the topography, wetlands occur extensively and consequently land suitable for settlement is limited.

The number of Neolithic artefacts in museum collections is low from this area in comparison with those from the bordering sandy plains (Malmer 1957, karta 7–10), as also are the monuments from this period. Just one megalithic tomb is recognized within the survey area, while several tombs are known to have existed on the adjacent plains (fig. 3).

As can be seen from fig., 2, the wetlands have been considerably reduced in both area and number during recent decades. Also, an important data-set is preserved in a military reconnaissance map from around 1815, which predates the implementation of large-scale drainage activity and therefore gives a unique insight into the size and distribution of wetlands, several of which have been totally drained today (*Skånska rekognosceringskartan* 1986). In most of these cases the former wetland area can still be monitored as these areas are highlighted by darker soil, which remains visible as a result of the high organic content of the plough zone.

Because of the undulating topography, the view of the landscape varies considerably, with excellent views from hilltops and a restricted field of vision in the lower areas. This change can take place within less than 100 m, and can significantly affect a person's perception of the landscape. These characteristics of the landscape imbue it with a kind of monumentality in itself, an element which contrasts markedly

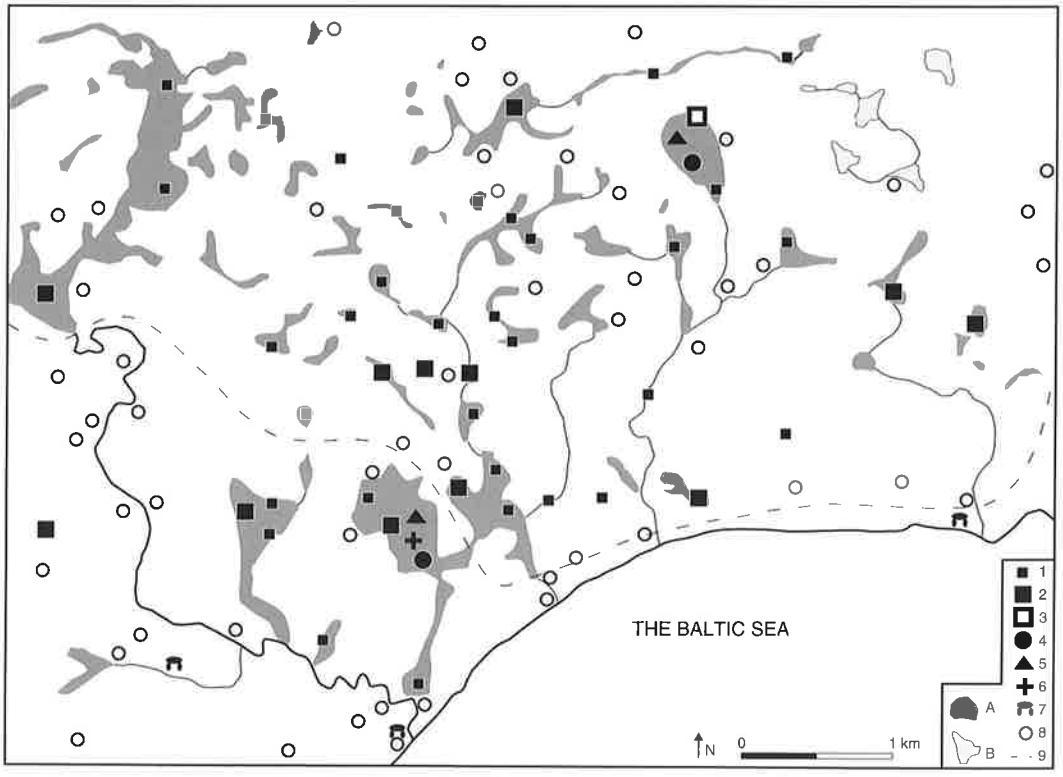

Fig. 3. Votive depositions from the Neolithic within the research area in southernmost Scania, southern Sweden. 1: deposition of a single artefact; 2: deposition of at least two artefacts; 3: deposition of several artefacts; 4: deposition of artefacts made of antler or bone; 5: depositions from the Bronze Age; 6: depositions from the Iron Age; 7: megalithic tombs; 8: settlement; 9: the extent of the hummocky area; A: wetlands; B: lakes.

Fig. 4. View of the hummocky landscape within the research area, with wetlands in different stages of preservation.

with the surrounding plains. In this topographic setting the wetlands are usually rather small in size, or they are long and narrow, and occupy the discrete areas between the hills (fig. 4). In several cases it is possible to see from one wetland to another, but lines of sight are restricted and controlled by the higher ground. Even in areas close to the coast, the Baltic Sea is not visible from any of the wetlands.

The settlement remains of the Neolithic period are situated on small hills, especially on those formed of well-drained material (fig. 3). Unfortunately, ploughing has heavily damaged all of these settlement sites. However, they are all of limited extent, usually encompassing an area of less than 1000 m^2.

Although the wetlands form an important part of the landscape, their functional use appears to have been limited. There is no evidence of wetland having been used as pasture, a practice which is first evident during the middle Bronze Age (Berglund *et al.* 1991). Hunting and fishing could have been of some importance, even though the latter would have been a seasonal activity, as large areas of the wetlands were almost dried out during the summer.

Judging from the museum collections, the hummocky landscape has yielded a small number of finds compared to most of the southern coastal zone of Scania. However, field survey by the present author, along with information gained from several farm collections, means that the find locations of a considerable number of archaeological deposits are now known (fig. 3), with information on over 80 flint artefacts having been recorded. Most of these artefacts have been found during ploughing, with a small number recovered during digging for drainage. Judging by the yellow to red patination of artefacts in the farm collections, a large number were found in wetlands.

Axes, mainly of flint but also of stone, are the dominant artefact type in most of the farm collections. Most of the finds from museums, as well as from farm collections, include intact tools. However, during surveys, several fragments of axes and also daggers have been found. While some of these might have been intentionally split, some axe fragments have a pattern of breakage consistent with their having been broken during use (Olausson 1983, fig. 26).

Duration of deposition

Another feature of deposition is a mixture of tool types which is often associated with a marked chronological gap occurring within the same small bog, or within the same part of a somewhat larger wetland. One example of

Fig. 5. A flint axe from the Late Neolithic and a battle-axe from the Early Neolithic, found in a small wetland.

this phenomenon was recovered from a small wetland, some 20 m across and close to a small brook, where a battle-axe from the Early Neolithic was found along with a flint axe from the Late Neolithic, representing a minimum of two depositions occurring over a millennium apart (fig. 5). In some cases, finds have been made in small wetlands that are not recorded on the map from around 1815. One of these bogs is less than fifteen metres across. On different occasions, a flint axe, a fragmentary stone axe, a flint core with a shape resembling an axe, and a small polishing stone have been recovered. However, in this instance, as the axes are of the same type, the artefacts might have been deposited simultaneously and dispersed later by ploughing.

From the perspective of the Neolithic period, almost every wetland was used for some form of votive deposition. Compared to Continental Europe, where depositions in rivers and lakes are rather well known, the number in southern Scandinavian contexts is small (Forssander 1933). Only two instances have been reported where artefacts were found in small streams within the research area (Karsten 1994).

Wetlands and artefact deposition

Most of the wetlands considered here contain only a few artefacts, whereas in the larger wetlands on the plain a considerable number of artefacts have been found, judging by some farm collections. In most cases these were recovered during peat cutting which took place over a number of years, but which occurred within a limited area of the wetland. There are observations of tree trunks and concentrations of bark and branches in connection with the discovery of artefacts, but it is not possible to state whether these are natural finds of fallen trees or parts of trackways or platforms associated with the act of deposition.

The largest votive deposit found within the undulating area comprises a total of seventeen axes, with a shape and size that strongly indicates that they were made by the same flint-knapper (Rydbeck 1918, figs. 42 and 43) (fig. 3). Other artefacts have been found in the same wetland, which is the largest within the hummocky area. However, the most numerous deposits seem to be related to the plains – areas that are also marked by a larger number of settlement sites and megalithic tombs.

In some cases the remains of settlements are situated only a short distance from a wetland in which artefacts have been found. In an area with intensive excavations about 10 km west of the survey region, deposits of axes appear close to settlement sites (Larsson 1992). They were deposited a short distance from the shoreline area, which was marked by decaying stumps of bushes and small trees. When relating the find spots with the surrounding landscape, it is remarkable how most deposition sites have a very delineated setting, with most occurring in close proximity to steep hillsides.

In view of the fact that we are dealing with wetland deposits, it is conceivable that people stood on the bank and threw the objects out into the water. However, in those cases where a more detailed account is given about the precise context of axes that were found close to each other, the finder has observed that they were often carefully placed in a special arrangement within the wetland. Axes have been found close to, and sometimes on top of, each other, with the edges directed downwards or in a circle (Rech 1979). This substantiates the observation that such artefacts were carefully placed in the water rather than being thrown out into the basin.

Fig. 6. The intensity of deposition pattern in wetland within the research area during the Neolithic.

Landscape and society

In certain respects, the cosmology which is related to wetland offerings was active throughout most of the Neolithic, and also in later periods. Some wetlands appear to have been imbued with ideas of a sacred character over many centuries, and in some cases millennia (Stjernquist 1997).

The dating of the finds from the surveyed area highlights an interesting variety in the intensity of deposition, which is in good agreement with the record from the Scania region (Karsten 1994) (fig. 6). A number of tools might be very difficult to date. In several bogs blades, scrapers and cores have been found but they are not dateable. This might mean that certain periods of the Stone Age might be under-represented or over-represented because the depositions of a certain period include tools that are more or less easy to identify.

A small number of artefacts belong to the Early Neolithic (EN I). A much larger number of tools are dated to the latest part of the Early Neolithic or the Early Middle Neolithic (EN II–MNA II). A much smaller number can be dated to the later part of the Middle Neolithic (MNA III–V), but the latest part of the Middle Neolithic (MNB) and the Late Neolithic (LN) are also well represented. The earliest concentration of deposition is contemporaneous with the building of megalithic tombs and causewayed enclosures. Thereafter, there appears to be a hiatus in Scania, during which the wetland locations that acted as foci for votive deposition were seldom exploited. In spite of the time interval, however, there is a close spatial relationship between depositions dating from the late Early Neolithic/early Middle Neolithic and those belonging to a late part of the Middle Neolithic, and also continuity into the Late Neolithic. This observation appears to be of major importance for understanding the world-view of Stone Age societies and how it can be observed in material culture.

Depositing artefacts within a delimited area of a wetland, over intervals of several centuries, means that knowledge of the ritual importance of the site survived for generations. Knowledge of the physical as well as the metaphysical components of the landscape was passed on over long timescales, and during certain periods the relation of these components to the wider world-view is marked by ritual practice involving the material culture. However, it is apparent that for long intervals the knowledge was passed on without any visible reaction by the Neolithic societies in question, in terms of active votive deposition, and this observation perhaps best reinforces the conclusion that these locations held significance beyond the spiritual.

In this context, there may have been changes occurring in the society, when people had a need to disrupt as well as establish links with much earlier societies. Bringing the old offering sites back into use during the later part of the Middle Neolithic might have been a way of re-establishing contact with earlier generations. The sites represent a connection with societies of the past based on legends, and could function as a means of legitimization, as well as emphasizing a different value system from the society which had been replaced.

As repeated depositions of artefacts occurred within a limited area of the wetland, which was shallow and in some cases seasonally desiccated, there would have been some knowledge of the excellent status of the tools used in offerings, which could have been several generations old. The deposition or transformation of artefacts in water would presumably confer special value on them, and this must surely have been the primary intention behind such offerings. Where wetland depositions became visible during dry summers, when the harvest might have been adversely affected, the appearance of such deposits might well have been an important stimulus to reinforce connections with the metaphysical world.

In the cosmology of certain societies the

cosmos involves three worlds – the underworld, the earth and the sky (Jacobson-Widding 1979; Helskog 1999). The underworld is usually connected to water, so wetland might have been regarded as the liminal zone between the underworld and the physical world. Water is life-giving for all organisms, and wetland depositions might therefore be related to underground spirits, connected with fertility, where the wetland was regarded as a point of bodily access to the hidden soul, i.e. to the underworld. Votive offering in wetlands might have been a regular practice, where the desired effects were long-lasting but not immediately noticeable. We can envisage a situation where change is not visible, unless the offerings cease. Some of the wetland offerings may be viewed as abandoned projects, especially where the deposition period stretches over several generations (Barrett 1994, 13).

According to palaeoecological studies, most Neolithic wetlands were partially covered or encircled by small trees and bushes. The deposition context of a small wetland, with a dense vegetation of bushes and trees surrounded by steep hills, focusing on a small part of the sky, produces a location tailor-made for secret depositions made by individuals or a small group of people. The situation is quite different in larger wetlands on a plain, where the deposition could be witnessed by a large group of people. The first example is a ritual act of which the most important part is to create contact with members of the underworld or upper world. In the second case, it should be anticipated that at least some depositions are made in order to allow several people to take part in an act of votive offering which was initiated and performed by certain members of the society. This latter form of ceremony might be related to the activities of burial in megalithic tombs, or involve offerings made to the monuments themselves. Such ceremonies are well attested by the large quantity of pottery and tools found outside the entrance to such tombs (Strömberg 1968, 1971, Tilley 1996).

Final comments

Votive depositions within the hummocky landscape are usually rather small-scale, with the more substantial depositions being found in the larger wetlands on the plain, but in a context that exhibits a close connection with the adjacent hummocky landscape. This might indicate that wetlands in different kinds of landscapes could have special importance in the metaphysical world, and the fact that they are still used during later parts of the prehistoric period also indicates their continued ritual and symbolic importance.

The numerous small wetlands within the hummocky landscape will have had a limiting effect on population size and the potential for communities to expand their resource exploitation areas. This might mean that conflicts between any new settlers and the existing habitants were minimized, thereby reducing the potential for stress in the society. The need to mark the relationship of people with monuments was therefore unnecessary in this more marginal landscape, but this does not mean that ceremonies of different kinds were not taking place; as stated earlier, ceremonies will have taken the form of both more individual votive offerings in small wetlands, and larger societal expressions of ritual behaviour in the wetlands of the plains. Wetlands clearly functioned as natural monuments within the landscape in regions where monumental architecture was either an impractical or unnecessary form of societal ritual expression and legitimization.

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