

Olive Trees as Witnesses to the *Longue Durée*

Individual, ancient trees, sometimes referred to as “historical,” “veteran,” or “witness” trees in modern scholarship, punctate both the archaeological and literary landscapes of the classical world as physical and memorial landmarks. These trees are singled out especially for their age, which, in the case of olive trees, can approach two millennia (Schicchi et al.)

In classical literature, such trees tell a story about individual and cultural identity and practical human-nature entanglements. For example, the olive tree from which Odysseus crafted his marriage bed (*Odyssey* 23.183-204) identifies him as Penelope’s husband and signifies her fidelity. Vergil at *Aeneid* 12.766-771 recalls the olive tree sacred to Faunus, decorated by ancient cultural practice of sailors; this tree has been cut down by the Trojans severing its ties to the local, pre-existing culture. In their respective texts both trees, even after the destruction of one, are unique and persistent signs of memory and activity within their local context.

The significance of trees has been well-acknowledged in landscape archaeology since Ingold’s 1993 analysis of the ancient pear tree in Bruegel the Elder’s painting *The Harvesters* (1565 CE). Yet more recent scholarship (e.g. Hoan, and Taxel) has indicated that limited study of such ancient trees in the archaeological landscape has been undertaken. Additionally other recent scholarship has made an appeal for acknowledging the agency of trees, similar to that of stone monuments, in shaping human behavior (Jones and Cloke, and Taxel). This agency is inherent in Ingold’s discussion of Bruegel’s pear tree which serves to illustrate his “taskscape” concept - a “pattern of dwelling activities” that is inherently social and tied to the various features of landscape and temporality. The capacity of landscape studies has “considerable

potential in bringing together these aspects of daily life...and revealing contemporary peoples' experiences and perceptions of the world around them," (Whyte, 509).

As witnesses, trees can inform our understanding of how identity was constructed and about the reciprocal nature of humans and landscapes in the classical world. In his development of the "taskscape," Ingold discusses the relationship between storytelling and knowledge. He cites the Western Apache, "who," he says, "insist that the stories they tell...are intended to allow listeners to place themselves in *relation* to specific features of the landscape, in such a way that their meanings may be revealed or disclosed," (Ingold, 171). In this paper, I will argue that stories about such "witness" trees in literature and the archaeological landscape provide us with an opportunity to grasp their meaning. My aim is to consider such trees, both real and literary in light of recent landscape archaeological approaches through an examination of three case studies - the two olive trees referenced above from the *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*, and a ca. 1700 year old olive tree that until recently stood in the territory of Fossacesia, Italy (Caravaggio).

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