

CHRIS TILLEY – MYTHOGRAPHIC TRIPTYCH (ANNOTATED)



Reflections on the work of Christopher Yates Tilley 2

This is Part 2 of a reflection upon the works of Chris Tilley, prompted by his too-early death in March 2024.

I want to do justice to the range and depth, the significance of his work in anthropology and archaeology. My reflections are based on memories, close

collaboration, and deep reading of all his writing. His work, now finished, deserves close attention because it deals with matters of wide concern and in such a sophisticated way, dedicated to careful consideration – relationships with environment; respect and acknowledgement of diverse voices; developing secure foundations of knowledge, in experience, modes of engagement with the world, representation and report.

What follows is not an exposition of his ideas but a reflection upon them, something of an exchange of ideas as I unpack how I react. I do look back with hindsight and wish that the conversation that ended when we parted ways in 1993 had continued. I disagree with much of what Chris came to stand for. I do not think he has the answers. But he always got me to think more carefully.

Part 1 is about our collaboration at Cambridge, two academics provoked to set things right.

In Tilley's Garden: a Summer Long Ago [Link]

Part 2 presents some allegorical associations in something of a play with the mythmaking that I find quite endearing in Tilley's anthropological archaeology.

Mythographic Triptych (annotated) [this post]

Part 3 is based on reading his work since we parted ways in 1993. I offer sketches of some personae in his scenario of experiencing landscape, and some features of a concept map within which his oeuvre might be situated.

In Tilley's Garden: Figures in a Landscape – [Link]

Part 4 is a celebration of Tilley's humanism – valuing individual experience and autonomy, grounding in empirics and critical thinking, focus on life and presence, environmental secularism. I find his humanism most considered, even profound. I think this is what he left in most of us, certainly those friends, family, colleagues, students whom I have heard react to his death – quite a passion for life and the qualities of things.

In Tilley's Garden: Transcendental Experiences – [Link]

Tilley in the north – with glass – magnifying glass, Claude glass, dark mirror?





Thomas of Erceldoune, the Rhymer, Thomas the True, poet and prophet who could not tell a lie. 1292 Scottish Borderlands. Favorite of Walter Scott, inventor of the historical novel – Wizard of the North.



Kronos, titan, who consumed his children in fear that they might one day overthrow him. When he demanded his new son, his wife Rhea handed him instead a pebble. He ate it, mistaking it for a human form.

(Click on an image to view the gallery full screen)

Pebbles from a northern beach, Nyborg Strand, Fyn, Denmark. What do you see, what can you make out in the dark mists of stone textures? Pareidolia. Signals and noise. Figure and ground.

















Signs are taken for wonders. "We would see a sign":
The word within a word, unable to speak a word,
Swaddled with darkness.

T S Eliot, Gerontion, 1920.