

Ritual sites were an integral and important part of the prehistoric landscape. Relics of various types of sacred constructions of past populations of Neolithic can still be found in it in a form of burial places and rondels. From the Eneolithic period onwards, we encounter large ditch (causewayed) enclosures, and still clearly visible in the landscape, earthen long barrows and circular mounds. These monuments have structured the landscape symbolically for many centuries. How did the communities that lived there hundreds or thousands of years later treat these sites? How did people use the ritual sites of their ancestors? Did these places retain their spiritual purpose? Or were they incorporated into the profane parts of settlement areas and gradually overlaid with residential and farming structures? Awareness of the ritual purpose of the space was certainly passed down in oral tradition. But this was also strongly supported by the existence of distinctive above-ground constructions. It was the existence of ditched enclosures and burial mounds that contributed to the perception of the ritual significance of the sites over many generations. In some parts of Europe, these monuments have survived in the landscape to the present day. We therefore know that their existence was known to all previous generations. However, in the area of Bohemia, similar monuments are invisible in the terrain today. We can only guess when they disappeared and for how long they influenced the perception of the sacredness of a particular place. The aim of this project is to investigate the development and perception of Neolithic and Eneolithic ritual sites by successive generations. Using modern archaeological and natural science methods (particularly geochemical, micromorphological analysis of soils and sediments), we aim to investigate the dynamics of the disappearance of monumental structures by Neolithic and Eneolithic populations in the landscape and to describe the gradual change in the perception of these sites by subsequent prehistoric populations. In doing so, we will also contribute to an important discussion on the evolution and perception of ritual landscapes and cultural landscapes in general, both past and present. The project will focus on three geographical areas. These represent parts of the landscape, with different patterns of use. In the Czech Republic we will focus on two areas that are linked by the current use of agricultural land. Here, archaeological monuments are almost completely lost in the relief of the terrain. However, they differ in the recorded archaeological monuments. Both are regions with archaeological evidence of Neolithic and Eneolithic ritual activity in the form of burials, long and circular barrows, rondels and ditch enclosures. The first region is the area between the villages of Straškov and Dušníky in the region around the Mount of Říp. The second region is the area around the village of Chleby in the Nymburk region. In contrast to the previous area, here the ritual activities of the Eneolithic and Early Bronze Age are followed by residential complexes of the Iron Age. The third region is the wooded area around the Polish village of Muszkowice, where the remains of long barrows, as well as later funerary monuments, have recently been discovered and are still preserved in the relief of the terrain. It is therefore a situation that is different in terms of preservation from previous regions and can provide an important comparison related to the perception of the landscape based on the existence of funerary monuments.

We can therefore compare these three diverse regions. A region where the tradition of ritual objects is long-standing, yet they have not been preserved in the terrain, an area where a significant change in the use of the landscape probably still occurred in prehistory, and finally an area with a long-standing ritual purpose that has remained intact to this day.

The project combines archaeological and natural science methods. On this basis, a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of landscape development from the Neolithic to the present day can be achieved. Modern remote sensing tools such as aerial photography, geophysical surveys, and airborne laser scanning will be used to map archaeological sites in all regions. Based on this data, large sectors will then be selected in which soil samples will be collected and subjected to geochemical analysis to indicate the type and intensity of human activities of past populations based on the chemical composition of the soil. Based on the study of the evolution of soil horizons we can thus reconstruct the ancient vegetation character of the landscape. For this purpose, pollen analysis data will also be used, which will be carried out at suitable locations in and around the areas under study. Also an analysis of archaeobotanical findings will be carried out to determine the origin of the organic matter in the soil at the sites. OSL dating of the sediments and radiocarbon dating of the organic remains will be performed, comparing the grain size of the sediments and the presence of coprophilous fungal remains.

The dynamics of the destruction of cult monumental structures is also an important question to address. We want to recognize the process of natural filling of ditches within the enclosures and around long barrows, and also the rate of mound scouring. This process may have been very slow and these monuments may have persisted in the field for many millennia without maintenance. To obtain accurate data to be able to confirm these hypotheses, we are planning limited excavations in the selected area. In addition to the process of the natural deterioration of the monuments, we will also focus on data indicating their possible deliberate destruction.