Editorial

Sarah Semple

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Editorial

Temporary gatherings and meetings have been happening for thousands of years, and still do. Modern mega-events, like Glastonbury Festival in the UK or Burning Man in Arizona, USA, offer riotous temporary collectives where thousands indulge in performance, music, trade, artistic expression, exotic foods and recreational substances. To join these events is to dispose for a short while of a sense of self and participate in a new vibrant collective identity, broadening knowledge and experience. Much archaeological discourse across the decades has centred on the physically prominent and enduring aspects of the material record: monumental complexes, cities and tombs. For a time, archaeologists believed that ephemeral and temporary activity, whether camps or outdoor assemblies, would be hard to establish materially (e.g. Childe 1936, 81), but as this collection demonstrates, gatherings can provide a rich evidential base with temporary events or activities revealing complexity in their transient architectures. The geographic situation of such places is often specific and ideologically charged and their material culture varied and informative, attesting to ritual action, coalescence, production and consumption. Such places are vital in terms of understanding social connectivity in past societies. Taking inspiration from seminal studies on homelessness (Zimmerman and Welch 2011), political protest movements (Schofield 2009) and modern mega-festivals (White 2013), this collection reveals the power of material narratives derived from ephemeral sites and activities to inform on notions of identity, coalescence and counter-culture. This issue is complemented too by the 2018 World Archaeology issue on ‘Celebrations’ (50.2). These collections intersect in their focus on the seasonal rhythms of gatherings and festivals, travel to celebratory events and the shared cultural practices encountered such as feasting, ritual action and specialist production. Both collections also question how we should identify and read the material traces of short-lived events and the capacity of the archaeological record to preserve such evidence (Sykes, Conneller, and Spriggs 2018).

The theme for this issue received an exceptional response in terms of papers: a testimony perhaps to the growing recognition that alongside settlements, cemeteries and monuments, archaeologies of transience and temporary activity can reveal much about mechanisms for negotiation and coalition. In this collection, authors investigate temporary camps and settlements, from the fairs and ritual sites used by pastoralists in Somaliland, East Africa (González-Ruibal and de Torres 2018), to the temporary upland settlements common to many Northern European rural communities as late as the nineteenth/twentieth centuries, us (Costello 2018). Articles explore modern Africa, first-millennium South America, Europe across the Iron Age, medieval and modern periods, ancient Greece and the Neolithic in Eastern Europe. Additional papers received, but included in other World Archaeology issues in 2018, touch on gathering places in Saudi Arabia (Weeks et al. 2018), pilgrimage in South-East Asia (Davis and Coningham 2018) and Bronze Age spectacular events in northern Europe (Løvschal and Fontijn 2018). Temporary places and gatherings are shown across these contributions as essential and powerful mechanisms for social change, forging broader scales of identity and operating as territorializing stimuli. In some cases, they offer a temporary sense of unity and a chance to break from traditional behaviours (Costello 2018); in others, they serve to re-inscribe existing social structures and connections (Ugwuanyi and Schofield 2018).
Articles are divided here between those that deal with seasonal gatherings and events, situated in separate locations from settlements and requiring travel by participants, and others that were intramural to rural or and urban settlement. In some cases the temporary sites under consideration were occupied for part of the year by just some members of a community, for example the upland summer settlements or ‘booleys’ in western Ireland (Costello 2018). These places often brought together multiple communities, playing a vital role in engendering social cohesion. The mega-sites operating in Ukraine in the fourth millennium BC, however, developed architecturally as places where many local communities relocated, gathering for periods of time in larger temporary settlements (Nebbia et al. 2018). Spectacular one-off and repeated events feature too, explored here as gatherings that unified participants in the experience, becoming embedded in social memory. The archaeological traces of the Great Exhibition of 1851 tell the story of a single mega-event that was not repeated, but lived on through imitations and the fragmentation and reuse of its building materials. Crucially it has lived on in memory too – with calls even in the present for its revival (Gardner 2018).

The broader perspective, afforded by this collection, illustrates that temporary sites and gatherings were, and are, essential mechanisms for human populations providing opportunities for integration and diversification. They allow communities to broaden experience and develop alternative or shared senses of identity and in this way can be powerful as agents, contributing to the emergence of larger political alliances (Swenson 2018; Reynolds 2018). Inevitably such places are diverse in terms of their architecture and material culture as a result of local influences or traditions. Yet there are strong overlapping similarities, as with celebrations (see Sykes, Conneller, and Spriggs 2018). Choices of meeting-site for periodic gatherings were specific and often revisited at set times of year. Even open-air locales were commonly selected for distinctive liminal and topographic qualities and aesthetics. In the Jequetepeque Valley, Peru, seasonal mobile populations convened large temporary gatherings, often peripherally situated at the junctures of different resource areas that brought together pastoralists, farmers and fishing communities. This connected and diversified communities, spreading ideas and technologies, and creating a broader sense of Moche identity (Swenson 2018). There are shared themes here with northern European late Iron Age and Viking assemblies located at naturally liminal locales such as islands and isthmuses, fording places and junctures between cultivated and common land (Sanmark 2009; Semple and Sanmark 2013; Semple et al. 2019). These liminal locales perhaps lay beyond the jurisdiction of any one group or authority, but were also places and resource zones needed by different communities (e.g. common grazing, fresh water sources or portages), that naturally presented themselves as meeting-places and even required negotiation and consensus for their common use.

Temporary places and gatherings can also serve a diverse range of purposes. In contemporary society we might include pop festivals, sporting events, protests and political rallies, as well as campsites and festivals. Yet whether regular or one-off, these events are opportunities for combining activities and there are some striking themes that emerge across time and space in their material signatures. The large, seasonal local gatherings of early medieval Ireland – óenaig – offered opportunities for play, horse racing and wrestling, food production and evidence for the production of goods and trade (Gleeson 2018). The village arenas of the Igbo in Nigeria were also used across the year for masked performances and festivals involving wrestling, games and feasting, but also dispute settlement and legal activities. These confluences of activity are found too at the pilgrimage hubs of south-east Asia, where devotional activities such as processions, prayers and votive acts take place alongside cooking and catering to meet the needs of a large transient population (Davis and Coningham 2018).

At the fairs and sanctuaries of Somaliland, where nomadic groups combined the activities of trade, exchange and ritual acts with feasting (González-Ruibal and de Torres 2018), sites were situated within a communication network and were accessed via long-distance movement that took in specific sites and
places at certain times of year (ibid.). Travel is necessary for temporary gatherings but the act of travel in some instances can become ritualized. Pilgrimage, for example, is a very specific form of gathering, involving short- and long-distance movement and repeat visits to ritual foci. In this way it leaves its imprint across the landscape and not just at religious centres. Pilgrims, through their journeys and stopping off points, can ritualize entire routes (Davis and Coningham 2018), to the extent that for pilgrims the journey, as much as the final arrival at a shrine, was integral to the devotional act. Many papers in this collection suggest that by exploring movement, routes and paths, rather than ‘sites’, we can potentially reconceive the lived experience, even for sedentary communities in the past, as fluid and mobile (Lane 2016). The numerous ceremonial centres and shrines of the ancient Moche in Peru, for example, suggest a high degree of mobility in populations known for their intensive agricultural economy (Swenson 2018). This evidence of greater mobility for farming communities is relevant to the first millennium CE in Europe as well, where emphasis has often been on identifying large-scale migrations, rather than considering the possibilities of seasonal mobility, temporary sites and cycles of ritual movement. Transhumance practices were active in upland landscapes as late as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Costello 2018), and coastal communities in many regions carry an identity shaped by the mobility and risks involved in maritime exploitation (Barrett and Orton 2016). The assemblage and re-assemblage of communities as part of the ‘rhythms of life’ in these rural communities would have codified experiences and nurtured political subjectivities.

Meeting times in past societies were often governed or ordered by the seasons, occurring at set times of the year when people may have needed to gather (see also Celebrations, Sykes et al. 2018). Aspects of setting also imply the desire to manage or regulate the unusual and non-normative nature of temporary events and sites. The frequent choice of ‘interfacials’ between land and sea or liminal locations between resource areas freed people from the constraints of their daily norms, but perhaps also ideologically delimited and constrained gatherings (Semple et al. 2019). Travel to upland sites in early-modern Europe involved protective boundary rituals, while in the public spaces in Igbo settlements in Nigeria, some performances, dances and processions placed emphasis on being a ‘good’ participant in the community (Ugwuanyi and Schofield 2018). The public gatherings at Huaca Colorada in the Jequetepeque Valley, were tightly scripted events, controlled by ritual with an intensified materiality, involving performances, movement and activities structured by sacred complexes and the consumption of prized foods (Swenson 2018). Over time, northern European assemblies as well were increasingly rooted in conservative ideas of tradition involving using the correct sites and protocols and laws to ensure the legitimacy of the meeting, while weapons were prohibited and poor behaviour was restrained by the threat of exclusion (Sanmark 2017). Large gatherings of people of course can be dangerous and temporary events can offer opportunities to break from social norms. These rituals that guided movement and behaviour at gatherings may thus have operated as subtle mechanisms of control, necessary to the order of proceedings. The structuring of space, however, and the use of group rituals, could also encourage cohesion and unity. At the great healing sanctuary of Asklepieion, outside Epidaurus in ancient Greece, the developing architecture shaped processional routes through the complex and allowed for individual and group experiences. The complex combined sociopetal and sociofugal spaces, which enabled and constrained participants in viewing rituals and in meeting or assembling in groups (Kristensen 2018).

The frequent placing of gatherings at sites at older antecedent funerary monuments such as barrows, tombs and more recent burials and cemeteries also suggests an ancestral or supernatural presence was often a necessity at decision-making events The multi-functional local gatherings in early medieval Ireland made use of territorial boundaries and burial grounds, natural prominences and large ancient
monument complexes (Gleeson 2018). This suggests that communities desired to meet at places with ancestral resonance that offered a connection between real and supernatural worlds. For the seasonally mobile populations of Somaliland, older and recent burials and cemeteries represented a fixed point that provided an ancestral linkage with the landscape and operated as sites of intense rituality in a time of dramatic cultural change (González-Ruibal and de Torres 2018). They anchored mobile and transient communities within this landscape, offering stability, with repeat visits serving to reinforce memory and social connection. Associations between meeting places and earlier funerary monuments or cemeteries (and older monuments in general) are a common feature of temporary gathering places in late Iron Age/early medieval northern Europe (Semple et al. 2019). In post-Roman Britain, at least in certain regions, dispersed and relatively mobile communities seem to have used such features as fixed points for regular meetings. The example of Saltwood in Kent reveals the way in which such potent places might be claimed and used by several groups, initially for burial and later as places of assembly (Reynolds 2018). Such gathering traditions, whether small or large scale, may in fact capture the essential building blocks necessary to the transition from local or kin-based units of social organization, to notions of a broader community identity and the coalescence of a supra-regional political identity (ibid.).

Assemblies and gatherings therefore might be agents in the development of more complex relationships between communities as part of the processes driving emergent complex societies. Whether gathering outdoors at a cemetery site with neighbouring communities or travelling to participate in a larger communal settlement initiative for a time, the process of co-location, and the activities that often took place, such as performances, competitions and games, processions and group rituals, would have encouraged interaction and helped forge a sense of collective connection and identity. At the large temporary mega-sites in Ukraine in prehistory, a sense of collective and supra-regional identity was developed by participating in a collective architecture. In Jequetepeque Valley, Peru, gatherings codified what it meant to be connected to a broader Moche community. Temporary places and events, therefore, should not be underestimated as powerful agents in territorializing processes, facilitating the forging and consolidation of broader alliances. It is for this reason, perhaps, that gathering sites and rituals are often prone to manipulation by elites and authorities. Public events, ritual and spectacle play a powerful part in the staging of authority and choreography of power (Geertz 1980), and existing regular meeting patterns in some societies may have presented a particularly useful opportunity for aspirant elites and authorities. In Iron Age Europe, the large rural settlement forms called oppida are suggested as constructions designed to manage and enhance human experience of group events as a form of control by particular households (Moore 2017). In northern Europe, in Ireland, popular assemblies had associations with kingship and royal land. The emphasis on burial at these places changed towards the later centuries of the first millennium AD, replaced by evidence for intensive production and processing, perhaps demonstrating great control by royal authority (Gleeson 2018). In Viking Age Scandinavia, meeting sites became more heavily developed with the addition of new monumental forms, symptomatic perhaps of increasing social complexity and the growth of elite power (Sanmark 2017; see Ødegaard 2018). This investment in ritual and public theatre in northern societies seems to have developed alongside the need to control larger territories and kingdoms perhaps explaining the motivations in medieval Scotland for kings to look to the continent for inspiration, resituating elements of courtly culture within traditions of outdoor assembly and inauguration rituals (O’Grady 2018). One-off events might be engineered as well to enhance people’s sense of order and hierarchy. As the Great Exhibition of 1851 and its setting the Crystal Palace were designed to promote Britain’s industrial prowess and swell national pride (Gardner 2018), the repurposed structure five years later at Sydenham hosted a refreshed exhibition.
designed to reinforce Victorian sensibilities of grandeur and superiority also underlining that gatherings can be temporary in several senses: not just impermanent in terms of the usage, but also short-lived as temporary ventures.

This collection emphasizes that temporary events and gatherings and places are relevant not just for mobile communities from the Palaeolithic to the present, but also to sedentary and even urban communities. Gatherings of all kinds are shown here to be intrinsic to forging a sense of collective identity and cohesion: sharing food and competing in wrestling or races, or participating in processions and dances, are activities that heighten interaction and emphasize shared experiences and memories. While the centrality of public spectacle to authority has long been recognized, the articles here reveal the potency of temporary places, gatherings and assemblies in creating and transforming social relations well beyond the bounds of the event. They also demonstrate their ability to provide unique political affordances for communities that might lead to the realization of more complex and supra-regional identities. Their territorializing power can be found in a range of different societies and cultures over time, while their material grammar, often based on collective traditions, time and again seems to have provided a rich seam of inspiration for the staging of elite authority and power.

Notes on contributor

Sarah Semple is a Professor of Archaeology at Durham University in the UK. Her interests lie in exploring the use and perceptions of place and space in historic-period societies and in the funerary archaeology and ritual of late Iron Age and early medieval societies in northern Europe.

References


Sarah Semple

*Durham University*

✉️ s.j.sempi@durham.ac.uk