

Soils, Culture, and People

DECEMBER 2015

Soils in Culture

Soil and people are intricately linked. In fact, the Latin root of the word *human* is similar to the root of the word *humus* and means earth. Soil touches people's lives in many ways, including serving as the source of food and clothing, and for its ecological services, such as filtering drinking water. People have recognized the importance of soil since ancient times and soil has found its way into many cultural references. And, many religions have references to soil and many feel a spiritual connection to land and earth.

Soil has also found its way into art and literature, often viewed as reflections of society. Interestingly, clay tablets were among the first portable writing and painting surfaces used. The colorful minerals of soil have inspired artwork and been used as dyes and paints. When soil is mentioned in songs and poems is usually follows one of two paths. The soil may be discussed as a metaphor for some part of the life cycle, similar to its reference in the common prayer, "from dust to dust". In the Johnny Cash album, *Songs of our Soil*, nearly all songs are about death. The other common theme of soil is in reference to work, with the word 'toil' often being used as the rhyme for soil. This surely references the hard life those who work the soil experienced. Yet, when land or earth are mentioned, it is generally with a prideful meaning of home.

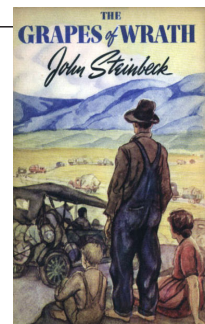
There are some novels with soil or soil related events as a central focus. One of the most significant soil events in U.S. history was the extensive soil erosion, the cause of the Dust Bowl era. Fictitious work such as *Grapes of Wrath*, by John Steinbeck and nonfiction such as *The Worst Hard Time*, by Timothy Egan tell stories of folks who lived through this event.

While there are both fiction and nonfiction works focusing soil and the need for soil conservation, characters who understand soil have also been used in many mystery novels, such as the Sherlock Holmes series and Temperance Brennan series, which both also became movies and/or television shows. These characters use soils found on or near victims to track the causes of death and likely murderer.



The Antigo Sitt Loam Song F. D. Hole (1980)

An - ti - go, a soil to know, Wis - con - sin's crops and livestock grow, and forests too, on
An - ti - go, and forests, too, on An - ti - go.



Soil has also found its way into art, music, and literature.

Soils in History

Soil has also had an influence on shaping history. Around 3000 BC, the Sumerians built large cities in the deserts of southern Mesopotamia (now mostly Iraq). Using irrigation, they farmed the desert soils and created large food surpluses that made their civilization possible. But around 2200 BC, the civilization collapsed. Scientists debate why, but one reason may be tied to the soil. Irrigating in dry climates can cause a buildup of salt, a process called salinization.

Dust and mud have proven significant in battles from ancient history through modern times although soil is not often noticed in battle strategy. Yet, its properties have been critical to certain battles. Examples can be seen from the battle of Agincourt (1415) when the fields along the English front line turned to mud from heavy rains, to trench warfare during WWI, and the presence of dust as troops and equipment advance. As struggles continue in the Middle East, many armies have found that tanks and other equipment have shortened life-spans in these dusty conditions.

Many factors go into deciding the fate of a battle and into determining the course of politics. Soil can be a factor. The massive soil erosion of the Dust Bowl brought about many new environmental policies and organizations in the U.S. Government. What we know today as the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service started as the Soil Conservation Service following those events.

Soil has influenced the course of history and soil also gives clues to what happened before modern records. Archaeologists and soil scientists work closely together to interpret the information contained in soils. New deposits of parent material take time to develop into soil. By studying how developed the soil burying an archaeological site is, scientists may determine how long ago the site was buried. In some cases, soil scientists know when a type of parent material was deposited; for example, there has been no new glacial till since the last ice age. In other cases, knowing the age of the civilization helps determine when the deposit occurred. This can be useful in dating volcanic events that buried towns. Ancient farm fields also have clues in them about the type of agricultural management practices that were used and the types of crops that were grown. These details can tell us how well a society ate. We continue to leave our footprint in a similar manner for future generations to study.

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Clues within soil can be a guide to what has happened in history. Clues within art and literature can be a guide to how societies have viewed soil. Evidence indicates that soil has been important in deciding the success or failure of many societies through agricultural sustainability and events such as battles or political changes. Soil and people are bound to each other. If we care for the soil, the soil will care for us.



Tools at a dig site.



Battle of Hattin. Wikipedia



A great 'roller' moves across the land during the Dust Bowl. NRCS