Three Facets of Maritime Archaeology: society, landscape and critique

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This essay arose from the session 'Theoretical Advances in Maritime Archaeology' at TAG '93 in Durham, for which I was a discussant. The essay was submitted together with other papers from that session to the International Journal of Nautical Archaeology, but its suitability for the readership of that journal was questioned. Written whilst I was at the University of Southampton, the essay in the form here was published on the Department of Archaeology's research pages in March 1995 (http:/avebury.arch.soton.ac.uk/Research\Firth\). As those pages are no longer available the essay is republished here (April 2010) to maintain accessibility.

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Introduction

I would like to present some ideas about maritime archaeology that bridge apparent divisions between theory and fieldwork, between instruction and research, and between academia and management. Although it is quite easy to state the need for fresh connections, the debate as to how to bring them about is often quite stagnant because it starts from the position that such divisions are real rather than analytical. In the following discussion I adopt a different approach, founded upon an understanding of archaeology as practice. The discussion addresses the study of 'maritime societies' as phenomena in the past and in the present and draws upon notions of landscape and of critique, where 'landscape' incorporates the physical and cognitive setting of everyday life, and 'critique' concerns the way in which archaeologists direct their actions and their interpretations in transforming modern society.

The first stage in overcoming apparent division is to adopt a level of analysis that is closer to archaeologists' own experience of archaeology. In many instances it makes no sense to divide archaeologists' activities into theory, fieldwork, instruction, research, academia and management, or to worry about the traditional divisions between disciplines, because all such activities and disciplines are blended in the course of practice. A focus on archaeology as practice, therefore, integrates the many facets of archaeology by concentrating on the archaeologist who invents and reinvents the discipline through each successive action.

This perspective is informed by social theories addressed to the interaction of agents and structures in everyday life, notably Giddens' theory of structuration (Giddens 1979: 69). According to Giddens, society is constituted by routine social practices carried out by individuals who draw on, reproduce and transform the structures of society. Consequently, the activities of archaeologists through time can be understood to structure, and be structured by, the practice of archaeology. Giddens argues that structure is 'instantiated' (i.e. manifest in the instant of action) through rules and resources, where rules consist of the meanings that are attributed to things and of the norms according to which those things are treated, and where resources manifest inequalities of life chances which can be discerned as power (Giddens 1979: 82, 88). Further analysis suggests that the structure produced and reproduced in the course of archaeological practice has two components: first, the distillation of the archaeological resource from ancient material, revealing power relations in the past and in the present;

second, engagement with rules about what archaeology is and how it should be conducted, indicating the individual responsibility of each practising archaeologist for the present and future of 'the business'. The application of social theory to archaeology presents some useful insights into the treatment of monuments and discoveries, the behaviour of archaeologists, and the contribution of archaeologists to contemporary social life. These points are touched on briefly below and are the focus of my current research (Firth, in prep.).

One advantage of a focus upon practice is that ideas applicable to the business of archaeology, which is practice in the present, can also be applied to ancient activity, which is practice in the past. The activities of past individuals structured and were structured by the processes which constituted ancient society, and these processes can be understood in terms of rules and resources.

Locale

Giddens, drawing on Garfinkel, proposes that individuals (be they archaeologists or ancients) take into account not only the effects of their own actions and the actions and reactions of those around them, but also the settings within which interaction takes place (Giddens 1979: 57). Such an appreciation of setting, conceived of as 'locale' (Giddens 1979: 206-207), is tremendously important to archaeology because it identifies material culture as an active medium of social reproduction rather than as a passive backdrop that merely reflects the processes going on up front. Thus archaeology is the study of past societies based on the actual material through which those societies were produced and reproduced.

The focus on practice is applicable equally to past and to present so the notion of locale pertains to ancient material and to contemporary material alike. Archaeologists are concerned with contemporary material as much as with ancient material because their studies of ancient material take place in the present. Ancient material becomes contemporary material because it takes on fresh 'archaeological' qualities that dictate how the material should be handled, treated, valued and displayed. For example, bits of old damp wood may be transformed by archaeologists into a present-day historic ship. The process through which ancient material 'becomes' an archaeological resource in the present is, arguably, an exercise in power relations (see Carman 1990; 1993; Firth in prep.).

Locale also applies to different scales of interaction. At one extreme it provides insight into the way in which one person draws upon and transforms a single object, like a child playing with a stick. At a larger scale it can apply to the relationship between a large group of people and their surroundings, in which case 'locale' approximates to archaeologists' use of the term 'landscape'. It is worth noting that 'locale' overcomes an apparent division between nature and culture in addressing the physical environment. Even if the features of the landscape are wholly natural they can still be discussed in terms of how they are drawn upon and reproduced by people. For example, a person can enjoy a view of a bay without that enjoyment marring the sea, but it would be incorrect to suggest that the unsullied sea remained 'natural' or without cultural relevance.

In sum, the combined temporal and spatial attributes of locale can accommodate the ancient landscapes that archaeologists try to recreate as well as the 'historic' landscapes in which people live today. Such landscapes may be as small as a room or as big as a continent.

Maritime Societies

The prominence given to locale in Giddens' definition of society provides an analytical tool capable of probing the elusive link between societies and the landscapes which they inhabit:

> A social system may be said to be a society ... if it embodies an intermingling of the following criteria:
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> | | |
> |---|---|
> | The association of the system with a locale comprising a 'social space' or 'territory of occupation'. Such a locale does not have to be a fixed, immobile area. | [Defined locale] |
> | … the sustaining of a legitimated series of prerogatives over occupied social space: especially the prerogative of the use of the material environment … | [Legitimised prerogatives] |
> | An 'institutional clustering' of practices among the participants in the social system, sustained through mechanisms of social/system integration. | [Shared institutions] |
> | An over-all awareness, discursive and practical, of belonging to an inclusive community with a certain 'identity'. | [Inclusive identity] |
>
> (Giddens 1981: 45-46)

The above definition lends itself to a perspective on 'maritime societies' where the qualifier 'maritime' indicates that the locale, prerogatives, institutions or identities of the society are shaped by the contact of its members with the sea. Hence the identification of a society as a 'maritime' society reflects the degree to which the sea shapes each of the four aspects of the society concerned, so the term can be applied with considerable sensitivity to the evident characteristics of the society under consideration. Such sensitivity challenges the assumption that activity in, on or near the sea is inherently 'maritime' and avoids defining maritime archaeology by reference to pre-existing topics, subjects or methods (Gale 1993; McGrail 1984: 12; Muckelroy 1978: 1-10); the question 'what is maritime' becomes a conclusion towards which progress is directed rather than a starting point that determines which things maritime archaeologists should study. In short, maritime archaeology might be described as the use of ancient material in examining whether it is appropriate to apply the term 'maritime' to past societies.

As locale is integral to the definition of society, the notion of 'maritime society' can be applied flexibly according to the scale of the setting of interaction. At one extreme the crew of a vessel or the residents of a fishing village might constitute a maritime society. At grander scales the term might be applied to the Neolithic population of the Solent, to the hunting and gathering inhabitants of Canada's Pacific Coast, or to the medieval citizens of Europe. Moreover, the approach is applicable to the present as well as the past, so the study of archaeology as a contemporary practice becomes a question of the extent to which modern archaeologists comprise or contribute to a maritime society today.

Coastal Landscapes and Critical Directions: a framework for practice

The term 'landscape' can be used in maritime archaeology in at least four ways:

- First, maritime cultural landscapes, consisting of material and immaterial aspects of networks of sailing routes, ports, harbours, related constructions and other remains

of human activity on land and underwater, mirroring the entire range of maritime economies (Westerdahl 1992);

- Second, ancient landsurfaces, comprising palaeoenvironmental features and associated material which has been inundated or alluviated as a result of changes of sea-level or coastal morphology;
- Third, the present situation, conceived of as the setting of everyday life at the coast 'here and now';
- Finally, the management environment, meaning the physical and cognitive circumstances of the practice of managing archaeology.

There are at least four critical directions that can be pursued in relation to maritime society:

- First, a critique of modernity, addressing the origins, dynamics and global spread of western industrial capitalism and its associated institutions;
- Second, a critique of previous interpretations of the past. This critique reappraises interpretations which omit maritime or coastal components in addressing terrestrial societies, and interpretations which omit the terrestrial context in interpretations of sea-borne activities;
- Third, a critique of contemporary use of the past, that is to say, of the use of ancient material to support claims regarding meanings, norms and power in societies today;
- Finally, a critique of coastal management, namely the process by which co-ordinated strategies are developed and implemented for the allocation of environmental, socio-cultural and institutional resources to achieve the conservation and sustainable multiple use of the coast (see CAMPNET 1989).

The four types of landscape can be juxtaposed with the four critiques to create four landscape-critique combinations which provide a framework for addressing purported maritime societies. It is worth noting that many other combinations are conceivable; I am simply focusing on those which appeal to me most.

Maritime cultural landscape and modernity

A critique of modernity can be pursued by examining the concept of maritime cultural landscape in the early modern period, i.e. from the late medieval period to the industrial revolution. The processes through which modernity developed - such as industrialisation, globalisation, colonialism, capitalism, nation-building and the consolidation of the territorially defined state - each have a maritime component which may be susceptible to a landscape approach.

The concept of maritime cultural landscape assists in identifying the relationship between the details of ancient maritime material and broader societal processes because individual discoveries can be seen as the remains of items through which those processes were produced and reproduced. Thus the spatial and temporal patterning of ship construction evident in the remains of yards, hards and hulls can be regarded in terms of a landscape of technological and financial innovation inhabited not just by shipwrights but by the whole of the soon-to-be modern population of the region. Similarly, the evidence of fleets and forts in the Solent, for example, is indicative not only of advances in firepower, but of changes in the character of the state and state-system that may have been apparent to all who fished or traded within sight of the guns.

It is, of course, difficult to make secure inferences about the way in which people saw their world in the early modern period from archaeological sources alone. However, Westerdahl (1989) has demonstrated the scope for using the concept of maritime

cultural landscape to assimilate information from archaeological investigations with historical, toponymic, iconographic, and cartographic material. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) could be used to assimilate such varied sources of spatially indexed data and to facilitate the generation of new data. Although GIS are recognised as useful tools for coastal management, their use in maritime archaeology is less well developed despite their demonstrable utility in archaeological research (see e.g. Allen et al: 1990). Exploration of maritime cultural landscapes using GIS could raise fresh questions about the origins of modernity in societies which displayed maritime characteristics.

Ancient landsurfaces and the critique of previous interpretations

This combination has had a practical expression in investigation of submerged or alluviated terrestrial sites for a number of decades, so my intention is primarily to assimilate its theoretical underpinnings within the proposed framework. Investigation of submerged land consists of an appreciation of ancient landsurfaces and a critique of previous interpretations of the past. Analytical separation may encourage archaeologists to elaborate the relationship between landsurface and landscape, and to hone their proposed inquiries. Research which identifies drowned landsurfaces as an extension of dry land may propel the discipline towards reappraisal of terrestrial landscapes that have been studied in isolation from their lowlands simply because the latter became submerged. Archaeologists may have to struggle with the meaning of 'maritime' if they try to apply the term to the inhabitants of such extended terrestrial landscapes.

The present situation and contemporary use of the past

The notion of 'present situation' is directed to the effect of the ancient component of the landscape inhabited by today's public upon their appreciation of their own place in history. As stated earlier, people draw upon and reproduce their physical surroundings in the course of routine activities, hence it may be argued that people draw upon monuments, artefacts and landscapes which they transform or reproduce tacitly from day to day. The persistence of monuments in heavily used landscapes indicates that they have been 'reproduced' repeatedly through the ages; uses and abuses of the past in times up to and including our own are embedded within these surviving monuments. Appreciation of the historic landscape in terms of locale suggests a critique of existing studies of contemporary use of the past; a critical perspective will recognise the integral role of ancient material to the production and reproduction of inequality rather than as a feature of attractive but largely irrelevant scenery. This perspective suggests a change in emphasis away from tourists and museum visitors towards the wider public's experience of the past in routine daily life.

Management environments and coastal management

The 'management environment' is a specialised form of 'the present situation' applicable to archaeologists, as they have a more discursive relationship with the past than many members of contemporary society. The concept refers collectively to the broadest range of factors affecting any manager, including questions relating to value, to known and perceived ancient material, to the overall aims of management and to the institutional setting. While such factors can be expressed abstractly it is also possible to map the factors as a landscape to identify distinct management environments. For example the management environment associated with preservation of ancient waterfronts in industrial outer estuaries under port authority control could be contrasted with the management environment applicable to research on Roman buildings that are threatened by erosion in inland waters subject to riparian rights of ownership.

The manager's landscape is shaped by existing coastal and marine boundaries because the management environment includes institutional concerns. Such borders are usually an extension of terrestrial limits that may be ill-suited to the unique features of the coastal environment. Any challenge to the application of terrestrially-derived boundaries

to archaeology underwater also raises questions about the suitability of such boundaries to management of terrestrial matters and, ultimately, about the territorial foundation of the nation-state. Hence the juxtaposition of management environment and coastal management offers an approach to archaeology underwater that amounts to a critical perspective of management of coastal and terrestrial resources in general.

Conclusion

This paper is intended to provoke discussion and to encourage explicit use of theory in maritime archaeology. I have argued that the search for bridges across apparent divisions in the discipline should start with archaeology as it is practised. Insofar as analytical distinctions cause division, then the discipline should be reoriented according to practical frameworks that integrate diverse activity. This does not mean, however, that practice should simply be dressed-up in theoretical language; archaeologists need a developed lattice of theory in order to give direction to their activities.

I have set out a framework based upon critique and upon landscape for applying the term 'maritime' to societies. The relationship between the three facets is expressed in Figure 1. The juxtaposition of critique and landscape is necessarily abstract, but it gives way to concrete examples of archaeological investigation. Investigations of some of the types mentioned are already underway, in which case the framework may be used to elaborate their theoretical underpinning. In other cases the framework can be used to identify fresh questions to which new investigative programmes can be addressed.

I have emphasised that societies in the past and societies in the present can be exposed to equivalent theoretical perspectives. It is essential to recognise that archaeological practices are as susceptible to analysis as the ancient practices that archaeologists investigate. I hope that increased awareness of the character of archaeological practice will encourage maritime archaeologists to savour their personal capacity to transform the discipline, and I look forward to the debate that should ensue.

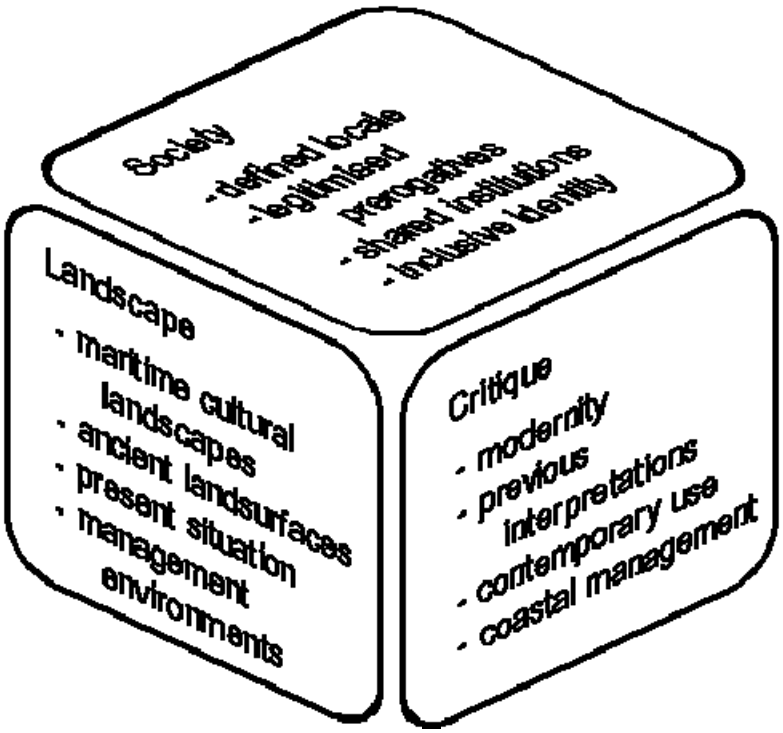

Figure 1 Three facets of maritime archaeology: society, landscape and critique

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