

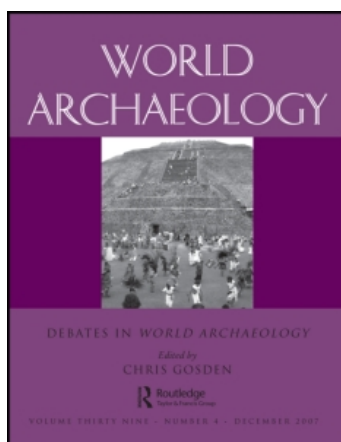
This article was downloaded by: [Ingenta Content Distribution TandF titles]

On: 2 November 2009

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 911795436]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



World Archaeology

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713699333>

Introduction: seeing land from the sea

Gabriel Cooney

Online Publication Date: 01 December 2004

To cite this Article Cooney, Gabriel(2004)'Introduction: seeing land from the sea',World Archaeology,35:3,323 — 328

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/0043824042000185748

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0043824042000185748>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Introduction: seeing land from the sea

Gabriel Cooney

The archaeology of coastal landscapes and islands is a long-established focus of research, but there has been a tendency to concentrate on the dry edges, the land, rather than on what Braudel (1992: 65) referred to as the liquid plains of the sea. This could be seen as viewing the sea from the land. There has also been a long tradition of recognizing the ways in which seas connect different places and coastal zones. For example, the significance of coastal navigation and contact has been an enduring theme in the archaeology of Atlantic Europe (e.g. Bowen 1972; Cunliffe 2001) and Childe (1940: 6) recognized that the Irish Sea between the islands of Britain and Ireland 'is the natural centre of a province whose several parts it unites rather than divides'. This emphasis on travel and contact can also be seen in the traditional focus in maritime archaeology on ships (e.g. Ruppé and Barstad 2002). But in coastal areas the sea is not just the main means of contact between inhabited places, it is central to the way of human life (e.g. Parker 2001; McErlean et al. 2002). Jonathan Raban (1999), writing as he was sailing from Seattle to Juneau in Alaska along the Inside Passage that separates Vancouver Island from mainland British Columbia, made the point that people who inhabit the dry edges of a sea actually live across its fluid surface.

Seeing and thinking of the sea as seascape – contoured, alive, rich in ecological diversity and in cosmological and religious significance and ambiguity – provides a new perspective on how people in coastal areas actively create their identities, sense of place and histories. As an aside, it is interesting that the term has already gained a currency in wider public discussion in a way that landscape perhaps has not. For example, the Irish national broadcasting organization, RTE, has a weekly radio programme entitled *Seascapes*, with coverage of all aspects of the marine and coastal communities. The term also provides a context within which to move beyond a preoccupation with subsistence and its associated technology, which has dominated much of the discussion to date on the archaeology of coastal areas. Several of the contributors to this volume make the crucially important point that this technological, functionalist approach needs to be recognized as a particular theoretical perspective, which may actually impede our understanding of the archaeology of seascapes. People in traditional societies in coastal areas, on islands, as elsewhere, would not have separated ritual and habitual actions. Hence it is important that we approach the archaeological record in the same way.

This volume makes an important contribution to the archaeology of seascapes. While the papers are varied in their theoretical perspectives, approach and subject matter, there

are a number of recurring themes in them. The first of these is the dynamic, ever-changing relationship between the land and the sea. Patterns of similarity in the lifestyles and beliefs of people in different coastal environments are also a persistent underlying theme, alongside the recognition that it is local knowledge and lived experience that lie at the heart of the way in which people socialize seascapes. Part of this process of socialization is the recognition and marking of the land and sea in ways that may leave material traces. While these landmarks and seamarks may facilitate movement and the identification of boundaries, they also involve the critical issue of the recognition of the spiritual power of the sea, islands and coastal zones. Thinking about the prevalence of belief in the spiritual and physical power of the sea also provides a better understanding of how ships and sea travel, the acquisition of knowledge and material could be seen by people as floating in symbolic counterpoint to the ship as a vehicle of death, taking the occupants to another world. Finally in this overview we should note as a theme the way in which standard archaeological methodologies and approaches, appreciating spatial and chronological change, can both transform our knowledge of seascapes and allow us to integrate them with the wider domain of the archaeologies of landscape.

Currents, winds, seabed topography, seasonal changes, the diurnal and monthly rhythms of the tides combine to create a constantly varying world. Seasonal variations are central to patterns of life in coastal areas (e.g. Robinson 1995: 184) and Carson (1951: 28–36) vividly described the visible changes in the colour and life of the sea with the changing year. The daily ebb and flow of the tide is crucial to the understanding of the use of inter-tidal areas, as indicated in the discussion by Aidan O’Sullivan (this volume) of medieval fish traps in Britain and Ireland and the hypothesis put forward here by Ian McNiven that stone arrangements made by Australian indigenous marine specialists high in the inter-tidal zone are to do with the spiritual control of extreme tidal regimes. In passing, the title of McNiven’s paper begins with the term that these people use to describe themselves, ‘Saltwater People’. This might be useful to bear in mind as expressing the centrality of the sea in the lives of people of the coast and islands. Analysis of long-term patterns in relative sea levels since the last glaciation and how they impact on the shape and extent of the coast in different areas of Newfoundland is at the heart of the detailed discussion by Trevor Bell and Priscilla Renouf (this volume) of the pattern of early human settlement of the island of Newfoundland. This paper clearly indicates the need for awareness of such environmental changes if we are properly to understand the pattern of settlement in coastal areas.

In relation to patterns of similarity in the lifestyles and beliefs of people in different coastal environments, Chris Ballard, Richard Bradley, Lise Nordenborg Myrhe and Meredith Wilson (this volume) argue that, traditionally, people in coastal areas shared similar daily preoccupations and, through the process of ritualization (Bell 1992; Rappaport 1999), these preoccupations came to play a central role in cosmological and religious beliefs and their material expression. How are we to approach such similarities without falling into the trap of making ahistorical, generalist statements? In developing an archaeology of seascapes there is clearly merit in developing a comparative approach and methodology for the examination and understanding of similar features in coastal zones. For example, in this volume Ian McNiven suggests that there are four key issues (increase or maintenance rites, hunting magic, control of the elements and mortuary rituals)

addressed in the rituals carried out by maritime hunter-gatherers in northern Australia, which might be of wider application in the interpretation of coastal ritual sites. Colin Breen and Paul Lane, in considering approaches to seascapes in East Africa, argue that we need to be more generally aware of the variation in the types of activity and communications/movement that characterize different zones from the coast out to the open sea.

On the other hand, it is clear that it was local knowledge and awareness of the particularity of specific coastal areas and seascapes that created the rich archaeological diversity reflected in the papers in this volume. The nature of the weather and the tide, for instance, is very much a local matter, with potential for significant differences over a restricted geographic distance. Local topography is very important in determining the features of the tide. As one example of a human response Tomás Ó Criomhainn (1978: 97–8), writing about his life in the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, recalls in detail the knowledge of local sea conditions and lived experience that was required to hunt seals successfully in the caves of the Blasket Islands off the south-west coast of Ireland. Only strong and experienced swimmers could undertake the long swim into the caves and the risk was worthwhile only because of the prospect of a successful seal hunt. In this volume, Ian Barber analyses the changing patterns of early and later period Maori use of the sea and fish in the northern area of the South Island of New Zealand. He addresses the question of whether these changes are best explained by the application of foraging theory, as might be applied to any group of maritime-focused foragers, or, are they to be meaningfully interpreted in the context of the particular world-view of the Maori? A key comment that Barber makes is that ritual and habitual action were unified in Maori tradition and behaviour, emphasizing the importance of interpreting the archaeological record in the same way.

As in many other parts of the world, Maori communities marked out their fishing grounds and this was done from the sea, using prominent landmarks. It is the visually distinctive elements of the coastal topography, such as points or promontories and ridges or hills, that are useful in this regard (Pocius 1991: 68). Not surprisingly, these are often named and given ancestral significance and are used in defining and orally recounting lineage histories and rights of ownership. This gives us a good sense of people being at home on the sea and seeing it as a habitually used and important activity area. Tim Phillips (this volume) provides an example of the value of seeing the archaeology of the land from the sea. He shows how the siting of megaliths becomes more understandable when we consider that on the Orkney islands off the north-east coast of Scotland megalithic monuments of the Neolithic period appear to have been sited with the assumption that they would be habitually seen from the sea. In an archipelago like Orkney the sea was the axis of movement and an area of daily activity. By contrast, in Caithness on the adjacent area of mainland Scotland the megaliths were located to be seen from the valleys.

The reality of the sea as a medium in a state of constant change must have been brought home to people in coastal areas or on islands by the impact of the weather and sea conditions on their ability to fish, hunt or travel or not. Allied to the fact that this fluid world always had to be negotiated by people moving between coastal areas, it should not be surprising that the sea would be perceived as having spiritual power. Teeming with fish and marine life, capable of taking a human life with a sudden change in conditions and viewed in a cosmic sense as the underworld (e.g. Bradley 2000: 12), the sea was both

valued and feared, something to be utilized and respected. It is not surprising that, in many traditional societies, the shore and more broadly the coastal zone, as the contact zone between the sea and the land, is seen as a liminal zone, resource-rich but also appropriate for the disposal of the dead (e.g. Pollard 1996; Scarre 2002a, 2002b), whose spirit may live on in the sea or on an island. Islands in many societies are perceived as having cosmological or religious significance, as a realm of the dead and the ancestors (e.g. Weiner 1988: 53–4). Like caves, mountains, springs and rivers, islands are seen as liminal but also as linking different worlds. They have a particular character as sacred, special places because they are where the land, sea and sky conjoin (Helms 1988: 25) or, as Steffler (2000: 76) graphically puts it, they are where ‘three of the world’s walls meet’. A number of the papers in the volume make reference to the significance of islands as places of burial and disposal of the dead. In the case of the late Maritime Archaic cemetery at Port au Choix, Newfoundland, Trevor Bell and Priscilla Renouf’s detailed reconstruction of the contemporary landscape demonstrates that it was on an island, with a settlement site nearby on the mainland.

This association of the sea and islands with death leads on to Astrid Lindenlauf’s contribution to the volume with its focus on the sea as a repository in which the ancient Greeks deemed it appropriate in particular circumstances to place and dispose of a range of valuable materials, as well as using the sea as a more general dumping ground. The suitability of the sea as a place of no return seems to have been linked to an appreciation of its power to bring death. It was this property of the sea that made it appealing for people who wished to use it purposefully as a place from which things could and would not return. Running through discussions about the connection of the sea with death is the powerful metaphor of the boat, as discussed by Chris Ballard and his colleagues in looking at the ship as a symbol in the prehistory of southern Scandinavia and south-east Asia. In Scandinavia itself there is strong evidence for a continuing connection between boats and ships, the journey of the dead and death and the afterlife from Mesolithic to Viking times (Crumlin-Pedersen and Thye 1995). Again this can be linked back to the significance of boat journeys and seafaring in coastal areas. This is the focus of Robert Van de Noort’s paper (this volume) in which he discusses the impact of a new type of sea craft, the sewn-plank boat, in Britain around 2000 BC. He points to its importance in trading networks and provision of access to material and knowledge from outside Britain and suggests that the beginning and ending of sea journeys may have been marked by ritual activity to ensure the success of the boat and its crew (see also Lundberg 2003: 321–2).

Several contributors make reference to the emphasis there has been in maritime archaeology on the study of ships and shipwrecks (e. g. Gould 2000; McGrail 1987, 2001; Ruppé and Barstad 2002). While this is an important area of archaeological research, Colin Breen and Paul Lane (this volume) point out the dangers of focusing on the archaeology of ships without considering their wider social context. Looking at the East African coast and its complex history, they argue that, both from a theoretical perspective and taking into account the methodologies that are feasible with local resources, what is required is a research strategy that focuses on the archaeology of the sub-tidal and inter-tidal zones. The advantage of this approach is that it focuses on using standard, widely used archaeological methods of compiling and analysing data which can be

complemented by marine geophysical and underwater surveys as appropriate. Realistically, this kind of approach is more likely to be of widespread application than one focused on the application of expensive technology. It is also the approach that will, as Robert Van de Noort puts it, allow us more fully to see how people in the past actively engaged with the sea and the changing patterns of that engagement over time. Breen and Lane, in their exploration of the changing seascapes of the East African coast, indicate just how complex human use of the sea and the coastal zone can be when there are local and colonizing societies operating side by side. They emphasize that there was also a considerable degree of continuity over time. In a very different context this is also a point made by Aidan O'Sullivan in discussing medieval fish weirs of Britain and Ireland. Here there is evidence for considerable continuity of form and location in the fish weirs, in some cases spanning several hundred years, despite significant local social changes. But O'Sullivan also focuses on the use of memory and local knowledge as people bring back into play what may have been quite ancient fishing structures as a way of building and maintaining social identities in estuarine areas.

In conclusion, the papers in this volume indicate the great potential that there is in the archaeology of seascapes. Because of the relatively recent realization of the presence and significance of archaeological features in coastal zones much work still remains to be done. Many low-lying coastal areas are currently under threat from rising sea levels. There are also significant impacts posed by coastal development. Inevitably much of the modern development or re-development of coastal areas is focused where there have been long histories of human activity, leading to the loss of local knowledge and understandings that are celebrated here (e.g. Griffith 1999). In that context, the volume is a timely reminder of the significance of the archaeology of 'saltwater people' across the world.

Acknowledgements

I am very pleased to express my thanks to all the referees who commented on papers, to Colin Breen and Aidan O'Sullivan for their comments on an earlier draft of this introduction and especially to the contributing authors.

Department of Archaeology, University College Dublin, Dublin 4, Ireland

References

- Bell, C. 1992. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Bowen, E. G. 1972. *Britain and the Western Seaways*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Bradley, R. 2000. *An Archaeology of Natural Places*. London: Routledge.
- Braudel, F. 1992. *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. London: HarperCollins.
- Carson, R. 1951. *The Sea Around Us*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Childe, V. G. 1940. *Prehistoric Communities of the British Isles*. London: Chambers.

- Crumlin-Pedersen, O. and Thye, B. M. (eds) 1995. *The Ship as Symbol in Prehistoric and Medieval Scandinavia*. Copenhagen: The National Museum of Denmark.
- Cunliffe, B. 2001. *Facing the Ocean: The Atlantic and its Peoples*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gould, R. A. 2000. *Archaeology and the Social History of Ships*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Griffith, D. 1999. *The Estuary's Gift*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Helms, M. W. 1988. *Ulysses' Sail: An Ethnographic Odyssey of Power, Knowledge and Geographical Distance*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Lundberg, A. 2003. Time travels in whaling boats. *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 3(3): 312–33.
- McErlean, T., McConkey, R. and Forsythe, W. 2002. *The Maritime Cultural Landscape of Strangford Lough*. Belfast: Blackstaff Press.
- McGrail, S. 1987. *Ancient Boats in Northwest Europe: The Archaeology of Water Transport to AD 1500*. London: Longman.
- McGrail, S. 2001. *Boats of the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ó Croidhin, T. 1978. *The Islandman*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Parker, A. J. 2001. Maritime landscapes. *Landscapes*, 1: 22–41.
- Pocius, G. L. 1991. *A Place to Belong: Community Order and Everyday Space in Calvert, Newfoundland*. Athens: University of Georgia Press; Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Pollard, T. 1996. Time and tide: coastal environments, cosmology and ritual practice in early prehistoric Scotland. In *The Early Prehistory of Scotland* (eds T. Pollard and A. Morrison). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 198–210.
- Raban, J. 1999. *Passage to Juneau: A Sea and its Meanings*. London: Picador.
- Rappaport, R. A. 1999. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Robinson, T. 1995. *Stones of Aran: Labyrinth*. Dublin: Lilliput Press.
- Ruppé, C. V. and Barstad, J. F. 2002. *International Handbook of Underwater Archaeology*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.
- Scarre, C. 2002a. A pattern of islands: the Neolithic monuments of north-west Brittany. *Journal of European Archaeology*, 5: 24–41.
- Scarre, C. 2002b. Coast and cosmos: the Neolithic monuments of northern Brittany. In *Monuments and Landscape in Atlantic Europe* (ed. C. Scarre). London: Routledge, pp. 84–102.
- Steffler, J. 2000. *The Grey Islands*. London, Ontario: Brick Books.
- Weiner, A. B. 1988. *The Trobrianders of Papua New Guinea*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.