

Moving beyond the ‘scape’ to being in the (watery) world, wherever

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Abstract

In seeking to replace traditional, stilted ‘land vs water’ views of the world with a more seamless perspective, the seascape is undoubtedly a useful heuristic concept. It moves us closer to addressing the fluid relationship that those who live and work on and around any body of water experience in reality. However in this paper we argue against the continued juxtaposition of land and sea in the development of the concept through the binary notions of landscape and seascape. Instead, drawing upon two very diverse, archaeological and anthropological examples, from the backwaters of present day Kerala, southern India, and from the island archipelagos of Mesolithic western Scotland, we propose a move away from the modern, Western need to atomise and categorise people’s experience of the world as existing in a landscape or a seascape. Instead, through these examples, we demonstrate how in daily life, in being in the world, land and sea are always intermingled and always connected in a way that defies the simple realm of one ‘scape’ or the other.

Introduction

We’d like to begin this paper about *seascapes* with a quote about *landscape*:

“The landscape, I hold, is not a picture in the imagination, surveyed by the mind’s eye; nor, however, is it an alien and formless substrate awaiting the imposition of human order...neither is the landscape identical to nature, nor is it on the side of humanity *against* nature. As the familiar domain of our dwelling, it is *with* us, not against us, but it is no less real for that. And through living in it, the landscape becomes a part of us, just as we are part of it” (Ingold 1993: 154).

Whilst this land-based quote might seem somewhat incongruous in a seascape session, we will go on to explain why we think it is not simply relevant but fundamental to how we interrogate and apply the notion of the seascape in our work.

But first, we want to use this quote to make a point. We have chosen it because it represents one of a range of fascinating works that appeared in the early 1990s which explicitly sought to challenge the pervasive Cartesian understandings of landscape that existed, unquestioned, in archaeology until this point. Fifteen, or so, years on,

such counter-modern approaches to past and present landscapes are ubiquitous in the literature (just some of the key texts include; Bender 2006; Brück 2005; Gosden and Head 1994; Ingold 1993; Johnson 2006; Lemaire 1997; Thomas 2001; Tilley 1994; and numerous authors within Bender 1993, Hirsch and O’Hanlon 1995 and Ucko and Layton 1999). Whilst some studies of landscape remain concerned with the land as objectified and commoditized, it is in challenging these ideas that many recent publications have been able to develop alternative, nuanced interpretations of the past (e.g. Edmonds 1999, Conneller 2005). Understanding the landscape as taskscape (to borrow another phrase from Ingold), as inherently temporal, social and political, and existing through the continually embodied actions, and reciprocal interaction of both animate and inanimate things and persons (Ingold 1993: 163-164), enables us to think through the complicated ways that the biographies of people, places and things were entwined, enacted, experienced and remembered in both the past and the present.

So how does this relate to the seascape? In many ways it is this rich body of literature about the *landscape* that prompted the rise of our disciplinary concern with the seascape. Such a fixation with landscape, whether viewed in Cartesian or counter-modern terms, represents a view of the past which for many archaeologists is simply the-past-on-dry-land. Traditionally accounts of the past stop at the water’s edge, unless they are developed by underwater archaeologists, when invariably accounts of the past-submerged stop at the water’s surface. This view has perpetuated the idea of islands as isolated (Terrell, Hunt and Gosden 1997), of various coastal regions as marginal and peripheral, and ultimately it has reinforced the modern, Cartesian dualism of land vs water and all of the associated, and problematic connections with this (e.g. culture vs nature, subject vs object – the problems with such dualisms more broadly are discussed in Thomas 2004).

This, then, is where the seascape comes in. The notion seeks to replace our stilted ‘land vs water’ view of the world with a more seamless perspective, which addresses the fluid relationship that those who live and work on and around any body of water experience in reality (Cooney 2003 and others). We all agree that it is crucial to break down this boundary – that’s why we’re here today. But does the notion of the seascape really do this? Does it deliver in this sense? To explore this, let’s return to the quote with which we began this paper. The point it is making about landscape is

clear – so let's replace the word landscape with seascape to explore whether the term seascape can be understood in the same way;

“The [seascape], I hold, is not a picture in the imagination, surveyed by the mind's eye; nor, however, is it an alien and formless substrate awaiting the imposition of human order...neither is the [seascape] identical to nature, nor is it on the side of humanity *against* nature. As the familiar domain of our dwelling, it is *with* us, not against us, but it is no less real for that. And through living in it, the [seascape] becomes a part of us, just as we are part of it” (Ingold 1993: 154).

The first part of this quote articulates exactly the idea that the seascape has been invoked to express, as Cooney argues, “contoured, alive, rich in ecological diversity and in cosmological and religious significance and ambiguity ... [through which] people in coastal areas actively create their identities, sense of place and histories” (Cooney 2003: 323). In these terms we can understand the maritime environment in exactly the sense that we see Ingold discuss landscape, not as culture vs nature, or in this case land vs sea, but as dynamic, temporal and social.

So then, what's our problem? If the term seascape can work like this, and stimulate this way of challenging the land/sea division in our accounts of the past and the present, what is our argument? Well, put simply, the issue we have is raised in the last sentence of Ingold's quote “... [a]nd through living in it, the landscape becomes a part of us, just as we are part of it” (Ingold 1993: 154). This concept is incredibly useful. In this short sentence lies that notion that places, things and people are not fixed, but rather all are extended into and disclosed in the temporal, social world. People, things and places emerge and are understood and negotiated through biography, narrative, memory and simply being-in-the-world. However it is in the face of this notion that the idea of the seascape starts to fall short. If we argue that the seascape “...becomes a part of us, just as we are part of it” (Ibid.) then we are faced with the reality that the objects, smells, experiences and memories of the maritime environment ultimately can and will extend far beyond this. This raises the question: where does the seascape stop? And it is in asking this question that a fundamental problem with the term is revealed.

Ultimately, the term seascape still asks us to define the limits of the maritime environment and then draw a line between what is maritime and what is not. Consequently it perpetuates exactly the kind of reductive, divisive and Cartesian objectification and division of land and sea that the term itself seeks to challenge. In contrast, in the rest of this paper we will propose a move away from the modern, Western need to atomise and categorise people's experience of the world as existing in a landscape *or* a seascape. In discussing examples from two very different case studies, from the island archipelagos of Mesolithic western Scotland and from the backwaters of present day Kerala, southern India, we will illustrate how the complicated relationships between people, places and things may be extended inland and out to sea in a variety of different ways which ultimately defy the classificatory boundaries implied in the term seascape.

Where does the seascape stop?

Turning first then to the Mesolithic northern Irish Sea basin, here there is ample evidence for the diverse relationship people held with the maritime environment. Although preservational issues, such as the presence of raised beaches and substantial inland peat coverage, inevitably skew the record, nonetheless many of the nearly 1500 Mesolithic sites in the area are found by the coast or in the coastal hinterland. Evidence from sites such as the Oronsay middens indicates that people were engaged in deep sea fishing, whilst also moving regularly between different islands and peninsulas and exploiting the differing resources that these offered (e.g. Mellars 1987). Consequently, as a range of recent accounts have argued, the centrality of the sea to Mesolithic lifeways must have been fundamental, and in turn the sea must inevitably have played an important symbolic role in Mesolithic cosmologies (Cobb 2005, 2007, 2008; Cummings 2003; Pollard, J. 2000; Pollard, T. 1996; Warren 1997, 2000, 2005; Wickham-Jones 2005).

Whilst the concept of seascape undoubtedly provides a useful way for thinking through such *direct* interactions with the maritime environment (cf. Wickham-Jones paper in this session), I suggest that it may also be productive to consider how different types of materials and material practices in the Mesolithic drew upon specific understandings of the world that were tied to the sea to extend and

incorporate these elsewhere. Taking such a perspective may enable us to interpret the material record in a very different light.

An interesting example of this is represented in the extensive spread of Mesolithic material around Gallow Hill (Donnelly and Macgregor 2005) and the nearby Littlehill Bridge (Macgregor and Donnelly 2001) on the Ayrshire coast. Here, on the edge of a hill, on the raised beach, to the north of the once lagoonal and estuarine area at the mouth of the Water of Girvan (Donnelly and Macgregor 2005), both fieldwalking and more targeted excavation work have revealed extensive surface scatters of Mesolithic material, a series of mixed, unstratified Mesolithic deposits, *in situ* scattered lithic material and open site activity including pits, hearths, areas of burning, stake holes and, several sub-oval, shallow sided scoops (MacGregor and Donnelly 2001: 5).

Radiocarbon dates and the accumulations of material in this area, extending over approximately a square half kilometre, suggest that it was potentially revisited over a period of at least 1500 years in the late Mesolithic. I have suggested in more detail elsewhere (Cobb 2008, Cobb and Harris forthcoming) that the repeated activity at this specific locale indicates that it had come to represent a potent place. Part of this potency must simply have been engendered through its reuse and thus its temporal connections to the past. However this site conceptually connected people and places across the Firth of Clyde and the northern part of the Irish Sea in a number of ways. For example a wide range of raw materials from a wide range of sources, such as Pitchstone from the Isle of Arran, were being brought to and worked at the site (Donnelley and MacGregor 2005: 50). We may envisage these materials themselves as visceral reminders of journeys, places and people across, entwined with and connected by the sea. In addition the location site and the visual connections it affords must equally have enhanced the physical and mnemonic connections it elicited across the seascape. Indeed from here there are superb views both inland over the Midland Valley, and out to the Firth of Clyde, the northern Irish Sea, the islands of Arran and Ailsa Craig (which can clearly be seen from the Antrim Coast) and much of Argyll and Bute, as well as the edges of the Southern Uplands.

Whilst this site may have acquired a potency from its use over time, and as a hub for bringing together a series of material and visual connections across the seascape itself,

the critical point here is that these connections would then have been extended back out into the world, far beyond what may conventionally be defined as the seascape. The excavators, for example, have pointed to a focus on specialised blade and microlith production (Donnelley and MacGregor 2005: 58), and the repair of microlithic tools (Ibid.: 56). This is significant because, as Finlay (2000, 2003) has argued, through their composite nature, lithic technologies, and especially microlithic tools, may have been multiply authored and thus acted to bring together different identities and different parts of the world in their creation. These in turn would then be extended out into the world as the tool was used, further affecting and transforming the user or users of the tool and the animal or substances that may be encountered. The critical point here is that one does not need to be on the sea, or by the sea, or in a maritime environment at all, to be affected or transformed by a tool which itself encompasses a elements or identities related to the sea. Thus the swift kill of a deer, far from the sea, deep within the forests of the Scottish Southern Uplands, with a tool that was fixed or hafted at Gallow Hill and Littlehill Bridge, may have recalled the affects of the potency of this location and its connections across the seascape, to the past and the present, to the sea and people over the sea. In turn this tool would have acted to evoke the cosmological significance and symbolism of the sea far beyond the conventional boundaries of the seascape.

Neither seascape nor landscape?

In this example then, it is clear that the divisions implied in the term seascape may work more to restrict our interpretations of past understandings of identity and the world, rather than allow us to explore the potential for how connections to the sea may have extended far beyond this.

However, we also want to critically examine the applicability of the notion of seascape in another context, in those places that are neither seascape nor landscape, but are between or – even - beyond these two terms. Munruthuruthu is one of those worlds that fall between *landscape* and *seascape*. This village in Kerala, southern India, known for boat-building, is situated on the fringes of an estuarine lake system. The Kallada river flows north of it and the largest lake – Ashtamudi – lies between it and the Western Indian Ocean. It is threaded with small channels, canals and waterways, with interconnected ponds and pools. It is very much a watery world, but

though the estuary is ultimately connected to the sea, it is not part of a maritime world. The people of Munruthuruthu, the inland fishermen, government workers and boat-builders alike, make a clear distinction between their world and that of the nearby coastal fishing villages.

Estuarine fish are compared to sea fish, unfavourably, just as coastal fishing people are characterised as rowdy: drunk fishermen and brash fish-wives. *They* live packed close together along the beach, build their boats differently, and fish in different ways at different times for different fish. They are of another caste with their own seafaring ‘superstitions’, practices and knowledges. They rarely travel into the backwaters of the estuary – their world is coastal and orientated to the sea. There are of course interactions between Munruthuruthu and coastal fishing villages, such as Chavara. Fish-sellers moving through the village waterways sell *kayalmeen* (sea-fish) alongside estuarine species. Likewise, Lali, a sand-transporter from Munruthuruthu, went to Chavara and bought a second-hand fishing boat, to dismantle to provide timber for repairs to his boat. The timbers he didn’t use, he sold. The *thalamaram* (stem piece) was incorporated into Manoharan’s new boat, and other timbers went into, at my count, four other village boats. Yet, as well as illustrating material connections, Lali’s sea-boat highlights the distinctions between Chavara and Munruthuruthu. It was sold because of a fire onboard; it was left watertight but perceived as unlucky - no one wanted to go to sea in it. The purchase was cheap and profitable for Lali, since in Munruthuruthu this idea has little currency. It is only an anecdotal illustration of the difference between coastal and backwater villages. Though there are connections, the world of Munruthuruthu is not part of a *seascape* - but neither is it a *landscape*.

For, that part of the concept of seascape which undermines the binary division between land and water, *is* pertinent to Munruthuruthu. This is not a *land*-scape. Water is moving, mixing, and unpredictable. Land, on the other hand, is solid, stratified, permanent and sure. The seasons may change but the “bones of the land”, as Tilley says, stay the same (Tilley 1994). Indeed in Munruthuruthu conceiving of land and water as bounded elements is entirely inappropriate. The watery between-ness of Munruthuruthu is part of the everyday, deeply embedded in the regular rhythms and pragmatic living of village life - of work, school, marriage, temple festivals, politics, and gossip. The physical boundary between land and water is mutable and constantly

renegotiated. People regularly, and unaffectedly, remake land and water as part of everyday action. The paddy field becomes a coconut grove, as mud is collected from the paddy's bed and raised up around new palms, simultaneously making land and the channels between. The intricate network of channels that weave through the village change; they are widened, in-filled and re-opened. The older generation made the land their houses stand on, collecting mud from the lake and in infilling paddy fields. Mud-collecting is still a profitable livelihood. Men cut mud from shallow areas of the lake bed with their feet, dive down and scoop it into their boats to transport it into the village - to coconut groves, fields and revetments. In this way, parts of the village are made from the lake. Similarly, water itself keeps shifting, a constantly re-establishing balance. In areas of reclamation, one high tide, even at this distance from the sea, can change land to water. Whilst, at the edges of the village where ponds, channels, and coconut groves blend into lake, land dissolves into water and water is absorbed into land. And Munruthuruthu is comfortable with the shifting states of land and water within which it sits – they are integral to its past and present – to paddy, prawn pond and sand-mining.

This division is also blurred in people's experience of and movement through the world – easy shifts are made from boat to path to wading small channels. People call out across rivers, gather news from passing boats, and fishermen eat in their boat at waterside teashops. The world is not experienced or lived with a bounded distinction between land and water. It is neither a *land* nor *sea* scape.

Instead in Munruthuruthu, the world is conceived as village and 'lake'. A 'scape' produced through the people's experience of their world. Most watery occupations, such as sand-mining, and boat-work, like transporting coconuts or livestock, happen within a short distance of home. However, sand-transporters like Lali and village fishermen travel kilometres into and across the lake. The boundary between village and lake is not the shoreline, but the boundary between the area they work in and the area within which their friends and neighbours move. According to Lali, this is about ½ km from the shoreline. The lake, as opposed to the village, is also defined by knowledge and experience. Different skills are required to paddle, pole and sail longer distances, skills which can only be acquired and tested through experience of storms and sudden changes in wind or tide; similarly knowledge of different places, of

the lake bed, currents and confluences, tidal flow and wind patterns are not needed nor acquired in the village. This world, and its conceptual boundaries, are about place and locale rather than land and water, and they are formed by doing and knowing, by being-in-the-world.

Despite its useful disruption of the Cartesian boundary between land and water, the concept of seascape creates its own classificatory boundaries, and leaves places like Munruthuruthu marooned in between land and sea. So rather than coining a new term – estuarine-scape anyone? – to go alongside the binary pairing of *seascape* and *landscape*, it might instead be worth suggesting that we stop atomising people's experience of the world in order to categorise them according to our own conceptual frameworks. In the end, it is very clear that Munruthuruthu's *-scape* is produced through work and movement, doing and knowing, through dwelling and being-in-the-world. So its 'location' is not maritime, nor land, it is simply lake and village, a watery world.

Conclusion

The two examples that we have presented are incredibly different, yet both suggest that we might be better to move, in our interpretations, beyond the seascape. Returning to Ingold's argument that "... through living in it, the landscape becomes a part of us, just as we are part of it" (Ingold 1993: 154), we have sought to demonstrate that this argument applies as much to the sea as to the land as to any watery world – from the Keralan backwaters, to the Mesolithic of the Irish Sea, to simply you or I, waiting to cross a busy road in a busy city, thinking of the sea. Cooney argues that the seascape is "contoured, alive, rich in ecological diversity and in cosmological and religious significance and ambiguity" (Cooney 2003: 323), but what we have sought to demonstrate today is that this is as much the case by the sea as it is far from it, where the water and the shore and the dunes and the mud are just as present in memories, materials and actions. The sea and the water and all of its connections do not stop at an easily definable line, but rather, as we have seen in Munruthuruthu, what is land and what is water are continually flux. Here, as in Mesolithic Scotland, ultimately we argue that there is no easily discernable place where landscape stops and seascape starts. In this sense then we question the value of a term which, whilst aiming to explore the holistic, wide reaching experience of the watery world,

nonetheless continues to contrast it with landscape. Perhaps more useful is Ingold's notion of the taskscape – a scape which does not ask us to pin ourselves down to the categories of land and sea. But ultimately we suggest that it is simply in escaping from the scape, and in exploring the specificity of the being in the watery world wherever, that the future of seascape studies lies.

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