The context of North Sea Archaeologies

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Introduction

The purpose of this short paper is to place North Sea Archaeologies; a maritime biography 10,000 BC—AD 1500 (Van de Noort 2011) in the context of its submission for a PhD by Publication.

Acknowledging that academic books are not the same as PhDs — and that very few PhDs are printed as books without significant changes — this paper provides the information that examiners would expect to find in a PhD, but which are omitted from or not made explicit in North Sea Archaeologies. In this case, this paper details my personal background and research experiences that have led to this submission. It also includes a short but explicit method statement and a consideration for future research — some of this already underway — which is a matter of little interest to the reader of academic books, but forms a standard part of a PhD thesis. Finally, I have included one erratum.

Personal background

Having written North Sea Archaeologies it feels, in retrospect, as a natural conclusion of my archaeological research to date. During my years as a student at the Instituut voor Prae- and Protohistorie (IPP) of the University of Amsterdam in the 1980s, I took part in several excavations near the Dutch North Sea coast, including those in the Assendelver Polder (Brandt, Grounman-van-Waateringhe, and Van der Leeuw 1987). I worked for a month on the excavation of the 1st century AD Roman base and harbour facilities of Flevum, at Velsen (Morel 1988), and four months on the Roman vicus near Valkenburg (Van Dierendonck, Hallewas, and Waugh 1993), where I did my ‘fieldwork supervision report’, qualifying as an archaeological excavator in the Dutch
system. Later, after a year at the British School at Rome, I worked in Rotterdam on the archaeological excavations in advance of the construction of the Willemsspoortunnel, part of the rail link between Amsterdam and Brussels. Here, Holocene deposits reached a depth of 35 m, and my time on this project focussed on the excavation of the earliest traces of the urbanisation of Rotterdam, including the excavation of the oldest houses on the dam in the River Rotte (Carmiggelt, Guiran, and Van Trierum 1997).

Although this was not my principal concern at the time, what these projects had in common was the apparent disconnect between the archaeology of the dryland landscapes of the coast and the archaeology of the sea. The sites that were being excavated were all closely connected to the North Sea, but little thought and even less work was expended on connecting the land-based excavations with the broader landscape-seascape environment. In effect, the coastline marked the boundary of the study areas — something that has also been observed for landscape projects in other countries bordering the North Sea and other seas — as was shown on the illustrations that accompanied these projects’ publications (Figure 1).

This intellectual separation of the study of the land from the study of the sea was reinforced by the separation of working practices. Terrestrial archaeology was the domain of the Rijksdienst voor het Oudheidkundig Bodemonderzoek (ROB), the Universities, and the municipal archaeologists. Maritime archaeology, which in the 1980s was equivalent to the study of watercraft, was undertaken by the Afdeling Oudheidkundig Bodemonderzoek van de Rijksdienst voor IJsselmeerpolders (‘Archaeology Unit of the State Service for the IJsselmeer Polders’), based in the Museum voor Scheepsarcheologie in Ketelhaven. In the 1980s, there was effectively no collaboration between the two camps, something that would end with the incorporation of the Archaeology Unit by the ROB in 1992.

I moved to England in 1991, and after a stint teaching GCSE and A-level Archaeology at Barnsley College and three months working for the commercial outfit Tempus
Reparatum, I was offered the position of Project Officer of the Humber Wetlands Project at the University of Hull. This was the last in a line of English Heritage-funded wetland surveys, which commenced with the Somerset Levels Project (1973—88), and had also included the Fenland Survey (1981—88), and the North West Wetlands Survey (1988—97). After a year in which I, alongside colleague Paul Davis, produced a desk-top assessment (Van de Noort and Davies 1993), English Heritage commissioned me to write the project design for a full-scale project along the lines of the earlier wetland surveys. This design was for a six-year long venture with annual regional surveys: Holderness in 1994—95; the Humberhead Levels in 1995—96; The Ancholme and lower Trent valleys in 1996-97; the Vale of York in 1997—98; the Hull valley in 1998—99; and the Lincolnshire March in 1999—2000. The project...
was undertaken by a team of six (in the first year) or seven Field Officers, with the results published in annual volumes (Van de Noort and Ellis 1995; 1997; 1998; 1999; 2000; Ellis et al. 2001). A synthesis volume was published in 2004 (Van de Noort 2004a).

The method statement contained within the project design for the survey of the Humber Wetlands made it stand out from the earlier wetland projects funded by English Heritage. Whereas the earlier surveys had been principally based on the survey of ploughed fields and peat extraction sites, the Humber Wetlands Project was specifically designed to incorporate a multifaceted approach. Thus, the core aim of the previous wetland projects to cover as much of the former and extant wetlands as was possible with the resources and manpower available, was exchanged for the detailed survey of selected areas, which we referred to these as ‘mapviews’. Combined, these mapviews were considered to be representative for the relevant region, and within each mapview the survey could include field walking, dike and coastal survey, earthwork survey, aerial reconnaissance, geophysical survey, intertidal survey and excavation. This approach has become something of a personal trademark, in the sense that the full integration of landscape and seascape surveys has characterized my subsequent research, and this is a central theme in *North Sea Archaeologies*. In the early 1990s, only the research in the Severn Estuary undertaken by the partners of the Severn Estuary Levels Research Committee (SELRC) had adopted a similar approach to the research of coastal landscapes (cf. *Annual Reports of the Severn Estuary Research Committee*, published since 1990).

The extension of the Humber Wetlands Project into the intertidal Humber, and the coasts of Holderness and the Lincolnshire Marsh below mean tide, was not without controversy. At the time, English Heritage’s remit did not extent into the marine environment, and anything below mean tide was considered to be ‘out of bounds’. This was a particular issue for the Humber Wetlands Project. After all, what connected the six regions of the Humber Wetlands, not only in terms of geography, but also in geomorphological and cultural contexts, was the Humber estuary. Making forcefully the argument that the Humber Wetlands Project without the Humber
would result in a disjointed project, English Heritage’s Chief Archaeologist, Geoffrey Wainwright, reluctantly agreed to the survey of the intertidal and coastal landscapes in the region. Once we started to make our discoveries — first a wooden Roman road at the confluence of the River Ancholme with the Humber, next a great number of Bronze Age trackways in the Vale of York part of the estuary, and finally a Bronze Age fishtrap on the foreshore of the Lincolnshire Marsh near New Holland — any remaining reservations quickly evaporated, and our discoveries were the subject of a feature article in English Heritage house magazine *Heritage Today*. Whilst this does not represent the first occasion that archaeologists surveyed the intertidal zone in the North Sea basin — that honour goes to the Hullbridge Survey Project in Essex (Wilkinson and Murphy 1995) — the Humber Wetlands Project was the first to integrate terrestrial and intertidal survey in an integrated manner in this region. It did produce a sea change in my personal thinking about the way coastal landscapes should be studied.

The further extension of research from the terrestrial and intertidal into the open sea came about after University of Hull colleague Richard Middleton discovered a carved plank in 1996, during a field visit to the Holderness coast with the Hull Natural History Society. This plank was quickly recognized as the remains of a sewn-plank boat, and we called this the Kilnsea boat (Van de Noort et al. 1999). The study of the plank was pretty straightforward. The presence of axe facets from bronze axes, the remains of the base of an integral cleat — a feature common to all sewn-plank boats but not known from any other Bronze Age construction — the plank shape itself, and the location of the find in an intertidal channel of the Humber, all indicated that this was once part of a sewn-plank boat. The radiocarbon dates placed the plank in the Early Bronze Age, at 1750—1620 cal BC, slightly before the dates suggested by the radiocarbon dates from the Ferriby boats available at that time.

The discovery of the Kilnsea boat led to three further developments in my research. First, I realised that the extent of the disconnect between the studies on the Bronze Age sewn-plank boats and the studies on the long-distance exchange in the Bronze Age also involved the study of seafaring. Archaeologists investigating the sewn-plank
boats had said practically nothing about the functions of the craft and, conversely, colleagues studying long-distance exchange of gold, copper, bronze, amber, faience and jet artefacts, or of the Beaker phenomenon, rarely referred to the craft that made this exchange possible. Second, I noted that the context of the boat remains had not been considered in their publications. Investigating the landscape context of the Kilnsea boat as any landscape archaeologist would as a matter of course, it became evident that the late Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments surrounding the location of the Kilnsea boat were exceptional in their number. This, in turn, produced the third development and let me to consider the symbolic and ritual, and later the socio-political, contexts of the sewn-plank boats. These development can be traced in my publications (Van de Noort 2003; 2004b; 2006; 2009) and have come to full fruition in North Sea Archaeologies (chapters 7, 8, and 9).

After my move to the University of Exeter in 2000, I developed modules in wetland archaeology and, expanding my knowledge base, maritime archaeology. In 2004 I was appointed as Head of the School of Geography, Archaeology, and Earth Resources, which provided opportunities to gain access to advanced theoretical discussions in human and cultural geography, including with Paul Cloke whose work on hybrid nature-society relationships, and especially his work on the role of ‘other-than-human-agency’, has influenced my thinking about the fundamental way in which archaeologists consider the relationships between people and the environments they inhabited. This can be clearly seen in North Sea Archaeologies, in particular in explaining the practice of votive deposition in prehistory (chapter 3) and the use of boats and ships in funerary rituals (chapter 8).

It seems therefore appropriate to describe North Sea Archaeologies as a reflection of 30-odd years of personal research and experience in archaeology and germane disciplines.
Method statement

Chapter 2 of *North Sea Archaeologies* presents the theoretical context of the study leading to, what I have called, ‘An archaeological theory of the sea’. The conclusion of that chapter provides, in effect, a statement on the methodological implications for the research undertaken. However, it does not present this explicitly as a method statement. The following paragraphs will provide this.

Advancing the theoretical framework for the archaeological study of the sea has not involved a rejection of functional/processual frameworks and their replacement by postprocessual ones. At the very heart of the archaeological theory of the sea is that qualitative narratives must be supported by comprehensive — albeit critical — analyses of available data, including quantifiable sets of data, and this work deliberately seeks to encompass both functional/processual and postprocessual research agendas. Quantifiable data sets were not available for all themes explored in *North Sea Archaeologies*, but the study of fish consumption and fishing (chapter 4), and the dates and distribution of logboats (pages 152—60), provide examples of a critical engagement with these.

The concept of hybridity provides a coherent framework that enables the functional/processual and postprocessual research agendas to be integrated. Indeed, the key supposition in hybrid nature-society studies is that nature is at the same time external to societies — i.e. it is real and ‘out there’, the way in which functional/processual archaeology sees the world — and internal to societies — i.e. nature is defined through human perceptions, as postprocessual archaeologists understand this. In hybrid studies, the boundary between nature and culture is at the same time real but highly permeable (cf. Latour 1987 for the same arguments between science and society; also Latour 1993). In *North Sea Archaeologies*, the hybridity concept is applied consistently. The way in which past societies have engaged with the North Sea was culturally defined, but the sea was very real and dynamic, and this reality and dynamism were key factors in the cultural definition of the North Sea through time. Recognizing the dynamic interplay between this
environmental realism and culture construction of the sea has led me to reject the one-way enculturation concept, and replace this with the idea of socialization of the coastal landscape (e.g. page 240).

The methodological implication of adopting this theoretical framework is, principally, the incorporation of studies from either side of the modernist—post-modernist divide into non-representational narratives of ‘how human and non-human formations [were] enacted and performed’ (page 28). North Sea Archaeologies does not seek to offer cause-and-effect arguments, but to emphasize the interplay between environmental realism and culture construction in nature-society studies, as in the use of Foucault’s concept of the heterotopia (chapter 8). The actual work involves, principally, reading all available publications for each of the themes explored in North Sea Archaeologies and the subsequent critical rethinking of the issues within the theoretical framework presented in chapter 2. This process is clearly shown in the construction of the individual chapters. These seek to present the current state of knowledge for each of the themes. This is followed by a reanalysis of this knowledge using the new theoretical insights, for example the description of the socialization of coastal landscapes (chapter 5), or the role of the sea as a deviant space (chapter 8).

Future developments

There are a number of ways in which the findings and methods presented in North Sea Archaeologies can be taken forward. This section considers some of these future opportunities, and will encompass both the projects I am taking forward myself, as well as general opportunities for the archaeological community.

The first project I am currently working on concerns the full-scale reconstruction of a sewn-plank boat, using Bronze Age technologies only. The research undertaken to date on the sewn-plank boats of Britain has left many questions unanswered, in particular regarding the most likely design of these craft — noting that even the best-preserved examples of Ferriby-1 and Dover represent less than 50% of a
complete craft — the time and skill required for its construction, the performance of such craft at sea, and the degree to which a craft of this type takes on water, which is crucial in determining its performance. An experimental archaeological project building a sewn-plank boat is expected to clarify such issues, and it may also provide a framework for (re-) considering the social interactions that took place in such a heterotopia. Ole Crumlin-Pedersen’s (2010) *Archaeology and the sea* (published after I had submitted the final script of *North Sea Archaeologies* to the publisher) provides many examples on the potential research benefits of prehistoric and early historic craft. This project, formally entitled ‘Connecting communities and their maritime heritage: Cornwall and the sea in the Bronze Age’ is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and involves as partner institution the National Maritime Museum Cornwall (NMMC) in Falmouth, and co-investigators Andy Wyke (NMMC), Anthony Harding, Linda Hurcombe, and Andy Wetherelt (all University of Exeter), Lucy Blue (University of Southampton), and Paul Inman (Oxford Brookes University). The building of the sewn-plank boat, which will be modelled on Feriby-1, will be completed in September 2012.

The second project is entitled *Climate Change Archaeology: building resilience from research in the world’s coastal wetlands*. This project emerged directly from the work on the North Sea, where I noted the various sustainable and unsustainable attempts of coastal communities to deal with the impact of Holocene sea-level rise and the adaptive pathways that had been adopted. Some were destined to be unsustainable, for example where the construction of dikes along the coast caused the tidal ranges to extend stream upwards estuaries and rivers, sometimes causing great floods and at other times requiring extensive remediation and additional dike construction. Others were more successful, and the way the terpen dwellers in the Waddensea created opportunities to become wealthy from the stock that grazed on the young saltmarshes, whilst not destabilising the balance between sea-level fluctuations and sediment transport, provides an inspiring example of sustainable living with sea-level change. *Climate Change Archaeology* aims to study sustainable and unsustainable adaptive pathways in coastal wetlands in the North Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Bay of Bengal and the Gulf of Mexico. It will develop long-term
perspectives using archaeological data, and it hopes that it can, in a small way, make a contribution to climate change debates. The project involves field visits to the Sundarbans in West Bengal and the coastal wetlands of Florida, and the results will be published by Oxford University Press in 2013.

Beyond these two projects, I hope that two aspects from *North Sea Archaeologies*, in particular, will be adopted and developed further by the archaeological community. The first is the full integration of terrestrial and maritime archaeology for other sea-based studies. It is of course debatable, but I believe that I have presented a case where the results of fieldwork and debates from two — usually separated — fields of archaeological endeavour have been integrated to an extent that has not been achieved before. Christer Westerdahl’s (1992) concept of the Maritime Cultural Landscape has been, quite rightly, considered to provide a benchmark for such studies to date. However, and despite Westerdahl’s own work of later date (e.g. 2005), most Maritime Cultural Landscape studies retain their predominant maritime and functionalist perspectives (cf. Ford 2011). I would like to think that the integrated approach presented in *North Sea Archaeologies* puts the interplay between environmental realism and culture construction of the sea central to the integration of terrestrial and maritime archaeology. John Mack’s *The sea; a cultural history* (2011 – published three months after *North Sea Archaeologies*) echoes many elements of my work, albeit this anthropological and historical study is predominantly set in more recent periods, and in different seas.

The second aspect I hope will be used and developed further is the concept of the hybrid nature-society study. The processual—postprocessual divide in British archaeology is waning, and hybridity is already seen by some archaeologists as a theory that facilitates the crossing of old divides. That ‘new’ way of thinking appears to be most eagerly adopted by a young(er) generation of scholars as, for example, shown by papers presented in the session ‘Oneness and otherness: self and identity in relation to material and animal worlds’ at the Theoretical Archaeological Group conference in Durham in 2009. More specifically, applying the other-than-human agency concept makes far-reaching assumptions about the attribution of forms of
agency and personhood to animate beings and inanimate objects clearer. It extends the notion of the ‘social life of things’ (Appadurai 1986) —a concept that has already been eagerly adopted by material culture-focused archaeologists —further and now also encompasses features and phenomena such as the sea. It would be fascinating to see if this concept is applied in different contexts, for example in terrestrial landscape archaeology.

Erratum

I have found one error in the publication, on page 20, where Fernand Braudel is printed as Ferdinand Braudel.

Additional references (not included in North Sea Archaeologies)


Van de Noort, R. (2011). *North Sea archaeologies; a maritime biography, 10,000 BC—AD 1500*.


