

North Sea Archaeologies: A Maritime Biography, 10,000 BC to AD 1500

By Robert Van de Noort

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As implied by its title, *North Sea Archaeologies* covers a broad geographical area, a lengthy time-span and a substantial body of archaeological evidence. As such, it cannot feasibly be fully comprehensive and rather it represents a convincing manifesto for a distinctive application of recent thinking about landscape, with maritime contexts as the central focus. This is a logical extension of the view of 'landscape' as dynamic, interactive processes involving both human and nonhuman agencies: a set of relationships which include interconnected biological, geological and cultural phenomena, and extend ubiquitously across space and time. Yet many archaeologists lack experience and understanding of the sea, creating a conceptual barrier that this book sets out to overcome. In so doing, Van de Noort hopes to launch a 'maritime turn', which may enrich archaeological interpretation generally by addressing underexplored aspects of the relationship between nature and society from a fresh perspective.

In order to accomplish this, and informed by a number of theoretical approaches, Van de Noort employs numerous case studies and questions and contextualises their interpretations, structured by a series of themes arising from the study. The author draws out the tension between the essential applicability of theories of landscape and material culture to the sea, and the inherent differences between sea and land. Seas do not visibly embody and convey the effects of human action in the same way that lands do; and coastal areas are more susceptible to erosion and thus accommodate monumentality differently, and on different timescales. At many times in the North Sea's history, its landscapes would have changed perceptibly within human lifetimes, and memory can be transmitted culturally on still greater timescales. If people are entangled in relationships with

nature, it follows they must actively respond to and effect changes in the natural world.

We may well expect such cultural and environmental interactions to be manifested in the archaeological record, and Van de Noort's examples explore a range of the available evidence in this respect. Whether interpreted in terms of ritual, religion, symbolism or magic, practices such as the purposive deposition of objects and the construction of intentionally transient monuments such as 'Seahenge' highlight the active, creative use of natural and cultural resources, centred on liminal places, to socially interact with the changing environment. The exploitation (or not) of marine resources has long been a choice for individuals and societies, made with reference to subsistence requirements, availability, trade connections and cultural preferences, but always a choice. What is essentially highlighted by these examples is the importance of actively maintained, continually negotiated relationships between people and nonhuman agencies, throughout the history of the North Sea reasserting the significance of the nonhuman, which is often downplayed in favour of the cultural.

Given the entangled, interrelated nature of such agencies, it is perhaps unsurprising that inhabiting and interacting with the sea, being dependent upon it and yet at its mercy, and possessing specialised skills in order to do so, engenders a distinct sense of identity amongst seafarers. One's knowledge and sense of the world is inevitably informed by experience, and this distinct experience can create a strong sense of 'otherness' and difference with those who do not, and cannot, understand this experience. Van de Noort also highlights the sense of alternative reality that can emerge in any relatively enclosed society, applying Foucault's concept of *Heterotopia* (Ch.8) of which the ship is a prime example. These alternative societies are born of, and serve to highlight, the mutability of human social relationships and norms in an isolated and altered context. Thus seafaring as a practice by its very nature creates societies and, as Van de Noort puts it, a 'deviant space' in which otherwise established rules and power relations may be subverted, even if temporarily or intermittently. A similar logic also applies to islands, and these may also be 'charged with cosmological significance' as a result of their liminality of location (p.134).

A significant contribution of *North Sea Archaeologies* is its study of the social function of boats and ships (Ch.9). Boats are a highly pragmatic and functional form

of material culture, useful for travel and subsistence, and designed skilfully with physical laws and elemental forces in mind. Yet they are also an extension of the culture, cognition and, ultimately, the bodies of humans; the medium through which we may inhabit the sea. Often boats may represent a transformation of trees, with which people have long been interdependent and culturally entwined, and as such are further imbued with meanings and social relationships. The use of sea-vessels for burial represents a significant metaphorical dimension to the complex conceptual interactions between land and sea. But Van de Noort navigates a way between ship burial as literal belief in transportation to the next world and the rather woolly notion of 'symbolism', by arguing that boats were 'liminal agents' which in burial detached from their physicality together with the soul of their human occupants, and were at times even held responsible for their role in conflict.

North Sea Archaeologies features a close interaction between theory and evidence, although because of the ambitious scale of the subject matter, this can at times feel lacking in depth. The examples and theoretical ideas are explained well and the bibliography is extensive and useful. As an overview of such a broad subject matter, there is a tension between this sense of 'shallow depth' and a text that is packed densely with information. For this reason, *North Sea Archaeologies* is perhaps not a particularly easy read, but for anyone desiring an interpretive overview of archaeological scholarship concerning the North Sea region it is ideal and its breadth of relevant case studies and clear and concise introduction to recent theoretical strands are both useful and interesting. Its images are helpful and used well, although it could have perhaps benefitted from more of these, particularly for the more descriptive sections.

This book represents an innovative and ambitious application of ideas from landscape theory to maritime contexts on an impressive scale, and it will be attractive to archaeologists interested in landscape archaeologies and/or the North Sea region. Van de Noort's 'maritime turn' both answers and reiterates a challenge to push the boundaries of our use of archaeological evidence to understand relationships between nature and society in the past. If, as he implies, the technologies for deep sea diving and paleogeographical mapping continue to develop apace, the potential for economically viable targeting of archaeological evidence, which likely survives relatively untouched by the ravages of oxidisation, is exciting

indeed; and the development of an archaeological ‘theory of the sea’ may thus prove timely.

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