

LIFE WAVES

Explorations in Maritime Contact and Identity in Prehistoric Saltwater Communities

The forthcoming conference has been designed to invigorate the study of different aspects relating to prehistoric saltwater societies. Archaeological research has tended to ignore the specific practices and qualities associated with saltwater societies. Discourse has tended to focus on a past of fairly uniform land based societies, and notions of maritime navigation and contact have been explained in terms of population diffusion and cultural correlates. Despite recent critiques of culture historical models little has been done to readdress this imbalance when considering the sea. Direct archaeological evidence is extremely variable for such societies and alternative methods by which consider their existence in specific contexts have not yet been fully explored by archaeologists who are themselves both land based and land orientated. Yet despite this, the concept of maritime travel and contact is often implicit within many dialogues concerning prehistoric societies.

However, recent archaeological debate has opened up new ways of thinking about the nature of material culture and the ways in which identities are created and mediated through being in the world. We would like to apply these theories to studies that deal directly with the sea and the activities that take place upon it. In particular we would like to explore notions of social identity that accompany such practice. By doing this, we hope to open up a forum for debate in which the sea and saltwater peoples can be better integrated into the wider discourse on prehistoric life. We would also encourage contributions from those outside of the discipline to provide contributions which allow us to deepen our understanding of saltwater communities. Papers should be 20 minutes in length and those wishing to present should submit an abstract of no more than 300 words to the convenors.

TO BE AT SEA

In this first session we intend to examine the habitus of saltwater people. All too often studies centred on coastal or insular communities have tended to overlook the inclusion of the sea in their narratives. While much work has been done to develop an embodied approach to landscape and the experience of moving through it, little has been done to apply this approach to movement on water. We would argue that it is time to readdress this imbalance, and invite papers which examine how different recognitions of space and place might inform the identity of people who live and work on the ocean. How might we begin to think about the experience of journeying on a different element? In particular we would like to problematise the notion of the sea as liminal. We would like to dissolve the notion of land-sea boundaries and instead, encourage studies which consider a unified habitus of both land and water bound together by the practices and experiences of those who live on them.

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PATHWAVES OF CONTACT

In this session we turn our attention to the notion of contact during prehistory, giving special emphasis to those episodes where this is undertaken by peoples geographically separated by sea. Culture history explained culture change only through diffusion, which in turn was represented by material similarities within the archaeological record of geographically different areas. However recent approaches now recognise that culture is in fact relational and fluid. This being so material culture cannot be relied upon as a simplistic indicator of contact but instead should be understood as being employed intentionally in relation to different social contexts and relationships. We recognise that material culture can be employed by societies to express notions of identity and difference as well as to demonstrate links and similarities. In light of this we would argue that it is time to return to this material and re-analyse the mechanisms of material culture change.

We invite studies that engage with this topic and examine the problems of identifying periods of contact within prehistory. Of particular interest are papers which engage with this subject in contexts which do not present any examples of material uniformity, and might previously have been interpreted as isolated and insular.

CONSTRUCTING SALTWATER IDENTITIES

Our final session deals with the role of the sea and structures associated with it in the social production of knowledge during prehistory. While much attention has been paid to the creation and mediation of social roles during processes of construction and use at monumental prehistoric sites, discussion of material culture related to maritime activity is still largely constrained to boat typologies, and to the identification and classification of materials which may be involved in maritime activity. We would argue that the social processes outlined at monumental sites are just as pertinent to maritime activities as they are to explorations of land-based processes. We would invite papers which explore the role of maritime activity, such as fishing, boat construction, long distance navigation and the actions associated with them, in the wider mediation of social relationships within the community. Speakers should engage with the idea of maritime activity as an embodied process involving the construction and transformation of knowledge rather than as a set of subsistence strategies, vessel typologies or as merely a method for transport. Of particular interest is how these maritime activities can be integrated into a dialogue with practices occurring on land in order to create a more integrated vision of everyday practice during prehistory.