

THE DAWN OF EVERYTHING: A VIEW FROM THE WATER

The historiography of maritime archaeology is one of margins and peripheries. Linked to the development of underwater archaeology, efforts to advance theoretical frameworks within the discipline have been slow at best. There remains a widespread assumption—even amongst archaeologists—that maritime archaeology deals mostly with shipwrecks and underwater sites, and as such, has little to contribute to broader debates within archaeology. This assumption is ‘confirmed’ by maritime archaeologists for whom developing hi-tech responses to the practical challenges of excavation underwater trumps the many ways in which maritime theory can contribute to our understanding of the human past. A glimpse of what we could achieve by thinking ‘from the water’ was exposed rather early by Christer Westerdahl (1992), when he proposed that shipwreck remains should be contextualised with other legacies left behind by maritime communities, from folk tales to place names, infrastructures, iconography, and so on, in order to conduct a holistic study of what constitutes maritime cultures. This approach, which is known as the Maritime Cultural Landscape, provided maritime archaeologists with a theoretical framework from which to start piecing together our human past in and around water, be that at sea, river, or lake. Whilst this framework helps make sense of remains associated with the use and exploitation of aquatic spaces, the concept has not transcended the field of maritime archaeology as much as it deserves.¹ Archaeology remains a terrestrial affair that rarely engages with water worlds,

and when it does, it retains its feet firmly on ground. So, what do a land archaeologist and an economist have to offer to the world of maritime archaeology?

Graeber and Wengrow’s *The Dawn of Everything: A new history of humanity*, published in 2021, has had, fittingly, a worldwide impact. The aims of this large book were never small, but they revolve around a single question: how did we come to be dominated by authoritarian, bureaucratic, centralised states? The authors are particularly interested in choice: when and where it is exercised, and how and why it is taken away. More specifically, they argue against the irrevocability of history: states do not have to exist, and when they do, they need not be the final step: not only can they ‘fail’, they can also *choose* to disaggregate themselves.

Graeber and Wengrow’s arguments are firmly land-based, and the closest they get to maritime societies is to reference the northwestern Pacific coast, where salmon fishing was central. However, in spite of its terrestrial focus, *The Dawn of Everything* speaks to a number of recurring issues in maritime archaeology, where scholars worry about the relationship between terrestrial states and maritime worlds. Such concerns are central to the very constitution of maritime societies: are they hierarchical or heterarchical; or are they the same as or different from the wider societies in which they sit? In the maritime discourse, environmental determinism takes a greater role than Graeber and Wengrow would admit in their book. This is partly because they deride the prevailing argument that the

emergence of the state is the outcome of the privatisation of agricultural surplus, but also because they are highly resistant to the notion that hunter-gatherers—both Palaeolithic and later—were automatically egalitarian because of the constraints the environment placed upon them: that is, where mobility reduced carrying and storage capacity, a social premium is placed upon co-operation.

A core argument of *The Dawn of Everything* is that egalitarian and cooperative social configurations are capable of co-existing within hierarchical structures. In fact, they may be baked into the form of the state itself, as with the Councils of Elders in Mesopotamian cities, or be time-limited and seasonal, as in the Mississippian culture of Cahokia, in which large seasonal gatherings were hierarchically organised and rigidly policed, only to dissolve into smaller-scale heterarchies once the ceremonies were over. This seasonality is, for us, one of the most fascinating aspects of *The Dawn of Everything*, where the discussion revolves around the alternation of different governance structures, emphasising the fact that during times of agglomeration, when people are bound together by livelihood activities, social structures become more rigid and power is more centralised. However, when the seasonal activities end, groups disband and organise themselves in different ways. We see this issue becoming a key focus in the coming years for the field of maritime archaeology as we move away from static models of the environment and into more dynamic models that better reflect the ever-changing nature of maritime landscapes and the seasonality of activities and mobilities.

Waterborne movements are inextricably linked to cyclical patterns, from localised ebbs and flows to trans-regional trade winds. For most of maritime history, the movement of ships was constrained by the environment,

and it was not until the invention of steam power in the nineteenth century that humans could (at least partially) overcome these limitations. This means that for most of human history, movement has had to take the seasons into account, balancing favourable seasons—when most movement could take place—with unfavourable seasons—when the increased unpredictability of the weather made waterborne transport more risky. As Levinson's 2016 book, *The Box: how the shipping container made the world smaller and the world economy larger*, shows, the unpredictable nature of maritime travel resulted in agglomerations and hectic work at port in short periods of time, followed by long periods of idleness. The impact of the cyclical nature of maritime movement extends beyond the water's edge and has shaped society in many and surprising ways, yet this phenomenon has been, until recently, under-explored within maritime archaeology.

There are signs that this is changing. Current work on fish resources and fishing strategies in the Mekong indicate that dependence on these resources produced socio-ecological systems that resulted in the agglomeration and dispersal of populations in the river basin (Walker Vadillo 2016, *forthcoming*). Every year, fishing communities move in and out of fishing grounds in floodplains, with some seeking refuge out of season in specific areas of the river called deep pools. This behaviour mimics the ecological behaviour of the fish upon which they rely, resulting in cyclical patterns of movements that would have likely required different forms of social organisation. Ethnographic evidence indicates that goods like salt were exchanged in key locations along the routes followed by the fishing groups during these seasonal migrations in order to supply the needs of communities involved in the fish harvesting and processing. Yet, the morphology

of these networks and the knowledge that was needed to move through watery landscapes likely resulted from fish ecology and fishing practices. Rather than marking the path, trade seems to have piggybacked on the existential action that is producing food surplus. We, therefore, must agree with Graeber and Wengrow that perhaps the excessive focus we place on markets and trade may be obscuring other equally important aspects of past societies. If instead of focusing on material goods we redirect our attention to livelihood activities of maritime communities (i.e., we apply a maritime cultural landscape approach or a socio-ecological systems approach), as suggested by Ray (2003) and Rainbird (2007), we may begin to capture a broader picture that better relates to the emergence of maritime networks. This is where Graeber and Wengrow point the way forward, since they treat seasonal structures of governance as a social as much as an economic phenomenon, and present other models of governance that have as much, if not more, traction on the maritime world as the terrestrial world that is the focus of their argument.

How waterborne communities organised themselves is another point of contention. Once Westerdahl introduced the concept of maritime cultural landscapes to archaeologists (1992), the line between land and sea became blurred not just physically, but conceptually, with social, economic, and religious practices and beliefs rippling back and forth between ships and sailors, traders and warehouses, fishermen, and the whole gamut of tangible and intangible maritime cultural heritage. Amongst other things, Westerdahl's work prompted a repositioning of the environment within the discourse, with water seen as a means of connectivity, rather than an obstacle or barrier to overcome. Maritime cultural worlds were conceived of as something that transcended

terrestrial boundaries. This gave agency to mariners, who were no longer reflections of state control, but actors in their own right, creating communities of practice along the sea lanes and fluvial highways with cultural consequences beyond the intended outcomes of trade.

Maritime archaeologists are torn in two directions regarding the fluid and cross-border nature of such maritime societies. Some emphasise their inherently hierarchical nature, born out of the specialisation of roles on board ship and the need for swift action and compliance in challenging conditions at sea. Yet others see no contradiction between this and the relatively fluid nature of sailing life, where sailors move between ships and states as the need arises. Approaches to pirate societies encapsulate this perfectly. Piracy has often been viewed as an aberrant practice—as opposed to its twin, state-sanctioned privateering—and used as a measure of the health of the state. In recent years, piracy has been reimagined as a bottom-up resistance to the state, with pirate communities noted for their disruption of pre-existing social and gender norms and multi-ethnic, multi-lingual constitution. Thus, the discourse has narrowed to the extent to which pirate societies deviate from mainstream society, a line of inquiry that has also been extended to coastal communities—both trading and fishing—along with the consequence that mobile and mutable societies are judged by the standard of immobile and (theoretically) mutable ones.

In fact, pirate societies, whilst undoubtedly hierarchical, tend to be more heterarchical than contemporary society, and generally offer greater opportunities for disadvantaged souls of any gender and any class. David Graeber flirted with this notion in his study of pirates in eighteenth-century Madagascar (*Pirate Enlightenment, or the real libertalia*), a relatively obscure work, first published in 1997 but re-issued on the

back of the success of *The Dawn of Everything*. While the former is not explicitly referenced in the latter, it is clear that Graeber was still thinking along the same lines. He emphasised the interplay between Malagassy women traders, who created alternative loci of socio-political and economic authority, and pirates, who wished to extend their heterarchical view of society to their life on land. He took a broad approach, where the cultural landscape extended in a seamless way from sea to land, to mutually construct reality. This conversation should be extended to maritime communities as a whole. Their seasonality creates a constructive difference to their organisation, but one that is interleaved with terrestrial seasonality. Since planting, harvesting or fishing seasons rarely coincide in their entirety, communities are able to shuffle agricultural and maritime labour between specialists or between sexes and age groups. Society thus constructs itself to achieve them all.

More recently, locations on the maritime cultural landscape have been defined as clusters of maritime tasks. This flips the narrative from places to people and from objects to practice, water thus becoming not just a place, but also a space for human action (see Walker Vadillo, Mataix Ferrándiz and Holmqvist 2022). The environment is still strong here, since a host of new studies highlight the seasonality of maritime and fluvial life. While seasonality tended to be seen as a technical issue of nautical efficiency, which expanded or contracted trade or travel, attention to the seasonality and mobility of fish appears to be a force with the capacity to shape every aspect of society (see for example Zangrando 2009, Mohlenhoff and Butler 2017 and Scartascini 2017). In the right season, large numbers of people could be brought together for a short period of time to

harvest grain or fish. The difference lies in the mode of control over the workforce. While seasonal pickers may circulate around a large area, they enter into specific labour deals with the landowner (unless the local community works together). In maritime ‘harvests’, widely disparate groups—who may not normally encounter one another—gather for limited periods of intense activity (for whalers in the North Atlantic, see Bouchard *forthcoming*; for fishing communities of the Tonle Sap in the Mekong River, see Walker Vadillo 2016 and *forthcoming*). Lines of authority may not be as clear on sea as on land, but must cooperate, and rights and disputes must be managed for maximum efficiency and safety. In this context, Graeber and Wengrow’s notion of fundamental freedoms seem pertinent here. They argue that, for a state to exist, its population must have been persuaded to relinquish the three fundamental freedoms: (i) the freedom to relocate or move away from one’s surroundings; (ii) the freedom to ignore or disobey the commands of others; and (iii) the freedom to shape entirely new realities, or move back and forth between them. The latter is a particularly useful framework for thinking about maritime societies during these seasonal gatherings. Indeed, such highly contingent problem-solving mechanisms, by their very specificity, render questions about the relationship of maritime cultural worlds to wider society moot.

Graeber and Wengrow’s interest in fluid societies that have the capacity to construct and deconstruct themselves seasonally find their best laboratory in maritime cultural worlds. Both the ancient past and the ethnographic present provide us with an opportunity to understand the contingency of power and decision-making, all within the framework of a seasonal environmental landscape. If nothing

else, *The Dawn of Everything* encourages us to look at each society on its own terms, so let us start by getting our feet wet.

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NOTES

- 1 For example, as part of the project *Survivors of Ragnarök* funded by the Academy of Finland (332396) led by Kristin Ilves, Walker Vadillo has examined the *Journal of Island and Coastal Archaeology* to analyse the impact of maritime archaeology in island archaeology. Preliminary results show that key authors in maritime archaeology, like Christer Westerdahl, are notably absent from reference lists.

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