Chapter 4

Approaching the Mesolithic through taskscapes: a case study from western Ireland

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Positioning landscapes and taskscapes

The use of the concept of the ‘landscape’ as an analytical tool by archaeologists began in the mid-20th century, following the gradual move away from a focus on artefacts and sites to a more regional one on networks between sites. A driving force for this new regional perspective was the resources available so archaeologists could afford grander projects (Sherratt 1996). In a pre-Celtic Tiger Ireland context it is apposite that some regional projects folded partly due to financial issues (Woodman and Johnson 1996), and that the first two large prehistoric projects in Ireland – the Carrowmore project (Burenhult 1984) and the Ballylough project (Zvelebil et al. 1987) – were both funded by institutions from outside of Ireland. Sherratt has argued that the divergent paths of archaeology, between studying the landscape as a signature of settlement patterns on the one hand, and studying the landscape for the sake of the landscape, can be rooted back to the beginnings of archaeology as a discipline and the tensions between the Enlightenment and Romanticism:

‘whereas the Romantic archaeologist will be happy to examine his own backyard and trace its genealogy as a place, this will be regarded by the Enlightenment archaeologist as parochialism: a retreat to “parish-pump archaeology”.’ (Sherratt 1996, 143)

In an analogy that he makes between an early 19th century account of a prehistoric landscape in Brittany and a TAG paper abstract, Sherratt (1996) highlights the Romantic inheritance of the phenomenological accounts in archaeology; in contrast he argues that the Enlightenment view of the landscape, the settlement pattern, is exemplified by an invasive approach to the landscape.

From this account we can see that approaches to the study of the landscape are ultimately mediated through the researcher’s or research group’s own particular training and understanding. It is repeatedly noted that the landscape is an ambivalent term, readily malleable to divergent methodologies. Further, the roots of the term are
also ambivalent, with a number of variants possible (cf. Bender 1993, 2; Berque 1997, 22; Lemaire 1997, 5). Baldly, in the western European tradition ‘landscape’ has its roots in an Anglo-Saxon word connoting a small-scale patch of land, ‘that corresponded to a peasant’s perception’; this petered out and was followed by a connotation of a larger-scale area, a political territory, in the eleventh century (Bender 1993, 2). From the beginning of the modern period, the term related to a certain perception, a gaze, which Bender (1993) argues was related to the emergent capitalist west. This relation between seeing and landscape is a powerful one, which continues to dominate the theorising and evaluating of landscapes: the perception of the environment is seen as a key ingredient in the study of landscapes. Indeed, as Bender (1993) comments, this perception of the landscape is a key arena of conflict. The dominant powers can use and naturalise the landscape for their own agendas; the allusions and portrayals of the landscape can be manifested to mask and obfuscate human relations of dominance and inequality.

The act of seeing the landscape is connected with our studying and interpreting the landscape. That the landscape, and the study of the landscape, is not neutral and can be an ideological tool is again readily apparent in the book The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes edited by Meinig (1979), a series of articles by academic geographers. In looking at how one approaches the landscape, Lewis (1979, 12) suggests that ‘Americans tinker with landscapes … and have been doing so ever since their ancestors landed at Jamestown and Plymouth and began chopping down trees’. What is immediately apparent is that in one fell swoop he has managed to wipe away some 10,000 years of Americans’ history. By setting up his parameters for study, the Native Americans are immediately reduced to a non-entity; they are non-Americans, a politically inert detritus on the outskirts of society, not worthy of consideration. Even leaving aside the hunter-gatherers and their landscape use, agriculture was being practiced in north-east America, where Lewis is based, before it had arrived to Britain, from where the pilgrims, and his ancestors, eventually came many millennia later.

**Ingold’s taskscape**

Ingold’s (1993; 2000) approach has been picked up on by various researchers of both the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods in Britain and Ireland (e.g. Conneller 2000; Pollard 2000; Whittle 2003; Little 2005). In Ingold’s (2000) collection of essays he has elaborated, while acknowledging himself a child of a western intellectual tradition, on ways of dismantling the opposition between culture and nature, mind and body, space and place. He has argued that one can adopt an approach to landscape studies that rests on the idea of the taskscape, and the temporality of the landscape. Influenced by phenomenology, he suggests that tasks are the constitutive acts of dwelling and:

‘it is to the entire ensemble of tasks, in their mutual interlocking, that I refer by the concept of taskscape. Just as the landscape is an array of related features, so - by analogy - the taskscape is an array of related activities.’ (Ingold 2000, 195)
Importantly, an understanding of the taskscape is founded on the acknowledgment, and rejection, of the ‘great tool-use fallacy’, which has separated social and technical domains, with Ingold (2000, 195) arguing that this separation ‘has blinded us to the fact that one of the outstanding features of technical practices lies in the embeddedness in the current of sociality’.

Ingold suggests that the landscape is the congealed form of the taskscape and uses the analogies of music and painting to draw out the relationships: like music, the taskscape resonates; the taskscape is manifested through engagement, and consists of concurrent rhythms ‘just as social life consists in the unfolding of a field of relationships among persons who attend to one another in what they do, its temporality consists in the unfolding of the resultant pattern of resonances’ (Ingold 2000, 199). Ingold (2000, 197–9) proposes that painting viewed as a process, as a performance, can be analogous to the landscape, as the landscape is never complete.

Ingold has provided a powerful concept by which to understand people and the landscape. By focusing on people in terms of their dwelling in the world, notions of a dichotomy between people’s actions, their technology, and their sociality are made redundant, as the former two can be seen as being mediated on the latter. With the taskscape being the activities of peoples’ dwelling, the landscape can therefore be understood as the ‘embodied form’ of this taskscape (Ingold 2000, 195). With cognisance to the fact that the taskscape is never ending, so the same applies to the landscape; because the landscape is continuously being created, Ingold suggests that this is why the dichotomy between natural and ‘man-made’ features is problematic: an issue highly pertinent to archaeologists, especially in terms of the creation, and positioning of monuments in the landscape, as well as in terms of the analysis of lithics (Tilley 1994, Bradley 2000). Moreover, the taskscape approach highlights the fundamental issue of the temporality of the landscape.

Whittle (2003) has highlighted some difficulties with Ingold’s approach, one being that his focus on a dwelling perspective, whereby people are attentive to the world around them, possibly overlooks how the daily routine, and indeed much of life, can be conducted on an unconscious level without the awareness and intellectualisation apparent in a dwelling perspective. He comments that cumulative effects of these unthinking and unconscious actions ‘may often be what has been called the “unintentional reproduction of structures”’ (Whittle 2003, 22). A second point that Whittle (2003, 15) makes is that the taskscape concept understates the acts of socialisation and learning, and the ‘weight of collective tradition and culture’. However, these are issues that Ingold (2000) has tackled head-on in other articles in his collection, and are therefore are taken here to be implicit in the concept of the taskscape.

The Mesolithic in western Ireland – an overview

Very briefly, and generally, the Irish Mesolithic is divided into two main phases; the earliest date for the Early Mesolithic is c. 8000 cal BC (Woodman 2003), with the lithic
technology typified by a microlithic technology, as well as the use of flake, core, ground, and polished axes. At some stage in the 7th millennium, the Later Mesolithic began (Warren 2003; for debates on the chronology, see Costa et al. 2005; Woodman 2015), characterised by a switch from a microlithic to a macrolithic technology, with the Bann flake as the iconic tool type of this phase. These Bann flakes, however, were just one part of this macrolithic technology, and indeed, only in one sub-phase of the Later Mesolithic (see Woodman et al. 1999).

For a variety of reasons the evidence for, and research of, the Mesolithic in western Ireland has been low-key up until recent years (see overview in Driscoll 2006), with almost all the evidence coming from stone tools from surface collections – primarily uncovered during the artificially lowering of lake levels in western Ireland and the midlands during the early twentieth century – and findspots often amounting to just a single artefact (Fig. 4.1; Driscoll 2009a). The province of Connacht in western Ireland is bordered on the west by the extensive coastline of the Atlantic with a number of findspots along the coast, including the recent excavations of a Mesolithic (and later periods) quartz lithic scatter at Belderrig (Driscoll 2010; Warren 2009). Connacht’s eastern border is defined almost entirely by the River Shannon and the Shannon system’s major lakes; the Shannon watershed covers a large section of western and central Ireland, and Figure 4.1 shows that besides the coastal sites and find spots, the great majority of evidence for the Mesolithic in western Ireland has been found along the Shannon system’s rivers and lakes including the large surface collections from Lough Allen and Lough Gara (Fredengren 2002; Driscoll 2009b; Driscoll et al. 2014). Further sites along the Shannon system include the surface collection from Corralanna, County Westmeath (Warren et al. 2009); the excavations of Later Mesolithic sites at Lough Kinale (Fredengren 2004) and Clonava, County Westmeath (Mitchell 1972); the Early Mesolithic site at Lough Boora (Ryan 1980); the excavations with Early and Later Mesolithic human remains at Killuragh Cave (Woodman and O’Shaughnessey 2005); and the Early Mesolithic cremations at Hermitage on the bank of the Shannon (Collins and Coyne 2003; Collins 2009) towards the south of the system. Further, as outlined elsewhere (see Driscoll 2009a, 4) there are at least 1800 ground and polished stone axes from the west of Ireland, and some, if not many, of these probably represent Mesolithic activity (Woodman et al. 1999; Woodman 2003; Driscoll 2013).

**Mesolithic taskscapes**

*Death on the Shannon*

Ironically, considering the dearth of evidence in the west, the clearest signs we have for the Early Mesolithic in the west is not the usual ephemeral lithic scatter that signifies a prehistoric inhabitation of an area, but the series of cremations at Hermitage on the banks of the Shannon (Fig. 4.2; Woodman 2001; Collins and Coyne
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The oldest cremation (7530–7320 cal BC) excavated contained an above average weight of bone than is usually found in excavated cremations, suggesting that the bones were carefully collected from the funeral pyre and deposited in the pit. The cremated remains were placed around a post that has been...
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interpreted as a grave marker, and placed against this post was a polished shale axe; chert and flint lithics were also in the pit (Lynch 2001; Collins 2009). The osteologist (Lynch 2001, 114) commented that the cremation was ‘expertly carried out’, and ‘the process of cremation would have been a considerable effort, requiring significant planning and a major input of time and effort’ – the author argued that the condition of the bones in the pit suggests that the people who undertook it were familiar with the processes of cremation.

The next evidence for burial at this site came between 15 and 25 generations later (7090–7030 cal BC). Here, the circumstances were different in that it is suggested that there is the possibility that only selected parts of the body were cremated, or only a partial amount of the cremated remains were deposited in this pit. The deposition of lithics in this pit was different from the first in that they were almost exclusively chert, and nearly half were taken to be naturally fractured pieces as opposed to flakes or blades; there was also cremated fish bone present in the pit. A third pit that may represent a cremation dates to about 20–30 generations after the second (6610–6370 cal BC): this consisted of a minute amount of bone – not identified as human – which was deposited with six flakes and blades (one flint, two chert or limestone, and the rest chert), and three small stones. For the second pit at Hermitage, it is suggested that disarticulation of the body took place, with only some of the remains cremated, or deposited in the pit. Evidence for disarticulation may also be found in regards to the Early and Later Mesolithic humans remains from the rest of Ireland (Woodman et al. 1999; O’Sullivan 2002); the disarticulation and movement of body parts around the landscape would seem to be a recurring theme in the European Mesolithic in general (Conneller 2009).

It is more than likely that not every person who died was treated in this manner. While this could suggest that this was the funeral of a man or woman who was considered of significance to the community for whatever reasons, it could also be indicative of a significant event in which the cremation of this person was deemed to be appropriate or necessary. Indeed, while the cremated remains in this pit were taken to represent a single individual, and hence could be seen – and in a later prehistoric context probably would be seen – in the context of the rise of the importance of the individual in society, the understanding of different concepts of personhood suggest that what we see as an individual would have been perceived differently in the past (Taylor 1992; Fowler 2004).

The funeral rites of this cremation were performed by mindful communities of practice (sensu Dobres 2000), and members of the community would have had their own roles to play in these rites, whether actively or passively, as participants or spectators. Funeral rites are considered key arenas in which the social values of a community are not only reflected but are also arenas instrumental in the social reproduction of the communities (Thomas 1991). However, while doing this, the rituals can be open to ambiguity, subversion, and contestation (Cooney 2000, 89). Furthermore, Howe (2000) has noted that an element of ritual that is often overlooked
is that of risk: the risk of the incorrect performance of the ritual, or the inability to
control the (supernatural) forces being contended with.

The process of cremation is not a particularly practical method of the disposal of
the dead and was ultimately tied up in the cosmology and world view of the community
involved. In cremation, the transformative power of fire is given a central place in
metamorphosing the body, and a large fire is a highly visual way of disposing with a
body, seen from close by and also from afar from the rising smoke. Ingold (1986, 246)
and Zvelebil (1997, 37) have noted that the world view of hunter-gatherers is often
typified by a tripartite division of layers: sky, earth, and water, which are ‘linked by
a “cosmic pillar”, or “cosmic river”, symbolised in the shaman’s turu, or a tree often
placed in the centre of the shaman’s tent’. At this cremation by the Shannon we see
these three layers converging: the body ascending into the sky through the flames
and smoke; the remains being deposited in the earth, with bone embedded in burnt
clay; and these actions being carried out beside the river.

The commitment to cremate the body of this person necessitated a considerable
undertaking in time and effort for a community. The process of this burial rite may
have been carried out over days, weeks, or even longer. This would have involved at
least the following tasks and stages, not necessarily all in this order:

a) the preparing of the body for cremation;
b) the gathering of the various materials for the pyre;
c) the lighting of the pyre;
d) the maintenance of the pyre to thoroughly burn the bones;
e) the cooling of the fire;
f) the inspection of the pyre’s remains for bones (and other material added?);
g) the collection of the bones and other material into containers;
h) the post-cremation alteration/preparation of the bones (pounding/grinding);
i) the digging of the pit;
j) the forming of the grave marker (this may have been a feature already there);
k) the deposition of the bones and lithics, and possibly other organic material

- all the while as people mourned, ate, slept, talked, played, took care of infants.
All these processes involved differing communities of practice, and necessitated the
negotiating and asserting of the power relations involved in the community: whose
place was it to do step a), or who was excluded from doing step i). These communities
of practice would have involved the socialisation of children into the processes, from
observing the activities and the older peoples’ interactions, to active exclusion or
initiation in the processes involved.

A key consideration of this cremation concerns the relations that the community
involved had with the landscape – the gathering of wood for the fire was not a matter
of resource exploitation, but would have been tied up in their understandings of
the animacy of the woodland (Ingold 2000, 144); the gathering of the mudstone,
chert, and flint lithics for deposition along with the bones in the marked grave
again brought different parts of the animate landscape together with the wood and the person.

The burials at Hermitage represent evidence for burial beside the river intermittently over a period of 35–55 generations, with further evidence for probable occupation at the river bank dated to the end of the Later Mesolithic (4680–4040 cal BC; Collins 2009). This represents a persistent place in the landscape, a bend of the River Shannon where communities returned to over the generations. It has been suggested that this was a fording point on the river, highlighting that there were two axes of movement here – the crossing point of the river between east and west, and the movement up and down on the river, from the sea into the interior of the island. A key to the landscape perception of hunter-gatherers is suggested as being paths (Tilley 1994; Ingold 2000). Indeed, Ingold has commented that the image of life as a trail or path is ubiquitous amongst hunters and gatherers. Obvious pathways in the landscape are the rivers, lakes, and sea, which were traversed using boats, such as along the Shannon. But looking into the woods themselves, paths would have been of importance:

‘Some routes through the trees were long established – the track to the riverside from the tents themselves, or the route onto the floodplain for the large gatherings of the community. Other routes were trod once and once only. In a similar way old paths from a previous year’s visit towards good hunting grounds may still have been viable and could be retrodden. Possibly some spring and summer growth needed to be cut back in order to maintain important routes. Some people may have outlasted particular paths, whereas some paths had always been there. Treading the same paths as a now deceased parent, or an elder sibling now married, may have been an important part of the biography of particular individuals. Paths had differing durations and the scar of erosion created by the routines of labour may, in turn, have shaped the activity of those following. Particular routes through the trees created certain views and vistas – in a very subtle way structuring a community’s experience of the local world. Learning traditional paths, their names and the names of the features of the landscape visible from these routes were a vital part of socialisation.’ (Warren 2005, 73–4)

This eloquent quote from Warren’s book on Mesolithic Scotland highlights the embedment of humans in the landscape, and the temporality of the landscape. The paths were not there simply as an access way to somewhere, but rather were an integral part of the community itself. The journey itself is as important as the destination.

While at Hermitage we have a persistent place in the landscape, we must be cognisant of both the continuity and change in the communities over this period. Indeed, depending on how one views the transition to the Later Mesolithic, this time frame could represent both Early and Later Mesolithic cremations. Moreover, the landscape would have undergone considerable changes over this length of time, in terms of the changing water levels, and with the development and alteration of the composition of the woodlands. With only a small strip of the river bank excavated, it is unclear what further evidence there is for the Early Mesolithic in the area. The
closest other Early Mesolithic material are the human remains from Killuragh Cave, County Limerick. These are overlooking an eastern tributary of the Shannon, which were found with a range of lithics (Woodman and O’Shaughnessey 2005). Following the Shannon north, the next evidence for the Early Mesolithic is at Lough Boora, County Offaly about 100 km from Hermitage, connected to the Shannon via the River Brosna (Ryan 1980). While at Hermitage we have explicit ritual behaviour in the form of burials and artefact deposition, at Lough Boora the site is traditionally viewed in economic terms as a temporary hunting/fishing site. However, Finlay’s (2003a) reading of the site suggests that the burnt lithics found there represent more than simple discard – she has suggested that the high level of burning of the lithics, which altered their appearance similarly to bone, represents purposeful acts; she suggests that the lithics were being metamorphosed. Therefore, what this highlights is that we are not dealing with two ‘type-sites’: a ritual and a profane. Lough Boora is not simply an economic campsites, a convenient stopping place in a seasonal round. Rather, the tasks at Lough Boora were carried out in landscape infused with ritual: the taskscape is a ritual taskscape. This is not to suggest that the landscape was simply a homogeneous spread of ritual locations, without special places acknowledged and demarcated. But rather, that the tasks carried out at, and the perception of, ‘mundane’ sites such as Boora were enmeshed in the world view of the communities who visited and stayed at them. Indeed, the use of the term ‘ritual’ is problematical in that it creates a binary division between the ritual world of religious or spiritual actions and the mundane world of setting up camp, hunting, gathering, lighting a fire, disposing of “waste”, where these are inextricable fractions of life.

In terms of the revisiting and reuse of locales, such as witnessed at Hermitage, what is interesting is that while the bog encroached the site at Lough Boora and fundamentally altered its topography and ecology, Later Mesolithic material was found in the peat during excavations, suggesting a reoccurrence of activity here at a much later stage when the place had physically changed. Is this a fortuitous find, simply because this area happened to be excavated, or does it signify something more about the re-visitation of this locale during the Later Mesolithic?

On the waters and in the woods
As outlined above, the evidence for the Later Mesolithic in the west of Ireland consists of lithics found along the north and west coast of the region, along the Shannon system, as well as in the interior of the region. However, the distribution of material is biased towards the two lakes of Lough Gara and Lough Allen, where drainage schemes have exposed lithics on the shoreline. The consistent pattern in the distribution of material is the dominance of waterside locations when compared to post-Mesolithic material. However, this patterning is sometimes misstated – for example, Fredengren (2002, 137) has suggested that ‘all recognisable human activity in the Mesolithic took place in the border zone between land and water’, arguing that this was so due to the Mesolithic inhabitants’ cosmological relationship with water. This would appear,
however, to be an erroneous reading of the distribution of Mesolithic material: while the Mesolithic material is undoubtedly gravitated towards water, evidence from the southeast (Zvelebil et al. 1996), the west (Driscoll 2013), the north-west (Kimball 2000a), and north-east (Woodman et al. 2006) has shown that Mesolithic material is not restricted to the border zone alone. The known distribution of material from Lough Gara and Lough Allen has been created by the drainage schemes: the only areas investigated on these lakes have been the exposed shorelines, entailing that the distribution of material away from the lakes is almost unknown.

In terms of the west of Ireland, the finds from Clonnaragh, Urlaur, Prospecthill, Streamstown, Leedaun, and Ballycurrin Demesne, are, while all found near water, not related to the border zone itself (Fig. 4.1; Driscoll 2006). Therefore, apart from the evidence produced from the drainage schemes of the two lakes, half of the findspots in the west are away from the land/water border zone. Indeed, the find of the retouched point from Prospecthill, County Galway (Driscoll 2013) highlights a find from inside the woodland itself – while today the findspot of this lithic is about 700 m from the coast, in the Mesolithic a lower sea-level of 3–6 m would mean that the coast was 2–3 km away, as the bay is shallow around this point. The closest river is also 2 km away, highlighting that this lithic is not related to a waterside location, but rather deep in the interior of the woodland itself. Again, the two Mesolithic finds from Clonnaragh, County Roscommon, are not directly related to water, but rather would have been in the interior of the woodland as well.

Elsewhere I have looked at the Irish Later Mesolithic as comprised of constructed landscapes, which involved both looking at how we construct these past landscapes, and how the landscape was actively constructed and reconstructed in the Mesolithic (Driscoll 2009b). Examining the growing body of evidence for various types of constructions in the Later Mesolithic landscape and, it was suggested that by looking at the platforms and other constructions of the Mesolithic landscapes as personalities can obviate the necessity to interpret them in light of monumentality or economic functionality. Rather, as personalities, and from a taskscape perspective where the animate and inanimate are inextricably linked, the division lines between persons, objects, and places are blurred; the construction of all these unfold in a continual process of creation and recreation. As discussed above, for the Mesolithic in Ireland there is a strong gravitation towards riversides and lakesides. Looking back to the taskscape at the water’s edge, we can see that the waters and the woods are not two diametrically opposed parts of the landscape. Rather, they were together the dwelling place of the communities. As we can view the platforms by the waters as personalities in the landscape, so too can we suggest that the paths through the woods that connected these constructions to other nodes were also personalities (Driscoll 2009b).

The Mesolithic period has long been linked with the development of the post-glacial forests – the communities were called ‘Forest folk’ (Childe 1957), with the forest seen as a ‘problem’ to the communities (Hawkes and Hawkes 1947), rather than their home.
While it is clear that the Mesolithic communities in Ireland were in fact woodland dwellers, the woods have usually been treated as simply an *a priori* ecozone (Woodman 1978; Kimball 2000b) or an inhibiting factor of the inhabitants’ settlement (Mitchell and Ryan 2001; Lynch 2002), as opposed to a lived-in environment. Where researchers in Britain have looked at the forest in the Mesolithic, it has tended to be towards how the Mesolithic communities altered, or managed the woodlands for their economic benefit: Warren (2001, 127) has commented, that this ‘concept of management ... was connected to a desire amongst researchers to identify Mesolithic populations that were actually doing something significant’, as opposed to simply dwelling.

As mentioned earlier in the context of Hermitage, we have to be cognisant of the changing aspect of the woods. As we are dealing with a time span of over 2000 years for the Later Mesolithic, the composition of the woodland would have changed dramatically at both a regional and local scale. It is often stated that the forest cover in Ireland consisted of a dense canopy, with no breaks apart from the big rivers and lakes (Mitchell and Ryan 2001). However, considering the fact that the shrubs and trees here are shade intolerant, regular clearings, primarily through tree-fall by various agencies, must have been present to allow the trees to regenerate; the woodland was not a continuous canopy, but rather intermittently interspersed by glades (Rackham 1988). These glades were not just humanly caused gaps in the forest, but rather, a natural part of the life cycle of the ecosystem. In Ireland, there is evidence for openings in the woodland in Ireland (Preece *et al.* 1986; Molloy and O’Connell 2004; Warren *et al.* 2013). Furthermore, Rackham (1996) has argued that the description of the climax forest as being, for instance, a ‘mixed oak forest’ belies the complexity of the woodland composition; he suggests that individual stands of trees would have differing compositions. Rackham (1996) further argues that hazel should be considered a canopy tree as opposed to a tall shrub: it has been undervalued in the canopy composition because it produces little pollen if shaded by taller trees, whereas alder has been over represented due to the locations where pollen cores are taken.

Mitchell and Ryan (2001) have noted that the trees left in the Irish landscape are of a diminutive size compared to what would have grown at the time; for instance they suggest that oaks would have reached 27 m in height. These trees would have grown for hundreds of years. This temporality of the woods is a critical aspect of the relations people had with the environment. Whereas a human life can be measured in the yearly cycle of a deciduous tree over the seasons, the fact that a tree would have stood for generations of human life marks them out as different from animals and other plants. On a smaller temporal scale, whereas today’s floodplains are relatively free from debris and fallen trees, in a wooded landscape this would have been considerably different (Brown 1997). Fallen trees and organic material can dam rivers and alter the channels; the evolving channels lead to the terrestrialisation of channels, and the creation of new ones. Brown (1997) suggests that the floodplain forest on the River Lee, in today’s landscape in the south of Ireland possibly represents the best analogy of the Cool
Temperate Mid-Holocene alluvial forests. Here, the maze of anastomosing channels run through woodland, from the wet species such as willow and alder on the wetter islands and margins to the dry species such as oak and ash on the higher islands and islets. This small floodplain woodland has 20 species of trees, 83 species of flowering plants and ferns, and 62 species of moss and liverwort (Brown 1999). We can suggest that the Mesolithic communities living by the rivers would have inhabited a similar landscape to this, in stark comparison to the almost treeless, channelled rivers in the west of Ireland today.

It has been argued that the Later Mesolithic lithics were essentially a wood-working kit (Woodman and Anderson 1990). From the excavations of the fishing traps on the Liffey, we have possible evidence of the coppicing of trees (McQuade and O’Donnell 2007). The possible evidence for coppicing does not need to be portrayed in terms of woodland management (cf. Warren et al. 2013) – of a distinction between the cultured woods and the natural woods – instead, the coppiced woodland highlights the enmeshment of the Mesolithic communities’ in the landscape. As the communities created space for the woods to flourish, and flourish in a manner aptly suited to their needs, the constructed woodland in turn structured the inhabitation of the communities in the landscape – these constructed spaces were returned to over generations, long after the initial creators had passed. From the Liffey excavations there is also evidence for the selective use of hazel at the site, even though other suitable types of trees were available (McQuade and O’Donnell 2007). In a wooded environment, we can suggest that the Mesolithic communities understood the woods intimately, in terms of both the physical and spiritual properties of the woods. As Ingold (2000) has commented, the trees themselves would have been considered animate, spiritual beings, not just the animals that lived in the woods. In a similar vein, Bloch has expanded on the ritualistic implications of plants, arguing that the importance of plant sacrifice has been neglected in ethnographic accounts, possibly because ‘it is a less spectacular subject for ethnographic films than the essential staple of animal sacrifice that characterises this form of entertainment’ (Bloch 1998, 40–1). He further argues that transformative potential is the central fact of ritual symbolism, and the ‘symbolic power of trees comes from the fact that they are good substitutes for humans’ (Bloch 1998, 41).

Maclean (1993) outlined the possible range of edible flora available in Ireland, listing a minimum of 120 possible species available, with more available in restricted geographical areas. She comments that this is simply those possible as availability will not guarantee use – cultural factors also dictate what is considered acceptable for consumption. Zvelebil (1994) discussed evidence for plant use in the European Mesolithic; he cited Lough Boora as producing evidence for hazelnuts. However, this is taking a minimal view of the possible plant use, with others available in the area, as O’Connell’s (1980) pollen analysis highlights. The use of plants went beyond food as well. Plants, lichen, and fungi would have been used for medicinal
purposes (Allen 2004), with the Irish landscape containing fungi with hallucinogenic properties, including Fly Agaric (*Amanita muscaria*), and Liberty Caps (*Psilocybe semilanceata*). The use of flora and fauna for food, medicine, clothing, and shelter would have been understood on the basis of the mythopoesis of the landscape and all its constituents.

**Human–animal relations**

Discussions of the subsistence practices, or hunting and gathering, of the Mesolithic communities in Ireland invariably comment on the impoverished nature of the flora and fauna on the island. However, it is arguable that impoverishment is a relative term. What was there was a bewildering array of foods that the Mesolithic communities could have obtained (for a recent review see Warren 2015). On assessing the isotope readings for the Mesolithic human remains, Woodman *et al.* (1999) asked if the interior of Ireland could have supported Mesolithic people without a reliance on salmon. Clearly, it would seem that it could. When looking at the faunal subsistence of the Mesolithic communities, an important point to bear in mind is that we are not looking at just how people survived by eating, but rather at the relations people had with their neighbours – the animals – in the woods and the waters, as well as with themselves: as Jordan (2006) has put it, subsistence involves a symbolic and cosmological dimension, and as well as social negotiation. He argues that material signatures of these are visible in the archaeological record, but usually glossed over in the hunt for economic and ecological questionings. Looking at the Irish context, and taking into consideration the poor preservation rate of bone, an interesting omission from the faunal record from almost all Mesolithic sites is the bear. The bear is universally singled out as a special animal, due to their human-like appearance, footprints, excrement, and omnivorous diet, as well as because they are ‘manifestly intelligent’ (Ingold 1986, 258). The paucity of bear remains on Mesolithic sites in Ireland does not necessarily indicate a taboo with eating them or killing them for their hides due to these anthropomorphic qualities. Rather, Jordan’s (2006) example from Siberia highlights that there, the bones of the bears were treated in very specific ways and not discarded or deposited in a similar fashion to other faunal remains.

Indeed, it has even been speculated that bear may have been brought onto the island by Mesolithic communities (see discussion in Warren *et al.* 2013), with other mammalian introductions by Mesolithic communities including dog and wild boar (Green and Zvelebil 1990; Woodman and McCarthy 2003), and possibly badgers and pine martins (Lynch 1996). This thesis is similar to that of the ‘transported landscape’ discussed in the context of the hunter-gatherers in the Pacific islands (Gosden 1994), with analogous behaviour seen in Europe (Zeder 2011). While these were not domesticated animals *per se* this notion opens up the whole question of human–animal relations to a greater extent, rather than the dichotomous relationship between the domesticated and the wild such as developed by Hodder (1990).
Commenting on the Achaur Indians and other Amazonian groups, Descola (1993) demonstrates how, although they are horticulturalists, they have not attempted to domesticate animals even though they do tame animals. He comments that this should not be seen as a failing as such on their part – a lack of technical know-how – as they are adept at handling and domesticating plants. Rather, it is due to their understanding of the world. He surmises that ‘along with the Achaur, many Amazonian tribes regard the beasts of the forest as subject to the spirits that protect them; accordingly they are already domesticated as they possibly can be’ (Descola 1993, 131). Around their houses, they very often have tamed animals, usually the young of animals hunted, and that some of their houses ‘resemble positive Noah’s Ark’, and once tamed they are never eaten (Descola 1993, 130).

Zvelebil (2005) has discussed this issue of the taming of animals, suggesting that it has its origins in the Palaeolithic, which intensifies in the Mesolithic. In Ireland the one domesticated species was the dog, and in the Scandinavian Mesolithic the numerous dog burials at Skateholm attest to the special relationship this animal played in the communities (Larsson 1993). One of the richest graves in terms of grave goods was that of a dog, with the animal buried with a deer antler along its spine, flint blades at its hip, and a decorated antler hammer at its chest – the antler and the blades were placed in the same manner as male human burials. Again, as in the human burials, red ochre was used. It was suggested that at Skateholm I, six of the eight dog burials were placed in a delimited area. This was taken as possibly meaning that the dogs were treated similarly yet differently. However, dogs were also buried with humans, and it was suggested that the placement of decapitated dogs in human burials is signs of sacrificial rites. One difference between human and dog burials is that dogs were never placed with animal teeth, whereas humans often were (Larsson 1990).

Looking at the question of human–animal relations and the fluidity of the boundaries between humans and animals, Conneller (2006, 161) has suggested that unless the specific conditions at play in the Mesolithic are investigated, the pronouncements ‘run the risk of adding to the list of “banal phenomenological truisms” that have become common in many “post-processual” Mesolithic narratives’. She adds that her work showed that deer remains were treated differently at Star Carr. However, this would seem to miss the important point that human–animal relations are not solely centred on one species of animal. Rather, the distinction between the modern western view of organisms – with their essential nature as pre-specified prior to entry into the life process – is fundamentally different to hunter-gatherers (Ingold 2000). Using the example of the Cree, Ingold (2000, 51) shows that for them life is not pre-specified, but is described as continuous birth: ‘to be alive is to be situated within a field of relations which, as it unfolds, actively and ceaselessly brings form into being’. Therefore, personhood is as much a part of non-human animals and plants as it is for humans. This suggests that even though we may see special treatment of certain animals, such as Conneller has suggested for deer at Star Carr, this does not
mean that the communities there did not view all animals as open to personhood, but rather that they were treated differently for another reason.

What is curious about the possible Mesolithic transport of large fauna to Ireland is that they seem to have forgotten to bring deer. Deer, and deer hunting, are prominent motifs in Mesolithic studies (Finlay 2000). The discovery of deer frontlets at Star Carr that may have been used as a headdress has entrenched the economic and symbolic importance of deer in British Mesolithic studies, so much so that Fredengren (2002) has suggested that the antlers of extinct giant deer found at Lough Gara may have been used in a similar fashion. However, it could be argued that the Mesolithic communities would have been more involved with their more contemporary companions, the boar. Rather than imagining the communities at the time donning massive antlers, it may be more apt to regard the tusks of boars, which have also been found at Lough Gara, as more suitable apparel. It is noted that the Irish Mesolithic hunter-gatherers have been described as fisher-hunter-gatherers. Looking at the relations that people had with fish, the idea of appearing like a salmon or an eel would not seem to have the same romantic image as much as the shamanic practices of wearing deer frontlets. However, the stone carvings from Lepenski Vir have been suggested to represent half human half fish beings (Mithen 1994), suggesting that the relations people had with animals were not restricted to those on terra firma. This special relationship with fish is more than likely analogous with areas such as Ireland, where waters and fishing were arguably central to Mesolithic communities and taskscapes.

What these aspects of human-animal relations highlight is that analyses based on optimal foraging strategies, or resource maximisation (e.g. Kimball 2000a) must be tempered with the understanding that subsistence is not a straightforward research agenda. Moreover, peoples’ relations with animals did not begin and end with the animals that they either ate or killed for hides. Just as the flora in the landscape was not just a repository of resources to be exploited, the animals were more than just provisions waiting to be used. While Mesolithic taskscapes may not have involved the trapping and eating of swallows, the arrival and departure of swallows and other migratory birds would have marked the coming and going of the seasons, forming the cyclical backdrop to the everyday routines of the taskscapes.

Looking back to the taskscapes, these same seasonal changes would have been experienced as the rise and fall of water levels by the waterways and in the wetlands. As Warren (2001, 30) has put it, ‘the temporality of activity is not just a matter of scheduling seasonal resources, but that these time frames are important in understanding identity and the ways in which people came to terms with their landscape’. Clearly, the climate and ecology shape a community’s positioning in the landscape, but this is not translated to reified models of subsistence. Commenting on ethnographic work undertaken on the Amazonian floodplain, Whittle (2003, 25) outlines that the rise and fall of the river levels between the wet and dry season leads to, in turn, congregation and dispersal of the communities: ‘seasonality is not just
4. Approaching the Mesolithic through taskscapes

Concluding remarks

‘Landscape has to be contextualized. The way in which people - anywhere, everywhere - understand and engage with their worlds will depend upon the specific time and place and historical conditions. It will depend upon their gender, age, class, caste, and on their social and economic situation. People’s landscapes will operate on very different spatial scales, whether horizontally across the surface of the world, or vertically - up to the heavens, down to the depths. They will operate on very different temporal scales, engaging with the past and with the future in many different ways. The landscape is never inert, people engage with it, re-work it, appropriate and contest it.’ (Bender 1993, 2–3)

‘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 part of us, just as we are part of it.’ (Ingold 2000, 191)

These extended quotes neatly encapsulate a number of key points that are central to the use of a landscape approach in this paper. A focus on the landscape must contend with the realisation that what we as present day researchers regard as landscape is not what was known or thought of by the people whom we are attempting to study. We live in vastly different times, and to repeat a commonplace, the past is a foreign country.

So how can we approach prehistoric landscapes? A phenomenological approach is an intuitively attractive proposition. However, there are considerable complexities in following such an approach, a key issue being the peril of essentialism. How can we translate a long past experience of the world into our terms? It is clearly of importance to use an approach that is founded on an understanding that one’s physical place in the world is integral to one’s experience. The idea that we are somehow divorced from the landscape is quite bizarre but a commonplace in the western tradition of thought. For example, Meinig (1979, 33) states that ‘landscape is defined by our vision and interpreted by our minds ... Strictly speaking we are never in it, it lies before our eyes’. However, if I raise my hands, I am immediately in my vision in the landscape: I am, therefore, in the landscape. This notion of the detached human entity, the brain in a body, is of course deeply ingrained in the ‘I think therefore I am’ paradigm.

Using Ingold’s concept, one can view the landscape as an array of features formed and also unformed by peoples’ sociality. However, this is not a methodology, but rather a tool for thinking about one’s methodology. By adopting the taskscape approach, and recognising the temporality of the landscape, allows one to investigate the landscape from the position of the interconnection of the evidence we see of the periods. Moreover the change seen between the Early Mesolithic and the Later Mesolithic, and indeed the subsequent Neolithic transition, can be seen as process whereby the changes in the material culture – be they new lithic strategies or
ceramics or the introduction of new flora and fauna through transported landscapes – can be seen as changes in the taskscape, not solely technological advances or economic achievements but rather an array of differences that altered how the landscape was used and perceived. The temporality of the landscape maintains that the landscape and its perception are grounded in the historical particularities of activities taking place.

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Forms of Dwelling
20 Years of Taskscapes in Archaeology


edited by
Ulla Rajala and Philip Mills
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