Taming Time, Timing Death
Social Technologies and Ritual

Edited by
DORTHE REFSLUND CHRISTENSEN
Aarhus University, Denmark

RANE WILLERSLEV
University of Oslo, Norway

ASHGATE
Chapter 1

"Seaweeds and Limpets will Grow on Our Grave Stones": On Islands, Time, Death and Inhuman Materialities

Stuart McLean

"Sorry for your loss." The phrase is a staple of mass-produced bereavement cards and the rhetoric of professional funeral directors (think Six Feet Under, for example). Yet, generic as it seems, it speaks always of the loss of a particular someone—a family member, friend or loved one. Moreover, it is, invariably, a phrase spoken by the living to the living, offering comfort and consolation in the name of one who was once but is no longer among them. But how might the dead themselves speak of loss if they were able to do so? Might they speak to us not of individual bereavement but of a loss that is absolute, all-consuming and without recompense but that is, nonetheless, the indispensable precondition for ... well, everything? To imagine what the dead might tell us about loss though, we need to think of them not as the particularized individuals whose names are printed in obituaries or inscribed on headstones but as an altogether more diffuse and expansive presence, one that infinitely exceeds that of the living. Such a presence, I propose, can be grasped most effectively not by examining beliefs and practices specific to a particular cultural-historical context (for example representations of the dead as individuated ancestors or as an unquantifiable mass) but by juxtaposing accounts from a variety of times and places, including my own current research on relations between the living and the dead and perceptions of long-term environmental change in the Orkney Islands, off the northernmost tip of Scotland. The spatiotemporal shifts that follow are intended less to establish links of comparison across periods and localities than to effect an evocative conjuration of time and matter as the impersonal ontological basis for the making and unmaking of human worlds. It is in these terms, I shall suggest, that the expressions of the living regarding the dead—verbal, visual, performative, architeconic—can be most suggestively understood.

A further wager of this chapter is that islands might have something distinctive to teach us about the ways in which time and matter are implicated both in relations between the living and the dead and in the shaping of humanly significant cultural worlds. Anthropologists, of course, have often written about islands, whether as the paradigmatic setting for Malinowskian participant-observation fieldwork or as spaces of intercultural contact and exchange—for example between Europeans and
the various populations they encountered through voyages of trade, exploration or colonial expansion (Dening 1980; Malinowski 1984; Sahlin 1985). Drawing on my own research in Orkney, along with a range of archival and documentary sources, I aim here to consider the material specificity of islands as settings for a variety of encounters of a rather different kind: between the living and the dead, between solid and liquid modalities of matter, between humans and a range of other-than-human materialities and, not least, between human-centered, culturally calibrated time (including both historical time and the more expansively conceived temporarities of environmental and geological change) and the more definitionally elusive, impersonal and non-linear time of becoming and dissolution from which, I suggest, the latter must be understood to derive. Given its geographical location and its long history of human settlement (stretching back perhaps as much as 9,000 years), Orkney is at once a landscape densely marked with the enduring physical after-traces of the dead of past generations and one subject to continuous refashioning through the ongoing marine erosion that will, eventually, cause the islands to vanish beneath the waters of the North Sea from which they first emerged (Finlayson and Edwards 2003: 122–3; Wickham-Jones 1994: 59–63, 74). Articulating an account of the disposal and memorialization of the dead in Orkney with an overview of long-term environmental change and its associated imaginaries, I develop an understanding of death, death ritual and mortuary practices less as expressive of social relations among the living or of culturally specific beliefs of the living about the dead than as a generative interface between a self-designated human realm and the processes of material transformation and dissolution by which it is at once constituted and continuously threatened.

Islands before and after History

The short essay “Desert Islands” (1953) is an early work by the philosopher Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze was interested in islands primarily as a source of creativity, of new beginnings, demanding as such a particular kind of attunement to one’s environment on part of their human settlers. According to Deleuze there were two kinds of islands—“continental” ones, broken off shards of existing landmasses—and “oceanic” ones—the result of the petrification of coral reefs or of magmic upwellings from beneath the ocean floor, rising, cooling and solidifying to create new formations. Both kinds of islands testified that the elemental “strife” of land and sea was not yet at an end (much as humans residing in more populous localities might like to pretend otherwise). They thus served as a reminder that nothing was settled, that the forms of the existing world were not definitively fixed. The strife of land and water was one that preceded and would continue beyond the limited time-span of humans’ presence on earth: “Islands are either from before or after humankind” (Deleuze 2004: 9). In this sense, for Deleuze, all islands were, in effect, desert islands, belonging to a time at once pre- and post-historical. Human imaginings about islands participated in and carried forward the movement out of which islands themselves emerged. The arrival of humans, whether as refugees, colonists or castaways, did not put an end to the desertedness of desert islands but rather completed it, bringing it to consciousness of itself. But the individual human imagination, according to Deleuze, was not capable on its own of immersing itself fully in the movement—the éléphant giving rise to islands. To do so required the engagement of the collective imagination, as revealed most profoundly in the guise of ritual and mythology. Crucially, for Deleuze, mythology was not an explanatory framework imposed upon reality, not something simply “willed” into existence, but a human creative act participating in and giving expression to the other-than-human creative energies and forces that produced desert islands themselves as privileged sites of new beginnings (Deleuze 2004: 10–12). Deleuze, however, sees the creativity exemplified by islands is as a matter of re-creation, of beginning again rather than beginning from scratch. The point is an important one because the second creation, the act of re-creation, affirms creativity itself as an ongoing and endlessly open-ended process, a capacity not to create ex nihilo, nor simply to repeat what has gone before, but to repeat and differ (Difference and Repetition being, of course, the title of one of the best known of Deleuze’s later philosophical works). The beginning anew associated with desert islands in effect usurps the privilege of any single, unique and self-identical origin, appealing instead to a principle of originary difference that remains inassimilable to chronologically marked time: “In the ideal of beginning anew there is something that precedes the beginning itself, that takes it up to deepen and delay it in the passage of time. The desert island is the material of this something immemorial, this something most profound” (2004: 13–14).

1 The material evidence of life in the Mesolithic period (c. 10000–5000 BCE) in Orkney is scant, consisting principally of a number of “lithic scatter” sites (at Seater, South Etti, Wideford Hill, Valdegar and the Loch of Stenness), which have yielded small polished stone tools and chippings. A charred hazelnut shell, recovered during excavations at Longhowe in Tankerness in 2007 has been dated to 6820–6860 BCE. A recently excavated site on the northerly island of Stornsay has produced pieces of flint with a tentative dating of 7000 BCE or older and may prove to be the oldest settlement in Orkney. There is, however, no evidence to suggest that these sites were in year-round occupation and no Mesolithic tombs have been found in Orkney, or, indeed, anywhere in present-day Scotland (Finlayson and Edwards 2003; Towie 2008; Wickham-Jones 1994: 59–74, 2007).

2 The notion of such a second beginning finds one of its most forceful expressions, for Deleuze, in the myth of the Flood, in which the Ark, as the crucible of a new beginning, finds its resting place on a de facto island, a solitary mountain peak protruding above the otherwise ubiquitous waters (Deleuze 2004: 13). In order to begin anew Deleuze suggests, it is necessary, at least provisionally, to separate oneself from whatever, according to the logic of chronological time-reckoning, came before. It is the water, the ocean or sea surrounding the island that embodies a principle of segregation necessary for such second creation to begin: “as though the island had pushed its desert outside” (2004: 11).

"Seaweeds and Limpets will Grow on Our Grave Stones"
The Sea of the Dead

In the mythologies of land and sea invoked by Deleuze, the dead have often played a conspicuous role, both as named individuals and as an anonymous backdrop to the existence of the living. Elias Canetti, in his study *Crowds and Power*, suggests that the so-called “invisible crowd” of the dead may be amongst the most ancient and the most universal of human imaginings:

Over the whole earth, wherever there are men, is found the conception of the invisible dead. It is tempting to call it humanity's oldest conception. There is certainly no horde, no tribe, no people which does not have abundant ideas about its dead. Man has been obsessed by them; they have been of enormous importance for him; the action of the dead upon the living has been an essential part of life itself. (Canetti 1992: 47)

Of these invisible dead, he writes: “generally it was assumed there were a great number of them” and he proceeds to give, by way of illustration, an eclectic range of ethnographic examples: the Bechuana of South Africa, who “believed all space to be full of the spirits of their ancestors”; the Chuckchi shamans of northeastern Siberia, with their “legions of auxiliary spirits” called upon in effecting cures; the belief, shared by the Sami of Northern Europe and the Tlingit of Alaska, that the *aurora borealis* or Northern Lights is composed of hosts of the dead; and the Gaelic term *sluaich*, used in the Scottish Highlands to refer to massed spirits of the dead who “fly about in great crowds like starlings” (Canetti 1992).

Representations of these massed dead often depict them as a cloud or vapor, or else as a swirling liquid, overflowing all boundaries. For example, in the Afro-Cuban “inspiration” known as Palo or Palo Monte—a complex set of beliefs and practices relating to sorcery, healing, divination and communication with the dead—a key concept is the Ba-Kongo derived term *Kalunga*, the sea of the dead. This is often used to invoke the dead as an undifferentiated and all-pervading substance, or as what Todd Ramón Ochoa, in a recent study, calls “the ambient dead.” Ochoa writes that his own understanding of *Kalunga* (and his curiosity about the role of the dead in Palo more generally) derives in large measure from conversations with Isidra, a 60-year-old woman and Palo practitioner living in an apartment building in the El Cerro district of Havana:

Kalunga, as Isidra taught it through variegated reiteration, was the great, indifferent sea of the dead ... As Isidra used it, Kalunga was not only haunted by the dead, but was also composed of the dead and simultaneously constitutive of them; the dead were immanent to it, in the same way a broth makes a soup. Kalunga, Isidra said, comprises all the dead that could possibly exist or have existed. It is ancient beyond memory, and within it the dead exceed plurality and become instead a dense and indistinguishable mass. According to Isidra, the world and experience, all things available to perception and perception itself, are a series of condensations within this fluid mass of the dead. (Ochoa 2007: 482)

In Isidra’s rendering, Canetti’s invisible crowd becomes something more akin to a universal primordial substance, a polymorphous stuff, capable of manifesting itself in a seemingly endless variety of forms (what Ochoa terms “versions” of the dead) and out of which not only material bodies but also thoughts and perceptions are fashioned, along with the “responsive dead”—the deceased loved ones, family members and, in some cases, historical figures called upon by Palo practitioners in the exercise of their craft. What *Kalunga* appears to name, then, Ochoa suggests, is a material power of self-differing out of which everything emerges yet that forever exceeds the actuality of what currently is. It is crucial, I think, that the dead referred to here “exceed plurality” becoming instead an indistinguishable and (by implication) uncountable mass. To affirm *Kalunga* as the immemorial sea of the dead is, one might say, to affirm reality as non-identical to and non-coincident with itself, to affirm a fundamentally unquantifiable power of becoming occupying not the status of a higher order of being or a transcendent creator god, but immanent rather to the very stuff of the universe. As such, the ever-present sea of the dead cannot be located within linear chronology or historical time, or, indeed, within any humanly conceived calibration of time. Instead, it affords an intimation of time as differentiating difference, a force at once creative and destructive, out of which humanly marked time and Palo’s associated repertoire of stories and practices relating to the dead emerge and into which they recede. Modern Western philosophy has given a variety of its own names to this generative and dissipative time—Nietzsche’s “eternal recurrence,” Bergson’s “duration,” Deleuze’s “pure and empty form of time” (Bergson 1991; Deleuze 1995; Nietzsche 2006). My concern here, however, is not to invoke these as explanatory or identifying labels but to consider some of the ways in which the widely recounted interplay between the particularized and the massed dead and their associated materialities can be understood as affording a distinctively revealing interface between humanly elaborated social-cultural worlds and the impersonal and inhuman powers of time and matter that are at once their condition of possibility and the source of their undoing.

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3 The Scots Gaelic term *sluaigh* ["spirit multitude"], Canetti adds, was often conjoined with another Gaelic term, *gairm*, meaning “to shout or cry.” The resulting compound, *sluaigh-gaierm*, meaning the battle-cry of the dead, is the origin of the Modern English “slogan” and Canetti notes (with apparent satisfaction) that “The expression we use for the battle-cries of our modern crowds derives from the Highland hosts of the dead” (Canetti 1992: 49).

4 Ochoa uses the term “inspiration” in part to avoid what he regards as the restrictively European implications of “religion” and in part to underscore Palo’s orientation toward newness and creativity: “Inspiration implies a playful attitude toward past and future, as opposed to a perspective marked only by the trauma of dislocation and impossible recovery” (Ochoa 2007: 8).
The Dead of St Magnus

In terms of the distinction borrowed by Deleuze from geological science, the islands of Orkney can be assigned to the “continental” type. Their formation, however, long pre-dates the contours of present-day Europe. They are, rather, the remnants of a mountain chain formed between 400 and 600 million years ago by a collision between long-since dispersed prehistoric super-continents—the great southern continent of Gondwanaland and the great northern one of Laurasia. As the continents were forced apart by magma welling up from the earth’s core—Europe separating from North America and the Atlantic Ocean opening up between them—the mountain ranges were eroded by sea to form the present-day island chains of Orkney and its northerly neighbor, Shetland—a process that continues to the present and that will eventually cause the islands to disappear beneath the waters from which they first emerged.

The earliest evidence of a human presence in Orkney dates from around 6500 BC. Successive waves of incomers followed, including the Neolithic builders of Knap of Howar, the oldest surviving house in Europe (occupied c. 3700–2800 BCE), on the northerly island of Papa Westray, of the Skara Brae settlement on Orkney Mainland (occupied c. 3100–2500 BCE) and of the stone burial cairns scattered across the Orcadian landscape. They in turn were followed from the eighth century by the Norse sea raiders, later turned farmers and fishermen, who became the dominant presence in Orkney, leading to the islands’ annexation to the Kingdom of Norway in 875. The Earldom of Orkney, comprising Orkney and Shetland, was transferred to the Crown of Scotland in 1468 as part of a marriage settlement and became, in turn, part of the British nation state with the Acts of Union of 1707. Today the islands of Orkney are home to some 19,000 people, most of them concentrated on Mainland, the largest island. The sea has continued to play an important role in the life of the islands, not only through commercial fishing, which declined sharply over the course of the twentieth century, but also through the onetime involvement of Orcadians in the whaling industry and, more recently, through the region’s role in pioneering and developing marine energy technologies.6 Over the centuries, however, the sea has been as much a cause of death as a source of livelihood, as winter storms and fast-running currents have claimed the lives of innumerable ships’ crews. The wrecks submerged beneath Orkney’s coastal waters were further added to by military vessels sunk during the First and Second World Wars, when Orkney was the headquarters of British Grand Fleet. Today these same wrecks are also a lucrative source of tourist revenues as parties of divers visit the islands every summer to explore them (Childe and Clarke 1983; Davidson 1989; Hacquebord 1990; Renfrew 1993; Thomson 2008; Towsen 2002; Watts 2012).

Let us turn our attention, however, from the sea to the terra firma of an island graveyard. The one in question adjoins St Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall, the principal town of the Orkney Islands, situated on Orkney Mainland. Named after Orkney’s patron saint and martyr, the building of the cathedral began in 1137 and was not completed for more than 300 years.7 Its main entrance on Kirkwall’s principal street is framed by two memorials, listing the names of Orcadians killed in the First and Second World Wars. Inside the cathedral, the remains of St Magnus himself, originally buried at nearby Birsay, are now interred inside a pillar. Surrounding him are a number of gravestones and memorials dating from the seventeenth century onward and featuring images of death along with inscriptions commemorating the deceased. More recent memorials include one to the poet and novelist George Mackay Brown (1921–96), arguably Orkney’s most celebrated twentieth-century writer (Mooney 1947; Tarlows 1999).

St Magnus Cathedral and its grounds seem at first glance far removed from Isindr’s vast sea of the dead. What we encounter here are not the anonymous hosts of the dead but rather those whose passing has been marked by funerary rites and whose presence on earth is materialized in the form of inscriptions, headstones, monuments and memorials—the transitoriness of fleshly substance replaced by an enduring body of stone. It would be a mistake, however, to draw too stark a

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5 Although the islands had come increasingly under Scottish influence during preceding centuries, not least through their predominantly Scottish clergy, the transfer of sovereignty was not intended, initially, to be a permanent one. Rather, it amounted to the pawn—or Impignoration—of the islands by Christian I of Norway and Denmark, who lacked the funds to provide an adequate dowry for his daughter on the occasion of her marriage to James III of Scotland. The ostensibly temporary nature of this arrangement has continued to be invoked by local activists. For example, in the 1980s campaigners against the disposal of radioactive material at the Dounreay power station in Caithness drew up a declaration calling on the Danish monarchy to challenge Orkney’s constitutional status as part of the British Isles. Around the same time, the Orkney and Shetland Movement, a group seeking devolution for the northern isles, unsuccessfully contested the Orkney and Shetland Parliamentary seat in the 1987 general election, polling just over 3,000 votes. The islands’ Nordic past has also been a persistent theme of Orcadian literature, including the work of Orkney’s best known twentieth-century writer, the poet and novelist George Mackay Brown (1921–96), whose novel Vinland (1992) is set during the period of early Norse settlement (Hall 2010: 2–3; Thomson 2008: 189–205).

6 The European Marine Energy Center (EMEC) was established in Orkney in 2003 to provide testing facilities for developers of wave and tidal energy converters and currently operates 14 full-scale test berths, along with two “nursery” test sites for smaller devices or ones at an earlier stage of development. According to EMEC, Orkney was chosen as a base because of “its excellent oceanic wave regime, strong tidal currents, grid connection, sheltered harbour facilities and the renewable, maritime and environmental expertise that exists within the local community.” In July 2012 the Pentland Firth and Orkney Waters were designated a Marine Energy Park (EMEC 2012).

7 Magnus was killed by his cousin Haakon Paulsson in or around 1115 in a dispute over succession to the earldom of Orkney. The story of his martyrdom is told in the Orkneyinga Saga, written in the early thirteenth century by an unknown Icelandic author (Palsson and Edwards 1981). Between 1154 and 1472, Orkney was part of the Norwegian archbishopric of Trondheim, after which it became part of the Scottish province of St Andrews. The cathedral was assigned to the people of Kirkwall by King James II of Scotland in a charter of 1486 and is owned today by the Royal Burgh of Kirkwall (St Magnus Cathedral 2012).
contrast between the massed and the individuated dead. Indeed, as Sarah Tarlow points out in her archaeological study of Orkney burial practices from the late sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, the degree and manner in which the dead were individuated varies considerably. One obvious contrast is between burials in the churchyard and interments within the walls of the cathedral itself, the latter at one time the exclusive prerogative of the wealthy and powerful. There are significant variations too in the scale and design of the stones themselves (from the cross on a base flanked by a sword that is the earliest surviving monument, dating from the sixteenth century, to the mass-produced gravestones of the later nineteenth century), in the extent of the information given about the deceased (name, dates, details of occupation, relationship to surviving kin) and in whether the same stone commemorates a single individual or multiple family members (husband and wife, parents and children, etc.). The cathedral and churchyard attest also to the impact of the Protestant Reformation upon commemorative practices in Orkney. Protestant theology’s repudiation of Purgatory and the possibility of intercession on behalf of the soul of the deceased led, Tarlow suggests, to a “radical dislocation” of mortuary and commemorative practices. Images of saints and crucifixes were henceforward proscribed (along with other representative religious art). At the same time, and in partial mitigation of the increased distancing of the living from the dead that the Reformation brought about, commemoration came to assume an increasingly didactic function, whereby the deceased could be presented both as a reminder to survivors of their own mortality and as an example of the virtuous Christian life that the living could emulate. The material record provides evidence of this shift in the seventeenth century and later has relief memorials that are a conspicuous feature of the cathedral interior and that typically include a visual representation of the deceased, heraldic imagery emphasizing his or her social status, an inscription sometimes incorporating a didactic message and a generic image of death, often in the form of a skull or hourglass (Tarlow 1999: 50–107). The one shown in Figure 1.1, dating from the eighteenth century, commemorates one Mary Young (d. 1756), wife of John Riddoch, a magistrate of Kirkwall (“She lived regarded and died regretted”).

8 Tarlow’s study is based on records produced by the Orkney Graveyard Project, available for consultation in the form of a database in the Orkney Archive Office in Kirkwall (Tarlow 1999: 50–51).
9 The Reformed Church of Scotland also introduced a formal ban on intramural burials (on pain of excommunication) in 1579. Although this was strictly observed in many parts of Scotland, burials within the walls of St Magnus Cathedral appear to have continued until the early nineteenth century (Tarlow 1999: 89–94).
10 An adjacent memorial, commemorating George Liddell of Hamner (d. October 1681, aged 48) contains a more overtly didactic message (along with a family crest and skull): “Death hastens no flight avails to pay the tribute of mortality man is bound by nature’s law all things go back to where they came and seek their mother and what has been returns again to nothingness But I lament the loss of time material damage everyone can make good no one can make good the loss of time.”

Figure 1.1 Memorial to Mary Young, 1756, St Magnus Cathedral (photograph by author)
The image’s power is attested by the fact that it continues to attract the attention of present-day visitors to the cathedral: the kneeling figure, her eyes raised heavenward, her hands clasped in prayer, framed by emblems of mortality, the origins of which extend back into the pre-Reformation Middle Ages and beyond. No doubt, as Tarlow’s account so eloquently demonstrates, there is much to be learned both about and from it by reconstructing the initial circumstances of its production and reception. Yet perhaps there is also something here that escapes or exceeds the explanatory power of context. Doesn’t the power of the image to derive in part from its lingering at the interface between the personalized deceased and the nameless and numberless hosts of the dead? Perhaps what continues to compel the spectator (the twenty-first century as much as the seventeenth-century one) is precisely the juxtaposition of a named individual with the still anticipated but inevitable death of everyone?

Their differences notwithstanding, it is tempting to see all such acts of commemoration as gestures of solidification aimed at pushing back the sea of the dead, just as the actual sea, which once washed close to the cathedral, has been pushed back over the centuries by a series of land reclamation projects (Thomson 2008). But is the sea of the dead really so far away? Decades or centuries of Orcadian weather—including persistent rain and winter storms—have rendered many of the inscriptions in St Magnus churchyard indistinguishable. Others have been grown over by mosses and lichens, accretions of animate matter transforming incised text into a semi-abstract surface of grey, green, and grey, out of which, occasionally, there emerges into legibility a date, name, or term of relatedness—husband, wife, daughter, son. Those able to afford the distinction of an intramural burial have often fared little better.11 Renovations to the cathedral during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries resulted in the wholesale removal of many of the remains interred beneath the floor of the nave and their reburial en masse in a pit outside.12 At the same time, all those who lie in the cathedral and churchyard are underlain by a host of earlier occupants whose presence is no longer recorded, while the Christian burials housed in the vicinity of St Magnus are surrounded by traces of the now anonymous, pre-Christian dead in the guise of the Neolithic chambered tombs that dot the Orcadian landscape, like the one known as Maes Howe, situated around 15 miles west of Kirkwall (Ashmore 1988).

Where Do They Come From?

It would seem then that, from the perspective of the longue durée, gravestones and memorials are no more than temporary expedients and that it is the fate of the (more or less) individuated dead to be absorbed back into the undifferentiated mass of their forebears, like the Mongolian shamans described by Caroline Humphrey, who are believed after death to be amalgamated, gradually, with the anonymous powers animating the landscape in which they once lived (Humphrey 1995). Where do they come from then, these hosts of the dead—swarming in the depths of the sea, billowing in the air, shimmering in the boreal night sky? Are they simply humanity’s accumulated past, the aggregate of all those who have lived and died and slipped from the memory of those still living? Many narratives of encounters between the living and the hosts of the dead seem to suggest such a possibility. Think, for example, of the Europe-wide repertoire of stories relating to the Wild Hunt—a raucous, nocturnal, sometimes airborne animal–human cavalcade in which spectators have sometimes claimed to identify the figures of recently deceased relatives, new recruits as it were to the massed ranks of the dead, who have not yet sunk wholly into the anonymity of forgetting (Davidson 2001). Do we not find here an explanation of how the invisible crowd of the dead has been constituted and added to over the course of human history by the sum total of individual deaths?

Marcel Granet, writing of the religion of ancient China, suggests a different possibility. Granet argues that the primacy of the collective over the individual—a view that underpinned the sociology of his onetime teacher, Émile Durkheim—applied no less to the relationship between the dead and the living. The vision of the dead as an amorphous and undifferentiated mass was, in other words, prior to any conception of the named and individuated dead. The dead, however, in Granet’s account, feature less as a collective representation than as a primordial substance. Granet finds the earliest religious conceptions to be embodied in the ancient beliefs and practices of the Chinese peasantry. A central place in peasant religion was occupied by the Earth as a source of fecundity. A bond of consubstantiality linked the Earth to its human occupants and a similar bond conjoined the living and the dead. The dead were subject to a double ceremony of burial. Initially they were interred within the family compound for the time it took the flesh to rot, so that the stuff of the dead entered the domestic soil. Afterward their remains were transferred to an ancestral graveyard forbidden to all who were not family members. The view thus arose, Granet suggests, that the conception of new life was the work of fecund powers emanating from the soil where the dead themselves became absorbed into the maternal substance of the Earth. The living were understood to be linked to the dead through their shared participation in this amorphous ancestral substance. Unlike the living, however, the dead were not differentiated: “The family was divided into two parts: one was that of the living, strongly united but endowed with the peculiarities inherent in each individual life; the other, that of the dead, formed an indistinct mass.” Only at a later time, with the development of feudalism,
was the individuated character of the living transferred to the dead as particularized ancestors to whom offerings could be made and acts of worship addressed. Such a conception of specific and identifiable ancestors was, however, distilled out of an older sense of the dead as an undifferentiated ambient presence, “floating confusedly in a corner of the house” (Granet 1975: 52). If we accept Granet’s claim regarding the primacy of the ambient dead, what requires explanation is not the ontology of Canetti’s invisible crowd but rather the way in which the individualized dead—and, perhaps, the living themselves—are condensed out of it. In other words, are ancestral cults, death rituals and practices of memorialization understandable as the means by which a distinguishable presence is solidified out of and thus disentangled from the always antecedent throng of the unnamed and undifferentiated dead?

Anthropological literature, at least since Hertz, has frequently emphasized the role of death ritual in effecting a definitive separation between living and dead, consigning the latter to their own realm (what Hertz calls a “society of the dead”) where relations with them can be undertaken without risk to the living (Hertz 1960: 58). It is worth asking, however, whether such an undertaking has not often required, at the same time, a certain self-conscious differentiation of the dead that is as much a material practice as an act of symbolization. In order for relations with them to be regulated and managed, the dead must be produced as something other than an all-pervading and formless substance. Certainly the widely documented practice of exhuming and reburying the remains of the dead once the flesh and other decomposable parts of the body have rotted away can be understood as allowing the liquid indeterminacy of putrefaction to be replaced by the solidity of dry bones, which can then be safely consigned to their final resting place. The multifarious material culture of death practices—including tombs, ossuaries, memorials and grave goods—needs to be understood too as concerned not only with symbolizing the deceased’s social status or of the community’s beliefs about the afterlife but also with intervening in and modifying states of matter. Hertz’s account intimates as much in its extended discussion of the threat of pollution widely ascribed to the remains of the dead during the intermediary period between their initial and final disposal. Hertz writes of the “impure cloud” that surrounds the deceased, polluting everything it touches, including not only people and objects that have been in physical contact with the corpse but also everything connected with the deceased in the minds of survivors (1960: 38). If Hertz ultimately ascribes these perceived dangers to the threat to the social collective posed by the death of one of its members (particularly an individual such as a chief in whom the power and endurance of the collective is understood to be embodied), his formulation here evokes a pervading and miastic materiality more akin to Canetti’s invisible crowd or Palo’s sea of the dead than to his own society of the dead, modeled as the latter is on the institutions and practices of the society of the living, albeit freed from the constraints of mortality. The taboos and gestures of ritual prophylaxis described by Hertz here seem directed at a presence more palpable—if no less elusive—than the “social stuff” that Hertz’s mentor, Durkheim, has recently been criticized for assuming as the defining constituent of human collectives (e.g. Latour 2005). Instead, Hertz’s account points on occasion to the powers and dangers of a very different sort of “stuff”—an other than human materiality that is, nonetheless, profoundly implicated in the fashioning of bodies, selves and collective practices even as it overruns and exceeds their bounds and determinations. Perhaps then what is at stake in death practices is not so much the objectification of social relations or values as objectification in and of itself, for its own sake—a process that is at once framed within and staked against the amorphous liquid or vaporous mass of the dead that, as Canetti pointed out, has so ubiquitously haunted the human imagination.

The Time of the Ancestors

Figure 1.2 Cuween Hill Neolithic tomb, near Finswath, Orkney Mainland (photograph by author)

The Neolithic settlers who were the builders of Orkney’s chambered burial cairns arrived in the islands around 5,500 years before the present, probably crossing Pentland Firth in skin boats from the vicinity of Caithness on the Scottish mainland (Richie 1984). In addition to farmsteads and dwellings, they also built

13 Hertz’s examples here (and throughout his study) are drawn predominantly from the Olo Ngaju, a grouping of riverine peoples in southeastern Borneo (Hertz 1960: 29).
structures to house their dead. These vary in the details of their construction, but characteristic take the form of a stone cairn enclosing a rectangular chamber, sometimes subdivided by upright slabs and accessed by a low, narrow passage requiring the visitor to stoop or, in some cases, to crawl. Archaeologists have pointed out parallels between the layout of the chambered burial cairns and that of surviving Neolithic dwellings like Knap of Howar on the island of Papa Westray or the houses comprising the village of Skara Brae on Orkney Mainland, suggesting that the tombs were conceived of by their builders as “houses” for the dead. This in turn has fueled speculation that the Neolithic in northwest Europe (and elsewhere) marks a shift in attitudes toward the dead and, by extension, the emergence of a new conception of time, both of which are materialized in the archaeological record. Alasdair Whittle, for example, writes that the Neolithic period ushered in what he calls “the time of the ancestors”—a conception combining a sense of continuity between past and present, living and dead, with a new awareness of lineal descent whereby the living were able to articulate their own ancestry and their own constitution as a descent group via a sequence of forebears culminating in the present generation. It was, he suggests, the need to accommodate the remains of these newly differentiated collective ancestors that prompted the building of tombs as houses for the dead, including the chambered cairns that remain such a visible feature of Orkney’s present-day landscape (Whittle 1996: 1, 355, 363–6).

Nonetheless, if recent archeological scholarship has sometimes been inclined to find in Neolithic mortuary architecture the expression of a newly differentiated view of the ancestral dead, coupled with an emergent sense of lineal chronology, its findings have also demonstrated the extent to which the efforts of Orkney’s Neolithic settlers to objectify and commemorate their dead have been effaced or undone by the millennia that have passed between the building of the tombs and latter-day archaeological interpretations of them. For all the sophistication of current techniques of dating and analysis, the dead whose remains were housed in Orkney’s chambered cairns remain resolutely anonymous. Indeed, the material record presents an often confusing and uncertain picture with regard even to the deposition of remains. The largest and best known of Orkney’s burial cairns, Maes Howe, situated between Kirkwall and Stromness, has not been found to contain any human remains beyond a few skull fragments intermixed with animal bones. In contrast, Mid Howe, on the west coast of the island of Rousay, housed the remains of no fewer than 25 individuals, some arranged in crouched burials, others grouped together in a heap of bones at the center of the main chamber. Yet other tombs have been found to contain substantial quantities of animal as well as human remains, like Cuween Hill, lying southeast of the present-day settlement of Finstown on Orkney Mainland, where the remains of eight human skeletons were found along with 24 dog skulls, prompting speculation that the latter represent a sacrificial offering or the expression of a totemic complex (Davidson 1989). It has therefore proven impossible to arrive at general conclusions as to whether, for example, Orkney’s chambered cairns were indeed the final resting place of the dead, whether they afforded a temporary lodging during the process of decay and decomposition or whether remains were moved in and out of them at intervals in the course of ritual activity. In the case of Orkney’s prehistoric inhabitants, one effect of this hindsight-induced uncertainty has been to blur any clear-cut distinction between the collectively recognized ancestral dead and the always prior and undifferentiated mass of the dead.

If archaeological interpretations of sites like Maes Howe have often tended to see them as marking a move away from notions of an undifferentiated sea of the dead, it is nonetheless arguable that the actual sea that washes against Orkney’s shores remained a powerful presence in the cosmologies of the region’s Neolithic inhabitants. Chris Fowler and Vicki Cummings have suggested that the interplay of water and stone was a central theme in Neolithic cosmological thinking. Although the focus of their discussion is the eastern side of the Irish Sea (south- and northwest Wales, the Isle of Man and southwest Scotland) they argue that a close association between the two substances is to be found throughout the Neolithic world, finding one of its principal manifestations in chambered tombs, understood as places of transformation and transition, both between the realms of the living and the dead and between land and sea. They point to the location of many such tombs adjacent to the shoreline or on headlands or promontories, to the fact that stone from intertidal zones was often used in their construction, to the frequency of deposits of shells and pebbles and to the decorative and depositional use of quartz as a material commonly found both in inland, mountainous regions and in close proximity to the sea. For Fowler and Cummings, drawing on analogies with recent ethnographies of Melanesia, the conjunction of water and stone that characterizes the construction and location of many Neolithic chambered tombs is revealing of a conception of personhood and of the human life-course as unfolding via a series of transformations, finding one of their privileged expressions in the transition between solid and liquid modalities of matter and culminating in death, where the sea represents perhaps the final destination of the deceased (Fowler and Cummings 2003: 16).

Although some of Orkney’s chambered cairns, including Maes Howe, are built at a distance from the surrounding sea, others stand in close proximity to it, including Ishbister on South Ronaldsay and Mid Howe, Knowe of Yarso, Blackhammer and Taversoe Tuick on the south coast of Rousay, while Unstan, near Stromness on the south coast of Mainland, is built on a promontory extending into the Loch of Stenness. References to the sea are also to be found among the grave deposits in many of Orkney’s tombs, which include the remains of whales and other marine animals and, in the case of Ishbister, the bones and talons of sea eagles, giving the site its alternative name, ‘The Tomb of the Eagles’ (Hedges 1984).

Even when not explicitly referenced in the archaeological record, the sea is never far away: in fact, it’s getting closer all the time! The Neolithic village of Skara Brae, occupied between 3180 BC and around 2500 BC, is the best surviving and probably the most extensively researched prehistoric settlement in northern Europe.¹⁴

¹⁴ Since its rediscovery, Skara Brae has claimed the attention of a succession of internationally prominent archaeologists, including V. Gordon Childe, Stuart Piggott and Colin Renfrew (Childe 1931; Piggott 1954; Renfrew 1984).
heritage, including graves and memorials to the dead, and draws repeatedly on examples from his native island. He begins, however, not with burials of deceased humans but with the remnants of submerged prehistoric forests. On the west side of the bay of Otterwick, in Sanday, an area now accessible only at the low water line during the spring tide in March, it is possible, he points out, to dig through the overlying layer of sand to reach a bed of moss "in which the decaying skeletons of trees lie in every conceivable position" (Dennison 1995: 171). Such submerged forests, Dennison notes, can be found too on many of the other islands: at Storehouse Bay on the island of North Ronaldsay; at Pierowall on Westray; at Millbay on Stromness; and on Orkney Mainland and the south isles, affording proof that the land on which the trees once grew was formerly above sea level and that the islands of the Orkney archipelago have been undergoing a gradual process of subsistence (1995: 172). Dennison offers a brief imaginative reconstruction of these now vanished landscapes—the tree trunks and spreading leaves, the animals that once roamed there and the birds that sang in the branches—before going on to enumerate the traces of human habitation that are in the process of being effaced by the encroachments of the sea—as attested by the fragmentary ruins of houses and kelp stores at Swarthammer and Hamness, the side walls and seaward gables of which have now disappeared beneath the waters (1995: 171–2, 185).

Halfway through the lecture though, the perspective abruptly shifts. Dennison asks his audience to reflect on the transitoriness of all terrestrial forms, considered from the vantage point of geological time:

In our "talk, talk", we speak of the firm, stable, immovable earth. No words can be more fallacious when applied to our world. The truth is, we live on a globe of fire, ready at any moment, from many causes, to be hurled into terrific destruction. Imagine a huge chasm opening longitudinally in that part of the abysmal sea on which the two Atlantic oceans rest or roll. Those oceans would at once be precipitated on a tremendous mass of igneous matter, whereby an amount of steam would be generated sufficient to explode the world, making the earth like a bursting bombshell ... And while we talk of the immutable laws of nature, we should remember that all these laws must succumb to the inexorable law of exhaustion. (1995: 173)

From an account of transformations of the familiar landscape, we are catapulted into a vision of planetary destruction evoking the obliteration not only of the human presence on earth but also of the terrestrial globe itself as the ecological support of all life.

It is striking that Dennison should be propelled toward such a vision precisely by consideration of the interplay—the "strife"—between land and sea in an island setting. Islands appear here as sites not only of new beginnings, or beginnings anew—as they were for Deleuze—but also of violent and catastrophic endings. Concrete instances of death—whether it be the demise of prehistoric forests or of the human inhabitants of the ruined houses scattered along Sanday's shoreline—

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**Figure 1.3 Skara Brae, Orkney Mainland (photograph by author)**

Originally it stood at some distance from the sea, separated from it by sand dunes, which eventually engulfed the settlement after it was abandoned by its inhabitants for reasons that remain obscure, only to be uncovered in the mid nineteenth century when much of the sand was dispersed by a violent storm. Today, the remains of the village, comprising a number of houses and other structures interconnected by tunnels, sit precariously at the water's edge. In response, the conservators of the site, Historic Scotland, have closed off access to the dwellings themselves, in order that the effects of ongoing marine erosion should not be compounded by the feet of visitors. Nonetheless, given the continuing and unstoppable encroachment of the sea, the future of Skara Brae remains at best uncertain (Childe and Clarke 1983).

**"Our Island Home is Doomed"**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the encroachment of the sea upon the land has been a persistent theme of Orcadian imaginaries of place. Stromness, Orkney Mainland: Walter Traill Dennison (1825–94), probably Orkney’s best known and most prolific nineteenth-century folklorist, is addressing a meeting of the Orkney Natural History Society. Dennison was the son of a well-to-do farming family from Sanday, the largest of Orkney’s northern isles, lying around 20 miles northeast of Orkney Mainland. His lecture, published in 1893 in the journal The Scottish Antiquary is devoted to the effects of marine erosion on Orkney’s landscape and archaeological
are absorbed first of all into the encroaching waters of the North Sea and, finally, into a speculative conjuration of cosmic flux and dissolution capable of eradicating all vestiges of a human presence. In his subsequent writings, including his collaborations with Guattari, Deleuze would re-articulate the elemental strife of land and sea in terms of what he called a “geosophy,” situated in relation to the earth as the inhuman ground of human thought and action and tracing a continuous two-way traffic between the territorializing inscription of the earth by history, language and politics and the de-territorializing impetus of the earth itself as the undoing and the virtual limit of any possible actualization of territory and thus of any humanly conceivable project of world-making (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 85–113; Flaxman 2012: 72–114). More recently, the philosophical imperative to envision a cosmic reality from which humanity is radically absent has been re-asserted by Quentin Meillassoux, who refers to such a reality as the realm of the “ancestral” (or the “Great Outdoors”), referring not to the human ancestors documented in archaeological and folklore scholarship but to that which pre- or post-dates humanity and that demands as much to be thought as existing independently of its being given to a knowing, perceiving human subject. For Meillassoux it is, pre-eminently, modern science, including geology, that has provided access to ancestral realities such as the formation of the earth and the beginnings of terrestrial life, in the process throwing down a challenge to post-Kantian philosophy’s insistence on the inescapably contextual, linguistic or subjectivization of all knowledge (Meillassoux 2008: 1–27). Yet to suggest, as Meillassoux appears to, that knowledge of the ancestral is the exclusive prerogative of a self-sufficient philosophical or scientific rationality risks obscuring the ways in which the antecedent inhumanity of the ancestral remains implicated in human thought and language, no less than in the perhaps more self-evident materiality of bodies and perceptions. If the disavowal of any possibility of direct knowledge of reality in itself has been a defining gesture of modern, self-styled “critical” philosophies, it is surely worth asking whether intimations of a reality existing independently of our capacity as humans to think or perceive it have not previously found expression through other genres and media—whether, indeed, such expressions might not be as old as humanity, as old as “culture.” Might not what has been referred to as “culture” be nothing more or less than the human appropriation and encoding of an inhuman, anorganic force of matter that forever exceeds and displaces the humanly constructed orders fashioned from it?15 If so, might it not be the case that this displacement from within and without has attained one of its most potent manifestations in the immemorial and unresolved strife of land and sea and its associated imaginaries?

The ever present and ever encroaching sea that advances upon Orkney’s islands was an abiding preoccupation of Dennison’s output as a folklorist. Dennison’s writings on the Orcadian folklore of the sea first appeared as a series of articles in The Scottish Antiquary between 1890 and 1893. Here the sea appears not only as a constant presence in the life of the islands but also as the abode of a variety of other-than-human powers and agencies. These included: the benign and maternal Sea Mother (“Mither of the Sea”) who, each spring, fought and subdued her antagonist Teran (the bringer of winter storms) to ensure calm weather during the summer months; the Stoor Worm, a variety of sea serpent; the Nuckelavee, or Devil of the Sea, whose venomous breath blighted crops and caused animals to sicken; the missshapen Sea Trow; the Fin Folk, a race of beings usually described as human in outward appearance but living beneath the waves in and occasionally abducting human spouses to join them; and, perhaps best known, the selkies, or seal people, beings residing in the sea in the guise of seals but sometimes venturing ashore at twilight to cast off their seal skins and dance naked in human form on the sand.16 For Dennison, the repertoire of stories about these and other denizens of the sea that he collected from his native island of Sanday and elsewhere represented a series of cultural strata (or “survivals” in Edward Tylor’s influential phrase) extending back to the earliest human conceptions. The sea was thus not only the resting place of countless dead of past generations but also a repository of archaic imaginings relating to other than human forces and presences. Like Tylor, Dennison suggested that in these vestigial traces could be read a history of the evolution of human thought and imagination. Beginning with the Sea Mother (“answering to all the purposes of protoplasm”) he traced a progression through Teran and the Stoor Worm via Nuckelavee (“half man and half beast”), the Sea Trow (“in the form of a man, with the mind of a beast”), the seal (“a beast, yet able to assume the form of a man”) to the Fin Folk (“with astute mind, and well developed human form, yet with all the conveniences of a fish for aqueous existence and locomotion”), a progression tending, he suggested, toward the increasingly anthropomorphizing personification of elemental forces (Dennison 1995: 30). Dennison’s descriptions suggest, however, the possibility of considering the folklore of the sea as something more than the projection of human-identified traits onto an immemorial geography. The contemporaneous co-existence (at least until the late nineteenth century) of the various stories being inventoried by Dennison could be understood as indexing not the linear temporality underpinning Victorian stadal theories of social evolution but rather a time more akin to that of Deleuze’s pre- and post-historical strife of land and sea, of the self-differentiating potentiality of time and matter to which folkloric imaginings of elemental powers continuously refer us. The Orcadian folklore of the sea, to which Dennison devoted a lifetime of scholarly labors, might be approached then, not as the evidential scaffolding on which to hang a unidirectional account of human progress, but as an exemplification of what the young Deleuze identified as the “mythic” imagination, a collectively exercised power of fabulation that

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15 Clare Colebrook has recently argued that Deleuze conceives of “Life” in precisely these terms and that he is therefore not to be taken as a “vitalist” in the sense understood by some of his recent critics (Colebrook 2010).

16 On Orcadian folklore of the sea, see also Marwick (2000).
appropriates, condenses and elaborates the other-than-human forces and materials out of which human worlds are at once formed and carried beyond themselves.17

“The Sea is the Land’s Edge Also”

It is worth, I think, setting the reiterative presencing of the sea in the guise of folklore, material culture and marine erosion against, on the one hand, the sometimes voiced archeological interpretation of Neolithic tombs as marking the differentiation of the dead as a linearly unfolding sequence of group ancestors and on the other, the more varied technologies of particularization (gravestones, memorials, etc.) in evidence in the churchyard of St Magnus Cathedral. As the unevenness and variability of the intervening archeological record reminds us, we should be wary of locating such divergent expressions in a single trajectory of progressive individuation extending from the prehistoric past to the early twenty-first century present. What is evoked rather by Dennison’s anticipated cataclysm, by the fate of sites such as Skara Brae and by the material record itself is not a linear narrative of historical progress but a persistent and unresolved two-way movement between differentiation and de-differentiation, between, on the one hand, the solidification of collective, individual or sometimes named presences through the construction of houses for the dead, the ritual processing of remains, the erection of gravestones and monuments, the carving of inscriptions and, on the other hand, the continuing and finally unstoppable dissolution of the same back into the amorphous, all-pervasive and always prior backdrop so powerfully evoked in Isidra’s exposition of the Palo term Kalunga as “the great indifferent sea of the dead” (Ochoa 2007: 482). Further, are not the sea of the dead, Canetti’s invisible crowd and the more familiar, terrestrial sea from which the former borrows its name, themselves condensations out of the immense, indifferent and always antecedent matter of the universe—of planets and stars, solar systems and galaxies that were born and died long before the appearance of life on earth? If the cultural death-work performed by funerary rites, inhumation practices and acts of memorialization is apt to appear always as an attempt to resist or slow the dissolution of the deceased into the generative and un-totalizable mass of what came before (and will come after), these death practices nonetheless affirm and make visible at the same time the inevitability of such dissolution. What such gestures produce then is, arguably, a transitional space between differentiation and assimilation, one in which the striving toward commemoration or perpetuation becomes, at the same time, the disclosure of ephemerality, of our participation as humans and culture-makers in a materiality that at once constitutes and dispossesses us. Our bodies will liquefy, our stone monuments will crumble, our inscriptions will fade. Are we not who call ourselves the living, along with our tombs, memorials, funerary rites and prayers for the dead, no more than a passing hesitation, a transitory holding back in the face of the summons that murmurs continuously and irresistibly from the vast sea of the dead? Perhaps, indeed, it is the privileged role of the dead, the anonymous and mythic dead as much as our deceased favored ones, friends and family members, to remind us continuously of this. Dennison concludes his address to the Orkney Natural History Society by returning to a human time-scale, albeit one poised precariously on the brink of its own dissolution. He reminds his audience that their own memorials to the dead, the solid ground on which they stand and, indeed, they themselves, are, likewise, no more than a fleeting presence, fated to be reclaimed by the sea that beats continuously against Orkney’s shores:

our island home is doomed. In a few short ages the lobster and crab will crawl on our cold heathstones; whales and fishes will disport above where our chimney tops now reach; seaweeds and limpets will grow on our gravestones, and our graves will be nowhere. But our dust will be safe in that most glorious of all sepulchers – the mighty ocean – on which “time writes no wrinkle.” (Dennison 1995: 186)

References


17 For an anthropological account of creativity that parallels Deleuze’s, see McLean (2009). For an extended discussion of the notion of “fabulation” as it features in Deleuze’s writings, see Bogue (2010).


OLSA. Orkney Library Sound Archive. Numbers refer to tapes of recorded interviews.


