

THE HISTORY OF PEOPLE, COAST AND SEA: WHERE SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES MEET

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When biologists investigate the present marine and coastal ecosystems, they always have to take into account the influence of human activity. Indeed, a real 'natural' biotope can no longer be found on our planet and this is most certainly true for North-western Europe, traditionally one of the most densely populated regions on earth. Common sense often states that this human influence only became significant during the last centuries (e.g. due to the industrialisation) and only evolved into 'a problem' in recent decades. However, when ecological data are viewed into a true historical, and even pre-historical perspective, another story appears.

Quaternary geologists now realise that they have to replace the traditional paradigm of marine transgressions and regressions, used to explain the evolution of the Belgian coastal plain, by a new model in which humans play a markedly more prominent role. Evidence is growing that our ancestors voluntarily or unconsciously shaped their coast, instead of adapting to its naturally changing morphology. This breakthrough only became possible because geologists started to pay more attention to historical data and archaeological fieldwork, making their research interdisciplinary. The same process is now developing within ecology, since it is gradually more and more appreciated that historical, but certainly archaeological data provide the necessary time dimension for recent studies. The organic material excavated at archaeological sites often forms a biological sample dating from times in which biology was not yet invented. Using archaeology, it becomes possible to investigate the impact of man on marine and coastal environments during ancient times, and it has, for example, recently been proven that the growing exploitation of marine resources, perhaps even the onset of an overexploitation, can already be traced in late medieval collections of animal remains from Flanders.

The use of archaeological data offers possibilities but also presents dangers. Most important is that it must always be taken into account that the data excavated are filtered, and biased, by human activities. Therefore, in order to interpret archaeological finds, one must also study human behaviour. This explains why archaeology cannot merely be treated as a natural science but also belongs to the humanities. Former human behaviour cannot be reconstructed and understood completely by rational laws and models, since it is also the result of ideology, symbolism, religion, and social phenomena such as gender differentiation, status, identity, or the structure of society (and therefore politics). In a way, the intrigues at the republican court at Rome have influenced the evolution of the Belgian coast as much as any sea-level rise. Indeed, somewhere at the low tide level, the sciences and the humanities meet.