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## **Future Archaeologies**

### **method and story**

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Location of the islands of Orkney.

This will be an account of an ongoing experiment called ‘future archaeology’. Despite its name it’s not strictly an archaeological experiment, since I’m not an archaeologist. Nor is it strictly scientific, since I’m not a natural scientist. However, it is an empirical experiment: it draws on evidence, it draws on artefacts, it has a method, and is theoretically grounded in critical social sciences, anthropology, and archaeological theory.

But it is an experiment to which you are the witnesses. For a moment this keynote will become a laboratory, and I ask you as witnesses to consider its merits: what works for you, what does not?

The form of the experiment is a story, so by way of a prologue to this account, I just want to remind you of the history of scientific writing, or scientific storytelling. Science in its recognisable form as reproducible, verifiable experiment, witnessed either in person or in print, gathered form during the 17th Century enlightenment. One of the crucial developments was that of the scientific form of writing, the form in which scientific papers and results are recorded: the objective, trustworthy narrator, who writes in the 3rd person: “The apparatus was set up... The error was calculated as...” and so on. We often read it as factual, as somehow the antithesis of creative writing, but it is just one particular literary style. It is still literary and creative, as all writing is; or as a colleague of mine reminds me: it is an argument, and all arguments are stories with a particular literary form.

The form of writing I need to use to do this experiment is less often employed in empirical work (although it may be familiar to those in the humanities). My account is in the first person. It sounds more like a story, a narrative. It has people who act. It has landscape and wind; troublesome politics; and not everyone agrees about what they see in the world.

So this story is an experiment written in the third person, without the pretension of pure objectivity.

And it is story set on the islands of Orkney, off the north east coast of Scotland...



The Moon from the Ring of Brodgar.



Ring of Brodgar stone circle.

I was standing in a chill wind, late in the day. The cold air was breathing on my skin, through my layers of waterproof, fleece and thermals. A faint gibbous moon in a blue LED-lit sky was rising. A block of cloud hung over the twin hills of Hoy that lifted square over the far horizon.

I was an ethnographer, and had been living in the islands for the past 4 months. Orkney is closer to the Arctic Circle than to London, closer to Norway than to France. Off the top of mainland UK it is often sliced away, or inset in a box further south. Remote to some, but not to me. For I was (am) an ethnographer of futures. The people and things I study are those that make the future. And Orkney is rich in future-making.

Like the past, the future is not entirely unknown. The future is not magically always materialising, nor unimagined on the temporal horizon. Like the past, the future is made of stuff, of materials, landscapes, and people. Durability and heritage are as much a matter of the future, as a matter of the past. Things endure from past into future. It takes ongoing, unceasing work to conserve, to make things for the world to come. The future is hard work. It has to be made. It has conditions of possibility, as Foucault might say. Those possibilities for the future are woven by us, and we are woven in to them. The future does not happen to us, we are part of it, make it, are responsible for it. Although who we are, and where we are, makes a difference, of course. So informing or writing strategy documents, designing exhibits, creating fashionable trends, compiling timetables, ordering a book online, voting or not, all these effect what the future may be – for us and for others.

How we imagine and make the future, that's what I do. Not so unlike those of you concerned with imagining and making the past. So perhaps some of you might begin to understand why I was in Orkney, an archipelago with one of the world's densest proliferations of prehistoric monuments.

And here I was, leaning in to the wind, fingertips resting on the jagged bedding planes of a standing stone, part of the Ring of Brodgar stone circle, part of the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site.



Excavation remains at the Ring of Brodgar, 2008.

It was a few days after the workshop I had run on Orkney futures and innovation. And I had come to the stone circle to mull over a problem that one of the participants had voiced during the workshop, which had come to haunt me. I was also hoping to meet someone who might be able to help.

I walked a few stones along, following the muddy trail left by a summer of cruise liner tourists. The turf in front of me, in the gap of a missing monolith and down in to the ditch, was criss-crossed with spade scars. In a few months there would be nothing to see, but for now the lattice work of newly laid turf squares remained, and reminded me of the excavation of the monument's surrounding ditch.

It had been back-breaking barrow work, shovelling soil and mud from the three metre deep rock-cut ditch. Its shape had been revealed as scalloped, as though scooped out. Colin Richards and Jane Downes, the site directors, reconstructed the monument as the evidence developed. Their suggestion was that groups of people had cut a series of pits, and then joined them in to the ditch – not unlike causewayed enclosures, for those that know their prehistory. The stones themselves were also geological distinct, and may have come from different places around Orkney, and different places could mean different groups of people. So their imagined reconstruction was of groups of people from around Orkney coming to this place, bringing a standing stone with them, and digging a pit. Only together would stone and pit and people become joined, and made into a community that made a monument. Making the monument was also about making a community. Colin had argued that the Ring of Brodgar was perhaps never even intended to be completed, for it was the making that mattered.

Before my eyes, over the weeks of the excavation the monument had changed. The new evidence changed the monument now and into the future. Archaeology is a future-making practice.

A voice behind me murmured, “Every age has the Stonehenge it deserves – or desires.”

“Sorry?” I turned, the reverie dispelled.

The sun was sliding lower. Orange mist was climbing up over the surrounding low hills. And before me was, well, a version me (more or less), looking rather warmer in a white fleece hat.



Sunset at the Ring of Brodgar.

Her boot soles, I noticed, were translucent rubber so that she seemed to levitate above the muddy grass path.

“An assertion by the archaeologist, Jacquetta Hawkes. Monuments are how we interpret them, how we live with them. Stonehenge has been many monuments over the centuries. The Ring of Brodgar, too, will continue to change as we change.”

I had to interrupt her. “You are...?”

She grinned, held out her hand, gloved in white fleece, “I am the Future Archaeologist. You wanted to see me?”

Yes, I had. She was the person I had been hoping to meet here. She was the one person who might be able to help me.

It was slightly awkward, however, meeting a version of myself.

“You look like me.” I pointed out.

“You are an ethnographer,” she nodded at me. “You are a method. I am also a method, but a different method. I do something different to you. I see the world differently, with different eyes, a different body.”

“What do you do?” It was the obvious question to ask.

She pursed her lips, and pointed to the mosaic of turfs re-laid over the old trench. “That excavation created evidence, which the site directors reconstructed into a new version of the past.”

I nodded, and remembered how the Ring of Brodgar had been transformed by the evidence from a finished monument of 60 stones into one that may never have been intended to be completed.

“As archaeologists reconstruct the past from fragments of evidence, so I reconstruct the future from fragments of evidence. As the archaeological evidence changes so the past changes, and as my evidence changes so the future changes.”

“So what you do is evidence based?”

“Yes,” she affirmed. “But as with all reconstruction it is necessarily creative, too. I do not claim to reconstruct The Future, but just one version of a future. In a similar way to archaeologists’ who acknowledge their versions of the past are fluid, subject to change, empirical yet always uncertain. I cannot auger the future, I’m not a prophet, for the same reason that a pot sherd is not a crystal ball into the past.”

“You call yourself a Future Archaeologist, so you’re an archaeologist?”

“No, I don’t make that claim. I’m a cross-breed, a mutt with a bit of anthropology, science studies, sociology, and a little archaeology.” She looked at my hands pushed down hard into my coat, and said pointedly. “I could give you the literature review, but you seem a little cold.”

Her cropped dark hair seemed impervious to the battering breeze, whilst I could feel my hairs being lifted to let the cold air on to my scalp.

“But do you do excavation? How do you gather your evidence?” I wanted to push her on this ‘future archaeologist’ title she gave herself.

“Actually, that’s your job,” she said with a wry smile, a glint in her eye.

“It’s your ethnographic evidence I work with. Why don’t you show me something, and I’ll show you what I do...”

The wind was beginning to bite, and the planet-star of Jupiter was beginning to show in the sky above.

We were two methods, standing in the dying sun. And I was very conscious that there was a problem to be addressed.

“Well, in which case, I think I’ll start by showing you something that relates to the problem of futures in hand,” I said, and set off around the circle, down the slope, the Future Archaeologist keeping pace beside me.



Burgar Hill wind turbines from Ring of Brodgar.

I stopped between two thin monoliths. Our eyes skimmed over the top of the loch, and up on to the far horizon. Five wind turbines turned with distant, silent clock hands: hour, minute, second turning. On Orkney they relentlessly marked the passing of wind and time, both unceasing.

I pointed out the five grey time-keepers to the Future Archaeologist. “Those are fragments of the past and future.”

“On that hill stood the UK’s largest wind turbine, a test site for wind energy. Orkney has an archaeology and history as a test site for new renewable technologies.”

The Future Archaeologist shaded her eyes to look out more closely from the stone circle, to the grey monoliths on the far skyline.

“Okay,” she said. “But how do those wind turbines relate to your problem?”

I dumped my rucksack on the ground, and fished for a plastic box. Blue letters on a white piece of card pronounced through the transparent sides: A Box of Orkney Futures, and OrkneyLab: The Futures Workshop.

I passed the plastic box to the Future Archaeologist. She glanced at me:

“This box is evidence from your ethnography, correct?” she asked. I nodded. “As you pass your evidence over to me then it’s transformed into a fragment, an artefact from which I will create my reconstructions. So you should be attentive to the fragments you give me.”

“You don’t do fieldwork yourself?” I was curious. “Archaeologists pick up a stone and make it an artefact through their touch, separating it from the other stones. What happens when you touch things?”

She smiled. “You called me. I’m meeting you here to help with a futures problem, but I don’t really live here. I live in the worlds I make. As we all live in the worlds that we make for ourselves. I live in my reconstructions. When I touch things, as you put it, when I mark them out as fragments of evidence, I bring them into my reconstruction. I know my world, as I go.”



Evidence: A Box of Orkney Futures.

I laughed, “But that’s exactly what I do. I know as I go, not before I go, to paraphrase the anthropologist, Tim Ingold. This story, this account, this experiment,” I spread arms, “is a reconstruction of my ethnography. This didn’t happen during my ethnography, of course. But everything here is all based on ethnographic experiences and evidence. It is accountable and verifiable from fragments of evidence. We’re not so very different you and I.”

The Future Archaeologist hefted the box I had given her, and grinned. “And this little box will form part of a reconstruction of an Orkney future.”

She flipped the two catches on the box, and carefully opened the lid, keeping it low against the wind. Inside, I knew, as the author and curator of the box, were a series of carefully selected large postcards. She flipped through them, and I stopped her at a photograph of the concrete base of a wind turbine, the remains, the socket so to speak, of a monumental structure next to the turbines we could see on the hill. An archaeology of the wind turbine industry.

The Future Archaeologist pulled the card out of the box to look at it more closely.

“The images are either photographs I’ve taken as part of my ethnography here in Orkney, or they are pages of documents that I’ve collected,” I explained, as she absorbed the evidence. “Ethnographic artefacts are a little different in material form to archaeological artefacts. Ethnographic notebook rather than context sheet. Documents dug up from a pile on a participant’s bookshelf, rather than decorated pots from a trench.”

I pointed to the title of the box. “OrkneyLab was the workshop I ran with people here on futures and innovation. Twenty or so people all went through the artefacts in this box, and talked about the futures they reconstructed from its contents. But you’ll obviously do something different with the fragments, reconstruct them into a different future, since you’re situated differently to the people living here.

Then I sighed. “It was at the OrkneyLab workshop where I realised I had a problem.”

The Future Archaeologist gave me a stern look. “Finally,” she said in clear frustration. “What is this problem you keep alluding to? It’s obviously bothering you.”



Evidence:base of wind turbine at Burgar Hill.





Kirkwall, from the harbour water.



OpenHydro tidal turbine. Image from <http://www.openhydro.com/>

“I need to take you to another renewable energy test site, first” I said, knowing I was being evasive. “There are some things you have to experience rather than be told.” The sky was turning rose pink, the sun a golden globe above the horizon, but we had a couple of hours of light yet. We crossed the road to the car park, and I luxuriated for a moment as I shut the car door and enjoyed a break from the elements.

We drove out beyond the surrounding hills, around a sweeping bay, and in to the main town of Kirkwall. I parked hurriedly on the harbour front, and leaped in to a waiting boat. The skipper raised an eyebrow, “We wer aboot te give up on ye,” he remarked with humour as he reversed out of the jetty, and cut deep in to the waters of the archipelago, sailing north.

The Future Archaeologist said nothing, waited.

After half an hour of tracking along island coasts, green fields and cattle glossy in the late afternoon sun, the sea surface frothing around us, something large in the water began to loom ahead.

The skipper plunged straight for it.

Soon a vast yellow platform took shape, standing in a broiling sea. It quickly over-shadowed us. Jacked up above the platform was a vast white iris, open and watching the sky. It was the OpenHydro tidal turbine, currently up and out of the water, majestic, industrial, a Space Age future with its eye fixated upon us.

The Future Archaeologist was enthralled.

The skipper pointed out the state of the sea. The waters ran so fast and fierce that all the buoys, the size of cars, had been pulled below the surface. Half a metre of water was pushed up against the legs of the platform as the sea leaped past. Eddies swirled around the boat, and the surface sheered into shifting patterns.

“This is the tidal turbine test site for the European Marine Energy Centre,” I explained to the Future Archaeologist. “It’s one of the first test sites in the world for marine renewable energy, and it’s right here in Orkney. But this future is fragile, there’s a lot of competition as you can imagine.”

“It was someone from the test centre who gave me the problem,” I explained at last. “We were talking about how Orkney is not remembered as a site of innovation, of future-making, even though it has these archaeologies as a test-bed for new renewable technology. There is evidence of innovation, but there is no mythology, no story based on the evidence. Nobody remembers when it happens first in Orkney. Unlike Silicon Valley, for example, which is remembered as a quintessential site of innovation.

“He wanted me to reconstruct a moment of innovation in the marine renewable energy industry. He wanted me to make a myth of Orkney that might travel, and would mean these distant, remote islands might hold on to this burgeoning industry.” I looked at her very straight into her slate grey eyes. “You know, probably better than I, that telling stories of the future is not innocent. That making and repeating myths and stories changes the world. It’s always political, so to speak. A story of Orkney marine energy that travels around the world could change the future here.”

“So you want me to make that myth of an Orkney future?”

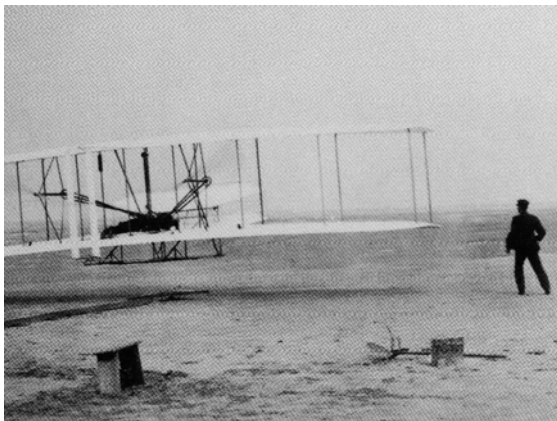
I nodded.

“Reconstruct an Orkney of marine renewable energy based on your ethnographic evidence?”

“Exactly. It has to be empirical. This is not fiction,” I reminded her.

She inclined her head. “No. It’s like the myth of the first mobile phone call in Manhattan by Marty Cooper in 1973. He really was the lead developer in the team, but there were hundreds of other almost forgotten people involved over decades.

“Actually,” I said. “The example used here in Orkney is of the Wright Brother’s first flight. That’s the myth of air flight that gets repeated. That’s the historic moment, based on the evidence of the photos, despite all the other people and moments before and since. This,” I waved at the vast turbine unblinking above us, “is talked of as at the same stage. Marine energy has been tested, it’s been proved, but it’s a long way from a commercial industry. And it needs a myth of how it all happened in Orkney.”



Wright Brother’s flight, 1903. Image source NASA.

“Orkney needs a heroic myth?” Asked my methodological alter-ego. “It already has the Orkneyinga Saga. All those Vikings vying for the earldom, and stabbing each other in the back.”

The skipper called out that he was turning the boat back to Kirkwall, and we both went in to the wheel house to find feeling in our ears and fingers once more. We sat down at the molded fibre-glass table, looked out at the passing white-sand beaches of the nearby island of Eday.

I shook myself out of the silence of the seascape. “I forgot, there’s another half to my problem. At the OrkneyLab workshop, where the futures box was used, one of the participants pointed something out to me.” I pulled off my gloves, fumbled with the zip of my rucksack and rummaged through for my ethnographic notebook. I showed the Future Archaeologist my notes:

“[What’s the] advantage of acquiring mythical status?... Orkney is trying to take that mythical position, and it’s currently contested. [You have] heros in history, but in reality it’s more complicated.” [Evidence]

“Historians of science and technology have shown how there are no ‘Eureka!’ moments,” I explained. “No single acts of universal genius when an entire mobile phone, or aircraft springs fully formed from one mind. Technologies are much harder than that, they take years, develop across people, places, relationships, conversations. As the participant said, it’s more complicated than the myth, in fact.”

My companion seemed unperturbed, however. “But reconstructions are stories, they are not truth. They are interpretations based on fragments of evidence that can be put together in different ways. As prehistorian, Josh Pollard says, far from being imbued with negative qualities, the productive and generative potential of breakage and decay must be acknowledged. Fragments are not a matter of loss of complexity, or loss of the whole. They generate possibility for the new.

She pointed back along the wake of the boat, “That tidal turbine is a fragment. It’s a large fragment, for sure. It’s a large artefact, but scale is irrelevant. It is an object that’s unfinished, in development, a kind of pot sherd of the future, so to speak. In archaeology, there are many pots that might be made from a pot sherd, although there are definite limits



OpenHydro tidal turbine at EMEC test site, Eday.



Hoy at sunset.



Stromness at dusk.

on the possibilities – we have a good idea of what’s likely. But it is still a creative process of possibility, of empirical and sophisticated imagination that transforms pots into a social worlds in an illustrated reconstruction. The same is true of this object, no matter its scale. From this fragment, as it stands in the water, I have to reconstruct one possible whole that may exist in the future.” She shrugged. “Bits of tidal turbine, bits of pot, same thing methodologically.”

But then she grinned. “Could present some interesting storage problems for a future maritime museum, however!”

The boat drew slowly inshore, drawn by the red sandstone steeple of the cathedral, the axis of Kirkwall.

“I’m going to need more evidence, though, for this reconstruction of a future Orkney,” pointed out the Future Archaeologist.

“For sure,” I agreed, looking apprehensively at the sun, now a gold line on the horizon below a purple gauze of air. It was going to be a cold night.

Back in the car we drove home towards the rising Moon and the hills of Hoy. The year and the light were waning fast.

Around the edge of the loch, we passed Neolithic passage graves, Viking settlements, until I turned left and up and over a rise of fields. We came down in to the town of Stromness, strung out in grey stone along the water’s edge. The houses and boats all glistened with orange fluorescent light.

We parked in the centre of town, at the old stone school buildings, now a business park. Here were many of the renewable energy companies, and where I had spent the majority of my time as an ethnographer.

“We should drop in to one of the companies,” I suggested, and was about to add more, when a familiar face turned the corner of the stone schoolhouse. He was a born rugby player, centre of gravity wide and low, a moving rock. He was also one of the most generous supporters of my work, and smiled warmly as we strode to meet him. “Hi, Laura,” he said. “How’s the research?”

“Gary, this is the Future Archaeologist,” I introduced them. “She’s the method I’m working with to explore the future of Orkney. I was wondering if you could show her your PowerPoint slides of the future of the marine renewables industry.”

“Sure. You’ve managed to catch me. I’ve got ten minutes before I have to go in to a conference call.”

He led the two of us up the stairs to the meeting area of the office space. We were surrounded by tall bookcases with displays of satellite photography, environmental products, company flyers, books, all with a fringe of thriving pot plants, long glossy leaves hanging down to soften the office furniture.

Because of the shortness of time, I asked Gary to focus on a couple of particular slides. He shook the mouse on the coffee table, and the large LCD computer screen before us lit up.

He began by asking if the Future Archaeologist was familiar with the 2020 targets. She shook her head, and so he quickly loaded a copy of the UK Renewable Energy Strategy from June 2008. I leaped in and read out to my methodological nemesis some key phrases:

In 2007, EU agreed a binding target to have 20% of energy consumption from renewables by 2020...

UK contribution should be to go from 1.6% in 2006 to 15% by 2020.  
[Evidence]

Gary hit the print button, and another fragment of evidence was made.

We moved on to his PowerPoint slides, and Gary explained to the Future Archaeologist that he had presented these to the Scottish Environment Minister in July 2008, as part of the promotion of Orkney as a national and international site for renewable energy.

“The government is about progress and going forward,” [explained Gary].  
“[The Minister] wants Scotland to be a ‘can do culture’.” [Evidence]

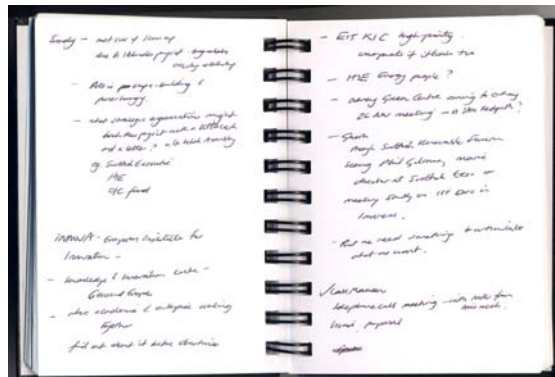
I listened carefully, and took notes in my ethnographic notebook. I passed the scribbled quote to the Future Archaeologist – another fragment.

## Energy people

- Orcadians are passionate about energy
  - We are surrounded by it (wind, wave, tide, biomass and oil)
  - We need a lot of it (harsh weather, old houses)
  - We pay a lot for it (21% fuel poverty)
  - We know the benefits it can bring (30 years of Flotta supplying 5% of total UK energy)



Evidence: Slide from presentation by Dr Gareth Davies, Aquatera Ltd., to Environment Minister, July 2008.



Scan of ethnographic notebook, notes concerning conversation on European bid.

Energy People, said the slide on the screen. Orcadians are passionate about energy. We are surrounded by it. We need a lot of it. We pay a lot for it. We know the benefits it can bring. [File – Print] went the mouse pointer.

Then Gary loaded his roadmap of all that did need to happen in marine renewables to reach the 2020 targets. He read out from the spreadsheet some particularly key calculations and figures:

Target requires 500 tidal machines and 500 wave machines to be installed and operating.

Need to build 10 new ships.

Fabricate, assemble, install and commission devices at a rate of 200 per year from 2013. [Evidence]

The Future Archaeologist raised her eyebrows at this, and glanced at me, “This is serious...”

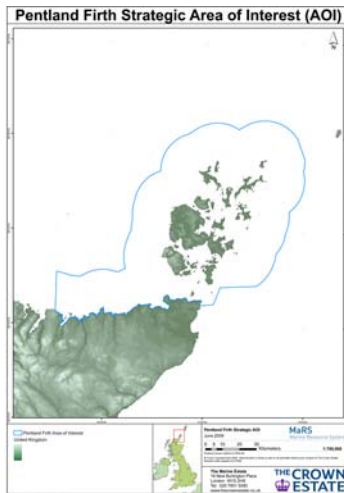
Gary and I exchanged glances. “This is about as serious as it gets,” I said.

The minister had been impressed by the roadmap, added Gary, and had taken both the slide pack and the roadmap with him. These were fragments that were already travelling, perhaps part of other people’s version of the future.

Gary glanced at the clock on the wall. “Listen guys, I’ve got to go. We’re just putting together a bid for this European fund, something to do with Living Laboratories.” He flashed me a grin, knowing I would like the term.

I remembered that I had some notes from a conversation this morning about the bid, which I passed to the Future Archaeologist. “I heard you’ve only had a day or to put the bid together,” I said to Gary. “Very quick, anyway.”

Gary smiled. “Simon calls it, fleet of foot [Evidence],” he said. It was a memorable phase and I made sure I passed the quote on to my companion.



Evidence: The Crown Estate map of 'Pentland Firth Strategic Area of Interest'.



EMEC wave test site, Billia Croo.

We returned to the car, and in to the dusk. The gibbous moon glowed like melting butter. I wondered where to go next, whilst the Future Archaeologist pulled at her ears, eyes misted, doing work elsewhere.

“So is it happening?” She asked quietly, without turning.

“Oh, yes.” I replied. “But then you should know that. Look in the OrkneyLab box.”

She had not let go of the box since I had given it to her, had held it close to her body as if it were part of her. Now she kept it upright against her chest, and eased open the catches.

“What am I looking for?” she asked.

“A map of the Orkney coast from the Crown Estate. It’s titled the ‘Pentland Firth Strategic Area of Interest’.”

The Future Archaeologist slipped it out of the box, held it up against the dim bulb in the ceiling between us.

“The Crown Estate is now leasing the sea in the Pentland Firth, between Orkney and Scotland, for marine renewable energy generation. In their press release, Alex Salmond said that the Pentland Firth had the potential to become the Saudi Arabia of marine power [Evidence]. You can dig out the release from my rucksack.”

I started the engine, knowing where we needed to go next. There was barely enough light, so this would have to be our last trip. But it wasn’t far, just around a couple of headlands.

Minutes later we stood on a thin shingle beach, beneath a great yellow diamond sign saying ‘Power Cable’. The waves curled and boomed onto the stones. Cliffs rose around us, but the walk down to the beach was a shallow track, well-worn by vehicles. Behind was a door into the hill, the power station for the wave test site, I explained.

My companion blinked, surprised. “This is a high-tech test site?” she said, looking around her.

“Yes, it’s seeming invisibility is part of the point,” I said. “The power station with all the cable landing points and data feeds is built in to the hill, covered by grass.” I then pointed out the four red lights from buoys out in the sea that made a large diamond shape. The lights marked the area of the test site, but all the devices were hidden below the surface. There was nothing to see but the lights winking in and out with the waves.

“Last stop,” I said. “Over to you now.”

The Future Archaeologist pulled out a flattened pebble-shaped cameraphone from her pocket, and looked at it with irony. “How dull. It doesn’t look like this in my world,” she noted.

She held the cameraphone up to the horizon, out across the rumbling waves. “Look,” she instructed.

I glanced at the bright screen, looked at the image of the waves, the blue-ink sky. The sea was richly studded with red lights. I glanced away, checked the water with my own eyes: four red lights. Looked at the screen: it was filled with a hundred or so red warning gleams.

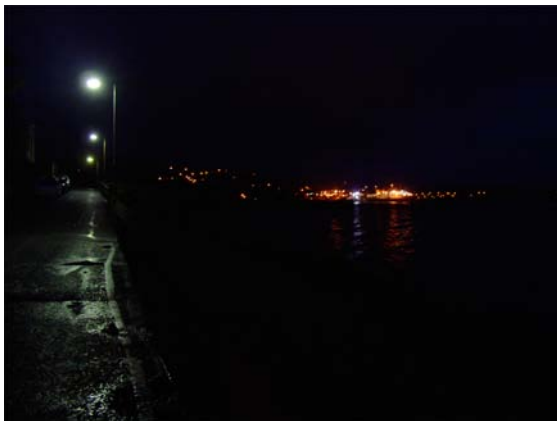
I took a breath, about to suggest that her cameraphone screen had some weird fault, but then the Future Archaeologist swung the camera around passed the headland behind us. There were the grass covered buildings, like hides, but now they extended all the way along the ridge above the beach – on her screen, at least. And the shape of the beach had changed.

“This cameraphone shows you my reconstruction,” explained the Future Archaeologist. “Illustrators have been creating virtual 3D reconstructions of archaeological sites for years. This is no different. It’s just in my phone. As you move through the world, you see the reconstruction of the future, not the past, on my cameraphone. *Augmented reality* is the term for the technological effect,” she explained.

Now I wanted to go back to Stromness, wanted to see that place through the Future Archaeologist’s eyes. I practically ran back to the car in my excitement.

As we drove, and I cooled slightly, a thought struck. “How does this help make a myth?” I asked.





Stromness at night.



Reconstruction: Wiki entry on Orkney in 2020.

“Because the myth exists in my world, that’s part of how it’s been reconstructed. I’ll show you.” And she gave a wry secret smile, looked out through the windscreen. I wish I knew what she saw.

I pulled the car up hard next to the Stromness main pier. Above us the white sides of the Hamnavoe ferry rose high like some friendly Moby Dick. Its engines thrummed the air, a sound and subsonic hum that was so familiar to me.

The Future Archaeologist nonchalantly handed me her cameraphone, her portal into her reconstructed world. I dashed from the car to look out over the water. On screen it was filled with boats moving, lights. As I pointed it down the curve of the water front, there were huge barges moored up, a floating crane. The sea was filled with vessels. I hurried down the main street of the town, and turned on to a small pier, stood on its flagstone edge looking out, through the device. There were flood lights on the far shore of Hoy, something industrial was happening there.

Returning the cameraphone I turned to the Future Archaeologist, still confused. “I see all the activity, all the maintenance and commissioning and support vessels,” I said. “But the myth?”

The Future Archaeologist pulled her white fleece hat down firm, and looked at her phone. She seemed to be waiting for something. Then her phone beeped, and she silently passed me the pebble–shape to read the screen. It was an alert message from a Wiki page, dated the year 2020.

“Orkney,” was the Wiki entry headline. “Orkney has five thousand years of technological innovation by maritime people, from the Ring of Brodgar to the Vikings, from the first British wind turbine to the European Marine Energy Centre. The iconic OpenHydro tidal turbine was first tested there. Orkney is a 24hour living laboratory, famous for being able to put together responses to bids and proposals in 24 hours. They were fast enough from the outset to be the world’s first wave and tidal test site. In the marine renewable industry it’s known as OrkneyLab. People come here with devices and dreams, and OrkneyLab knows how to make it happen quickly, can do it. They call it being fleet of foot. People are coming to prospect the Pentland Firth marine energy, reminiscent of the 1970s oil boom. Orkney is called the Saudi Arabia of marine power.” I was surprised, it seemed to have made so little use of some of the evidence, and too much use of other fragments, and I said so.

The Future Archaeologist simply laughed. “Innovation is retrospective,” she explained. “The moment of innovation, the myth of invention is invisible to you as the ethnographer. You can look all you like but you’ll never know which moment it is in your evidence. As I said innovation is a story that has been repeated and passed on, and so changed. You cannot hold innovation still. You can only tell the story yourself, and participate in its re-telling. That’s what reconstruction does, that’s what heritage does. It re-tells the story; heritage and history make the myths and moments of innovation. There never can be a mythical moment in the present, because the exaggerations and smoothing of the story that make it larger than life haven’t happened yet. The Wright Brother’s flight in 1903 was just one of many that only over time became the moment of invention.”

“So what did I expect, right?” I asked, bitter.

“You’re still missing the point,” she said, frustrated with me, her hands moving to her hips. “As a Future Archaeologist I’m not committed to your present, to describing in exacting detail what happens when. I’m committed to the generative potential of the fragments. What matters to me is not the true story of the history of flight, but the power that story of the Wright Brother’s first flight has, the way the photographic evidence has been enrolled in its re-telling, and how that evidence could be used otherwise.”

She relaxed slightly, and began to walk back up the pier, passing old lobster pots stacked up against a wooden fish-gutting shed.

“OrkneyLab is just my version of the future based on your evidence,” she continued. “It doesn’t matter if it’s true, it matters what effect it has, and how it passed on. Will people remember? It’s an experiment. I am an experiment. So it may take a few more tries. Cutting edge, difficult experiments always do.”

She stopped at a small door set in to the end of the semi-derelict fish-gutting shed. The buildings on the opposite side of the pier shadowed us in darkness. The door was thick wood, panelled and ornate, a door I would expect to find inside a house, not down a pier. I noticed there were white patterns, geometric swirls, sprayed on to the sides of the shed like some secret language.

The Future Archaeologist gave one of her sardonic half-smiles, a Clint Eastwood glint to her eye.



Stromness door.

“It’s a door to another world,” she said.

“To where...?” I was still caught up in her words, wondering if the experiment in evidence and story had been successful, looking back on our journey together as two methods.

I looked at the door, and admitted to myself that if there was ever a door to the underworld this would be high on my list of possibles.

“Through here is not your Orkney, but my Orkney,” the Future Archaeologist said to me, and placed her hand on the rounded door-knob.

“Through here is OrkneyLab.”

And with that, she turned the knob, opened the door a crack, slipped through into absolute darkness, and was gone.

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