

# Imaging the Ceramic Landscape of Premodern Japan

Barbara SEYOCK

## Introduction

The following paper makes use of the term “landscape” in a way that transcends common understanding of landscape as the visible features of an area of land and the change of its physical appearance over time, inevitably dependent on both natural influences and human activities. Instead, landscape here serves as a theoretical framework that highlights certain features of a certain society, both of which have to be detected and defined according to the questions raised within a certain discourse of research. With this approach I try to contribute to a more general question pertaining to modelling in archaeology: what is landscape, and how can it be defined?<sup>1</sup>

Landscape archaeology, or history, generally distinguishes between a visible and an abstract landscape. Both can be experienced rather directly at the spot, the former by physical observation, the latter by deducing from both natural environment and historical or recent administrative sources. Visible features would include landforms, flora and fauna, settlement morphology, industrial structures, land use (field boundaries and systems, deserted places, earthworks), cultural/architectural remains, archaeological remains, river and drainage systems, etc (Fig. 1). Abstract features of a landscape comprise climate, topography (location), pollution and natural disasters, place names, population, social issues – including religion and ritual, local historiography, as well as building plans and administrative concepts, and others (Fig. 2).

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1 This essay is a revised version of a talk with the same title given at the Research Institute for Humanity and Nature (RIHN) in Kyōto, March 2010. It picks up an issue (“what is a landscape?”) I initially raised during the final discussion of the 2008 general meeting of the RIHN Neomap Project, in March 2008. See Seyock 2009.

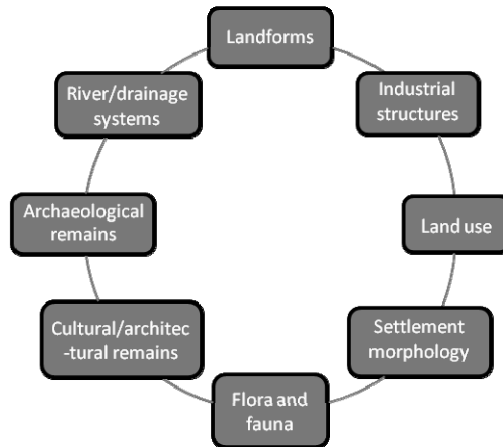


Fig. 1: Elements of visible landscape

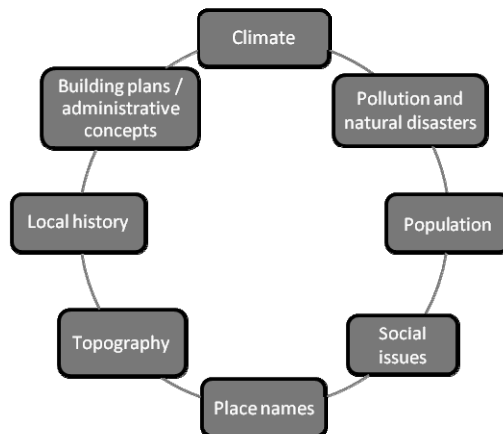


Fig. 2: Elements of abstract landscape

The main objective of landscape archaeology and history is to determine the way in which a society has interacted with their physical environment in a given period of time, and to deduce the objectives and mechanisms underlying these activities from archaeological remains and other sources. Space, distribution and mapping are considered key elements of landscape research. The significance of including a focus on the social use of space, and in consequence an interpretative approach towards the cognitive world of past human societies within an area much larger than what the single site may

illustrate, cannot be overstressed. Landscape archaeology nowadays can be viewed quite generally as an integrated part of archaeological research. It may also – in a second step – form the basis for an evaluation of the current landscape against the background of its historical significance, and for finding indications of, or even models for, future developments, including considerations of landscape conservation and management, and land-use planning.<sup>2</sup>

In the last decades landscape archaeology has been discussed both in the framework of specific regional and cultural constellations, and with a focus on past developments and future challenges of landscape research as such and the theoretical questions connected to that. Knapp and Ashmore have stressed that “*interrelationships* among people and such traces, places and features, in space and through time” (their emphasis) form a coherent part of any holistic landscape approach<sup>3</sup>, while it is Darvill who postulates “landscape” as a “generic term for the expression of particular ways of seeing the world”.<sup>4</sup> Treating a landscape as a “subject”, rather than simply mapping scattered finds and features, would allow creating an image of a historic landscape,<sup>5</sup> but still, revealing the real ends of a specific society’s space seems something hard to achieve. The common emphasis on the physical surroundings of human activity may disregard much of the manifold shapes of human motions and experiences that do not materialize in archaeological remains. Indeed, we are handling “cultural landscapes”,<sup>6</sup> always at the utmost linked with the very persons encountering the landscape, be it in an archaeological or historic setting, or in the reality of the current observer.

Even though criticism has been expressed regarding the inflationary and often unreflective usage of the term “landscape”, “seemingly attached to almost every research design or report on the archaeology of a chosen area”,<sup>7</sup> it is used here – again, in an attempt to illustrate a network of cultural interdependences that other models

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2 See e.g. Fairclough 1999; Lydon 2008; Darvill 2008, 63-64.

3 Knapp and Ashmore 1999, 2.

4 Darvill 1999, 106.

5 Darvill 1999, 108-109.

6 After Cosgrove and Daniels 1988, 1 (cited from Darvill 1999, 109).

7 Widgren 1999, 95.

of archaeological or historical research – to the authors conviction – do not fully reflect in all necessary detail. Thus, the landscape concept itself will be focused on and challenged by trying to outline a landscape that does not in the first place connect to an area of land that can actually be observed. On the contrary, the elements responsible for defining the landscape in question transcend the usual geographically limited physical spot and moreover link people of a large variety of societies and social classes.

It is the ceramic landscape of premodern Japan I am focusing on. By doing so, a geographic scope has to be applied that comprises large parts of the Japanese territory as well as many locations beyond the Japanese borders, in mainland China, in Korea, in South East Asia, and even in Europe and the Americas. Thus the usual scale of landscape history is by far exceeded, and any efforts to understand the full complex of this extensive landscape with all its visible and abstract features are doomed to fail right from the start. The landscape laid out here, instead, is a virtual one, concentrating on the production, trade and usage of ceramics, a landscape that of course has been real for the potters, traders, sailors, and consumers acting in it. Other realities, however, fade out behind these issues, although for other eyes with other interests, they are still there. The perception of landscape applied here thus necessarily is decidedly selective. What ties together the areas constituting the ceramic landscape of Japan constructed here is not in the first place their geographic identity but a certain type of archaeological find, and the production, trading, and consumption structures lying behind.

As no other feature can be found that link together the areas and people under discussion, it may be postulated that either a landscape approach as such turns out invalid, or, that we need to readjust the general concept of a landscape in history by accepting that boundaries of a landscape change or even vanish as soon as observers only slightly turn their kaleidoscope of questions.

### **The Ceramic Landscape of Premodern Japan**

The ceramic landscape I am laying out here derives from the typical composition of premodern archaeological complexes on Japanese territory. Archaeologists working in Japan are well aware that pottery

shards constitute a common find, starting from coastal Jōmon 縄文 period (c. 10,000–800 BCE) shell mound excavations up to the disclosure of medieval city drainage systems or the survey of residential sites of the modern era. Shards are omnipresent in most cases, such as at the famous Jōmon period Sannai-maruyama 山内丸山 site in Aomori 青森 with its many thousand pottery shards (Fig. 3), or a recent excavation of a medieval residential site in Okinawa 沖縄, which produced masses of high-fired celadon-glazed shards (Fig. 4).

Fig. 3: Pottery shards *in situ*  
(Sannai-maruyama site  
park, Aomori, Japan;  
photo by author, 2006)



Fig. 4: Celadon shards  
arranged for sorting  
(Archaeological Institute,  
Naha, Okinawa, Japan;  
photo by author, 2006)



These shards exist together in the horizontal topography of Japan today, so they could be considered as part of the Japanese ceramic landscape. But in fact they are vertically separated by many thousands of years and there is no realization of a link of whatever kind among

the people having produced, traded or consumed ceramics characteristic for these two types of assemblages. What I want to focus on is the horizontal relationships within one slice of time, successively, as indicated by my traverses through periods below. People acting in my “ceramic landscape” actually are aware of each other; generally speaking they are contemporaries within clear time limits; preceding time levels of course must be considered and included when specific memories and previously attained knowledge and techniques would persist or come to fruition. It is a mutually conditionally situation, which would not exist if one of its components were missing. Further, I analyze the aspects of pottery production that can have impact on the landscape in almost any period.

So what are the components I am referring to? As it is true for a landscape as such, both visible and abstract elements determine the premodern ceramic landscape. Visible are the architectural and structural remains of marketplaces, and of pottery kilns, or a kiln centre (Fig. 5). Visible are the heaps of waste, mainly shards of broken vessels, left in market places or port sites. Visible are the ports themselves – or at least their sites, and the remains of ships and ceramic cargoes lost during journeys across the high seas. Visible are crockery remains of residential sites, or ceramic hoards buried in soil, thus protected against destruction or theft during times of turmoil and war. And visible are the antique ceramic pieces kept in family possession, heirlooms which nowadays may be on display in museum collections or special exhibitions.

Abstract elements (Fig. 6) comprise the routes of ceramic trade, as can be deduced from the composition of ceramic complexes in comparison to the production sites of the respective pieces, as well as administrative guidelines connected to the trade of ceramics. Abstract features also touch upon the people connected to ceramics; impressions are left behind by private documents of connoisseurs, or by official trading lists and historical records. Abstract but detectable, moreover, are tastes and modes of ceramic consumption, dependent on both the factor of function, time, geography, and social circumstances.

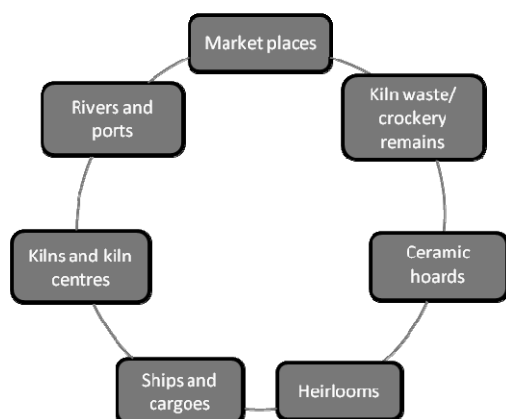


Fig. 5: Elements of Japan's visible ceramic landscape

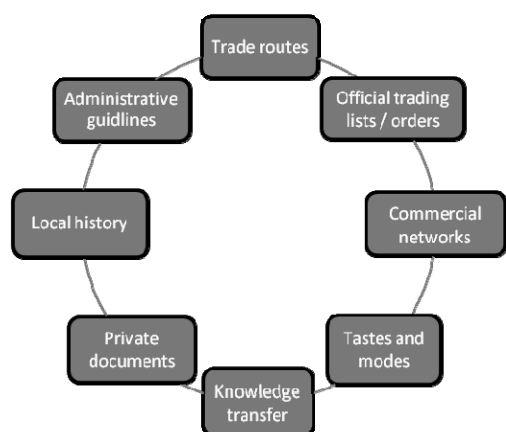


Fig. 6: Elements of Japan's abstract ceramic landscape

This concept of visible and abstract elements of a ceramic landscape of Japan basically works for many periods in history and prehistory. The simplest ceramic landscape we can think of may be represented by a member of a small incipient Jōmon (c. 12,000–7500 BC) society band producing a pottery vessel at the family hearth and giving it to the next of kin for direct usage. This scenario would have the slightest impact on the environment and would involve only very few people. “Landscape” may prove a model too large to be useful here.<sup>8</sup>

8 This perception, of course, might be challenged with view on the middle and later phases of Jōmon culture (c. 12,000–800 BC), when exchange became increasingly

Things started to change fundamentally with the Yayoi 弥生 period (c. 800 BCE–250 CE), when trading developed far beyond the social system of a family or small community. It is in this age that for the first time ceramics appeared that had been traded across cultural borders – I am referring to Lelang 樂浪 and Samhan 三韓 style pottery from the Korean Peninsula that had been excavated at Kyūshū 九州 sites in western Japan<sup>9</sup> (Fig. 7) –, thus linking the culturally foreign producer, the trader or traveller carrying the pieces, and the addressee, or consumer over a large distance. But, although the consumer on the Japanese islands might personally have been aware of the “exotic” value of the pieces, this still is not a strong scenario. Part of this kind of linkage could have been a product of chance, with no regular and conscious contacts; the interrelationship between the persons acting actually would have been rather loose and variable.



Fig. 7: Lelang and Samhan pottery  
(source: Miyamoto 2008)

It is only much later in history that a real “ceramic network” can be detected, strong enough and multi-levelled enough to deserve being conceptualized as a landscape in its own regard. And here, very clearly observable in the Muromachi 室町 period (1336–1573) – the height of Japan’s trade in ceramics, a picture emerges that combines all the visible and abstract elements I mentioned before. To illustrate my concept I will now concentrate on the main groups of actors within the ceramic landscape of premodern Japan, the potters, the traders, the sailors, and the consumers.

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important and cultural contacts inspired new pottery styles, such as the Sobata 曾畑 pottery in Kyūshū. See Kenrick 1995, 36.

9 See Miyamoto Kazuo 2008, 13-17.



## Potters

Potters certainly have the largest influence on the physical landscape of their environments. They take clay in huge amounts from suitable areas, using up whole mountains when necessary, such as in the case of the Arita 有田 kaolin quarry in North Kyūshū (Fig. 8). Potters construct kilns (Fig. 9), which constitute a major interference once production had developed from open fire procedure to kiln technology. Potters exploit woods to an extent that may cause large areas of wasted lands. And they leave heaps of ashes and kiln waste (Fig. 10), even modelling completely new landscapes such as in the case of the pottery village of Bat Trang in Vietnam, where the modern levels of living and working lie 6 to 8 meters higher than hundreds of years before (Fig. 11).

Fig. 8: Kaolin quarry  
(Arita, Kyūshū, Japan;  
photo by author 2008)



Fig. 9: Reconstruction  
of a dragon kiln  
(Arita, Kyūshū, Japan;  
photo by author 2008)





Fig. 10: Kiln wasters  
(Sukhothai, Thailand;  
photo by author 2009)



Fig. 11: Kiln waste heaps  
(Bat Trang, Vietnam;  
photo by author 2009)

Potters produce commodities (Fig. 12), use ware, table ware, luxury ware, for the locals and for the export market. Japan is one of the major consumers of trade ceramics in the centuries under discussion, so most of the potters who made the trade ceramics found in Japan were located in China, in Korea, in Vietnam, in Thailand, in Burma, and even in Minor Asia.<sup>10</sup> The pottery business has an impact not only on the visible landscape but also on abstract elements such as the subsistence and welfare of the pottery families, resulting in a variable extent of land use, building activities, and population development. The business determines the infrastructure that would be built around pottery kilns and centres (Fig. 13), and the networking and logistics that would be necessary to keep the business running. Naturally there will be feedback. Potters would react to shifts in consumers' taste, they would be creative in their own regard and

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<sup>10</sup> See Seyock 2008, 179-202.

interested in new technologies as well. Successful patterns would be copied elsewhere. And orders would be placed, coming in from national and international agents of ceramic trade.

And here is the link that connects the potter to the consumer, who may be located thousands of miles away and still takes interest in what the ceramic artist may produce. And here is where our ceramic landscape reaches a level that transcends the visible location of the potter's kiln and production location; and still it is an integral part of the potter's reality.

Fig. 12: Potter shaping a vessel  
(Hoi An, Vietnam;  
photo by author 2009)



Fig. 13: Porcelain workshop  
(Jingdezhen, China;  
photo by author 2008)



### Traders and sailors

Traders and sailors constitute the chain links between the potter and the consumer, and therefore can be referred to as the pulsation element of our ceramic landscape. Without these intermediaries the network is unthinkable.<sup>11</sup>

Traders and sailors of course have an impact on their physical surroundings. Trading posts would be constructed, ships would be built (Fig. 14), and ports would be frequented (Fig. 15). Guesthouses would be part of the infrastructure, as would be roads and carriages. Shops would be opened, market places developed. Of course, as has been said at the beginning, most of these features do play a role within other networks or land- and seascapes as well, such as in the spice business or in the silk- and cotton trade, but our focus here is ceramics and the people who are specifically linked to the ceramic business. Other qualities fade out behind these.



Fig. 14: Model of the ceramic cargo of the 14th century Shin'an ship (Maritime Museum, Mokpo, South Korea; photo by author 2004)



Fig. 15: Reconstruction of the medieval port of Izuhara (Tsushima, Japan; photo by author 2004)

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11 Being an island country, Japan naturally had to rely on maritime roads to a large extent, both nationally and internationally. While locally produced pottery wares regularly spread not much further than the province of respective manufacture (Hizen ware, Bizen ware etc.), so-called 'trade ceramics' reached the Japanese coasts in

A trader in ceramics does not necessarily have to be a sailor and the other way round. It may be the same person who is actually sailing from his home port, using his own vessel and crew, and calling at foreign ports to buy and sell, as for example the Tsushima 対馬 islander Sōda Rokurojirō 早田六郎次郎 did, who apparently commuted not only in the Korea Straits but also sailed as far as to the markets of the Ryūkyū 琉球 Kingdom, the turnstile for East- and Southeast-Asian wares. The members of the Sōda family were moreover notorious pirates, as we can learn from the Korean annals. Piracy is another facet of the ceramic trade; the Mizusaki 水崎 site, located in the former homeland of the Sōda family, revealed a lot of ceramics from South East Asia.<sup>12</sup>

Regularly, we should think of several intermediaries responsible for trading and transport. Not without reason would trader communities of very different provenance build up their warehouses in as many spots as possible along the East and Southeast Asian maritime trading network. For Hakata 博多 port the so-called *tōbō* 唐坊, the quarters of Chinese traders in the 12th and 13th centuries, are documented and identified through archaeological finds of ceramic shards bearing names and titles. Ports and trading spots of the late 14th to early 17th century, the height in ceramic trade, have been excavated at the Japanese coasts, their respective ceramic complexes revealing a network of contacts to various kilns in China, Korea, and Southeast Asia. Pictures scrolls, on the other hand, illustrate the factual ceramic trade business in the Chinese settlement at Nagasaki 長崎, the only licensed port after the Tokugawa 徳川 closed down Japan's borders in the early 17th century (Fig. 16).

The main objective of traders and sailors within these land- and seascapes, of course, is profit making, and therefore "good vibrations". Thus they not only shape their physical landscapes by constructing ports, warehouses etc. In setting up and cultivating commercial networks across national and cultural borders these people were actively involved also quite generally in cultural exchange, in knowledge transfer and in creating trans-political bonds. It is an abstract realm, but nonetheless of vibrant importance for the ceramic landscape of premodern Japan.

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large amounts via naval routes from various distant East and Southeast Asian ports in the 14th to 16th centuries (Seyock 2009, 55-72).

12 Seyock 2005, 91-124.



Fig. 16: Detail of a picture scroll showing a porcelain shop in Nagasaki, Japan (18th century), source: Kobe shiritsu hakubutsukan (1997, 109)

## Consumers

Consumers constitute the nucleus of Japan's ceramic landscape. Traders, sailors and potters circle around the consumers' tastes and demands. Naturally, as it has been mentioned before, there would be communication along these networks; all elements link up and act and react within their respective commercial realms. Ceramic shards turn up in almost every residential site excavation in Japan, and though the percentages of certain types vary strongly depending both on the geographical location of the site and the social position of the people connected, trade ceramics would be present in almost any case. Hoards of ceramics have been excavated at Hakata (Fig. 17),<sup>13</sup> for example, highlighting how much trade ceramics have been appreciated during the Muromachi period; and museum and private collections offer a lot of additional material on the consumers' side.

Compared to the potters, traders and sailors, the consumers' landscape, however, is less visible in a given geographical spot. Archaeological remains of consumers, namely pottery shards, turn up

13 E.g. Fukuoka-shi kyōiku iinkai 2004, 16-48, 128-129.

only after surveying and excavating the spot. Quite a few examples exist, however, where ceramic shards can still be found scattered on the surface in areas of strong commercial activity. The singular consumer, however, does not show in an observable landscape as such.



Fig. 17: Ceramic hoard *in situ* (reconstruction) (Hakata Archaeological Centre, Fukuoka, Japan; photo by author, 2010)

It is interesting to note that the ceramic trade has left very few traces also in documentary sources of the Muromachi period.<sup>14</sup> This does not relate to fine ceramics as such. It is possible to trace the consumers' appreciation of fine ceramics from China and Southeast Asia by consulting private diaries, where certain pieces are described in detail, often in connection with tea ceremonies or with the admiration of objects of fine art – including ceramics. We may also consult inventories such as the “Account of the decorations displayed in Muromachi palace” (*Muromachi-dono gyōkō okazari-ki* 室町殿行幸御飾記) – a hand scroll composed in 1437,<sup>15</sup> which features – in picture and text – the typical set of fine Chinese ceramics in the houses of the nobles during the mid-15th century, thus mirroring an integrate

14 We do have sporadic entries in Chinese documents connected to the tribute trade in the early 15th century, which mention ceramics as part of the business. We also know of (Kor.) Punch'ŏng 粉青 ceramics listed in the Korean annals as commodities of the coast-to-coast trade in the Korea Straits in the early 15th century (Seyock 2005). A few entries of the 'Precious documents of successive generations' (*Rekidai hōan* 歴代寶案), on the other hand, relate to ceramic trade between the Ryūkyū 琉球 Kingdom and Korea in the early 15th century (see Akamine Seiki 1988, 47).

15 See Zainie 1978, 113-118.

part of the cultural and social life in Japan. Similar scrolls and inventories were composed up to the 16th century, as for example the *Kundaikan sōchō-ki* 君台観左右帳記, which lists the collection of Ashikaga Yoshimasa 足利義政 (Fig. 18).<sup>16</sup> The appreciation of fine ceramics also shows in pieces, once broken, but repaired by tying the shards with brass and golden clamps and joints (Fig. 19).

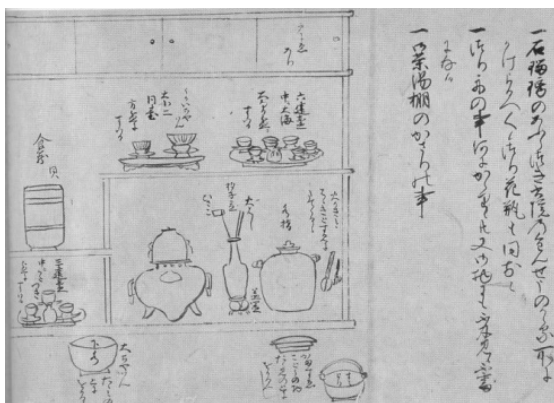


Fig. 18: Detail of the *Kundaikan sōchō-ki* (source: Kokuritsu rekishi minzoku hakubutsukan 2005, 167)



Fig. 19: Celadon bowl with old repairs (private collection; photo by author 2010)

The potter and the consumer, as we have seen, thus constitute the two swings of a pendulum, while the weights – the sailors and traders – keep the clock working.

16 See Kokuritsu rekishi minzoku hakubutsukan 2005, 166-167.



## Conclusion

Eventually coming back to the general question I raised in the beginning: what is landscape and how can it be defined? And, is a landscape approach as such invalid for the subject of my research – Japan’s maritime trade in ceramics – or do we need to readjust the general concept of a landscape in history by accepting that boundaries of a landscape can be quite ambivalent depending on the respective position (and questions) of the observer?

Darvill already postulated that “no two experiences of a landscape can ever be the same”. Light or weather would be different for every observer; value sets and social categories might have shifted.<sup>17</sup> Widgren stresses the inevitability of recognizing process and change within landscapes,<sup>18</sup> while Barnes points out that “any particular landscape feature may be attributed with different meanings by different viewers”.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, vividly illustrated by Barnes with regard to Buddhist landscapes in East Asia, explicit messages await the observer (of a *buddha* image, in this case);<sup>20</sup> but it is crucial to the encounter that an initiation took place that enables the observer to actually perceive the meaning of what he/she is confronted with.

An example: tourists visiting the pottery village of Arita in western Kyūshū may appreciate the many porcelain products – offered in an array of shops along the winding main street of the little town – by their virtual beauty, but applying a “landscape view” one at once realizes the tradition of Chinese porcelain manufacture as well as Korean pottery workmanship behind modern Arita porcelain production. The interrelationships of several physical and abstract landscapes rarely materialize so clearly in one spot, and rarely does a village (in Japan) embrace its ceramic history and reality so authentically. A classical landscape approach focusing on Arita town certainly is tremendously promising when exploring Japanese ceramic tradition. However, staying at the very spot and limiting the landscape approach to the Arita valley will never reveal the whole story. We have to inter-relate several land-

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17 Darvill 1999, 109.

18 Widgren 1999, 96.

19 Barnes 1999, 101.

20 Barnes 1999, 102-103.

scapes here to be able to enter the world of pottery makers and lovers in Arita, and the time and space that shaped this world.

Assessing the nature of these inter-related elements of Japan's pre-modern ceramic history that culminated in the establishment of porcelain kilns in the Arita area, the postulates of landscape modeling prove to be useful with regard to various aspects: landscape archaeology attempts to find the larger patterns within the area of observation, and to relate them to human activity. Visible and abstract elements of the landscape in question are explored, always underlined by the claim to understand the community or social unit in its completeness. These postulates work fine with Japan's ceramic landscape as I attempted to show. The decisive elements of this "ceramic-scape", the people, the time, the places and spaces, the social interrelationships and economic networks, and the cognitive structures and meanings connected, can be illustrated nicely by using this model.

However, one classical aspect has to be disregarded to some extent: the regional unity of the study object. Here, only certain facets of otherwise independent land- and seascapes (archaeologically materialized at kiln centres, ports, wreck finds, trading spots, residential sites) work together. What I conceptualize here as "ceramic landscape of premodern Japan" is a virtual landscape that transcends the area aspect and instead illustrates one slice of – and one perspective on – a multilayered and "multi-landscaped" system.

Darvill recently called attention to future challenges of landscape research. In his words

[o]rder, structure, and pattern may be perceived from many different directions according to the position of the observer. [Moreover] [l]andscapes do not have defined physical limits either in time or space, except where imposed by analytical procedures and intellectual traditions.<sup>21</sup>

In so far we do deal with a landscape here, both physical and abstract, I dare say we can create an image of the ceramic landscape of premodern Japan. While the time focus here has been the Muromachi period, it is the hope of the author that the model of a ceramic landscape transcending area may prove fruitful also for whatever period is being studied, in other cultural frameworks as well.

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21 Darvill 2010, 69.

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