This paper was born in an over-stuffed armchair in the Bryan Center. I needed a final paper topic for Dr. Christine Beaule's class, "The Archaeology of Death," and I needed it by 5 PM. I settled on sea burials, pausing to observe that there was surprisingly little literature on the topic. Dr. Beaule assured me that I would be able to manage. I would just have to make the most of what I could find.

So I began to hunt. I tracked down a few secondary sources to build a foundation for my paper, and I scored some musty compilations of sea lore in the stacks beneath Bostock. I sent out half a dozen requests through the inter-library loan system, hoping to get half of the books in time.

I had a Hollywood-style impression of what the ceremony must have been like in my head, one that drew me to the topic but answered few questions. Why weight the body? How would the surviving crewmembers have felt? How often did sailors actually die at sea?

The answers to each of these came from my sources. Once I started reading through them, the paper took on a life of its own. All I did was follow the sources—in Writing 20 parlance, I "came to terms" with them. What you have in your hands today is almost unimaginably removed from the hazy ideas I started with. Rough though it is, I present it to you as a source in its own right.

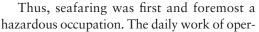# Interment without Earth: A Study of Sea Burials during the Age of Sail

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His body was reverently carried into the carpenter's shop and was laid out on the bench. The sailmaker and the carpenter prepared it for burial by washing and dressing him up in his best suit of "go-ashore" clothes, then sewing him up in a heavy piece of new canvas for a shroud, and with a couple of old iron cable shackles fastened at his feet, they laid the body on the sliding board, covered with the ship's ensign, to await burial…

—*Lt. Frederick Perry, 1876* [1]

The "Age of Sail" in the West, lasting from the fifteenth century to the close of the nineteenth, witnessed the rise of Western maritime supremacy as crews pushed ever farther across the world's oceans. Throughout the era, sailing vessels crisscrossed the world's oceans with increasing confidence. Yet even after centuries of progress in navigation, shipbuilding and sailing techniques could not guarantee the outcome of a voyage. No craft made of wood and reliant upon the wind could ever leave sight of land without some measure of risk.

Thus, seafaring was first and foremost a hazardous occupation. The daily work of operating a sailing ship was highly technical and often dangerous. A fall from a mast usually resulted in death or maiming, and sailors who tumbled overboard often drowned.[2] Lesser accidents were common. Although most studies suggest a low overall mortality rate, the omnipresence of risk and the potential for a catastrophic wreck made death a sailor's constant companion, at least in imagination. According to an estimate by Michael A. Lewis, so many risks emerged from normal operations at sea that even during the Napoleonic Wars, as few as 6.3% of the fatalities recorded on British naval vessels actually resulted from combat.[3] Whether they manned a warship or a tea clipper, sailors never escaped the hazards of their profession.

When these risks were realized, surviving sailors typically disposed of corpses at sea. Without refrigeration or any practical way to preserve bodies for a traditional land burial, and with the added superstitions surrounding shipboard corpses and hauntings, there was no real alternative. Yet the dead could be angered by a careless disposal, and men bound together by their shared way of life (a relationship that will receive ample attention below) could not dispose of the bodies of their close comrades as they might ordinary refuse.

Sailors lived in close proximity, and formed close ties without the traditional boundaries of land. Developed within this context, sea burials evidenced the heightened superstitions and emotional bonds of sailors and their need to both honor and protect themselves from the spirits of their dead companions.

Accordingly, Western sailors developed a highly ritualized, ubiquitous funerary service, distinct from burials on land and reflective of the unique context of shipboard life. A dead sailor would be shrouded, weighted, carried in a brief procession, and then slid overboard after a brief service. This iconic ritual, the product of a distinct and well-recorded environment, deserves greater attention from scholars for its enormous potential as a case study of how and why ritualistic ceremonies take their otherwise arbitrary forms.

An understanding of the shipboard environment and attitudes of the surviving crewmembers are the keys to appreciating the context in which the ceremony emerged. Sailors lived in close proximity, and formed close ties without the traditional boundaries of land. The constant dangers discussed above could never have been far from a sailor's mind. Developed within this context, sea burials evidenced the heightened superstitions and emotional bonds of sailors and their need to both honor and protect themselves from the spirits of their dead companions.

Putting the "Ship" in "Kinship": A Tie to Anthropological Theory

A shipboard death had an enormous impact upon shipboard life. The funerary ritual was the survivors' collective expression of their attitudes towards the death of one of their own, and so this study will first seek to understand the bond these men might have shared. Anthropological studies of kinship offer many useful insights that a number of authors, notably David J. Stewart, have applied to sailors. Far beyond personal relationships, the entire sailing community was bound into a distinct "folk group," a group defined by their shared culture and strong personal ties. Their acceptance of shared danger further bound them into what Edward T. Hall and Barre Toelken have termed a "high-contrast folk group,"[4] a distinct subset of a normal folk group.

These high-contrast folk groups can still be found in modern professions with relatively high personal risk. For example, Robert McCarl, studying firefighters, George Korson, studying miners, and Barre Toelken, focusing on loggers, have revealed characteristics common to both groups that Stewart applies to his study of sailors.[5] As Stewart explains, members of a folk group share skills, styles of dress, and vocabulary.[6] Although crews were often ethnically diverse,[7] most sailors were of

Figure 1. The funeral of NYC firefighter John H. Martinson on 8 January 2008.

the same (young) age.[8] They developed skills, fashions, and dialects—a culture of their own which is still shared to some degree by many sailors today.[9]

Firefighters—with specialized equipment, highly technical training, communal living, and a famously dangerous profession—share many of the characteristics of sailors during the Age of Sail. Modern firefighter funerals reveal the close bonds of the entire firefighting community, a classic example of a high-contrast folk group. Firefighters collectively honor their dead colleagues regardless of personal acquaintance. The funeral of New York City firefighter John H. Martinson on January 8, 2008 was notable for a mass outpouring of grief. New York Times reporter Anne Barnard wrote, "his fellow firefighters had already spent five days telling the world about his bravery"[10] running into the blaze that killed him. The entire firefighting community felt the loss, and "firefighters stood in ranks six or seven deep for several blocks" lining Martinson's procession. The mass demonstration of grief and the efforts to tie Martinson to the broader firefighting community are evident in Figure 1 above; note the firetruck, flag,

and attending firefighters visible in the foreground.

Evidence of sailors' concerns for their deceased brethren abounds in their memorials. Stewart describes one in the Seamen's Bethel in New Bedford:

This plaque is dedicated to three men who were drowned…in 1854. Two of the men have Anglo-American names, but the third, listed as "Frank Kanacka," was a native Hawaiian islander… While in some sense [Kanacka, an American term for the islanders, was] a racial epithet, the crew nevertheless felt it was important to record the death of their shipmate…even though the man… had most likely never been to Massachusetts, and likely had no family connections there.[11]

Only a close bond, like that of the high-contrast folk groups observed by McCarl, Korson, and Toelken, could have induced the dead sailors' crewmates to faithfully commemorate all three instead of the two who may have had a connection to the home port. Here, this bond outweighed racial factors and led sailors to bury each other as kin,[12] in sharp contrast to the class-based differences seen in land burials.

Methodology

This paper uses primary and secondary accounts of sea burials, customs and superstitions, both contemporary and modern, from a range of cultures. The sea burial service is considered in its entirety, from the washing, dressing and enshrouding of the body to the short procession, service, and then final ejection into the sea. Consideration of kinship theory and the bonds between modern high-contrast folk groups inform an attempt to contextualize the service within common shipboard relationships. Data on 19th century maritime superstitions is gathered from primary and contemporary secondary sources, as well as from modern secondary sources.

Sea burials have left few meaningful archaeological traces, but fortunately there are many records of individual ceremonies. Most first-hand accounts or records are not detailed, and are often as brief as "Buried on Stephen Wright."[13] The brevity of the entries belies the deep significance of a funeral service for all onboard ship. An unusually detailed account by Frederick Perry, an officer aboard the American clipper *Continental* in 1876,[14] offers a glimpse into the experience. Perry's account both encapsulates the structure of the ceremony and beautifully highlights a number of its theoretical underpinnings, capturing the mood and context. If this paper's claim, that superstition and tight kinship (itself born in part from shared, deadly risks) influenced burial practices, is defensible, Perry's account will reveal elements in the funerary ceremony designed to respect the dead, to assuage the crew's grief, and to protect from haunting.

The Sea Burial Ceremony

It is essential to note that sea burials were generally viewed as less preferable than earth burials. Stewart cites a number of accounts of ship's crews making considerable efforts to bury even junior officers ashore.[15] Dying on his flagship *Victory,* Vice Admiral Horatio Nelson is reputed to have told Captain Thomas Masterman Hardy, "Don't throw me overboard, Hardy!"[16] The sea could not provide a concrete final resting place for a body; mourners could never visit, and the fate of the corpse could not be known.[17]

Given the close relationship between sailors, it is likely that they would have wanted to bury their crewmates with care. Yet transportation to land from offshore was rarely considered. Difficulties of preservation aside, it was considered bad luck to carry a body onboard. Seafaring tales of haunted ships abound. U.S. Navy Lieutenant Fletcher S. Bassett compiled a significant number and published them as a five-hundred-page book in 1892.[18] Bassett concludes that "It was believed that they [corpses] were potent storm-raisers on board ship, and it is still believed that their presence at sea bodes no good."[19] Sailors were left with a difficult situation: a ship could hardly store a growing collection of decaying corpses for land burial, but no sailor wished to be discarded overboard.

Unfortunately, burying a body at sea—no matter how reluctantly—could be just as dangerous as leaving it aboard ship. In a discussion of sea burials, David J. Stewart suggests that postmortem rituals designed to protect the living from the malice of the dead "seems to be a cultural universal."[20] He cites a Western tradition stretching back "at least to Homeric Greece" and through the period when burial at sea on deep sea voyages began. In the Western tradition, ghosts were tied to premature deaths that were not properly respected by the living[21] and so returned to haunt them. Nor were Western sailors alone in their fretful imaginings: some accounts state that Arab sailors broke the bones of dead crew members before dropping the body overboard to prevent them from rising.[22]

Fearing haunting as well as wanting to bury their mates, sailors in Western tradition developed a hybrid ceremony that combined unique rituals with elements adapted from land. Many aspects of the funeral service are clearly intended to reproduce the terrestrial custom—but again with additional motives specific to life at sea. As Stewart observes, "Structurally, burial at sea was simply the funeral service used on land adapted to a maritime setting. Most of the elements of the ritual…occurred in the same order on land."[23]

Illustrating this duality, Perry begins his account with a description of how the crew "reverently" dressed the deceased sailor in a shroud and "in his best suit of 'go-ashore' clothes."[24] The shroud is commonly employed in land burials, where it serves to separate the living from the dead. This was a distinction all the more significant at sea, where water replaced earth and the traditional service did not employ a coffin. The decision to bury the sailor in land clothes rather than his maritime clothing was clearly deliberate. The clothing would have influenced the context of his corpse. Water could never replace earth as a substantial medium for interment. Thus the clothing became significant—and burying

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a corpse in clothing worn on land could have been seen as a way to separate him from the crew in death, even to "drown" him. Alternative or complementary motives, such as a desire to mimic landside funerals, are certainly possible. Nevertheless, it is telling that the crew, so closely bound in life, distanced themselves from the corpse.

"I am the resurrection and the life…We commit this body to the deep."

The common shipboard funeral procession, on the other hand, was an example of purer respect. Processions were common on land, where they both allowed a community to address the corpse and disoriented the deceased's spirit to keep it from haunting its home.[25] An abbreviated procession on a small ship could not disorient a ghost, so retention of the ritual aboard ship suggests an emotional need. Four sailors "reverently carried" the body of "poor Louie."[26] One or two sailors would have sufficed drag the body had practical considerations alone guided the ceremony. The crew of the *Continental* could never have staged a procession like that of New York City firefighter John H. Martinson, but even a short procession allowed the crew to come together to respect and acknowledge a dead mate.[27]

The captain of the *Continental* performed a brief, formulaic service, intoning "I am the resurrection and the life…We commit this body to the deep."[28] The religious overtones are intriguing but cannot be explored;[29] it is sufficient to note that Stewart concludes that mariners were often remarkable for their lack of religious adherence[30] and that even after religious revivals they were not especially religious compared to members of their home communities.[31] A religious service would have been performed on land, however, and it showed respect to the dead to offer it at sea.

This dignifying accent would have both comforted the crew and placated the deceased.

The practice of weighting the body as mentioned by Perry was more clearly unique to maritime tradition. Perry describes how the crew prepared the corpse "…with a couple of old iron cable shackles fastened at his feet."[32] Weighting with a cannon ball was more typical, but it is significant that the crew of the *Continental* employed such an immobilizing substitute as lengths of chain wrapped about the deceased's legs. In either case, the weight would help to ensure that the body would sink beneath the waves—and could not rise again.[33]

The ritual emphasis on keeping the sailor from returning as a ghost can be understood as a response to the transience of the sea and of maritime life. A crew lived with only wooden planking separating them from an abyss of water. No physical obstacle impeded individual movement from the surface of the water to the sea floor, or vice versa. Without weighting, a body might float on the surface indefinitely; a weighted body might sink, but the sea itself formed no physical boundary. Perry relates that the crew of the *Continental* reported seeing Louie's ghost a few days after his completely proper service.[34] Indeed, the very term "sea burial" is in a sense inappropriate—for how can a body be "buried" beneath a surface that is the very definition of fluidity?

The facility of movement at sea therefore must have had a profound influence upon the development of sea "burials," and thus the theory of mortuary boundaries should be considered briefly. Andrew T. Chamberlain and Mike Parker Pearson synthesize the academic discussion of the often "fuzzy" boundaries between the dead and the living, demonstrating how perceptions of a risk of crossover from one world to the next exist in many cultures.[35] Special precautions had to be taken to ensure that a seaman wrapped only in a shroud and dropped into the sea could not return to stalk his vulnerable shipmates.

A weighted body sank out of sight with a loud splash, which the crew welcomed as a sign that their shipmate and companion had finally been "buried." Perry ends his description of the ceremony itself by relating how "with a splash, [Louie's body] disappeared beneath the angry waves." This final splash was perhaps the only noise in a largely silent ritual, which substituted a silent stitch through a shroud for the dull thud of a nail in a coffin.

The splash mattered. In a modern compilation of U.S. Naval tradition, retired US Navy

Figure 2. Burial at sea on the USS Intrepid after a Japanese attack. 26 November 1944.

Commander Royal W. Connell and retired Vice Admiral William P. Mack cite an account by Captain Basil Hall, who witnessed a sea burial aboard his ship in 1812. In this case, the splash could not be heard: "The evening was extremely dark…So violent a squall was sweeping past the ship at this moment, that no sound was heard of the customary splash, which made the sailors allege that their young favorite never touched the water at all, but was at one carried off in the gale to his final resting place!"[36] Without the confirmation of "the usual splash," the crew could not be entirely certain about the fate of the body. Happily—and perhaps unusually—the sailors seemed confident that their mate was properly buried, although they were denied the "usual" confirmation and closure. For a further demonstration of this focus on the final moments of the ceremony, see Figure 2; note the extreme precision and care with which the sailors are releasing the bodies.

A more serious failure of the ceremony could leave the crew deeply troubled, whether out of superstition or genuine remorse. In *Folklore and the Sea*, Horace Palmer Beck cites one Dean MacFarlane, the captain of a modern ship, who was forced to bury a sailor at sea when the engine of his ship failed:

The engine wouldn't work no more…we would have really tried to give him a grave ashore, but you see he [could not] rest here…[we bathed him] and I had a nice mattress cloth and we shove him in…and sew him up…and the mate read over him…and we let him go.

But there is one mistake I made…as everyone was so sad and crying…I never remember to tie a sinker on him. Well, after they let him go he would not go to bottom. He float. The men kept watching…[until] he was gone…We gave him a sea burial and the mate reading as if it was ashore you know…but we really should have put a sinker

on him. Whenever you are going to bury a man out at sea you must put a sinker on him and when you let him go he goes. It doesn't matter if he make bottom or where he make. You must put a sinker on him. We could see him after we gave way to go and that was wrong. We should have put a sinker on him.[37]

Captain MacFarlane was less concerned with haunting than respecting his shipmate, but his regret over the failed funeral is palpable in his repeated insistence that a sinker was needed. Captain Hall's sailors were content that their mate was suitably taken care of, yet Captain MacFarlane failed to provide a sense of finality to himself or to his crew, and failed to honor the deceased. Their last sight of their friend was his body floating away—consigned indefinitely to bob on the waves in a purgatory of sorts.

The weights were not the only customary aspect of the sea funeral that the MacFarlane omitted: a less superstitious modern captain, he did not employ what has been called the "nasal stitch." Simply put, the final stitch of the shroud—in itself utterly lacking as an emblem of finality—was customarily threaded through the nose of the deceased. The nasal stitch was well documented and commonly practiced, especially during the nineteenth century, when Herman Melville included a lengthy passage on its merits in the novel *White Jacket*.[38] Writing in the *Journal of American Folk-Lore* in 1894 (at a time when the practice seems to have begun to fall out of use), the American naval surgeon G.P. Bradley observed,

> the sailmaker's mate…was well aware of the necessity for taking the *last stitch* through the tip of the patient's nose; without this precaution the body would not "*stay down,*" however weighted with shot, but would shake off the trammels of its sailor shroud, and reappear as a ghost to its former shipmates.[39]

Perhaps because it served to connect the shroud physically with the deceased sailor's body, this stitch was seen as a reliable method of forestalling a haunting. The stitch also sealed an entrance into a sailor's body, forming an additional barrier beyond the shroud itself. Moreover, it served a practical purpose: a sailor mistakenly believed to be dead could revive upon experiencing "the stitch," as Dr. Bradley also noted anecdotally.[40] Drowning a shipmate would have been an appalling error—and a commensurate response by the sailor's unrestrained ghost might have been expected.

Following the splash of the body beneath the waves, the crew of the *Continental* abruptly returned to their normal duties. Perry was after all "still on a sailing ship and there was no time to waste with wandering thoughts or sentiment when the wind, blowing fair, would carry us swiftly to our destined port."[41]

Sailing On

The sea holds the remains of countless shrouded, weighted corpses, buried in a ceremony similar to the one practiced on the *Continental* in 1876. The rite has endured in the popular imagination, from the novels of Herman Melville to the film "Master and Commander."[42] Both the sea funeral and its context were well documented and preserved, creating an ideal but under-explored opportunity to examine the relationship between the ultimate form of a ritual and the needs of those who developed it.[43]

The sea burial ritual was a complex response to a world of contradictions. Practical considerations forced sailors to throw the bodies of friends over the side of their vessel even as they struggled to show respect. Sailors grew close in part out of their shared risk, but superstition bred of vulnerability led them to fear haunting by their former shipmate. Complicating these considerations, the ritual itself was in a way futile: men sought to "bury" a body for good in the boundless sea. The burial rite addressed each of these concerns and more. Sailors prayed over a body before disposing of it. They paid their respects to a friend, then dressed him in land clothes, sewed a shroud through his nose, and weighted his corpse to sink him forever. They strained to hear a final splash before returning to their work.

Through this systematic examination, the ritual of sea burial can be seen as a response to a correspondingly challenging context. Far from arbitrary, this ceremonies like this one bear the unmistakable imprint of those who practiced them, offering insights into their deepest feelings and concerns. On the written page, study of funerary rituals can return the shadows of long deceased practitioners to life. ∎

Notes

[1] Cited in David J. Stewart, "'Rocks and Storms I'll Fear No More': Anglo-American Maritime Memorialization, 1700-1940" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Texas A&M University, 2004), 145.

[2] Ibid., 9-12.

[3] Cited in Stewart, "Rocks and Storms," 10.

[4] Ibid., 51.

[5] See also Stewart, "Rocks and Storms," 15.

[6] Ibid., 52.

[7] Ibid., 56.

[8] Figures are estimates, but numerous studies have concluded that most sailors were in their teens or twenties, and most officers began their careers before the age of 18 in the English and American navies during the 18th and 19th centuries. See Stewart, "Rocks and Storms," 53.

[9] Consider a description of the modern sailing community, a close group even today, in Louisa W. Pittman "Appeasing Neptune: The Functions of Nautical Tradition," *Chrestomathy* 5 (2006).

[10] Anne Barnard, "Tributes and Grief at a Funeral for a Firefighter," *New York Times,* January 9 2008, Metro section, http://www.nytimes.com (accessed 31 March 2008).

[11] Stewart, "Rocks and Storms," 226. A picture of the plaque can be found on page 225.

[12] Of course, most sailors were of modest means, and higher-ranked officers were often carried home for burial. See the famous case of English Admiral Horatio Nelson, recounted in this paper, for example.

[13] Sir Thomas Allin, Captain of the HMS Monmouth, Journal Entry, 8 February 1667. Cited in Stewart, "Rocks and Storms," 178.

[14] Stewart, "Rocks and Storms," 145.

[15] Ibid., 201.

[16] Stewart, "Burial at Sea", 3

[17] Hence Perry's "sympathy" for the mother of the dead sailor, "sitting desolate and alone way up in Mississippi River Valley, waiting and watching in vain for her boy who would never return," mentioned by Perry at the close of his entry.

[18] See Fletcher S. Bassett, *Sea Phantoms: or Legends and Superstitions of the Sea and of Sailors In All Lands and at All Times* (Chicago: Morrill, Higgins & Co., 1892). See also Angelo S. Rappoport, *Superstitions of Sailors* (London: Stanley Paul & Co, 1928).

[19] Bassett "Sea Phantoms," 473.

[20] Stewart, "Burial at Sea," 278

[21] Ibid.

[22] Referenced by Stewart, "Burial at Sea," 280. The practice is also referenced by G. P. Bradley, "Burial Custom Formerly Observed in the Naval Service" in *Journal of American Folklore* 7, (24, 1894): 68.

[23] Ibid., 180.

[24] Frederick Perry, journal, 1876. Cited in Stewart, "Rocks and Storms," 178.

[25] Stewart, "Rocks and Storms," 5

[26] Ibid.

[27] The draping of a flag over the body is difficult to interpret due to the rich symbolism of flags, but it may have served partly to place the body within a context and partly as an additional layer of separation between the deceased and the crew. Stewart comes to the same conclusion. See Stewart, "Rocks and Storms," 213.

[28] There was likely more content to this service; Perry prints only the passages that he feels are vitally important—and therefore provides the modern reader with a meaningful abbreviation.

[29] A discussion of the attitudes of sailors towards religion during this period would grow complex and exceeds the focus of this paper; for a lengthy consideration see Stewart, "Rocks and Storms," 246-305.

[30] Stewart, "Rocks and Storms," 245.

[31] Ibid., 305.

[32] Ibid., 145. Note also that weighing of the body is found in other rituals such as the burials of "bog bodies" by Celtic groups from the Neolithic to the Iron Age in Europe. See Andrew T. Chamberlain, and Mike Parker Pearson "To Infinity and Beyond? The Embalming of Corpses in Contemporary British and American Culture," *Earthly Remains: The History and Science of Preserved Human Bodies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[33] Note that spirits could still rise in a less dangerous form. Perry ends his account by suggesting that Louie could return in a seabird's body (specifically an albatross). Bassett and others have recorded this aspect of maritime lore; in some cases, sailors refused to shoot at birds out of this belief. The belief in birds adds another dimension to the confused boundaries of life at sea; in a sense, the dead were not only below the ship but also constantly in the air around it.

[34] David J. Stewart, "Burial at Sea: Separating and Placing the Dead During the Age of Sail," *Mortality* 10 (4, November 2005): 3.

[35] Chamberlain and Pearson, "Early Remains," 2.

[36] Royal W. Connell and William P. Mack, *Naval Ceremonies, Customs and Traditions,* 6th ed. (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2004), 73.

[37] Horace Palmer Beck, *Folklore and the Sea* (Mystic, Connecticut: Mystic Seaport Museum, 1996, c1973), 330.

[38] G.P. Bradley, "Burial Custom Formerly Observed in the Naval Service." *Journal of American Folklore* 7 (24, 1894): 67-69.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Stewart "Rocks and Storms," 145.

[42] *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World.* Dir. Peter Weir (2004; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation).

[43] Due to limitations of scope, this paper could only address one case study—Perry's account—in detail. Opportunities for deeper exploration abound. Further study of the relationships between sailors could shed more light on the concept of "kinship." Ties to land burials at the time should be developed, especially with respect to the role of religion. See the dissertation of Stewart, "Rocks and Storms," for an interesting but not comprehensive treatment of this topic.