

QUESTIONING ISLANDS, ISLANDERS AND INSULARITY IN THE MEDITERRANEAN *LONGUE DURÉE*

Some views from the island of Gavdos (Crete, Greece)

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ABSTRACT: The geological history of the island topoi started in the interior of the primordial sea of our planet hundreds of millions of years ago, an immensely long time before the appearance of humans. Evidence of hominid-“islanders”, and, consequently, their age-old sea crossings, is today being traced deeper and deeper in Palaeolithic stratigraphies. Written forms of the concept of islands exist in early scripts and, with consistency, later in Homer, in ancient literature and in other accounts. Research on islands was established in the 19th and early 20th centuries in major works by authors such as Darwin and Malinowski. But, despite such initial or “proto” activity, how much has our modern synthesis of knowledge and interdisciplinary understanding of islands and islanders – and their territories and seas, identities and behaviours – progressed? What makes us keep wondering about natural and human-made material and symbolic islandscapes, and their potential similarities and distinctions from non-insular worlds? Following on from previous reflections about the work of the University of Crete’s Island Interdisciplinary Workshop that mainly derive from our archaeological and interdisciplinary study of the island of Gavdos, off the southwestern shore of Crete, I shall try to suggest a relevant methodological framework by summarising a number of insular issues in a diachronic Aegean and Mediterranean perspective.

KEYWORDS: Island terminologies/etymologies; small islands; comparative island studies; Island Interdisciplinary Workshop of the University of Crete.

Introduction

In a way, the history of islands started hundreds of millions of years ago (Scotese, 2001), even before the Pangaea, the first landmass, was formed in the bottom of the Panthalassa, the vast primordial sea, and long before the appearance of mankind. People have lived ever since on a planet full of island-continents (such as Australia, and America after the opening of the Bering Straits) and other island formations: the results of dynamic tectonic, seismic, eustatic and other mainly physical actions which caused islands to break away and be cut off from continental lands and/or emerge and travel before adhering to mainlands again. Thus, islands of all types and sizes are born, and live, and die, in reality and in myth (eg Kopaka, 2009: 184-185), but never lose, it seems, their insular “genome” – islands like giant

Madagascar and even present-day mainlands such as India – which began as an island before it collided with Asia – are still havens of endemism and have distinct biota.

Primeval “islanders”, hominids and modern humans – and, in the same time, their age-old water crossings – are being found today ever deeper in world cultural stratigraphies (eg Simmons, 2014). Archaic maritime journeys’ to the distant Flores island in Indonesia and later, between 60,000 and 40,000 BCE, to Oceania launched debates on island “colonisations” and hominin capacity to cross the sea early in the Pleistocene (eg Anderson et al, 2010; Phoca-Cosmetatou et al, 2014; Bellwood, 2017; Leppard and Runnels, 2017).¹ The concept of the “island”, as a word or circumlocution, can be recognised in Egyptian, Hittite and probably other Near Eastern Bronze Age texts,² and appears regularly in Homer and various other accounts in ancient literature, medieval and later travellers’ and cartographers’ descriptions etc.

Despite such remote “proto” evidence, how much has a modern systematic, individual and general knowledge and essential, interdisciplinary, understanding of islands – their inhabitants and their territories and surrounding seas, and identities, and behaviours – progressed? While research on islands was already established in the 19th and the first decades of the 20th centuries, when major works like those by Darwin (1859) and Malinowski (1922) appeared, important research and theorisation on island culture studies has only developed in the two last decades – see, for instance, the *Shima* Editorial Board, (2007) and further contributions to this and other journals; for Aegean archaeology, see the seminal Broodbank (2000) and, for example, Berg (2010); and for Cyprus see Knapp (2008). But what makes us keep wondering, on an international scale, about insular worlds (eg Kopaka, 2009; Jędrusik, 2011; and Hayward, 2016)? And what motivates us to look for similarities and differences between these worlds and non-insular ones and for any concrete, essential features of being insular, of “insularity”? In fact, why are we not wondering, equally, with regard to the latter notions, about “non-islands” (ie mainlands) and “non-insularity”? Is the island not an obvious structural unit of scientific analysis? Or is it still a neglected issue that needs to be constantly defined and re-defined in our quest, or claim, for the “visibility” of the island topoi?

The Island Interdisciplinary Workshop of the University of Crete

The University of Crete’s Island Interdisciplinary Workshop was created to meet similar concerns and share them with colleagues who are studying and/or thinking about islands. The Workshop began in December 2013, on my initiative, when I was the Dean of the School of Philosophy with a responsibility to enhance collaboration among the School’s Departments. It originally involved 15 scholars in Biology, History, Archaeology, Sociology

¹ For prehistoric islanders of the Holocene Era, see Dawson, 2010; Copat et al, 2010; Phoca-Cosmetatou (ed), 2011; Ammerman and Davis (eds) 2013.

² Hieroglyphic inscriptions from 2nd millennium BCE Egypt refer to people from the *jw hrj-jb nw w3d-wr* (‘Isles in the Middle of the Great Green’), “almost certainly the Egyptian name for the Aegean islands, probably including the Peloponnese” (Panagiotopoulos. 2001: 263, and fn1) – compare the designation “that lies in the middle of the sea” that follows the name of (the island of) Arwad in Sumerian or Akkadian (pc with the assyriologist S. Dalley, 27th May 2015). The rare Hittite word *kuršawar*, which probably means “island,” maybe of Luwian origin, is related to the poorly-attested verb *kurša* (‘separate’), “which would make sense, an island being a separate piece of land” (J. Penney, pc 27th May 2015). I thank Helen Brock for her practical and critical help on this interesting issue.

and Cultural Anthropology who were addressing, in varying degrees, one or more islands, often without their realising that they were working in nissology.

So far we have achieved:

a) A series of monthly meetings/seminars in 2013-2014 on 'Islands and Islanders in the Aegean and the Mediterranean: Insular worlds in the *longue geo-cultural durée*'. These aimed to forge a common comprehension – and/or osmosis – between our different methodological approaches to islands and, thus, contribute to the shaping of an alternative perception of islandscapes – and show they encourage the quest for and critical evaluation of intrinsic parameters of insularity within a long lasting human geography, following Braudel's perceptions of time. In this framework, we started to discuss the following topics and questions:

1. Islands – Islanders – Insularity. Epistemological issues and definitions
2. Island ecologies
3. Island cultures
4. Island symbolisms
5. Research and education on islands

b) In December 2014, a year after the start of the Workshop, we organised a two-day Symposium at Rethymno that we hope will be the first of a series (Figure 1) but, this time, with invited external participants too. Indeed, a number of colleagues came eagerly to Crete

University of Crete
School of Philosophy
Island Interdisciplinary Workshop



First series of lectures

Islands and islanders in the Aegean and the Mediterranean.
Island worlds in the long geo-cultural durée

Figure 1 - Flyer for the Island Symposium held at Rethymno in 2014

from mainland and insular Greece, and a few from abroad, to get to know us and to share research experiences (archaeological and historical, sociological and cultural anthropological, ecological and biogeographic...) from their favourite islands, and their physical settings and communities.³ There have been 20 lectures in total, 19 in Greek and 1 in English and edited proceedings are under preparation. The Symposium was dedicated to the French geographer Émile Yerahmiel Kolodny, as a modest tribute to his pioneering contribution to our knowledge and understanding of the Greek and other Mediterranean islands and their populations (see, above all, the seminal Kolodny, 1974).

Among the aims of the ongoing research and education activity of the Island Workshop of the University of Crete is to participate in the new platform for interdisciplinary discussion of islands offered by SICRI in the form of its annual ISIC conferences.

Questioning islands, islanders and insularity

Here are some thoughts on which we are working at the University of Crete (not only in the Island Workshop but also in the Workshop of Prehistoric Archaeology and the Botanical Garden that are both focusing on Mediterranean human and natural landscapes) and which may help to shape a relevant methodological framework by summarising a number of questions concerning islands, islanders and insularity, especially in the holistic and long lasting perspective that we are looking for. These reflections are, of course, not new; and, far from being exhaustive, my bibliographical approach to them focuses mainly on what we have written, being lucky enough to have gained precious wisdom from a single small island, Gavdos off the south coast of western Crete and the south-easternmost Greek and European border (Figures 2, 3 and 4). We have carried out research there since the early 1990s, which we have since tested on other satellite Cretan isles (Kopaka and Kossyva, 1999), especially Dia to the north (Kopaka, 2012).

³ The text on the flyer introduced the event in the following terms: “The Island Interdisciplinary Workshop of the School of Philosophy of the University of Crete is hosting a first series of lectures on “Islands and islanders in the Aegean and the Mediterranean - Island worlds in the long geo-cultural durée.” Greek and foreign researchers from many scientific fields – biologists, historians, archaeologists, sociologists, social anthropologists... – are invited to present, discuss and share their experiences of islands within the various cultural contexts of prehistoric, historical, modern and contemporary times. Through the dynamic osmosis of different theoretical, epistemological and methodological approaches to Aegean and Mediterranean insular worlds, the lectures will contribute to the shaping of a comprehensive and alternative perception of natural, man-made, social and symbolic landscapes. This conceptual approach encourages the quest for, and critical evaluation of, potential intrinsic parameters of insularity in the framework of a qualitative human geography in the Braudelian long durée. The lectures are organised by the Dean of the School of Philosophy in collaboration with the Department of History and Archaeology, the Department of Philosophy and Social Studies and the Botanical Garden of the University of Crete. They will take place on Saturday 6 and Sunday 7 December 2014 at Rethymno (XENIA Cultural-Student Centre) and are open to students and the public. This scientific meeting is dedicated to Émile Kolodny, Honorary director of research of the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), for his seminal contribution to the study of the Greek and Mediterranean islands and island populations.”

Kopaka: Questioning Islands



Figures 2 - Map of the South Aegean and Cretan islands (elaborated by Pinelopi Stefanaki)



Figure 3 - Map of Crete and Gavdos/Gavdopoula (elaborated by Pinelopi Stefanaki)



Figure 4 - Gavdos from Gavdopoula (author's photograph, 2011)

Some key issues in the study of islands are, we believe:

1. A systematic approach and decoding of *island etymologies and terminologies*. Starting from the very word “island” and all its derivatives and contexts (see also fn1 above) including the concepts of “insularity” in its various forms in different languages (eg French *insularité, insularisme, insuléité*, Greek *nisiotismos/ νησιωτισμός, nisiotikotita/ νησιωτικότητα* etc). An invaluable aspect of this is the often-neglected contribution of island names (nissonyms) – and of adjectives and nouns, verbs and other relevant linguistic evidence (eg Kopaka, 2009). These shape a meaningful material and metaphorical identity for each island in time. Similarly, local place names (toponyms) describe individual physical and social inner settings (eg Kopaka et al, 2001; see also Ronström, 2009 and 2011; Nash, 2011). Such information provides experiential, real and cognitive mapping deriving from an empirical geography and ecology of the mind that is vital for islanders and of great assistance to people from the worlds beyond, including scholars and researchers.

2. A scientific emphasis on *small islands*. In fact, in our dialogues for and with insular sites, we spontaneously think first of small islands. These are the most efficient “laboratories for the study of culture process”, to narrow down Evans’s original idea (1973) to the small-insular scale. Such locations have been rightly been called “matchbox continents” (Held, 1989: 10), which they are not only in their environmental features but also as they seem to their inhabitants. As sea-locked and restricted domains, they filter broad cultural trajectories and conserve large historical sequences – and reflect them like mirrors set beyond the horizon to facilitate scientific investigation, observation and interpretation. For example, it was on Gavdos that we first detected dozens of often impressive ancient rock-cut winepresses (Figure 5) (Christodoulakos et al, 2001), before we tracked them in Crete, where they are also numerous but were unknown in the archaeological literature. And most interestingly, the Palaeolithic chipped stone tools that we found in the Gavdos survey fuelled a dynamic debate in 2006 on the hominin presence in the wider Cretan region, reversing previous scientific bias that had led to the invisibility of that remote period on Crete (Kopaka and Matzanas 2009 and 2011; Kopaka and Sampatakaki, 2017: 218 and references in n5-8; also, Strasser et al, 2010; Runnels, 2014; Papoulia, 2016). Above all, this

small island of ours has taught us how to think of and understand Crete as an island too – a great island, indeed/a *megalonisos* – and Cretan cultures (including the emblematic Minoan culture) as insular ones.



Figure 5 - Rock cut winepress, Gavdos (author's photograph, 1995)

3. The search for a *global eco-cultural knowledge*, environmental, geographical, archaeological, historical, sociological and other, for the studied islands – a multidisciplinary approach that we adopted early in the Gavdos project (eg Kopaka, 2015: 63) in line with novel approaches in Aegean archaeology such as in the survey (and publication) of the Milos project in the early 1980s (Renfrew and Wagstaff [eds], 1982).

Of great value here is the impact of oral tradition (when it exists) and not only for anthropologists (eg Hamilakis and Anagnostopoulos, 2009). Islanders' attitudes and points of view, if carefully decoded, can animate resistant aspects of their native material cultures and ideologies and provide convincing emic clues to their comprehension. From an old Gavdiot lady, Mrs Angeliki Vailakaki, we learned, for instance, how relative the notion of distance can be in this small place and space: indeed, she related that several months passed before she managed to hold her first baby grandson in her arms, as his family lived, she said, "too far away!" – but only 3 km separated her "mountain village" at Vatsiana from her son's residence on the coast at Sarakiniko... And it is Miss Androniki Gialynaki (Figure 6) who taught us how to conceive with the empathy that was needed, the dead person in a pithos burial of the 2nd millennium BCE which we excavated in her neighbourhood on the Tsirmiris hill at the beginning of the 2nd millennium AD (Kopaka, forthcoming). Countless other examples could support this view of a "living archaeology" that is ever weakening, alas, as local people age and pass away.

4. The *comparative study* of islands' analogies and discrepancies (eg Kopaka and Cadogan, 2012), while keeping in mind that "with fairly common natural ingredients the people of the

Mediterranean islands kneaded their respective cultural stratigraphies, using their own specific recipes to produce various doughs, fortunately with different tastes and flavours” (Kopaka, 2011: 25). With fragile ecosystems and subtle demographic and social balances, island societies have had to reconcile and accommodate their (pseudo-) autonomy and dependence and their introversion and extraversion. Small islands, in particular, are in vital need of exchanging with regions beyond the sea but also of maintaining and relentlessly recycling indigenous features and resources that may guarantee their existence and identity. Thus they develop, by necessity and sometimes by choice, mixed, distinct and even idiosyncratic features, especially when compared with the mainlands and/or other islands with which they interact (eg Kopaka, 2005, esp: 94-95).



Figure 6 - A Gavdiot lady with her animals (author's photograph, 1996)

In antiquity, for example, Gavdos was not connected culturally with its closest region, Sfakia, but with the more distant plain of Mesara to the east, and thus with central and northern Crete (see Kopaka 2005, esp. 98-100). While Gavdiot prehistoric material production resembles that of both its Cretan mother-island and the wider Aegean, without closely imitating either any of them; it is, in fact, quite different even from its near-neighbour, the islet of Gavdopoula. (See Figure 4).

5. The *crucial role of the sea*, which can be regarded as the key component of any discussion on maritime insularity. The sea is the unique way to and from an island, the absolute regulator of insular communication and isolation, the imposed physical and mental border line between islands and mainlands. Islands survive and even flourish only when sea routes favour them, and decline when they neglect them. The sea is the *chef d'orchestre* of the islands in pre-industrial Mediterranean geo-cultural policies, the element that distinguishes our islands from the 'other' those “that the sea does not surround” (Braudel, 1972: 160-161).

As I have noted elsewhere (and as is generally well known), the sea bestows on islands their particular reputation and specific and general material and immaterial value – eg for their resources, raw materials, staples and other products (like the “saltiness” of island wines) and for their cults, rituals, and overall beliefs. And islanders appropriate, use and even exploit the sea’s properties and “mythologies” in their dialogue with the non-islanders, often in an almost opportunistic way (Kopaka, 2005: esp. 94-97; Kopaka and Cadogan, 2012: 20-21, 22-23).

Epilogue

It is mainly the sea that makes a controversial and contested free zone (*zone franche*) of each island, a specific, usually utopian oasis, a hideout, a shelter and refuge, a gateway for hope, whether fulfilled or not. This is well stressed, even if in a rhetorical way, by Mankell’s timely and heretical claim that, for him, the symbolic centre of Europe is the small island of Lampedusa, “because it is there that every day the corpses of illegal immigrants coming from Africa are washed up” (2008: online – author’s translation). Today we can add other insular seascapes – such as Greek ones (Lesvos, Chios, Samos, Kos, but also small islands such as Leros, Chalki, Tilos, and even tiny Kastelorizo...). This may justify, especially in our turbulent times, the passionate, persistent and even obstinate international scientific (and other) interest in islands and their contribution to our past, present, and even future (eg Fitzpatrick and Erlandson, 2018). This interest is expressed through numerous publications, doctoral theses and further promising work by young researchers, including our own students; and through various island journals, multi- and interdisciplinary and even intercultural conferences, workshops, projects and academic networks in Europe and the Mediterranean, in America, in Australia and elsewhere (see, for example, Baldacchino’s recent edited anthology - 2018).

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