

RE-CAPTURING THE SEA

The Past and Future of ‘Island Archaeology’ in Greece

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Abstract

Research into past and present islands and coastal communities in Greece has long remained steeped in biogeographical concepts. An overview of relevant surface survey publications highlights their focus on landscape investigations, such as settlement patterns, mortuary landscapes, land use, soil analysis, botanical reconstructions and terracing. If mentioned, the sea occurs in the context of sea level changes or trade contacts. The new comprehensive agenda for an inclusive ‘island archaeology’ put forward by Broodbank (2000) and Rainbird (2007) has not yet been implemented. With the theoretical agenda clearly formulated, it is hoped that the potential of such a new, more outward-reaching survey design will soon be realised.¹

Keywords

Island Archaeology, Greece

The Potential of Island Archaeology in Greece

Due to their regional approach, archaeological investigations into islands and coastal habitats in Greece are most commonly associated with surface survey projects – many of which are interdisciplinary and multi-period in nature. A wave of intense survey activity since the late 1970s has insured that Greece has become one of the best researched regions in the world (Cherry 1994, 2003). Cherry lists no less than fifty surveys in mainland Greece, the islands and Crete (2003: Figure. 9.4), while Driessen records twenty-two surveys alone in Crete (2001). Broodbank, summarising survey and excavation data available for the Cyclades, lists intensive survey projects for Melos, Kea and Naxos, while Amorgos, Andros, Ios, Kea, Kythnos, Makronisos, Mykonos, Naxos, Pholegandros and Syros had extensive surveys undertaken (2000: 48). This dedication in research has led him to classify four out of the fourteen larger Cycladic islands as ‘well explored’, eight as ‘moderate’ and only two as ‘poor’ (Broodbank, 2000: 52).

Of these 68 surface surveys², considerably more than half are located either on an island and/or in coastal zones with direct access to the Mediterranean Sea (Figure 1). The potential for incorporating island and sea-based approaches should therefore have been considerable. Surprisingly, virtually all survey projects are focused inwards towards the land, frequently following a processual approach with emphasis on scientific methodologies (Cherry, 2003; Keller and Rupp, 1983). Such a land-based focus is perhaps not surprising for the older generation of surveys whose research

Berg – Re-Capturing the Sea

designs appear to have been rooted in biogeographical concepts (MacArthur and Wilson, 1967).

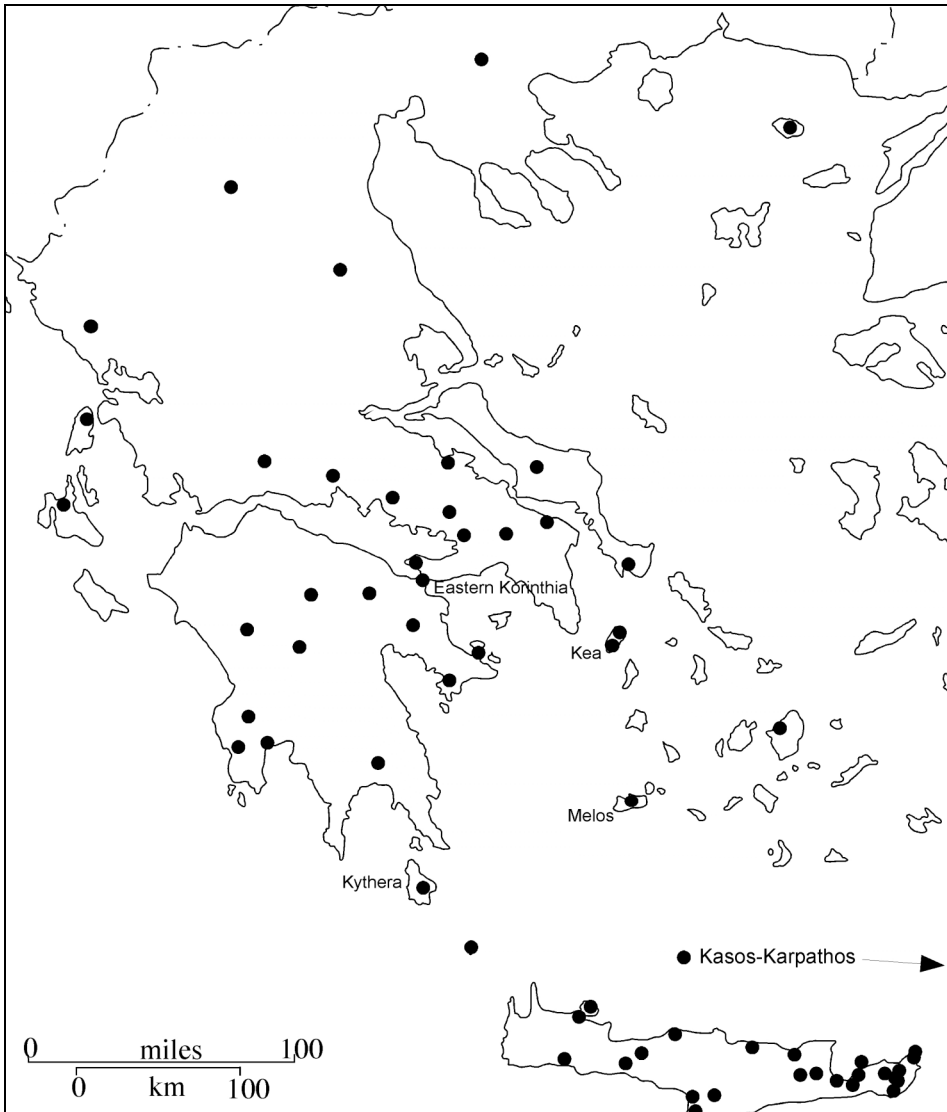


Figure 1 – Locations discussed in article

'Islands as laboratories'

On the basis that humans are, ultimately, also animals and are thus subject to similar constraints as other living organisms when establishing themselves on an island, many anthropologists had begun to refer to islands as laboratories in the 1950s and 1960s (for a detailed summary see Terrell, Hunt and Gosden, 1997: 156-163). However, it was only in the 1970s that Evans introduced the concept of 'islands as laboratories' into

Berg – Re-Capturing the Sea

archaeological discourse (1973, 1977). He argued that islands could function as small-scale experiments for cultural processes in general as they are clearly bounded and relatively isolated entities governed by fewer variables. For example, the limited range of resources available on islands allows imported products to be distinguished easily. Regarding human behaviour, isolation leads to development of endemic traits, such as exaggerated ceremonial rituals. Still, Evans acknowledged the crucial importance of cultural attitudes towards the sea and outside lands in determining the degree of an island's insularity. The concept of 'islands as laboratories' has been influential and long-lasting both in archaeology and anthropology (where it is experiencing a small revival after two decades of critique), and many scholars have perceived island societies as closed and bounded systems (eg Clark and Terrell. 1978; Fitzhugh. 1997; Fitzhugh and Hunt. 1997; Fosberg. 1963; Kirch. 1980a, 1980b; Mead. 1957; Sahlins. 1958; Terrell, Miller and Roe. 1977).

Several Mediterranean survey designs made explicit use of the concept of 'islands as laboratories'. The Melos survey, for example, regarded the island as a clearly defined area equipped with limited resources, "facilitating a systemic approach which permits a clear distinction between interactions within the system and those with neighbouring systems operating across its boundaries" (Renfrew and Wagstaff, 1982: 1). Renfrew has since acknowledged the limitations of the original survey framework and its lack of engagement with the wider region (Renfrew, 2007). Indebtedness to Evans was also made very apparent in the publication of the Northern Keos survey where it was argued that:

islands have clearly defined and relatively unchanging boundaries that delimit a natural area which can be expected to behave to some extent as a unified cultural unit... Similarly, islands lend themselves to the relatively objective operational definition of both population and available resources... Many authors have emphasized the laboratory-like conditions of comparative research in insular settlements; and where... there exists the possibility of observing the development of discrete yet related polities and of studying the long-term effects of differences among them in size, position, environment, natural resources, and so on. (Cherry, Davis and Mantzourani, 1991: 9)

Unfortunately, for the most part, projects were not explicit about their theoretical interpretative underpinnings. However, a quick scan through a sample of survey publications shows that their focus is exclusively on the landscape, and a search for the word 'sea' reveals results only in relation to 'sea level' and trade connections.

The awakening of 'island archaeology'

Despite the perceptive persuasiveness and simplicity of the 'island as laboratories' concept, scholars soon realised that humans do *not* act like animal or plant populations, and the island model was criticised and rejected in most anthropological and (to a lesser degree) archaeological circles (eg Bethel, 2002; Bowdler, 1995; Broodbank, 2000; Peckham, 2003; Spriggs, 1997; Terrell, 1997; Terrell, Hunt and Gosden, 1997).³

A great shake-up occurred in the year 2000 with the publication of Broodbank's seminal book *An island archaeology of the Early Cyclades*. In this book, the author casts a

Berg – Re-Capturing the Sea

critical glance at island archaeology. Having discarded outdated concepts such as ‘island laboratories’ Broodbank, while drawing heavily on authors working in the Caribbean and Oceania, sets the agenda for a more inclusive understanding of islands. Four key points are of great importance for scholars working in the Cyclades (or indeed any other islands) and worth repeating here:

- 1) Insularity is not an abstract geographic fact but may be socially constructed. As a consequence, an island may or may not be the ideal unit of analysis, and we certainly should not presuppose it to be so.
- 2) Models need to begin to take the sea into account and consider how and by whom it was used.
- 3) Insularity is a social construct. We need to investigate by what means and for which purposes insularity was devised.
- 4) The surviving material culture needs to be investigated for its potential in elucidating island social practices, not merely as a marker of culture groups.

Since its publication, *An Island Archaeology* has become one of the most widely read books on islands. Its theoretical impact has been vast and the topics of island archaeology, islandscapes and seascapes have been widely discussed by scholars working on islands in all parts of the world. The book has also contributed to islands becoming a major focus of research and interpretation in the Mediterranean with many recent publications drawing on Broodbank’s theoretical proposals (eg Antoniadou and Pace 2007; Berg 2007; Knapp 2008). Alongside the creation of new journals specifically dedicated to islands (eg *Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures*, *Journal of Island and Coastal Archaeology*, *Island Studies Journal*) and important conferences/thematic sessions at a variety of conferences (eg WAC, EAA, ASA, Lifewaves) devoted to their exploration, islands have established themselves as a prominent research focus.

Despite all these efforts to put island archaeology onto a more self-aware and human-centred footing, a quick glance at recent survey publications in Greece amply demonstrates how difficult a new beginning can be. All surveys sampled have clearly demarcated project areas that always end at the coastline. None of surveys undertaken in the Aegean have stretched beyond one single island to incorporate a group of islands. Several only cover a particular region within a single island. This boundedness applies even to the Kythera Island Project, the project arguably most closely allied with the goals of ‘island archaeology’. While there is little doubt that the Greek permit system for field projects can make a more regional approach difficult (as outlined by Betancourt in relation to the Pseira survey [2005: 3]), few projects offer a genuine regional outlook. It is little surprise then that articles discussing the fortunes and future of regional survey in Greece do not mention the sea in their discussion (Cherry 1994, 2003). Indeed, I am aware of only one project that has incorporated adjacent coastlines and the surrounding sea into its research framework and interpretation. This incorporation did not occur at the highest level of research design, however. The primary publication of the Eastern Korinthia Archaeological Survey is thus rather traditional in its format and focuses exclusively on land-based matters (Tartaron et al, 2006). A first acknowledgement of the importance of the coast and sea for the research design can be discerned from the Coasts and Harbour Survey sub-project. Framed as a conventional topographic, environmental and geomorphological survey in search of

Berg – Re-Capturing the Sea

harbour sites, it nevertheless recognizes the importance of the location of the Eastern Korinthia in relation to the Saronic Gulf - an important interaction zone between Attica, the Korinthia and the eastern Argolid with the island of Aegina at its centre (Tartaron et al, 2003; see also Rothaus et al, 2003). It is only in the most recent publication that the sea and coastlines themselves become a major focus of archaeological and theoretical endeavour. Building on their search for harbour sites, the authors promote a 'coastscape' approach. Central to this revised perspective is the appreciation that the Saronic Gulf is not peripheral to the land, but that land, coasts and sea create an interacting unit in which movement through and communication between its component parts are of greater importance than individual zones (Pullen and Tartaron, 2007).

While recent work is beginning to show greater awareness of Broodbank's above recommendations, the sea itself remains under-theorised and under-investigated in the archaeological (and indeed anthropological) literature on Greece. We still perceive the sea as a space one travels through in order to reach one's destination, instead of a place that was lived in and was imbued with social history and memories. So far, no survey has problematised the sea and people's interaction with the sea, or has incorporated it into its overall research design. Regardless of the rhetoric and language employed, the physical contours of islands and the coasts for mainland regions still demarcate borders of investigations.

These concerns are shared by Rainbird in relation to island research in general. There is now a real need for an archaeology that not merely attaches sea approaches to existing land-based endeavours, but truly incorporates sea, island and land, and treats them as a single interconnected unit. In line with a general theoretical trend towards more people-focused research, material culture and environmental data should be used to elucidate the lives of the communities involved, rather than serve as material studies *per se* (2007: 45).

The sea as human-centred social history

[M]ainstream archaeology has been terrestrially focused, maritime questions and considerations of maritime technology have been absent from considerations of most prehistoric groups. (Farr, 2006: 88).

The sea, very much like the land, is a dynamic 'scape' that is constantly reinterpreted. What some might perceive as undifferentiated surface is in fact an intimately familiar place that encapsulates a myriad of histories, memories, meanings, experiences, skills, and important relationships for those who live on it, near it and traverse it (Farr, 2006; Feinberg, 1995: 7; cf McNiven, 2003; Rainbird, 2004: 5; Nash, 2009). Thus, it is people and communities that are at the core of our exploration. Their engagement with the sea and activities carried out on and in it are ever-changing, dynamic and multi-faceted as poignantly captured by Lepowski:

Louisiade peoples [of Papua New Guinea] sail for practical reasons: to reach distant gardens or fishing grounds, to visit relatives, and to barter for foodstuffs and locally manufactured household goods. They sail for religious reasons as well: to request ceremonial valuables for later ritual exchange during mortuary feasts honouring spirits of the dead. People also sail for adventure and romance and to seek fortunes and reputations. They gain

Berg – Re-Capturing the Sea

wealth and renown through success in exchange; meet lovers and potential spouses; try their luck against treacherous seas, flying witches, and malevolent place spirits; see distant locales; and return to tell their stories to those who stayed behind. (Lepowski 1995: 35)

While the lacunae are many, the potential for an inclusive archaeology of islands, sea and coasts is great. This is vividly demonstrated by a recent collection of papers, among an emerging literature on seascapes, in *World Archaeology* v35 (2003), with examples from regions as diverse as the Pacific, Africa, and Britain (see also Gosden and Pavlides, 1994; Horton and Mudida, 1993). What these contributions have in common is their holistic and imaginative approach to the sea that they perceive as actively shaping life on land (practically and metaphorically). Barber (2003), for example, discusses taxonomic change in two Maori fishbone assemblages with reference to ritually regulating behaviour and descent group fishing ground boundaries. O'Sullivan's (2003) discussion of Medieval fish weirs in Britain also moves beyond a mere description of the archaeological remains and considers the meaning of these structures for those who worked there, in particular their potential for the construction, negotiation and resistance of changing social identities. Finally, a comprehensive investigation into the maritime landscape of Mombasa Island off the East African coast by Breen and Lane (2003) could serve as a blueprint for future investigations into seascapes and adjacent landscapes by combining a detailed survey of the seabed utilising sophisticated marine geophysical equipment and divers with terrestrial survey, test excavation and a comprehensive desk-based assessment (2003).

The holistic approach: islands, sea and coasts

As the above examples have demonstrated, exploration of the historical, cultural, symbolic and cosmological dimensions of communities in Greece needs to begin with the appreciation that islands, coasts and sea form one inseparable network of relationships. Thus, surveys of individual islands (or parts thereof) are missing vital dimensions of past lives and need to integrate studies of the surrounding marine environment. In addition, it is vital that projects expand their focus further and go beyond the physical outline of the island itself and incorporate other nearby regions into their design, such as other islands, coastlines or mainland areas (Baldacchino, 2006; Denning, 1980). None of this will be easy to achieve as the sea, by its very nature, does not allow us to build up a picture of its utilisation through time. However, the increasing availability of commercial 3D maps (and now also the expanded functions of Google Earth) may help us understand the relationship between subsurface features and human activities at sea. Investigations of the shoreline, field survey, careful artefact analysis, oral traditions and interviews with current users of the sea can go a long way towards filling the knowledge gap (eg Nash 2009); and allows us to understand how a community's interaction with the surrounding sea (and hence attitudes towards it) changed throughout time (for a good example of such a holistic survey design, see Breen and Lane, 2003).

Such a new generation of island projects has the benefit of offering a more human-focused and inclusive design than more traditional projects. The following points, I would argue, should be considered:

Berg – Re-Capturing the Sea

- Projects should expand beyond the island and also investigate the coastline, the surrounding sea and neighbouring islands.
- Projects need to be diachronic and holistic in their nature to be able to investigate changing cycles of isolation and connectivity.
- A cartographic survey of the sea needs to be complemented by ethnographic work to gain a comprehensive understanding of its physical features as well as practices and social histories associated with it.
- A collation of historical sources will provide insights into less recent periods and the inhabitants' life-ways, while anthropological enquiries can provide much information about recent practices.
- Being more inclusive and comprehensive, such a design also provides greater challenges. Practical considerations and administrative/political constraints need to be carefully considered to insure that they are compatible with the design.

In the end, whether we are investigating islandscapes, coastscapes or seascapes - the terminology may vary - our commitment to bring together intertwined dimensions of meaning is vital in order to enhance our understanding of past and current communities in Greece and elsewhere.

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Endnotes:

¹ A project following this new agenda had been proposed by the author, but has not been able to gain approval from the authorities.

² Since then, several more survey projects have been granted a permit.

³ Despite the general criticism levied at the 'laboratories' view, few scholars would deny the potential of human biogeography in understanding the parameters involved in human colonization (but see Bowdler, 1995), as for example explored by Cherry for Mediterranean islands (1981, 1990).

⁴ While not a survey, the edited volume *Mediterranean Island Landscapes* (Vogiatzakis et al, 2008) nevertheless exemplifies this conceptualisation perfectly.

⁵ It is fair to say that the final publications are yet outstanding, but see Broodbank, 1999: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/kip/> for recent information.

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