- DEBATES -

ARCHAEOLOGY, AQUAPELAGOS AND ISLAND STUDIES

HELEN DAWSON

University of Kent <h.dawson@kent.ac.uk>

Abstract

The burgeoning concept of the aquapelago is reviewed here in general terms and specifically in light of its applicability to archaeology, where a comparable debate has been taking place over the development of an archaeology of the sea to match that of the islands. The study of the sea in its own right is a promising approach, nonetheless we should still aim to address the continuum formed by islanders, land and sea.

Keywords

Archaeology, archipelago, aquapelago, Mediterranean, Malta

I welcome the opportunity to comment on Hayward's discussion of the 'aquapelago' (2012), a promising new concept in Island Studies. The chief aim of the concept is to draw our attention to the waters connecting islands and to counteract an increasing imbalance in recent work: the study of islands at the expense of our understanding of the sea. As Hayward explains, Island Studies focus on societies that feature an "insular condition" (being surrounded by water) and a form of "connectivity", afforded by the sea itself (ibid: 1). Certain geographical areas, such as Indonesia, Japan and Oceania, ie archipelagic nations consisting of small islands and extensive marine territories, would benefit from a redefinition of the prominence of the sea in relation to the land (ibid: 5). This, Hayward argues, would also enhance our understanding of these societies.

Hayward refers to recent attempts to define the archipelago (via 'Archipelago Studies' - Stratford et al, 2011) as a "human construct" as valuable but also as too anchored on terrestrial grounds (Hayward, 2012: 1-2). He also explains that the concept of the aquapelago is work in progress and that, given the broad scope of Island Studies, not all subject areas are likely to experience this imbalance to the same extent. In this debate piece, I highlight the relevance of the aquapelago to my own subject (Archaeology), where a similar discussion has been taking place, and I propose some general considerations on the potential future directions of this new approach.

In recent years, 'island archaeology' has emerged as a field in its own right, bridging terrestrial and maritime archaeology, traditionally separate subjects (see Phoca-Cosmetatou, 2011: 17-29, for a recent appraisal). In 2000, Broodbank introduced the concept of the 'islandscape'. He wrote: "sea and land combine to create islandscapes,

which are seldom congruent with unitary islands" (Broodbank, 2000: 33). Moreover, the islandscape comprises "land, coast, sea, horizon and sky", or, as Broodbank explains, "three bands and two liminal zones", which are likely to be reflected in the islanders' cosmology (ibid: 23).

Subsequently, Rainbird (2007) and Berg (2010) both argued that even greater emphasis should be placed on the sea, this being the most distinctive feature of island societies. Berg pointed out that "the sea itself remains under-theorised and under-investigated" (2010: 20), partly because, from an archaeological perspective, the sea "does not allow us to build up a picture of its utilisation through time" (ibid: 21). Broodbank had already issued the warning ten years earlier: "What is still missing is an archaeology of the sea to match that of the land" (2000: 34). He defined such an approach not merely as traditional maritime archaeology (eg the study of technological aspects of boat remains) but rather as the investigation of the "dynamics of maritime culture" (ibid), suggesting the following questions: how the sea was used, by whom, for what objectives, over what distance, at what cost, and how often.

Rainbird also argued strongly in favour of the 'Archaeology of the Sea' (even though his book was entitled, contradictorily, 'The Archaeology of Islands'): "Islands form only one part of a much more complex story, the story of maritime communities" (ibid: 45). In his book, he advocated a phenomenology of the sea, focusing on experience, embodiment, perception, and movement (ibid: 57-58). The editors of the *Journal of Island and Coastal Archaeology* reacted strongly to the idea of replacing island archaeology with the archaeology of maritime identity, pointing out that larger islands have inland populations that do not engage with coast or sea (Fitzpatrick et al, 2007: 232). Issues of island size and distance to other land have a strong bearing on these issues. Importantly, Hayward principally develops the notion of the aquapelago, as we will see below, with smaller islands in mind.

The previous discussion contains one point of agreement, the need to make the study of the sea more explicit, not a mere corollary of island studies. Our questions should aim to unravel social and cultural aspects of the human uses of the sea. In this spirit, Abulafia recently emphasised, in his lucid synthesis of Mediterranean history, the human experience of crossing the sea, or of "living in locations that depended on the sea for their very existence"; this, he explains, involves the "study of the rational as well as the irrational" (2011: xxx, xxxi).

As Hayward tells us, the Aegean is the archetypal sea, the 'archipelago' by definition, its chief characteristic being that it is "a sea of islands", similar to the Japanese *tatoukai*, (2011: 4). The idea of maritime movement is enshrined in famous literary works from this part of the world, such as the Odyssey or the epic of Jason and the Argonauts, wherein the theme of the voyage is a key feature. Conversely, in other regions, the emphasis shifted on the island element, the 'nesos' (eg Polynesia, Melanesia, Micronesia), as European explorers were interested in establishing *land* bases within the ocean. Instead, the native Pacific people could describe different parts of sea *in its own terms*, not necessarily in relation to land features. Nash's (2009) study of place-names illustrates this well. He observes that on Pitcairn Island and Norfolk Island offshore fishing grounds and diving sites were frequently named in relation to events, people, or some element of the natural landscape, such as the fish found in that area (2009: 126).

Hayward provides a definition of the aquapelago as an expanded version of the archipelago: as a way of emphasising the significance of water (2012: 5). Stratford et al refer to the archipelago according to its original meaning, as "a sea studded with islands" (2011: 113). Hayward's criticism of their approach is that they focus on island relations, or on the islands themselves (ie the terrestrial element) (2012: 2); nonetheless, it is implicit that such island relations are maritime. Both papers by Hayward and Stratford et al envisage these 'seas of islands' as social constructs, not merely as geographical entities. In order to understand the social dimensions of archipelagos, it is necessary to focus on the different uses of the sea, *as well as* the land: we must unravel the "intense and enduring relationship between land and water" (Stratford et al 2011: 115). This symbiotic relationship is borne by the dynamic interactions between islanders, their lands and seas, and their connections with mainland communities.

From an archaeological perspective, land and sea shed light on each other, helping us understand the communities that regard archipelagos as their domain: in fact, we are more likely to find evidence of the islanders' involvement with the sea on the island itself than underwater. For example, human remains and environmental data can tell us whether the islanders' diet had a maritime component; but even cosmological ideas about the sea leave their traces on land. A fine example of the latter comes from the island of Malta, where Grima (2008) used spatial software analysis to prove the shared characteristics in the location of the island's prehistoric temples: access to the sea, fresh water springs, and agricultural land. Grima believes these locations are characterised by liminality, being located at the boundary between land and sea (ibid: 38). He also observed that the iconography and spatial organisation of the temples closely reflects their insular location (2001), with spiral motifs and fish associated with the cosmological domain of the sea (in the area of the temple courts); and domestic animals and terrestrial plants associated with the domain of the island (in the area of the temple apses). Grima makes the fascinating point that moving inside the temple was a "metaphoric journey", and that "the temple complexes may themselves have been metaphors for islands" (2001: 63). Conversely, maritime data, such as shipwreck cargos, can provide a great deal of information on terrestrial dealings, for example concerning the different lands and people a ship visited on its journey. Underwater surveys may lead to the identification of submerged landscapes and settlements, concealed by rising sea levels. Land and sea-based archaeology mutually benefit each other. The study of both terrestrial and maritime evidence should allow us to determine which communities placed greater reliance on the sea, and therefore to identify those that were more 'aquapelagic'.

The distinctive aspect of Hayward's argument becomes apparent when he advocates explicit emphasis on the sea *in its own terms*, especially when small islands are concerned. This approach does not deny any of the important links between land and sea discussed above. Instead, Hayward notes that the sea has hitherto been undifferentiated in our studies: we should instead consider how humans interact both with its surface and its depths (eg aquaculture, fisheries). Interestingly, the sea in Hayward's aquapelago is not just a collection of sea-lanes connecting A to B, nor is it defined as a negative space in relation to the land (2012: 6), it is a positive space, it is three-dimensional, having not just a surface but both physical and temporal depth, and it is life-giving. His discussion of marine claims and rights is particularly poignant in this respect (2012: 7). These issues, he explains, apply to small island communities in particular: such communities are indeed more likely to experience the prominence of the

sea in respect of their diminutive land bases (both from an economic and ontological perspective). This is an important distinction from archipelagos generally, since these small island communities can benefit from such a redefinition (for example in terms of policies addressing their marine rights, as Hayward goes on to explain). Conversely, on the larger islands, as noted already, there is inevitably a greater focus on the land. Although larger islands are not 'aquapelagic' in the same way as these smaller ones, in larger islands too there is a need to define who participates in maritime activities and who is affected indirectly, as there are likely to be different shades of involvement.

The concept of the aquapelago, particularly in its novel ways of viewing the sea as a multidimensional arena, is very promising. However, the term underlines geographical characteristics, while Hayward's expressed intention is to highlight the social characteristics of archipelagos (2012: 5). Other possibilities could include 'nissopelagic', which underlines both the land and the sea in equal ways; 'pelagofile', to indicate a greater affinity with the sea; 'liquid islands', to hint at the fluidity of their boundaries. If the aim is to underline people too, then 'sociopelagic' is perhaps more accurate, but could refer to any society that engages with the sea (whether coastal or insular) and absolves itself from issues of island size.

While 'insular' in everyday language has acquired the meaning of isolated, I would argue that the term "archipelago" maintains a certain association to the sea. As we have seen, one can even stretch the term to refer to certain types of societies, island-based communities that interact with each other for whatever reason (be it subsistence, trade, intermarriage, religion, politics), and that display levels of cooperation or interdependence (the 'dance of the islands', as Costantakopoulou illustrates in her study of the Aegean - 2007). But, as Hayward goes on to clarify, we should also consider that that certain archipelagic communities are more sea-focused, or 'aquapelagic', than others. In my own research, I have observed that prehistoric Mediterranean colonisers gradually filled islands decreasing in size and with increasing distances to other large islands or mainlands, a pattern that reflects changes in engagement in maritime activities (Dawson, 2011: 41). There are also cases of maritime technology being forgotten, a process that had interesting effects on formerly maritime-focused communities. However, at one point or another in their history, island populations are, by necessity, maritime: involvement with the sea may be ancestral or part of daily life.

As Hayward's discussion shows, our study of the sea should not stop at its surface but delve deep. His study of small islands shows the importance of maritime activities, whether aimed at transport, resource procurement, communication, ritual, and so on. The aquapelago differs from the archipelago in that its inhabitants engage with the sea to a much greater extent, thus archipelagic communities may be more or less aquapelagic. This is a subtle but important distinction. These distinguishing features warrant a new approach and terminology. The sea is connecting and isolating, both smoothing and defining, at the natural and cultural level; for these reasons, people's interactions with the sea and with its (is)lands, their resources and communities, are to be considered as part of a complex tapestry. A test for Island Studies will be to avoid simply replacing one paradigm (the 'nesos') with another (the 'pelagos'), our challenge to unravel how the balance between these entities has shifted towards one or the other end of the spectrum at any given time.

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