

■ TOPICS IN CONTEMPORARY ARCHAEOLOGY

The Archaeology of Islands

PAUL RAINBIRD



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The Archaeology of Islands

Archaeologists have traditionally considered islands as distinct physical and social entities. In this book, Paul Rainbird discusses the historical construction of this characterisation and questions the basis for such an understanding of island archaeology. Through a series of case studies of prehistoric archaeology in the Mediterranean, Pacific, Baltic and Atlantic seas and oceans, he argues for a decentring of the land in favour of an emphasis on the archaeology of the sea and, ultimately, a new perspective on the making of maritime communities. The archaeology of islands is thus unshackled from approaches that highlight boundedness and isolation, and is replaced with a new set of principles – that boundaries are fuzzy, islanders are distinctive in their expectation of contacts with people from over the seas and island life can tell us much about maritime communities. Debating islands, thus, brings to the fore issues of identity and community and a concern with Western construction of other peoples.

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TOPICS IN CONTEMPORARY ARCHAEOLOGY

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The Archaeology of Islands

■ **PAUL RAINBIRD**

University of Wales, Lampeter



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For Sarah and Cerys

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preliminary discussions of the issues pursued more extensively in this book.

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The majority of this book was written in the place often regarded as *Iolkos* where the Greek myth places the home of Jason and where the *Argo* set sail in search of the Golden Fleece. This was an appropriate setting to collect my thoughts, particularly aided by early morning walks on the harbour front to witness the arrival of the fishing fleet and the sale of the catch of the day. Thanks to the staff of the University of Thessaly Library for their assistance and especially to Dr Elisabeth Kirtsolglou and the Kirtsolglou family, Lita and the late Danos, who made the stay in Volos both possible and pleasurable.

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Lampeter, February 2007

A Consciousness of the Earth and Ocean

The Creation of Islands

The geographical study of islands is the study of movement. In their creation, islands may have drifted as pieces of land separated from their continental birthplace. Water may have invaded the once-dry valleys which had previously joined the current island to larger pieces of land. Oceanic islands may have moved rapidly from the ocean floor to emerge above sea level or, as they sink, through the organic growth of coral, the island may be transformed as coral and trapped detritus struggle to maintain a breach in the surface of the water. According to Gilles Deleuze (2004: 11), the movement embodied in islands is the ‘consciousness of the earth and ocean’, a place where the dual elements of the earth’s surface are in sharp relief. Oceanic islands would be mountains if not for water; the wet and the dry cannot be separated, but the unstableness of these conditions is often on display.

According to Deleuze, the movement of islands makes them good to think with. They help provide conceptual spaces both for new beginnings and detachment. Additionally, islands are timeless as they are always on the move. Deleuze finds that 'islands are either from before or after humankind' (2004: 9). However, this is not an arbitrary space; it is constructed space, a space dreamt of and mythologized. For Deleuze, it is when we no longer understand these myths that literature begins, as it is an attempt to 'interpret, in an ingenious way, the myths we no longer understand, at the moment we no longer understand them, since we no longer know how to dream them or reproduce them' (2004: 12).

This book is an attempt to expose the myths and interrogate the dreams by which the study of islands in archaeology is often achieved. Such studies are occasionally grouped under the terms of a proposed sub-discipline of archaeology, 'island archaeology'. As we shall see, the study of islands as a unit of analyses in archaeology developed as a product of the 'new' or 'processual' archaeology in the 1970s, at which time quantitative techniques suited the supposed clear parameters provided by island space. In the 1980s, such approaches were critiqued and fell out of favour, and although it did not disappear completely, island archaeology also succumbed to this change. In recent years, island archaeology and island studies generally have come back to the fore and a contemporary topic of archaeology is the debate as to the utility of island archaeology for understanding the archaeological history of these places. The simple question is: Is there anything special about the archaeology of islands that requires a specific set of methodological and interpretational techniques different from that found on continents?

My intention is to show that, in part, the answer is a qualified 'yes', but for the most part it is a 'no'. It is mostly negative because I believe that we have been asking the wrong question and therefore debating the wrong issues. There can be no doubt, as I will show, that the Western imagination has placed islands as a special category of space in which to create myths and dreams, whether the sand

and palm trees stand for a relaxed holiday haven or an isolated slow death as a marooned castaway. As such, we have to treat islands in a particular way, not only to recognise these biases, but also to interrogate how this distinction came about. In this latter exploration, it is another environmental factor which I wish to highlight, that of the sea. Islands are defined by their being pieces of land surrounded by water, and this encircling creates the condition of insularity.

In this book, my interest lies in seawater and I do not consider islands in freshwater lakes, or indeed inland seas, as I wish to develop a thesis that links islands to the maritime environment. Indeed such an approach, one which decentres the land as the key defining geographical element, allows the development of an archaeology of islands that has at its heart a requirement to conceptualise coastal peoples, whether living on an island, boat or continent as members of maritime societies. This is the goal of the book that was not clear when I started the writing process. In debating the role of islands in archaeological understandings of the past, I have often been struck by the implicit or explicit expectation that islands equal isolation and this has formed the basis of much of my critique of island archaeology. However, while working through this book it has become clear that islands form only a part of a much more complex story, the story of maritime communities. Viewing islands in relation to maritime communities takes the book in the direction of an archaeology of the sea and begins to attempt to locate a different narrative, one still including but less dependent on bounded islands. To achieve this viewpoint, we need to go through the history of island studies to develop some key case studies. Therefore, this book in total represents only a point in a journey with a variable wind slowly pushing my intellectual pursuits into uncharted territory.

In this and the next two chapters, I will attempt to unpack the myths of islands and turn first to ecclesiastical history and then to popular literature as indicators of the perception of islands and the concept of island as, primarily, a metaphor for isolation.

■ 'FULL FATHOM FIVE': ISLANDS IN WESTERN HISTORY

According to John Gillis (2003), before the fifteenth or sixteenth century, the concept of an island in the Western hemisphere was normally associated with land-locked places such as the *insulae* of residential blocks and neighbourhoods. This, of course, harked back to a classical tradition, as did the conceptualisation of the world as formed by the land of three continents, Africa, Asia and Europe. The land formed by the three continents, *Orbis Terrarum*, was surrounded by water, creating in effect an island of all the land. But it is clear from classical sources that islands were known off the edge of Europe, one of which was given the name of Cassiterides by Strabo in acknowledgment of it being an extremely important source of tin (Cunliffe 2001). However, islands appear to have been sought for specific purposes among the adherents to the new Christian Church which was becoming established during the end of the Roman Empire in the West.

The early Christian mentalité, closely aligned with the long-held pagan beliefs of the natives, found powerful magico-religious associations with places on the fringe of the Christian world. In a number of publications Tom O'Loughlin (1997, 1999, 2000) has explored the attraction of the islands on the fringe of the world known to early Christianity. O'Loughlin makes a distinction between the known seas of the Mediterranean, where known islands were located, and the sea surrounding the continents, which was the *Oceanus*, a threatening place where the tides mimicked the breathing of a living animal, possibly the primeval 'abyss'. The ocean could be full of demons, making it not unlike the desert spaces of the known world. Monks and hermits were attracted to these places as it was seen as their duty to do battle with the demons. An earlier use of deserts for this purpose appears to have been translated to the Ocean in the West. So the ocean as a metaphorical desert hangs strongly in allusions to the monastic heritage of ascetic isolation derived from the Egyptian desert, the inversion of the island/land and sea/water dichotomy is