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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.

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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

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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.

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‘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

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found in the oasis/water and desert/land model, with water and sand providing the conditions for otherness and evil.

The unknown spaces of the ocean also provided mappers of the world with conceptual spaces in to which they could place known but unlocated places. So, for example, the Garden of Eden was located on an island in the *Oceanus*, as were other 'promised lands'. According to O'Loughlin (1999), this is part of the point of the allegorical tale provided by the voyage of St. Brendan, who on a seven-year voyage battles demons and finds marvellous islands. At this date, in the early mediaeval period of western Europe, it is clear that islands and headlands on the larger islands of the Atlantic Archipelago were sought in 'pursuit of a desert' (Dumville 2002). In considering the community of monks residing in the monastery on Iona, located across a narrow sound from the Ross of Mull, in the Inner Hebrides of Scotland, O'Loughlin (1997) notes that they had found their desert fastness, as imagined. O'Loughlin also finds in *Vita Columbae* (The Life of St Columba) that the monastery was spread over a number of islands, that boat trips were regularly taken between them and indeed much further asea, with crafts going to and arriving from the mainland, Skye, the Orkney Islands (*Orcades*), Ireland and France.

So although Horn, White Marshall and Rourke (1990: 3) find that 'it is among the stone ruins left on the Atlantic islands by small colonists of Irish monks that we find the boldest parallels to early Egyptian monasticism in Europe', it is also the case that the established monasteries on such islands were connected to distant places, ultimately to Rome and Jerusalem. However, the archaeological evidence does indicate that some may have achieved the ascetic ideal. Perhaps the most spectacular example of this is the long-unrecognised hermitage on the South Peak of Skellig Michael, off the Atlantic coast of County Kerry, Ireland, the remains of which were located on an artificial platform over 200 metres above sea level. The island is also home to a remarkable mediaeval monastery constructed of corbelled stone beehive structures (Horn, White Marshall and Rourke 1990).

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Clearly then, for a thousand years prior to the fifteenth century, islands were regarded as suitable locations for ascetics in monasteries and hermitages. Of course, metaphorical deserts were also provided by forests, deep valleys and mountain peaks. Islands then did not have a monopoly on use for this purpose, but the ocean as a mysterious and unknown place retained its power as a place to fire the imagination, as can be seen from the literature that grew up in the wake of this conceptualisation.

SUFFERING A SEACHANGE: ISLANDS IN POPULAR LITERATURE

We have already seen how some islands were imagined as 'promised lands' in the mediaeval mind, so it is no surprise that Thomas More's *Utopia*, published in 1515, is set on an island. The location chosen for this fictional society is a peninsula which King Utopus purposefully separates from the mainland by having a channel constructed across the isthmus so the sea could flow on all sides. As a literary device, this would have provided the contemporary reader with the clear message that this was a place of imagination where political dreams could be explored outside of reality. At this time, distant islands in the *Oceanus*, the Atlantic, were coming within the ambit of Europe for the first time. Between AD 1420 and 1472 the Madeiras, Azores, Sao Tome and Cape Verde islands had all been (re)discovered by Portuguese mariners looking for promised lands and the 'Fortunate Isles' (Gillis 2003; Mitchell 2004). The Canaries were settled many centuries prior to this, perhaps more than 2000 years ago, by people from the African coast lying 90 kilometres to the east (Mitchell 2004). Gillis (2003: 23) reports that in 1492 Christopher Columbus, in searching for the route to East Asia, made terra firma in the Caribbean. 'True to this mythical geography, Columbus's first landfall was an island. Everything he encountered was interpreted analogically in terms of the legendary isles that filled his mental maps.'

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If Thomas More was aware of these discoveries while writing *Utopia*, then most likely he would have regarded them in relation to prophecies of finding Eden as an island out there. Each time Eden was not found, the search was on for another one. As Gillis (2003: 25) continues: '[T]he myth of Eden, like that of other legendary isles, was kept alive by the process of discovery itself, with Eden always located just one step beyond the moving frontier.'

Such motivations, of finding promised lands and untold riches, finally drew the British into maritime explorations, so that by the time William Shakespeare was writing his 1611 play *The Tempest*, Sir Francis Drake had circumnavigated the globe. Tales of adventures and perils on the high seas and the people, animals and places encountered on the way would have been circulating in London society. In this context it is unsurprising that Shakespeare locates *The Tempest* on an imaginary island. Although it is an island rather closer to home in the Mediterranean, such closeness is diminished by its island status, and a magical netherworld is created. That Shakespeare had stories of islands elsewhere in mind is occasionally suggested by the naming of the main protagonist's servant-creature Caliban, perhaps a dimly understood reference to the Carib people of the Caribbean. As Gillis (2003: 24) makes clear:

> From the start, Europeans held highly ambivalent, unstable views of the peoples they encountered in the Caribbean and the mainland of the Americas. Sometimes they were treated as nonhuman cannibals and monsters, but just as often they were assimilated to the image of simple nobility that Europeans attributed to their own pagan past.

Shakespeare may have been picking up on one of these views and playing with the likely acceptable notion that islands are strange places where strange things happen. Cyprian Broodbank (1999a) has pointed out, however, that in *King Richard II* Shakespeare recognises that he too lives on an island, in pointing to 'this sceptred isle', but the kingdom of England was not in reality an island and the allusion

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to island is likely to be as a metaphor for boundedness (John of Gaunt, the protagonist, goes on to say 'England, bound in with the triumphant sea'). At the time of writing in 1595, only seven years had passed since the Spanish Armada had been defeated as much by a stormy sea as the lawn-bowl-relaxed tactics of Sir Francis Drake. The sea and the realm must have been strongly to the fore in imagination during this period.

Shakespeare's island is a strange, otherworldly place that suffers most from its desolate condition. Moving a century ahead, the solitary island of Shakespeare and the solitary human are brought together in probably the most famous of island books. Daniel Defoe's *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner* was published in 1719, and in recent times it has been generally accepted to be based on the experiences of Alexander Selkirk, who was marooned on the Juan Fernandez Islands in the South Pacific Ocean. Once again the fortunate isles are replaced with a sense of purgatory in isolation. Crusoe believes he deserves this purgatory, and his emotional journey can perhaps be compared with the penitential voyages on the *Oceanus* of the early Christian period (cf. Wooding 2001). Crusoe's 'Island of Despair' was empty of other humans apart from those of his nightmarish imaginings, and when humans did finally come ashore, he was wise to be wary, as they were cannibals.

The themes of isolation on islands and a fear of the unknown found in *Robinson Crusoe* continue in the nineteenth century and are exemplified in the works of such notable authors as Robert Louis Stevenson and Thomas Hardy. The main protagonist, David Balfour, in Stevenson's 1886 *Kidnapped* is thrown overboard from a ship in a storm and washed up on what he believes to be a small island in the Inner Hebrides of Scotland. Like Crusoe, rather than hoping to find inhabitants to aid his rescue, Balfour is fearful of not being alone. Eventually he is noticed by a passing fishing boat and finds that he is only on a tidal island and could have walked to the nearest settlement. The fear of islands, or rather what he imagined they meant, had led to irrational behaviour and unnecessary trauma. However, Balfour

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does accept that someone with experience of a marine environment (a 'sea-bred boy') would not have made the same mistake.

Hardy's novel *The Well-Beloved*, published as a complete work in 1897, is set in London and the 'Isle of Slingers', Hardy's fictional name for Portland Bill. Portland Bill is located on the Dorset coast in southern England and is a peninsula connected to the mainland by a spectacular beach constructed of storm-tossed pebbles. Although known today as the Isle of Portland, it is not physically disconnected from the English coast. For Hardy the island ascription is key, and the 'characteristics of the islanders' take on a central importance in understanding the narrative. The story involves a 'native' of the isle, Jocelyn Pierston, who has been able to spend many years away in London as an artist mixing in high society. Hardy emphasises the juxtaposition between the polite London society of Pierston's most recent acquaintance and the simple isolated conservatism and in-breeding of the 'islanders'. Using the island-like attributes of the promontory of Portland Bill eased Hardy's desire to juxtapose city/rural, cosmopolitan/isolated, modern/antiquated, educated/simple. Through this polarisation, the 'natives' of the 'Isle of Slingers' became the anthropological 'other'.

Many similar examples can be drawn from modern literature (see Rainbird 1999a and Broodbank 1999a). In much writing of literary islands there appears to be a process, beginning with a perception of physical isolation, through mental isolation (having few people with whom to express these fears), on to introspection and finally imaginings which include nightmarish subjects.

As each utopia or promised land was discovered, mapped and exploited, the search began for the next one. The Americas were viewed very much from perceptions, and thus, expectations of the 'old world'. It took at least two centuries for Europeans to begin to understand that these were new continents consisting of many things that were previously completely unexpected (Gillis 2003; Pagden 1993). In the meantime, the searching continued and only six years after *Utopia* was published, Ferdinand Magellan found a passage at the southern tip of South America. Magellan entered an ocean new

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to European mariners and named it Pacific on account of the calm weather he encountered. In March 1521 Magellan made the first historically recorded European landing on a Pacific island; death and destruction of property were an immediate consequence for the islanders. In the following centuries the islands of the Pacific were regarded as the abode of strange people who were poorly known and exoticised either as 'cannibal monsters' or 'noble savages'. Accounts of Anson's 1742 sojourn on Tinian in the Mariana Islands provided Rousseau with fuel for his noble savage philosophy, but did not take into account that this garden island, a 'paradise' for Anson's expedition that had survived a difficult crossing of the Pacific, was only such because the Spanish had previously forcefully removed the indigenous population (Barratt 1988). Even by the late eighteenth century and the expeditions of Captain Cook, the people and fauna were still being poorly represented in image and text (Smith 1989, 1992). The temptations of the Tahitians and the treachery of the Hawaiians were simplistic devices for attempting to understand difference. However, this was a two-way process, as Margaret Jolly (1996: 203) reports: '[i]n many oral and written traditions authored by Hawaiians, venereal diseases are portrayed as the "curse of Cook".'

It is not surprising then that the islands of Oceania not only gave to Europe 'tattoos' and 'taboo', but also a vision of islands spread as tiny dots across a vast ocean where, in their apparent isolation, 'primitive' people enacted strange rites which, on occasion, included cannibalism (McGrane 1989). As the Enlightenment saw the known world expand and distance become compressed, at least from a European perspective (Harvey 1990), the encounters being reported changed the way European people viewed themselves in the world. Part of the changing perception of the world was of islands, which rather than being considered ideal locations for a perfect society, to a certain extent insulated from other political regimes, were now considered dangerous in their isolation and for their perceived propensity to produce strange forms of human life. This perception has developed over a period of some 500 years and the myth

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