

Islands, Islanders and Insularity in the Ancient World

In recent years, the representation of islands as places of isolation and preservation has increasingly given way to an emphasis on their fluidity and connectivity. Traditional dichotomous approaches are consequently undergoing a continuous process of renegotiation.

A first question is whether islander identity necessarily entails a sense of otherness. Another question concerns the development of the concept of the island in relation to the mainland, which can be traced from its beginnings to the end of Antiquity.

The impact of insularity on human societies has, moreover, already been examined by scholars from a range of disciplines – biologists, economists, sociologists and archaeologists – who over the years have produced a substantial and wide-ranging body of findings.

Within research on islands and their perception in Antiquity, more specific studies devoted to the work of a single author or to particular representations of islands have been accompanied by investigations aimed at identifying and defining the concept of insularity itself.

From an archaeological perspective, the study of islands encompasses a wide range of significant research questions. Relevant processes include the colonisation and settlement of islands; the transport and transfer of goods, plants and animals; the development of trade and exchange systems between different cultural groups; and the evolving spheres of interaction. Comparative accounts of seafaring technologies on a global scale are also available.

The Greeks were presumably familiar with the numerous islands of the Aegean from an early date, and aware of the considerable influence that this distinctive seascape exerted on the politics and economy of the region over the centuries. The memory of an advanced, island-based maritime expansion in the Minoan age is preserved in a well-known passage of Thucydides (1.4; 1.8) on piracy among the islanders and on the role of King Minos in pacifying the Aegean. Plurality, moreover, must have been an integral part of Greek experience: although many *poleis* were united by a common language, a common religion and a shared sense of Hellenic belonging, each possessed its own identity, shaped by distinct historical, political and cultural experiences. In this sense, the geographical setting should be regarded as one of several significant factors, but not as an ethnographic category in its own right. At the same time, at the beginning of the Hellenistic period the islanders began to form separate federations (*koina*), such as the League of the Islanders (*Koinon tōn Nēsiōtōn*).

From a literary and historiographical point of view, it cannot be overlooked that seven of the thirteen stages of Odysseus' *nostos* (including its final destination) are set on islands: the Island of Goats, Aiolia, Aiaia, the island of the Sirens (where Odysseus and his companions do not land), Thrinakia, Ogygia and Ithaca.

Mention should also be made of *nesiotika*, a genre that has been almost entirely lost. Of works bearing titles such as Περὶ νήσων, Νησιάζ, Νησιωτικά and Νήσων κτίσεις, only a few fragments survive. Although several works dealt with islands, they were mostly composed within the

framework of local historiography, and their authors were as a rule natives of, or otherwise connected with, the places they described.

In the Roman world and beyond, the concept of the island persisted, and islands, by virtue of their insularity, played a significant role in geographical and political thought. In the texts transmitting the terms of the Peace of Apamea 188 BC (Polyb. 21.42; Liv. 38.38), for instance, the islands are referred to as a political space distinct from Europe.

Some differences from the Greek perception of islands can be observed. Notably, the role of islands as bases for colonisation, trading posts (*emporía*) or strategic landmarks (Thuk 5.97. 99), which was characteristic of Greek practice, became less important under Roman rule. Historical sources, particularly those relating to Sicily and Sardinia, suggest that the conquest of the islands was part of Rome's wider territorial expansion, initially on land and subsequently across the Mediterranean. It is also noteworthy that Roman interest extended to islands lying beyond the boundaries of the Empire. In Tacitus' *Agricola* the island functions as an exemplary paradigm prompting reflection on empire and imperialism. The text shows that Britain's insular position did not prevent its incorporation into the Empire: once conquered and pacified, Britain came to represent one aspect and expression of Roman identity. The evidence suggests that the island in fact maintained close ties with the opposite side of the Channel, a conclusion supported by Caesar's remarks on the similarities between the peoples of Britain and Gaul (*Gall.* 5.12-14). Islands were, moreover, regarded as designated places of *relegatio* and *deportatio* (cf. Seneca's *Consolationes ad Marciam*, ad Polybium, ad Helviam) while serving at the same time as ideal retreats for *otium*.

In Late Antiquity, the idea of islands as places of otherness proved remarkably persistent. It is manifest in the Coptic legend of Eudoxia, a popular version of the edict of Constantine, in which islands appear to lie beyond the ordinary coordinates of the *oikoumene*. In his *Historiae adversus paganos* (1.2), Orosius describes the Mediterranean islands as distinct from the continents. In Christian perception, finally, islands served as privileged settings for monastic experience, owing to the particular quality conferred on them by their isolation.

In sum, the subject of islands, islanders and island life is highly complex and has so far been only partially explored. The importance of islands is evident from the significant role they played in ancient history and culture. From a methodological point of view, their clear geographical boundaries are an advantage, and their ancient heritage is often better preserved than that of comparable mainland areas. The combination of geographical, archaeological and topographical investigation with the study of literary sources, inscriptions and coins therefore makes it possible to generate significant new insights.

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