

QUESTIONS OF INSULARITY IN THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN



Figure 1: Aerial view of Despotiko (courtesy of Yannis Kourayos).

In recent years, islands have moved from a topic of peripheral interest for academics to a central theme in scholarship. Thus, islands are being approached less as utopias, projections of dreams, and irrelevant tracts forever under the sway of external powers and more as paradigms for planetary transformation. For scientists, aid workers, and policy-makers, they offer conditions for the first-hand observation of such phenomena as rising sea levels and oceanic acidification as well as mass movements of refugees and the disappearance of traditional cultures. Researchers from a wide range of backgrounds are now, accordingly, engaging in island studies.¹

¹ Dawson and Pugh (2022).

The study of the Mediterranean islands in particular has, since the late 1940s, been rehabilitated in great part thanks to new theoretical conceptions that have provided fresh perspectives on well-known materials and narratives. The revolutionary ideas of Fernand Braudel presented in his ground-breaking work, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1949), shifted the focus of interest from the continental boundaries of the region to its marine basin, including its islands, to understand the various processes at work over the *longue durée*.² Few decades later, during the 1970s, Emile Kolodny argued that absolute isolation – a concept considered applicable mainly to the Pacific islands – was unknown in the Greek world.³ Island studies was further invigorated in the early 1980s by John Cherry's combination of processual archaeology and biogeography to explain the dynamics of cross-cultural interactions, similarities, and differences during the colonisation of various Mediterranean islands.⁴

Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell's *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (2001) represented the next significant advance in the study of the Mediterranean islands. Their study traced common themes in the region over the past three to four millennia, taking into account the extreme fragmentation into various land- and seascapes. In this novel analysis of the relationships among the various micro-ecologies, again, islands occupied a prominent place. The authors emphasised that the Mediterranean has been an area of uncertainty as well as great mobility, with the most extensive coastline per unit area on the planet. The fact that navigators could traverse much of it without losing sight of land, and that the sun illuminated it year-round, made the Mediterranean a land of opportunity that encouraged its inhabitants to diversify, produce, and explore. In addition, Patrice Brun thoroughly re-examined the role of poverty in shaping life on several Aegean islands, drawing on ancient sources, both archaeological and historical, to demonstrate the economic prosperity of islands such as Naxos, a major producer of wine, and Kythnos, a producer of cheese. Brun showed the alleged poverty of the islands to be frequently associated with a false notion of their isolation that was, in fact, a literary *topos* rooted in the idyllic visions of poets in Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine times.⁵ More recently, in the early 2000s, Cyprian

² Braudel (1958). Here is important to note that current scholarship does not consider even the Pacific islands as having been isolated; see as Terrell (1977, 1999, and 2018).

³ Kolodny (1974).

⁴ Cherry (1981).

⁵ Brun (1996).

Broodbank used “proximal point analysis” to explain inter-island connections (“islandscapes”), thus rethinking the premises, agendas, and methods of island archaeology.⁶ In particular, Broodbank rejected the linear narrative approach to the relationships among the Mediterranean islands in favour of a reticulated one encompassing all of them interacting with each other as well as with land-based societies. The now flourishing field of island studies has largely adopted the network approach to the history, social and religious life, and material culture of the Mediterranean islands.⁷

Within the framework of this research, the volume *Questions of Insularity in the Ancient Mediterranean* offers interviews, papers, and book reviews that, together shed light on current issues in insularity studies such as local identity and changes in the environment. The eight studies offer an interdisciplinary perspective that combines archaeological, historical, geographical, and literary evidence for various aspects of insularity in ancient Greece—mainly the Aegean region—over the *longue durée*, in this case, from the Iron Age to Roman times.

Thus, Ioannis Petropoulos, in “Field Notes from the *Odyssey*: The Fabulous Ethnography of Aiolie, Aiaie, and Ogygie,” approaches islands as places removed from the real world. His analysis of these three key islands in Odysseus’s tales of his wanderings (*Apologoi*) demonstrates that the work, the protagonist of which is an islander, is foundational for understanding archaic Greek perceptions of islands as “remote fantasy places, where the primitive and extreme facts prevailed” and that it went on to serve as the basis for Western perceptions of islands.

In other chapters, distinctive historical, archaeological, and geographical realities inform analyses of isolation and connectivity, concepts closely associated with insularity in the contemporary academic discussion. Thus, Doug Forsyth, in “The Iron Age Cyclades and Crete: Different Approaches to Connectivity,” uses the archaeological evidence as a basis for speculation about food security, proposing that environmental factors, especially rainfall, played significant roles in how connectivity developed in the Cycladic islands during the Iron Age. Crete, with more ready access to fresh water and

⁶ Broodbank (2000, 21–23, 239).

⁷ Amid the large volume of this scholarship, the most relevant works are Contantakopoulou (2010); Knappett (2011); Malkin (2011); Malkin, Constantakopoulou, and Panagopoulou (2011); Collar (2015); Dowson (2010b, 2010c, 2014, 2015, 2019a, 2021).

less dependence on imported food, developed an approach to insularity different from that developed on the Cyclades.

Alexandra S. Sfyroera, in “Island on a Pendulum: Naxos between Isolation and Connectivity,” analysing that island over the *longue durée*, discusses the various phases as the Naxians’ interactions with others and how they “forged their identity and differentiated it from islanders of other Cycladic islands and beyond” in response to various forms of interference, with the geographical position and geomorphology of the island making it the fixed point of the metaphorical pendulum.

Tadeu Andrade, in “Insularity and the Unique Position of Aeolic Song in Archaic Greek Poetry,” shows “how the insular geography of Lesbos contributed to the unique status of its poetry in the archaic period,” specifically, the island’s “size, territorial unity, and relative isolation, together with its ethnic and linguistic cohesion.” The fragments of poetry analysed here show that “not only did the Aeolians adapt pan-Hellenic phrasing to their metrics, but they developed their own system of formulae.”

Dora Katsonopoulou, in “Travelers in the Mediterranean: The Case for Ancient Parians,” analyses the archaeological and literary evidence for the connections among Paros, the northern Aegean and Adriatic Seas, and the Black Sea. The focus here is on the prominent role of the island-polis in Greek colonization in the archaic and classical periods and the continued export of its cultural products to the regions where its colonists settled, such as Southern Italy.

Eirene Poupaki, in “Stone Artifacts from Agathonisi, Dodecanese, Greece: Evidence of Insularity,” discusses the connectivity of this small island with Miletus and other cities and islands on the coast of Asia Minor in the classical and Hellenistic periods. Her analysis is based on categories of stone artifacts, both local and imported, found in Kastraki on the island of Agathonisi in the Dodecanese archipelago, that are published here for the first time.

Fabio Augusto Morales, in “Mithridates, Helianax, and Late Hellenistic Delos as a Global City: Urban Insularity and Integration,” contributes to the study of connectivity in global history by showing the relationship of various theoretical perspectives to insularity. To do so, he analyses the temple dedicated to Mithridates on the island of Delos in the late 2nd century BC as a product of urban insularity. The analysis supports the conclusion that “Delian elite connections were modulated by the particular urban insularity of Delos and its relations to Mediterranean integration processes.”

Anna Kouremenos concludes the selection of articles with a study titled “Insularity and Imperial Politics: Hadrian on the Greek Islands.” She discusses the role of the Greek islands in the Roman Empire and especially the emperors, highlighting the theme of island connectivity and isolation during Hadrian’s reign. Her analysis goes beyond the Aegean context to show that the Greek islands served as places of exile for the residences for Romans, but were never colonized by them. Emperors could even bestow islands as gifts; thus, Hadrian gave Cephalonia in the Ionian Sea to Athens. The author argues that the Greek islands were much more to Hadrian than pawns in his political agenda, however; unlike previous emperors, he saw them as the stage for the Greek past that he admired.

The volume also includes a review of a recent publication in the field of island studies. Specifically, Jesper Tae Jensen assesses *Mediterranean Archaeologies of Insularity in an Age of Globalization* by Anna Kouremenos and Jody Michael Gordon.

Interviews with two important contributors to the field of island studies close the book. In the first, Gilberto da Silva Francisco discusses his coordination of the archaeological research at the sanctuary of Hera on Delos and provides an overview of the history of the excavations.

We conducted the other interview with Jonathan Pugh in September 2021, discussing contemporary issues in insularity and the study of islands beyond the frequent topics of isolation and connectivity. Our talk explored his notion that this research “should be seen as more concerned with the concept of *islandness* rather than with the traditional definition of islands as entities surrounded by water.” Among the questions that we discussed during the interview were the manner in which islands became a peripheral topic in modern thought and the renewed interest in them in the Anthropocene.

Mare Nostrum volume 12, number 2 (July-December 2021) also includes two more articles and another book review. Felipe Aiala de Mello, in “Plutarco e os Lágidas: representação identitária e propaganda imperial,” analyses Plutarch’s representations of the Lagids and the Orient in his *Parallel Lives*. He argues that the ancient author, drawing on stereotyped oppositional dichotomies developed in Hellenic historiography and a cultural and moral hierarchy consistent with Roman propaganda, depicted the Lagids and the East as inferior to the civilisations of the West.

Ludimila Caliman Campos, in “Seria lícito se ocupar da espada, quando o senhor proclamou que quem a usa perecerá por ela? Tertuliano e a polêmica do serviço militar

(século III),” analyses the thought of Tertullian regarding Christians serving in the military in his *De Idolatria* and *De Corona*. For Caliman Campos, the questions raised by Tertullian in these treatises evidence not only a Christianity concerned with the maintenance of the *status quo* for Christian ethics during the controversy surrounding military service but also an urgent desire to differentiate Christian identity from identity associated with the rival cult of Mithraism.

Matheus Treuk Medeiros de Araujo contributes a review of *A History of Ancient Persia: The Achaemenid Empire* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2021) by Maria Brosius. He describes the book as “the most up-to-date” bibliography on the subject.”

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