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Article:

Zavagno, L, Darley, R and Jarrett, J orcid.org/0000-0002-0433-5233 (2019) Editorial. *Al-Masaq*, 31 (2). pp. 129-139. ISSN 0950-3110

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09503110.2019.1596645>

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'Not the Final Frontier': The World of Medieval Islands

Abstract:

The articles accompanying this one study a range of medieval island situations, varying in size, location, internal complexity, economic potential and political loyalties. The geographical range is similarly broad, encompassing the length of the Mediterranean Sea and stretching onwards into the Indian Ocean. This article therefore extracts comparisons from the articles its authors have here edited. Against a broader historiographical and theoretical background, it aims to isolate the common characteristics of what is here termed 'islandness' and the key gradients along which those characteristics vary. These are identified as size and internal complexity, location within wider spaces, relationship to a frontier, and social position between connectivity and isolation. While most islands fit in this matrix, the category remains fuzzy; not all geographical islands were always 'island-like' and some areas not surrounded by water were. The article thus sets up models of thinking about islands for comparison to other areas and periods.

Keywords: islands, Mediterranean, historiography, comparative history, late Antiquity

'Not the Final Frontier': The World of Medieval Islands

To be an island is to be caught in an unresolved dichotomy. On the one hand, islands are regarded as nodes of full connectivity, surrounded by the sea and intersecting shipping routes that crisscross maritime space.¹ On the other hand, islands appear relatively distant and peripheral spaces, limited in size and therefore often described as impoverished and characterised by unproductive social relations. This is often associated with their isolation. According to Rainbird, for instance, in much literary writing about islands there appears to be a movement, beginning with the perception of physical isolation, through mental isolation on to introspection and finally imaginings, including ghostly objects.² In this light, islands can become a sort of limbo, a place where a castaway can spend most his life in total (and sometime blessed) solitude.³ Although Rainbird wrote with the Pacific Islands in mind, it is easy also to find this tension in Mediterranean historiography. As Evans states, exemplifying a hesitation between isolation and connectivity, as well as an implicitly comparative regional exceptionalism:

Mediterranean islands are less isolated, not scattered across stretches of water, not inhabited exclusively by food gathering communities but above all [they can be] seen from other islands or coastline as well as serving as stepping stones along maritime routes.⁴

¹ Perhaps the touchstone of such thinking is Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922), but see Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process", in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 64–91.

² Paul Rainbird, *The Archaeology of Islands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

³ There inevitably comes to mind here Daniel Defoe's *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, Of York, Mariner* (better known as *Robinson Crusoe*) first published in 1719.

⁴ John D. Evans, "Island Archaeology in the Mediterranean: problems and opportunities", *World Archaeology* 9/1 (1977): 12–26, DOI: 10.1080/00438243.1977.9979682, p. 13.

It is easy here to be reminded of the perception of ancient seafaring as having mainly been based upon coastal cabotage ('tramping') and of the importance that islands have played in connecting different cultures and regions.⁵ The former assertion chimes with the concept of islands as isolated and remote places as observed by Fébvre and Braudel: "Isolation is a relative phenomenon. That the sea surrounds the islands and cuts them off from the rest of the world more effectively than any other environment is certainly true whenever they are situated outside the normal sea routes."⁶ Indeed, islands often occur in historiography as liminal spaces, identified as integral parts of frontiers between irreconcilable, or at best conflicting, worlds.

In this way – and in the medieval period in particular – Mediterranean islands have often been left outside generalising discourses, being labelled as outposts of self-sufficiency, places of exile, or secluded outliers of political and religious 'conservatism' which, if ascribed a strategic role at all, have one limited to their importance as military outposts.⁷ Scholars have instead preferred to dwell upon the supposed isolation of islands as a spur to the creation of peculiar and distinctive social structures, characterised by their lack of contact with other people.⁸ In the Mediterranean world of the Middle Ages, the period under scrutiny in this issue, islands like Crete or Cyprus, as well as Malta and the Balearics, have thus been interpreted as a sort of maritime

⁵ Christie Constantakopoulou, *The Dance of the Islands: Insularity, Networks, the Athenian Empire and the Aegean World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Carlo Beltrame, *Archeologia Marittima del Mediterraneo: navi, merci e porti dall'antichità all'età moderna* (Roma: Carocci, 2012), p. 195 with further bibliography.

⁶ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 2nd ed., trans. by Siân Reynolds, volumes I–II (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996 (originally published as *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, volumes I–II (Paris: Armand Colin, 1949, 2nd edn 1966), I: 150; also Lucien Fèbvre, *La Terre et l'évolution humaine* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1922), pp. 207–8.

⁷ Franco Bulgarella, "Bisanzio e le Isole", in *Forme e Caratteri della Presenza Bizantina nel Mediterraneo Occidentale: La Sardegna (secoli VI–XI)*, ed. Paola Corrias (Cagliari: Condaghes, 2012), pp. 33–41.

⁸ John D. Evans, "Islands as Laboratories for the Study of Culture Process", in *The Explanation of Culture Change: Models in Prehistory*, ed. by Colin Renfrew (London: Duckworth, 1973), pp. 517–20.

counterpart of the no-man's land that separated the Byzantine (and Christian) from the Arab (and Muslim) world.⁹ Although the complexity of the Byzantine-Islamic frontier has recently been asserted, the same is not true for the abovementioned islands, which remain mislabelled as outposts along a more straightforward maritime frontier.¹⁰ The role of islands and their inhabitants has been diminished as a result, with their material culture often described as exotic and out of touch with developments on the continents, the analysis of their socio-political structures engulfed in the endless debate opposing centres to peripheries, and, finally, their economic importance limited to their role as hubs across maritime routes serving the capital(s) of the Empires (Constantinople or Damascus).

In fact, the very isolation of islands can make them more busily productive of difference than mainland zones. Van Dommelen reminds us that this was what Darwinian scholars of evolution concluded led to the astonishing degree of cultural and biological elaboration found on some islands.¹¹ Socotra, studied here by [AUTHOR], is a famously extreme case: with 90% of its reptiles and a third of its 900 plant species found nowhere else on the planet, it has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site for this very reason since 2009.¹² Nonetheless, what this means is that, rather than contesting isolation as the defining insular characteristic, it has simply been attributed a more

⁹ John. H. Pryor and Elizabeth Jeffreys, *The Age of the Δρομῶν: The Byzantine Navy ca. 500–1204* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), p. 28.

¹⁰ Asa Eger, *The Islamic-Byzantine Frontier: Interaction and Exchange among Muslim and Christian Communities* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015); Telemachos Lounghis, *Byzantium in the Eastern Mediterranean: Safeguarding East Roman Identity (407–1204)* (Nicosia: Cyprus Research Centre, 2010).

¹¹ Peter Van Dommelen, "Islands in History", in *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology* 12/2 (1999): 246–51, p. 247: 'isolation [should be regarded] as not the only determinant [for] it is precisely the prominence and environmental emphasis that [brought] scholars [to] the Darwinian evolutionary and environmentally deterministic assumption that the greatest degree of cultural elaboration occurred on the most remote islands'.

¹² UNESCO World Heritage Centre, "Socotra Archipelago", *UNESCO World Heritage Centre* <<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1263/>> [accessed 13 June 2018]. See Mel White, "Where the Weird Things Are", *National Geographic*, 221.6 (June 2012): 122–39.

benign correlation. Historical islands have therefore become biogeographical places, hosting communities that lacked contacts with other people, experienced a lighter natural selection and lived in a sort of microcosm apart from the real world. This *de facto* turned islanders into a form of Rousseau's noble savage, a discourse that played into the hands of the colonial narrative, "even explaining isolation as cultural retardation".¹³ Scholars like Houfa and Fitzpatrick have however contributed to dispel this historiographical interpretative model. For them, islands may be the result of physical, cultural and geographical (inherent) boundaries, or they may be spaces surrounded by radical shifts in habitat, but, "this does not imply that islands are truly isolated, for separation often facilitated exchange and influenced the rise of social complexity over time".¹⁴

One may wonder, therefore, whether these perspectives can really cover all instances of the island concept. Is there space in such a theory for an island that is only marginally connected, but just as much, for example, as the mountains of upland Tuscany or inner Anatolia?¹⁵ Is it the sea that makes an island distinct from such landward zones, or is it more useful to categorise certain sorts of island with certain continental geographies and against other sorts of island and mainland places, as does [AUTHOR] here with [their] comparison of the Balearic Islands and landward la Garde-Freinet? We return to this and other questions later, but it is important to signpost at this stage that the category of island may itself be up for debate.

If, all the same, we accept for the purposes of argument Fitzpatrick's earlier-cited contention that where islands are concerned, 'separation facilitated exchange', albeit

¹³ Mark Patton, *Islands in Time: Island Sociogeography and Mediterranean Prehistory* (London: Routledge, 1996). On Evans' s biogeographical approach to islands see Evans, "Islands as laboratories" and Evans, "Island archaeology".

¹⁴ Scott M. Fitzpatrick, "Synthesizing Island Archaeology", in *Voyages of Discovery: The Archaeology of Islands*, ed. Scott M. Fitzpatrick (London: Praeger, 2004), pp. 3–19.

¹⁵ Chris Wickham, *The Mountains and the City: The Tuscan Apennines in the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 3–8, with contrasts between two such zones pp. 17–26 and pp. 157–70; Michael F. Hendy, *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy, c. 300–1450* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 21–58, with contrasts also to the island world of the Aegean.

thereby also denying any real notion of separation and situating islands perpetually within other systems, it brings to mind the centrality of the concept of connectivity in Horden and Purcell's *Corrupting Sea*.¹⁶ They stress the fact that islands could support large populations in Antiquity, mainly due to the importance they had within networks of communication.¹⁷ [AUTHOR]'s work on Chios presented here showcases this well.¹⁸ In thus describing islands, Horden and Purcell privilege a more dynamic and active role that islands played in the history of the Mediterranean, *de facto* harking back to the semantic roots of the very word 'island'. Indeed, as Kopaka has cogently showed, the word island stems from the Greek verb *ναω*, meaning to float or to swim. In the Greek myths an island can even be seen as moving and navigating into sea; in this light, islands are not static but rather form an unstable and fragile geomorphological landscape, as they can undergo rapid and drastic physical transformations.¹⁹ Medievalists may be put in mind here of supposed islands in medieval stories that turned out really to be massive sea-creatures, whose diving put an end to the ecologies on their backs, vegetal or human: tales of this kind from both Irish and Arabic traditions speak to a widespread medieval uncertainty about lands in the sea.²⁰

¹⁶ Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study in Mediterranean History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); also Christy Constantakopoulou, *Aegean Interactions: Delos and its Networks in the Third Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 1–19.

¹⁷ Horden and Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*, pp. 380–1.

¹⁸ [AUTHOR], "Mastic Production in Medieval Chios: Economic Flows and Transitions in an Insular Setting", *al-Masāq* (forthcoming).

¹⁹ Katerina Kopaka, "What is an Island? Concepts, Meanings and Polysemies of Insular Topoi in Greek Sources", *European Journal of Archaeology* 11/2–3 (2009): 179–97, pp. 184–5.

²⁰ "The Voyage of Saint Brendan", in *Lives of the Saints*, trans. John F. Webb (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), pp. 31–68, 41–2; see Jonathan M. Wooding, "St Brendan's Boat: Dead Hides and the Living Sea in Columban and Related Hagiography", in *Studies in Irish Hagiography: Saints and Scholars*, eds John Carey, Máire Herbert, and Pádraig Ó Riain (Dublin: Four Courts, 2001), pp. 77–92, and for analogies from other cultures, including an early version of the matching tale in the First Voyage of Sindbad the Sailor, see Aleem Anwar, "Wonders of the Sea of India: An Arabian Book of Sea Tales from the Tenth Century and the St Brendan Legend", in *Atlantic Visions*, eds John W. De Courcy and David Sheehy (Dun Laoghaire: Boole Press, 1989), pp. 61–66.

In more abstracted ways, this remains the substance of the modern engagement with concepts of insularity. Hadjikyriakou has recently remarked that the dynamic relationship between land and sea is intrinsic to islands.²¹ This concept of islands as depending on their intrinsic relation with the sea has been further enhanced by anthropologists and archaeologists like the abovementioned Rainbird and Fitzpatrick, as well as Broodbank, all of whom reject, in different ways, the traditional idea of the cultural isolation of islands which, according to scholars like Evans, permits them to be used as laboratories for the study of specific, conservative and backward socio-political organisations.²² The sea and the perception of it on the part of maritime communities thus become one of the main factors in defining islands.²³ For instance, although not explicitly referring to islands, Veikou and Nilsson have recently elaborated upon the concept of heterotopic maritime and coastal spaces as first introduced by Foucault, emphasising how the sea remained a dangerous place for the Greeks and the Romans (and Byzantines), but was at the same time a way of opening new routes of communications, facilitating people's everyday survival.²⁴ This leads us to a theoretical position in which such places are defined mainly by the ways that time and space are experienced there as different from normal everyday life, but should also remind us that scale complicates any assertion of islands as unitary participants in such different experiences of time and space. While a very small island, like Cabrera in the Balearics, whose settlement in Late Antiquity was probably almost entirely coastal, may indeed be

²¹ Andonis Hadjikyriakou, 'Envisioning Insularity in the Ottoman World', in *Insularity in the Ottoman World*, ed. by Andonis Hadjikyriakou [Princeton Papers, volume XVIII] (= *Interdisciplinary Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 18 (2017)): vii–xix, pp. vii–viii.

²² Rainbird, *The Archaeology of Islands*; Fitzpatrick, "Synthesizing"; Cyprian Broodbank, *An Island Archaeology of the Early Cyclades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 6–34; Evans, "Island Archaeology".

²³ Rainbird, *The Archaeology of Islands*, pp. 46–63.

²⁴ Myrto Veikou and Inge Nilsson, "Ports and Harbours as Heterotopic Entities in Byzantine Literary Texts", in *Harbours as Objects of interdisciplinary Research: Archaeology + History + Geosciences*, eds Carl Von Carnap-Bornheim, Fredrick Daim, Peter Ettl and Ulrike Warnke (Mainz: Verlag des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums, 2016), pp. 265–79, 276–7.

characterised as an island in this way, on an island like Sicily or Sri Lanka, harbours and coastal communities were more likely differentiable from their own inland neighbours on this basis, as much as from mainland actors.²⁵ Thus, the emphasis on littorality and the positioning of the frontier in analysing insular spaces in [AUTHOR]'s contribution again calls into question the utility of "island" as the defining characteristic of particular spaces and processes.

If, on one hand it may be useful to deconstruct and move away from the concept of islands, an alternative is offered by the works of Cyprian Broodbank, who has pioneered the idea of merging the concepts of landscapes and seascapes into islandscapes, "[in order not only] to practice an archaeology of sea that is more than an archaeology of boats [but also] to search for modes of maritime interactions, movement and trade".²⁶ As will be seen, this concept lies at the very basis of some of the recent reflections upon the concept of insularity in the Byzantine empire, for it is now clear that the abovementioned concept should be paired with that of "islandness", which is, as Veikou states, the totality of representations and experiences of people living on islands, which constructs their territory, thereby broadening the category to incorporate other perspectives.²⁷ Tapping into the theoretical frames proposed by anthropologists and archaeologists, Veikou has made this idea of 'islandness' a stepping stone for a different and multidisciplinary approach to the history of Byzantine islands, relying both on the analysis of material culture as well as the traditional way of defining islands on the part of Byzantine chroniclers and hagiographers. We return to this approach shortly, but stress here that the real novelty of Veikou's approach lies in the fact that she

²⁵ For Cabrera see *El monestir de Cabrera, segles V–VIII dC. Del 15 de març al 15 de juny de 2014, Castell de Belver, Palma*, ed. Mateu Riera Rullan (Palma de Mallorca: Ajuntament de Palma, 2014); for Sicily, [AUTHOR], "Sicily: A Frontier in the Centre of the Sea?", *al-Masāq* (forthcoming); for Sri Lanka, [AUTHOR], "The Island Frontier: Socotra, Sri Lanka and the Shape of Commerce in the Late Antique Western Indian Ocean", *al-Masāq* (forthcoming).

²⁶ Broodbank, *Island Archaeology*, p. 363.

²⁷ Myrto Veikou, "One Island, Three Capitals. Insularity and the Successive Relocations of the Capital of Cyprus from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages," in *Medieval Cyprus: A Place of Cultural Encounters*, eds Sabine Rogge and Michael Grünbart (Münster: Waxmann Verlag, 2015), pp. 357–87, 360.

attempts to include the traditional Byzantine concept of insularity as a peripheral *micro-cosmos* – a reduction of the whole world within a broader settlement hierarchy (mainland-city-island). This has in turn allowed her to overcome some of the issues of marginality and to consider insularity as the “dynamic relationship that has evolved between insular space and the society living in it.”²⁸ This underpins the work presented here by [AUTHOR], which seeks to use this new approach as the beginning of a redefinition of Byzantine island spaces, but both concept and methodology of study can clearly be applied more widely.²⁹

The contributions within this issue all approach this relationship between islands and the societies based in them in different ways, suggesting variant takes on the problem of understanding islands. Together, first of all, they emphasise the importance of moving beyond simple concepts of insularity toward the alternative notion of “islandness” in order to describe the political changes, social constructions and cultural perceptions that characterised insular spaces. With this in mind, the papers focus on the peculiar roles that different insular contexts played in the Mediterranean, and beyond, during the Middle Ages. During this period, after all, the unique political and economic unity constructed by the Roman Empire was split by a new ideological frontier between Christendom and Islam, however easily crossed it may have been, while Islam also expanded into the Indian Ocean along routes which had previously also been part of a wider sphere of Roman activity, before the third body of Western Europe, spearheaded by the Italian city states, emerged to contest the Mediterranean economy with both Byzantium and Islam, with more success in the former case than the latter.³⁰ Along

²⁸ *Idem*.

²⁹ [AUTHOR], “‘Going to the Extremes’: the Balearics and Cyprus in the Early Medieval Byzantine Insular System”, *al-Masāq* (forthcoming).

³⁰ These large-scale changes can be summed up in the terms of now-venerable historiographies, the “Pirenne thesis” (named of course for Henri Pirenne, *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (Paris: Alcan, 1937)) and the “Commercial Revolution” proposed in Robert S. Lopez, *The Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages, 950–1350*, 1st edn (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1971). The former has of course been famously debated ever since, including by Lopez (Robert S. Lopez, “Mohammed and Charlemagne: A Revision”, *Speculum*, 18 (1943): 14–38) but a consensus view is still lacking: Paolo Squatriti, “Mohammed, the Early

these new lines of either connection or division, and across them ambiguously in many cases—the Balearics, perhaps not all conquered by Islam at once; Sicily, moved from being behind a frontier of maritime activity to itself being a contested frontier zone; Chios, disjointed and cut off from its wider Mediterranean markets until Italian expansion brought it into a new economic unity; Cyprus, at one point shared between Byzantium and Islam and then enveloped in the Crusades; and even Sri Lanka, a symbol of connection and trade to some Roman and Byzantine writers but realistically beyond both their reach and their knowledge—lay the islands which are studied here.³¹

Secondly, as gestured at already, these articles show how important it is to reassess the idea of islands as fortresses along a frontier. Building upon the idea of islands as polysemous spaces, we advocate instead for an idea of insular spatial attributes as “socially constructed, as there is nothing fixed or stable in how humans perceive or interact with insular space”.³² This in turn allows us to use islands to challenge a common definition of the frontier as a military barrier which rests necessarily upon the idea of islands as strategic hubs, which can when strongly controlled become blockages.³³ On the contrary, the concept of “islandness” favours a

Medieval Mediterranean, and Charlemagne”, *Early Medieval Europe* 11 (2002): 263–79 offers the re-evaluation with most relevance to the present discussion but cf. now Bonnie Effros, “The Enduring Attraction of the Pirenne Thesis”, *Speculum* 92/1 (2017): 184–208. Lopez’s work, however, seems to have passed into general acceptance with far less discussion. For a larger-scale re-envisioning of the Mediterranean world over this period, however, see Horden and Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*, of which Squatriti, “Mohammed, the Early Medieval Mediterranean, and Charlemagne”, is an extended review.

³¹ Respectively by [AUTHOR], “Going to the Extremes”, and [AUTHOR], “Nests of Pirates: the Balearic Islands and La Garde-Freinet Compared”, *al-Masāq* (forthcoming); [AUTHOR], “Sicily”; [AUTHOR], “Mastic Production”; [AUTHOR], “Going to the Extremes”; and [AUTHOR], “Island Frontier”.

³² Hadjikyriacou, “Envisioning Insularity”, x.

³³ Such a definition of the frontier in this period is found most obviously in Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire, from the First Century A.D. to the Third*, 40th Anniversary edn. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), to which cf. C. R. Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire: A Social and Economic Study* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1994), but also now the various contributions of *Borders, Barriers, and Ethnogenesis: Frontiers in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. Florin Curta [Studies in the Early Middle Ages, volume XII] (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005),

definition of the frontier as a porous and fluid barrier, pierced, trespassed upon and frequented by island-dwellers and visitors alike (although as [AUTHOR] argues and [AUTHOR]'s picture of the Balearics implies, not necessarily in cooperation).³⁴ The construction of insular spaces in terms of a malleable frontier is an important theme encompassing most of the contributions. At first sight this may be regarded as a holistic approach to the subject. On the one hand, however, one should stress that the situation of the medieval Mediterranean arose from political and military competition, and on the other hand, the Great Sea cannot be isolated from broader changes, for the emergence of Islam contributed to its insertion into a larger political and commercial sphere of influence which included the Indian Ocean and part of the so-called Silk Routes.³⁵

This is not, of course, to deny that the Mediterranean became an economically fragmented, politically conflicted, religiously divided and culturally disputed space at the turn of the eighth century, but even within that space, Valérien points us toward, “the

though none consider islands. No definition of “frontier” commands a consensus but for extremity of variety contrast the works just cited with Henk Van Houtum, “The Geopolitics of Borders and Boundaries”, *Geopolitics* 10 (2005): 672–79, *Challenged Borderlands: Transcending Political and Cultural Boundaries*, eds Vera Pavlakovich-Kochi, Barbara J. Morehouse and Doris Wastl-Walter (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004) and the very different, but extremely complementary, classic Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 4th edn (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012).

³⁴ [AUTHOR], “Island Frontier”; [AUTHOR], “Nests of Pirates”.

³⁵ D. Valérien, “The Medieval Mediterranean”, in *A Companion to Mediterranean History*, eds Peregrine Horden and Sharon Kinoshita (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), pp. 77–90, 78. For variant perspectives on the idea of maritime Silk Routes in the earlier Middle Ages, contrast Brigitte Borell, Bérénice Bellina, and Boonyarit Chaisuwan, “Contacts between the Upper Thai-Malay Peninsula and the Mediterranean World”, in *Before Siam: Essays in Art and Archaeology*, eds Nicholas Revire and Stephen A. Murphy (Bangkok: River Books, 2014), pp. 99–117, with Rebecca Darley, “‘Implicit Cosmopolitanism’ and the Commercial Role of Ancient Lanka”, in *Sri Lanka at the Crossroads of History*, eds Zoltán Biedermann and Alan Strathern (London: University College London Press, 2017), pp. 44–65 <<http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1557938/1/Sri-Lanka-at-the-Crossroads-of-History.pdf>> [accessed 12 July 2017]. For the maritime routes of the earlier centuries of Islam see Kirti N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: an economic history from the rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

dynamism of actors who promoted the emergence and consolidation of new economic centres [and structured] new networks”.³⁶ Porous frontiers and the islands which dotted them lay at the very heart of this complex dynamic. Indeed, shipping and trade routes depended on the control of or possibility of frequenting crossing points like straits and islands. “In this respect changes of rule over islands corresponded to changes in the control of the sea routes, thus providing criteria for periodizing political history within and beyond the Mediterranean.”³⁷

In this light and by using material culture, archaeological evidence and literary and documentary sources, the papers gathered in this issue demonstrate that islands could act as sites of cross-cultural encounters and as political and economic poles of attraction, but could also close down, limit or deter such encounters in different contexts. Commerce in high-value crops like the mastic of Chios or the mules of Mallorca, as well as lower-level trade, pilgrimage and other forms of travel at the micro-historical level followed the ebbs and flows of caliphates, emirates and empires at the macro-historical level to make islands more than simply a cultural barrier between opposed political entities, but so did naval warfare and piracy, and difficult sea passages like the Straits of Messina, the approaches to Socotra or the constrained access to Muslim *Fraxinetum* remained limiting factors that made island-like spaces different at all times.³⁸ If we then choose, rather than accepting the vision of cultural

³⁶ Valérian, “The Medieval Mediterranean”, p. 83.

³⁷ Valérian, “The Medieval Mediterranean”, p. 81.

³⁸ Chios’s mastic: [AUTHOR], “Mastic Production”; Mallorca’s mules, [AUTHOR], “Nests of Pirates”. On the smaller narratives of trade and travel against larger-scale events the obvious reference point is Michael McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce, A.D. 300–900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), but numerous contesting evaluations have been offered, of which only a few can be mentioned here, such as ‘The Origins of the European Economy: a debate’, ed. Edward James, *Early Medieval Europe* 12 (2003): 259–323, Mark A. Handley, *Dying on Foreign Shores: Travel and Mobility in the Late-Antique West* [Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series, volume LXXXVI] (Portsmouth, RI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 2011) and most of all Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean 400–800* (Oxford: Oxford

barriers, to emphasise insular centrality in a creative and active process of the construction of a shared maritime and cross-frontier space, in something like the way that the discourse of 'borderlands' has emphasised the frontier's culturally generative capacity in that field, we must at the same time recognise the flipside to that agency and capacity, the corresponding abilities to disrupt, oppose or just ignore the use of the sea in which our islands, or island-like spaces, resided.³⁹

This themed issue therefore develops these overlapping and sometimes conflictual themes in order to propose more sophisticated ideas and concepts of insularity to be deployed of a period that, in the long wake of Pirenne, is still often described as the end of the Mediterranean as a highway for trade and the exchange of goods and ideas.⁴⁰ This reassessment of the role that islands had in a continuously negotiated and re-negotiated frontier between now-plural political and religious spheres of influence will hopefully lead to a historiographical parallel to that "progressive reconstruction of rules for this in-between space" detected by Valérian.⁴¹ Moreover, we also extend this frontier longitudinally, for as Purcell remarks the East-West alignment of the Mediterranean basin is often reinforced and continued by the regions which abut it to the east, between the Taurus mountain chains and the Arabian desert along the Persian Gulf. The topographical continuity of this long thin region suggests a corridor running from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean.⁴²

University Press, 2005). For Messina see [AUTHOR], "Sicily", for Socotra [AUTHOR], "Island Frontier", and for *Fraxinetum*, [AUTHOR], "Nests of Pirates".

³⁹ For borderlands scholarship see the review in Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, "On Borderlands", *Journal of American History* 98 (2011): 338–61, though this ignores Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, ironically supporting some of her thesis.

⁴⁰ On the Pirenne thesis see Squatriti, "Mohammed, the Early Medieval Mediterranean, and Charlemagne", and Effros, "The Pirenne Thesis", as well as McCormick, *Origins*, and Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*.

⁴¹ Valérian, "The Medieval Mediterranean", p. 78.

⁴² Nicholas Purcell, "On the Significance of East and West in Today's 'Hellenistic' History: reflections on symmetrical worlds, reflecting through world symmetries", in *The Hellenistic West. Rethinking the Ancient*

Indeed, the first essay by [AUTHOR] (entitled “Sicily: A Frontier in the Center of the Sea?”) stems directly from this model of interconnectivity between regions by using Sicily as a powerful diachronic example of a place which continuously acted as a threshold zone. Through this, “we perceive the development of polities which derive their character and dynamism from straddling peripheries, controlling the abutment of connectivities”.⁴³ [AUTHOR]’s study uses a new interpretive methodology to shape the creation and use of maritime places in the western-Mediterranean basin. The results of this modelling suggest that the waters around the island of Sicily acted as a frontier, distinguishing distinct zones of activity and maritime communities. In turn, and in tune with the aforementioned idea of “islandness”, this allows the author to demonstrate that islands help to mould the frontier as the activities and movements along it depend on the recognition by an observer: “like a cultural signifier, this frontier cannot exist without an individual to give it meaning”.⁴⁴

Likewise concentrating on the link between islands and frontiers, [AUTHOR]’s paper (entitled “Nests of Pirates: the Balearic Islands and la-Garde-Freinet compared”) allows him to assert that insularity can exist even in geographically landward contexts.⁴⁵ As Kopaka remarks, “the sea element is not always taken for granted as the word island and its derivatives are also applied to certain mainland formations (like mountainous hinterland)”.⁴⁶ In other words, even inland micro-regions may become distinctive because of their extreme isolation and can therefore be described as “virtual islands”.⁴⁷ [AUTHOR] manages to bridge this gap between virtual and real islands by comparing the Muslim colony of *Fraxinetum* (now modern La Garde-Freinet, then a stronghold on the southern coast of France) and the Balearics, both of which are often considered as

Mediterranean, eds Jonathan W. Prag and Josephine Crawley Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 367–90, quotation 373.

⁴³ Purcell, “East and West”, p. 375.

⁴⁴ [AUTHOR], “Sicily”.

⁴⁵ Cf. David Kennedy, *Gerasa and the Decapolis: A ‘virtual island’ in North-West Jordan* (London: Duckworth, 2007), p. 52.

⁴⁶ Kopaka, “What is an Island?”, 184–85.

⁴⁷ Horden and Purcell, *Corrupting Sea*, p. 65.

having been “nests of pirates” in the Middle Ages. [AUTHOR]’s contribution suggests that connectivity cannot be the totality of any diachronic definition of insular spaces: he concludes “these islands were only islands at some points in their history, and at others very definitely sat within a larger polity, not at its edge”.⁴⁸

[AUTHOR]’s contribution (entitled “‘Going to the Extremes’: the Balearics and Cyprus between Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages”) presents an alternative comparison, also anchored in part upon the Balearic Islands although focusing on a slightly earlier period within the Middle Ages. [AUTHOR] returns to the idea of connectivity and examines its importance in their history and that of another island at the opposite end of the Mediterranean corridor, Cyprus. Indeed, [they] argues, the relatively higher welfare of the Balearics and Cyprus within the post-Roman Mediterranean stems from the uninterrupted, although diminished, “connective” role that they played for Byzantium within the gravitational pulls of the Umayyad Syrian Caliphate and the emirate of al-Andalus. This role impinged upon the administrative structures that the Balearics and Cyprus developed, adapting to the political or military difficulties of the hour. Located astride shipping routes between the Byzantines and the Muslims, the medieval histories of the Balearics and Cyprus also allow [AUTHOR] to reassess the idea of a Mediterranean maritime “frontier” pierced by constant cycles of warfare or seasonal raiding; rather, [they] argues, we should see regions in these zones as enhanced by their regular, if not frequent, regional and sub-regional contacts with other areas of the Byzantine heartland or the Muslim Mediterranean.

Such contacts were substantially based on trade and commerce, and the article here presented by [AUTHOR] (“Mastic Production in Medieval Chios: Economic Flows and Transitions in an Insular Setting”), brings to our attention the often underestimated role islands could play as a source of agricultural commodities. Here the authors deliberately choose not to focus upon a staple product (wine or crops) but rather to examine the production and trade of a luxury commodity, mastic resin drops, produced in the island of Chios. These are examined in the *longue durée*, from the seventh to the

⁴⁸ [AUTHOR], “Nests of Pirates”.

fourteenth century, allowing the authors to track their island through different political dominations, from Byzantine to Genoese. Thus can be traced the dynamics of a transition to a more local and regional production and demand, reflecting the changing economic and political landscape and the fairly smooth transition from Byzantine to Genoese rule.

The final article in this issue, “The Island Frontier: Socotra, Sri Lanka and the shape of commerce in the Late Antique western Indian Ocean”, by [AUTHOR], takes an explicitly comparative perspective. These two islands in the western Indian Ocean are mainly encountered in their Late Antique phases through Mediterranean sources, and have been treated historiographically very similarly to the islands of the Mediterranean, especially with respect to narratives of isolation and connectivity. [AUTHOR] uses this as a starting point to ask whether such attributes of insularity are, in fact, universal consequences of being land surrounded by sea, or whether the different encounters of Sri Lanka and Socotra with their surrounding maritime spaces reveal more productive frameworks for understanding the choices available to island communities. This, for [AUTHOR], can be found in the analytical context of frontiers, one of the linking themes of this volume, and in the question, closely linked to issues of scale and proximity, of where the frontier lies on an island and how local resources enable or hinder its enforcement. What emerges is suggested parameters for understanding the possible and actual power relations of island dwellers in relation to each other and outsiders, which are then used to reflect upon the Mediterranean case studies in the volume. If the Mediterranean islands do not emerge from this exercise as unique, nor are their experiences typical, and comparison sharpens an understanding of why insularity in the Late Antique and Medieval Mediterranean developed its particular shape.

At the end of this project, therefore, we are equipped to view the world of medieval islands with a new level of complexity. It is obvious that very few rules which might be propounded for this world will apply equally to all its members. One important factor of differentiation is the variety of ecologies of production, which might change (as with Mallorca, famed for livestock in the Islamic but not in earlier periods), remain steady (as with Chios’s mastic) or be difficult to discern (as with Socotra, a source of

unique produce that is nevertheless conspicuously absent in crucial sources). Another such factor is size: Chios or some of the Balearic Islands were small enough that, as long as they were in contact with outside powers at all, they would almost ineluctably be governed by a single ruling interest group (although [AUTHOR] ponders whether it must necessarily have been the same group for all the Balearics at all times), whereas Cyprus, Sicily and Sri Lanka could all maintain internal frontiers, being of sufficient size and internal complexity to support contesting powers both within and beyond their shores. One more factor is clearly location, within the shifting geopolitical climates of this period: the Balearics, Chios, Cyprus all lay in areas which in the period of study went from being confined within one political sphere to being contested between, or at least in contact with, two or more, which radically changed the possibilities available to their inhabitants, in ways both positive and negative. Some of the islands we study here subsequently lost this interstitial role as one of the new political spheres succeeded in containing them fully. [AUTHOR] shows, however, that Sicily seems to have been on a frontier of a kind throughout our period of study, even when the political organisation around it was uniform, because of its position between almost all long-range destinations within the Mediterranean. [AUTHOR] also points out the significant difference between this Mediterranean context, where there is always a far shore, and that of the Indian Ocean, where voyages beyond a certain point could have no known destination.

Sicily and Socotra thus both return us to the dynamic between the idea of islands and the idea of frontiers. Here the diversity of opinions is more marked than anywhere else in our collaboration: most of our islands could be described as frontier zones at one time or another, but the definition of “frontier” would have to be different in each case, with frontiers being arguably within the islands (Cyprus, sometimes Sri Lanka), at their shores or edges (the Balearics, perhaps; Sri Lanka at other times and Socotra); and, if [AUTHOR]’s case be allowed, la Garde-Freinet while under Muslim rule), or beyond them in the sea-spaces they guarded (Sicily), and conceivable in terms of political allegiance, military action, commercial connections or religious loyalties, or several of these at once but not in consistent combinations. In this respect islands do not,

perhaps, differ very much from landward frontiers: even their necessarily liminal locations, with access in theory unconstrained by physical geography beyond the necessity of water transport to reach them, could in practice be limited by the difficulties of navigation, shortage of landing places or defence from within. The apparent difference, nevertheless, and in some cases the clear constraint upon resources available to those existing at such locations, makes islands ideal places to stand from which to exert leverage upon the wider discourse on frontiers.

The last point to be considered follows from such considerations of access and connection, and is that with which we began, the dichotomy between connectivity and isolation. It will be evident to the reader of these articles that the authors do not all share a single position on this. [AUTHOR], by necessity of his quantitative method, places no interpretative weight on connectivity *per se*; it can be seen or it cannot, and it is the difference that merits explanation. [AUTHORS] all see connectivity in their islands and construct it positively, as a force for prosperity and cultural exchange. [AUTHORS] are more wary, however, about connectivity being inherently either positive in its consequences or desired by historical actors. While it is impossible even for us not to see a reflection of very contemporary debates over Europe in this division, with the two [NATIONALITY] scholars the most ambivalent about wider connectivity, these discourses are also local to our areas of study: the Balearics and Sri Lanka also have long traditions of asserting the separateness of their identities from the mainlands with which they are most connected and Socotra today is struggling with the devastating impact of tourism on its ecology and society, while Greece and Italy have sought fellowship and assistance from Europe for the length of our lifetimes. In all of our scholarly discourses, however, opposite positions are conceivable: medieval Cyprus broke off from its parent régime more than once, the islanders of the Balearics repeatedly sought connection with greater powers in this period, and Sri Lanka's primary contact was always with the Indian subcontinent, however separately it might maintain itself.⁴⁹ All the islands of the Mediterranean, indeed, were at some point and

⁴⁹ On the Balearics in this light see [AUTHOR, "Nests of Pirates", and for Sri Lanka, [AUTHOR], "Island Frontier". On later medieval Cyprus see Jonathan Riley-Smith, "Latins and Greeks in Crusader Cyprus",

some level Byzantine possessions and ruled as part of a wider structure of government.⁵⁰ Obviously, such positions are for some of us the dominant historiographies that we now seek to question in the articles that follow. We hope that readers will be freshly enabled to evaluate those historiographies in the light of these articles, not least, as we have aimed to show here, because of the possibilities of comparison between them, but also because of the tensions that remain, indicating the possible directions of future research.

in *Medieval Frontiers: Concepts and Practices*, eds David Abulafia and Nora Berend (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 121–32, and Michel Grünbart, “How to Become an Emperor: The Ascension of Isaakios Komnenos (of Cyprus)”, in Rogge and Grünbart, *Medieval Cyprus*, pp. 11–28.

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Malamut, *Les îles de l'Empire byzantin. VIIIe–XIIe siècles*, volumes I–II (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1988).