

Islands Perceptions. Third Meeting of the DFG Island Studies Network

Veranstalter: DFG Island Studies Network

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The third DFG Island Studies Network meeting focused on the perceptions of islands and islanders. LAURA DIERKSMEIER and FRERICH SCHÖN began by introducing the network, its goals, and its past collaboration to the guest speakers who had been invited to attend.

Opening with a perspective on climate change, KATRIN DAUTEL (Malta) compared two contemporary novels – „Gun Island“ (2019) by Indian writer Amitav Ghosh and „Malé“ (2020) by German author Roman Ehrlich – and their depiction of climate disaster on islands. While both depict apocalyptic scenarios, in Ghosh’s novel islands appear as places connected through a network of watery spaces around the globe. The threat of rising sea levels is a shared experience requiring a sense of connectedness and collective responsibility. In contrast, Ehrlich’s novel ironically takes up the literary tradition of the island as remote place and laboratory, which is depicted as a playground for Westerners’ experimental lifestyles, staging the Maldives as a negative role model for the continents in the context of climate change.

Also against the backdrop of climate change, KATHRIN SCHÖDEL (Malta) examined the connection between islands and private property. The fantasy of an untouched, empty space makes islands seemingly perfect property, associated with an ideal of social and political independence through legal ownership. Islands appear as the dream of *homo oeconomicus* linking notions of freedom and property – a foundational ideology of capitalism. Such a view of islands disregards the inhabitants’ perspectives and promotes colonisation and exploitation. Instead, Schödel contrasted this with utopian ideas of common property; in the tradition of utopian

literature, islands are experimental spaces departing from the status quo and offering a perspective beyond the ideology of property at the core of capitalism. She concluded that such a perspective will be fundamental to fight climate change by fighting exploitative relations.

Pointing out that the notion of the island itself is an European concept and methodology, GODFREY BALDACCHINO (Malta) gave a review of how islands have been perceived over the centuries. In European creation myths, islands often played a central role up to the point that the world was an island world. While humans discovered more of the world, they saw the extend of the ocean and islands become smaller in cartography and imagination. Only from the 1960s onwards, islands had a comeback. First due to the island tourism and, after 1982, also thanks to the maritime regulation and the recognition of islands as powerful resources and strategic points. The latest island favourable trends are lifestyle refugees, Golden passports and remote working. Therefore, islands have gained in attractivity again. Furthermore, the field of island studies has grown wider and deeper with publications, conferences and networks. Only a methodology book is still missing that will be published in 2023, as Baldacchino announced.

After presenting the Islands and Small States Institute of the University of Malta, STEFANO MONCADA (Malta) addressed the question of vulnerability and resilience on islands. Islands, especially small ones, exhibit specific characteristics that make them more vulnerable to shocks, mostly due to population dynamics, small markets, remoteness, and proneness to disasters. However, many of these islands have overcome most of these disadvantages, and succeeded, by building resilience, especially through institutions and by nurturing favourable policies. Thanks to the right set of policies, most of these islands are, in fact, able to recover fast from shocks or even take advantage of negative events. A specific framework, that of the vulnerability and resilience framework, based on the formula that the risk of harm for a country is given by its vulnerabilities minus the country’s nurtured resilience, allows to classify

countries in specific categories, and gives a demonstrative overview that allows to compare and address limitations. This framework raised special interest among the participants, and led to a discussion that also included how such indices and comparative studies can be well integrated in the social sciences.

MAY-SHINE LIN (Taipei) presented the recent process through which Taiwan, geographically an archipelago, is looking at its own history not only through its connection to the mainland, but also to the ocean and other islands, rediscovering its islandness. Among others, Yung-ho Tsao was mentioned with his 1990 work focussing on the human-geographical connection instead of the political, China-oriented narratives; and Ming-min Peng, proposing the perspective of an independent island nation in his 1996 presidential campaign, which marked the beginning of a public reimagining of Taiwan's islandness. With a new generation of researchers since 2000, the four offshore islands have proven to be as distinctive research areas as the South Pacific Islands. Lin highlighted that the latter are of political importance through alliances, and of scientific importance for its „Out of Taiwan“ hypothesis, which propelled Austronesia-related research institutes and teaching programs since the 2010s.

The second day of the conference belonged mostly to archaeologists and historians. Focusing on examples from and around Cyprus, ANASTASIA CHRISTOPHILOPOULOU (Cambridge) gave a perspective on ancient migration and mobility. When undocumented, migratory movements are difficult to prove once the transition is complete and can be traced archaeologically mainly in the presence of pottery like white-painted wares. Though, while Cyprus is traditionally viewed as the dominant island spreading innovation, a new understanding of Cilicia and Cyprus as a shared culture koine during the Early Iron Age emerges. Further research also aims to bring together archaeological and archaeobotanical studies. While large-scale migration can be traced through genetic markers, mobility is more difficult to grasp. Being critical of the limits of archaeological evidence, Christophilopoulou argued for

comparative analysis regarding the Early Iron Age, which saw major transformations on Cyprus, as well as contemporary examples of population movement and cultural hybridization to enhance understanding of past examples, especially in cases where concrete evidence is lacking.

LUCA ZAVAGNO (Ankara) addressed the situation of the Byzantine Mediterranean islands between the Byzantine Empire and the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates (i.e., from ca. 650 to 900 AD.) Challenges of cross-cultural interactions and dialogue on the maritime frontier were left to local elites, which resulted in the insular Byzantine Empire being more politically flexible and resilient than the so-called Byzantine heartland (Aegean and Anatolia). Zavagno showed the rich material culture of insular urban life, highlighting the connection of the „archaeology of monuments“ vis-à-vis „archaeology of people“ and pointing to large Byzantine Mediterranean islands as economically and politically resilient spaces. Archaeological evidence like pottery, coins, and seals show a high level of autonomous actions and economic activities, literary sources often portrayed islands simply as peripheral spaces or, at best military outliers. With the notable exemption of Sicily (and partially Crete), the Byzantine Empire always retained a loose degree of administrative and political control over large islands like Cyprus, Sardinia, and Malta as having strategic importance and acting as a cultural barrier between antagonistic empires.

Continuing in the Middle Ages, LOUIS SICKING (Amsterdam & Leiden) shifted the focus from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, analysing the representation of Iceland, Greenland and the American Viking settlement known as Vinland, in texts and maps. The works of five authors, from the 11th to the 14th century, have been included in the case study done by Wouter Klein and Sicking. The analysis has shown that in the medieval perception the term 'insula' did not only mean island as we know it today, but mainly was used to refer to a remote land, whether it was an island or not. Another important conclusion is that the geographical information given in texts is more reliable than that given on maps. The closer an author was based to

the areas he described, the more reliable the geographic information.

EMANUEL BUTTIGIEG (Malta) focused on the special relationship between islands and military religious orders, using the case of Malta and the Order of the Knights of St John as an example of a multifaceted island-institutional relationship. From 1530 to 1798 Malta was the home of the Order, which made all the continental commanderies (land holdings) a kind of periphery. On the other hand, Malta had always depended on Sicily, a situation that the Order tried to mitigate in its efforts to turn Malta into an „independent“ state over time. Therefore, islandness - as a manifestation of both isolation and connectivity - played a central role during this period. Furthermore, the relationship between the Order and the island, as well as its inhabitants was always ambiguous: spaces were both shared and exclusive.

The meeting ended with discussions about the direction of the field of island studies. Last, network members intensively discussed on-going and future collaborative projects, including a special journal issue currently in progress, further third party grant applications, and a conference on Mallorca in May 2023.

Conference overview

Laura Dierksmeier / Frerich Schön (Tübingen): Opening Words

Katrin Dautel (Malta): Footprints in the mud – Depicting climate change in the island novels *Gun Island* (2019) by Amitav Ghosh and *Male* (2020) by Roman Ehrlich

Kathrin Schödel (Malta): Watery Lands? On Islands and Private Property

Stefano Moncada (Malta): Vulnerabilities and resilience in islands: The role of institutions

Godfrey Baldacchino (Malta): 'Doing island studies': Reimagining island methodologies

Anastasia Christophilopoulou (Cambridge): Ancient Migration or Ancient Mobility? Perspectives from Cyprus

Luca Zavagno (Ankara): „No Island is an Island“: the Byzantine Mediterranean between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (ca.

600-ca. 900)

May-Shine Lin (Taipei): Becoming an Island—Island Studies in Taiwan, 1990-2022

Emanuel Buttigieg (Malta): The Island Order State on Malta: The early modern Maltese archipelago and the Order of St John

Louis Sicking (Amsterdam/Leiden) / Wouter Klein (Leiden): The representation of islands in the Atlantic: Iceland, Greenland and Vinland in texts and on maps of the Middle Ages

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