

Island Environments. Second Meeting of the Island Studies Network

Veranstalter: DFG Island Studies Network. Interdisciplinary Approaches to Island Exchanges, Environments, and Perceptions

Datum, Ort: 31.03.2022 - 01.04.2022, Hamburg

Bericht von: Miriam Kroiher, Philosophische Fakultät, Fachbereich Geschichte, Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen

After the first meeting of the Island Studies Network, in November 2021, had revolved around island exchanges, the focus of this meeting was on island environments, a relevant topic especially in times of climate change. LAURA DIERKSMEIER (Tübingen) and FRERICH SCHÖN (Tübingen) pointed out in their introduction that there are few places with a „more delicately balanced relationship than that of island life to its environment“¹, as the marine scientist Rachel Carson wrote in 1951.

BEATE RATTER (Hamburg) opened the first panel with the question of how small islands respond to socio-ecological challenges. Using three case studies from the Bahamas, the Maldives, and the Penghu Islands, she explained that island ecosystems are by no means constant. Instead, they are subject to constant change. All islands and their ecosystems are generally complex in their behaviour. It was particularly important for Ratter to emphasise that complexity does not refer to the structure of the system, but to the behaviour. Complexity thus stands for constant change caused by numerous, partly interacting factors.

JAN PETZOLD (Munich) focused on ecotones, which refers to ecological transition areas of islands and coasts, places between the sea and land. With the process of terrestrialisation, these zones lose their connection to the sea and are less well equipped to adapt to climatic challenges. Therefore, there is a need to develop new strategies and visions in planning for coastal development and adaptation. Learning from island experiences may help develop „ecotonal“ and sustainable adaptation pathways also in other coastal contexts, such as coastal megacities at risk.

DAVID HILL (Oslo) considered the ques-

tion of island environments in a political sense, looking at poleis in the Aegean established from around 800-700 BC onwards. While usually only one polis was established on the smaller islands, the larger islands show a variation in whether the insular territory was divided across either several polies or united under one single polis structure. A pattern emerged that suggests political fragmentation was more sustainable. Particularly interesting is the case of Aegina, described by Hill as a precursor to later offshore economic centers, dominated by Athens which saw Aegina as a rival. Hill also considered the geo-political situation in the Baltic Sea, noting that the Island of Gotland also developed an economic role tentatively similar to Aegina's.

Continuing in the Baltics, VALERIE PALMOWSKI (Tübingen) devoted her lecture to the island of Gotland, the midpoint of trade in the Baltic region between 800 and 1100 AD. She used bioarchaeological evidence to analyse whether island life had an impact on the population's general health or if it produced unique features, reflecting a sociocultural influence on the islanders' bodies. While various subsistence strategies and diseases existed throughout the Baltic region, two characteristics indeed indicate uniqueness: The Gotlanders were, on average, larger than their contemporaries, the causes of which have yet to be clarified. Second, permanent, artificial tooth modifications (filed furrows) found from Denmark to Russia during the Viking Age originated on the island and may have been part of a visually marked trading community that offered protection and advantages to a small, exclusive community.

Water and the handling of this precious commodity was the focus of the second panel. FRERICH SCHÖN (Tübingen) presented an archaeological perspective on water management on volcanic islands around Sicily in the Punic and Roman period. He addressed how islands environments on Pantelleria Island and Linosa Island (Strait of Sicily) were used and transformed by ancient societies for water supply purposes. Rainwater collection and storage, especially during autumn and winter months, relied on large catchment areas in

¹ Rachel Carson, *The Sea Around Us*, New York 1951, p. 93.

natural and urban environments. The environment of the volcanic island always posed a latent threat to this system: ancient cracks in the walls of some cisterns caused by earthquakes, documented particularly on Pantelleria Island, highlight the vulnerability of island water supply systems.

STEFANO CESPÀ (Rome) dealt with water scarcity on semi-arid and arid islands in the same time period. In the case of Sardinia, however, it is important to consider whether, due to its size, it can still be seen as an island or rather as 'a mainland.' In any case, the issues highlighted are applicable to both contexts. The use of water in ancient Sardinia was a social practice based on the empirical approach of the inhabitants, and the domestic water supply was the responsibility of the individual households. Although such practices and knowledge persisted in the culture of the ancient inhabitants, the introduction of aqueducts in Roman times led to new and important infrastructures that changed their lifestyle with gardens, fountains, thermal baths, under-road sewers, and lead pipes.

LAURA DIERKSMEIER (Tübingen) spoke about cultural and religious responses to water stress using the example of the Canary Islands. Dierksmeier first reviewed why the islands have problems of freshwater scarcity, including brackish groundwater and no annually flowing rivers, deforestation, volcanic eruptions, and Saharan sand drying out the soil (*calima*). In the early modern era, colonial impositions made water supplies scarcer, as monoculture, water-intensive crops (sugar then wine) were grown for export with little concern for the needs of the local populations. As a result, massive emigration resulted. For those who remained, local practices, such as water processions to beseech God for water (*rogativas*) were carried out frequently. Dierksmeier concludes that records of rogation ceremonies provide us today with some of the most precise information as to periods of water stress in the past.

The last thematic block, 'Island Perceptions,' offered a preview of the network's third meeting to be held in Malta on Oct. 13-15, 2022. Guest speaker JONAS HOCK (Regensburg), also head of a network on island research together with Laura Linzmeier,

offered three theories on Mediterranean Islandness in the early modern period. Traveling from island to island has always been a paradigm in literature symbolizing the journey of life. In addition, he sees islands as palimpsests that are always being re-described and given an altered history. Over time, it also became more common to travel to islands oneself, to write travelogues and to compare them to other, older narratives about islands.

ANNETTE GERSTENBERG (Potsdam) concluded the lecture cycle with a name analysis of islands from the Mediterranean region. In the Middle Ages, the islands bore many different names that do not coincide with those of today. In each case, the choice of name was related to the political circumstances or dominations, the language contacts on the islands or even the author, and in the metonymic cases, the history of the island; these traditions can be a valuable resource for island researchers of all disciplines, as they allow insights into the cultural baggage and political impact of the names they use to refer to their study subject. The speech led to a vivid group conversation on the power of island names.

The meeting was rounded off by breakout groups in which the network members came together to advance their joint research projects, including a special journal issue in the island journal *Shima*. All in all, it can be said that the quote by Rachel Carson mentioned at the beginning was fully justified. The interaction between humans and the environment is particularly delicate on islands due to the limited resources, whereby islands here are well observed showcases for the general phenomenon of the coexistence of humans and nature.

Conference overview

Frerich Schön / Laura Dierksmeier (Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen): Opening Remarks

Panel 1: Island Environments

Beate Ratter (University of Hamburg): Island social-ecological environments – Reporting Island research in Hamburg

Jan Petzold (Ludwig-Maximilians-University

of Munich): The terrestrialisation of the shore in a changing climate – Risks and responses on islands and mainlands

David Hill (Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage Research): Divided or fragmented? Independent or federated? What is best for islands?

Valerie Palmowski (Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen): „We just sit tight while wind dives“ - Life ways and health of Viking Age populations in the Baltic Sea region

Workshop and Team Meetings

Panel 2: Island Water

Frerich Schön (Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen): Volcanic islands in the Strait of Sicily: Water supply in Punic and Roman Times

Stefano Cespa (German Archaeological Institute, Rome): Water scarcity in semi-arid lands: technical and social practices in Punic and Roman Sardinia

Laura Dierksmeier (Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen): Cultural and Religious Responses to Water Stress on Early Modern Tenerife

Panel 3: Island Perceptions

Jonas Hock (University of Regensburg): Three Theses on Mediterranean Islandness in Early Modern Literature

Annette Gerstenberg (University of Potsdam): How islands' names tell their stories - The Mediterranean Model

Tagungsbericht *Island Environments. Second Meeting of the Island Studies Network*. 31.03.2022 - 01.04.2022, Hamburg, in: H-Soz-Kult 07.07.2022.