

CONFERENCE REVIEWS

Review of “Global Perspectives on the Archaeology of Islands” International Conference, University of Auckland, 8th-11th December 2004

Helen Dawson
Institute of Archaeology, UCL

The “Global Perspectives on the Archaeology of Islands” conference held in Auckland, December 2004, was a joint collaboration between the Department of Anthropology, University of Auckland, and the Institute of Archaeology (IoA), UCL. The event showcased some 40 papers presented by researchers from around the world, highlighting the growing interest in the archaeology of islands. As stated on the conference website (University of Auckland 2004), the four-day event aimed to bring together “researchers studying the archaeology of islands and island groups throughout the world to examine island archaeology from a global, comparative perspective”. Although most participants were based in either New Zealand or Australia, many European, North American and Asian speakers attended the event. In retrospect, no setting could have been better suited to an international conference on islands, New Zealand being the last large island group on earth to have been settled by modern humans, around AD 1250 (Irwin 1992: 169). The organisers, Matthew Campbell (University of Auckland) and James Conolly (UCL, currently at Trent University, Canada), laid out a rich programme of talks and events. The latter included a *Powhiri*, or traditional Maori welcome, a boat trip to Browns Island to see a Maori *pa*, or fortified site, and a visit to a local vineyard and winery.

The premise that “island cultures possess distinctive, often unique characteristics” (University of Auckland 2004) was thoroughly discussed and occasionally challenged, particularly in the final plenary session, provocatively entitled “What is an Island?”. In line with many other recent island-focused events/studies (e.g. Fitzpatrick 2004), the conference followed a thematic approach with four sessions:

1. Interactions
2. Island ecology and subsistence
3. Island histories
4. Settlement and landscape

The thematic approach is popular in island studies as islands are useful units of analysis, encouraging comparisons that are more conducive to discussion than simple regional or temporal groupings. Non-marine ‘islands’ (such as lakes in arid landscapes) and the nature of insularity provided stimulating topics for debate, together with issues of physical versus cultural isolation and interaction, colonisation, population movement, maritime trade and exchange, abandonment, island ecology, environmental change and languages. Case studies were drawn mainly from the southern hemisphere and the Pacific region, in particular: Micronesia, Melanesia, Wellesley Islands (Australia), Queensland Islands (Australia), Uneapa Island and New Britain (Papua New Guinea),

Eastern Torres Strait Islands and Indonesia. The geographical coverage indicated the rising worldwide interest in islands, with papers focusing also on Okinawa Island, the West Indies, the Mediterranean islands, the Canary Islands, the Channel Islands (California) and the Irish isles.

Given this broad geographical spectrum it is not surprising that researchers expressed a wide range of theoretical positions. Although all the papers deserve detailed discussion, only a selection are reviewed here. In his keynote address, Spriggs (Australian National University) discussed the great potential of an island archaeological framework for analysis, and presented an insightful outline of the field's development over time. Starting from Vayda and Rappaport's (1963) original essay, in which the authors excluded small islands in regular contact with other islands and mainlands from their definition of 'islands', Spriggs explained how island archaeology has become an archaeology of both isolation and interaction. Vayda and Rappaport emphasised the isolation of islands, whereas in recent years attention has shifted to exploring the degree of interconnectedness of islands in different settings, and studies have effectively highlighted that isolation is a time-dependent variable, as physical or cultural isolation are mediated by islanders (e.g. Robb 2001: 192).

The first session on day one, *Interactions*, saw four papers dealing with human dispersal, exchange networks and linguistics. Dobney's (University of Durham) presentation used zooarchaeological and biomolecular evidence to compare human dispersal and voyaging in the North Atlantic Façade, the Baltic, the Mediterranean and the Pacific islands. Hazell and Fitzpatrick's paper (Latrobe University and North Carolina State University) discussed the transportation of megaliths in Micronesia. The authors illustrated how the islanders manipulated the environment and used the sea to their advantage to move the megaliths, exploring travel routes and the socioeconomic implications of contact. Cultural interaction was also the focus of Sheppard and Walter's presentation (University of Auckland and University of Otago), which raised the crucial question, "Is living on an island neutral?". Their study of the geography of interaction in the Western Solomons indicated that interaction is structured socially, as different segments of society have differential access to one another and to resources at any given time (not everybody can travel, for example). Their study also revealed that language areas in this region, rather than actual physical islands, appear to bear a greater effect on the islanders' identity, but that this may still be the result of the archipelago's geographical configuration, with its narrow coastal strips and large lagoons.

Dyson's (University of Buffalo) paper on Sardinia focused on the geography of cultural interaction between indigenous people and successive waves of colonisers (Phoenician, Carthaginian and Roman), and highlighted the strength of indigenous cultural systems during the Roman Period. This was related, at least in part, to the island's abundant resources, size and relative distance from the Italian mainland. Guillaud and Forestier (Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD) and Pusat Arkeologi Indonesia) compared the cultural development of the island of Sumatra and of two of its smaller satellite islands during the Neolithic and metal ages, explaining the differences in terms of the islands' resources and degrees of access to these. On the smaller islands, lack of resources generated greater social competition, which in turn affected the pattern

of settlement and the development of hierarchies, ultimately illustrating, according to Guillaud, “the importance of geographic scale on island anthropic systems” (Guillaud and Forestier 2004).

On day two, discussion moved to island ecology and subsistence. Petersen’s paper (City University of New York) on Micronesia’s ‘breadfruit revolution’ challenged the view that Micronesia is a “meaningless concept” (Petersen 2004), arguing instead that the islands formed a cultural area of great significance during the Middle Ages (AD 1000–1500). The linguistic and archaeological evidence, when combined with breadfruit genetics and ethnographic data, indicates that communities became integrated as a result of the hybridisation of breadfruit, which grew to be a much more viable resource than previously and thus spread across the region. Papers presented by Craig (University of Auckland), Takamiya (Sapporo University), Vogel (University of Otago), Yamaguchi (Keio University), McKenzie (University of California) and Morales (Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria) contextualised the role of resources and the environment in the development of island cultural systems. These papers also emphasised the degree of competition over resources, for example in terms of food stress and optimising the efficiency of resource exploitation. The authors discussed a variety of human adaptations and responses, with the corollary that loss of biodiversity is a recurrent feature of initial island settlement.

Day two continued with a session on *Island Histories*. Greene (University College Dublin) discussed Ireland’s islands and their Early Medieval settlements and challenged the view that these were simply secluded monastic sites, as seen by early nationalists idealising the Irish past. Greene used evidence from secular communities instead to dispute ideas of remoteness and insularity associated with these Early Medieval island settlements. My paper on Mediterranean island colonisation and abandonment was next in this session. I discussed the significance of pan-Mediterranean and regional patterns in the settlement of the islands, and addressed the relative weight of biogeographical parameters (e.g. island size, distances, configuration and availability of resources), their cultural mediation by island communities and contingent socio-political factors in Mediterranean prehistory. Finally, I illustrated through case studies the variety of activities and different adaptations falling under the general categories of colonisation and abandonment. The latter was also the concern of the paper by Sutton (University of Auckland), who noted that a more rigorous use of ‘process-descriptors’ is desirable. When describing colonisation processes and their associated material evidence, one should attempt to differentiate between discovery, exploration, visitation, occupation, settlement and establishment. This concern is not new in island archaeology (e.g. Cherry 1981: 48, 2004: 239; Graves and Addison 1995: 386), but it is worthy of reiteration.

Byrne’s paper (IoA) on day four, in the largest of the sessions, *Settlement and Landscape*, discussed the results of her fieldwork in Uneapa Island, Papua New Guinea (see Byrne, this volume), and queried the premise that unusual stone monuments and arrangements are found on islands because of their insular status (e.g. Malta or Easter Island). She noted that although particular forms are peculiar to Uneapa Island, similar monumental forms are found elsewhere in Papua New Guinea. At the same time, she

suggested that the density of ceremonial monuments on the island may be explained by the fact that Uneapa provided a refuge for mainlanders at times of heightened volcanic activity, and therefore that insularity would be more coincidental than causal to the kind of artistic expression found there.

Bedford (New Zealand Historic Places Trust) and Torrence (Australian Museum) both discussed human adaptation to volcanic eruptions. Torrence in particular argued that changes in material culture (e.g. tools) can be used to explore differential rates of colonisation (e.g. whether recolonisation occurred slowly or rapidly following abandonment), and significantly also could provide insights into the islanders' perception of their environment and whether this changed following the eruptions (as a change in material culture would suggest that a different need had arisen). In addition, Torrence suggested that each colonisation event represents a recreation of the island environment, as groups need to conceive of an island in a specific way in order to colonise it (e.g. as the extension of a mainland or in terms of perceived opportunities).

Torrence's paper opened the debate concerning the nature of insularity and the role of perception in island cultures, with regard to the ways in which researchers study them, but more importantly, also to the ways in which island communities create their living spaces. Sim's (Australian National University) study of aboriginal communities in the Bass Strait Islands and Northern Australian Islands indicated that the viability of island populations is to an extent related to the way they perceive their livelihood. This is often in terms of whether territory and resources are deemed sufficient or not, with certain communities dying out on the islands, presumably in the absence of alternatives, whether real or perceived. Conolly's paper dovetailed with this debate. He modelled Aegean island palaeodemography to illustrate that, while long-term population dynamics are susceptible to random variation, computer modelling indicates that small island populations are unlikely to become extinguished solely as the result of changes in reproduction and fertility rates or disease. Rather, Aegean networks had a much greater influence on what happened on the islands in prehistory in terms of the movement of people and the abandonment of sites.

The plenary session, chaired by White (University of Sydney), was an epic effort to bring together the many issues emerging from the talks. Several discussants addressed whether there are any causal links between specific cultural phenomena and their island setting, and whether making such links is useful from a methodological and/or theoretical perspective. As authors discussed different kinds of 'island effects', it became apparent that island archaeology has moved beyond its founding dichotomy (isolation versus interaction) to engage with a multitude of fields, such as the archaeology of contact, expansion, colonisation, mobility, refuge, abandonment, resettlement, subsistence, identity, demography, resources and sustainability, in settings as diverse as are imaginable. Concerns were raised that island archaeology may be doomed to hyper-relativism, as speakers emphasised the special characteristics of their case studies, wary of the stigma of facile generalisation. However, everyone seemed to agree that the comparative framework that island archaeology affords is a distinct strength of the subject, and provides a real powerhouse for the advancement of world archaeological theory. Islands are no longer seen by archaeologists to encapsulate a simpler version of mainland

situations (as they often are by ecologists) or described as having necessarily special features (Evans 1973: 519, 1977: 13; Keegan and Diamond 1987: 50; MacArthur and Wilson 1967: 3), but there is still much to be learnt from island laboratories across the world: islands are now considered interesting and worthy of study on their own terms. Island archaeology is in a process of self-definition and it was certainly exciting to be present at the Auckland conference, particularly as this event contributed to placing island archaeology firmly on the international scene.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Institute of Archaeology and the Graduate School, UCL, for funding this trip.

References

- Cherry, J. F. 1981. Pattern and Process in the Earliest Colonization of the Mediterranean Islands. *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 47, 41-68.
- Cherry, J. F. 2004. Mediterranean Island Prehistory: What's Different and What's New?, in Fitzpatrick, S. C. (ed.) *Voyages of Discovery: The Archaeology of Islands*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 233-250.
- Evans, J. D. 1973. Islands as Laboratories for the Study of Culture Process, in Renfrew, A. C. (ed.) *The Explanation of Culture Change: Models in Prehistory*. London: Duckworth, 517-520.
- Evans, J. D. 1977. Island Archaeology in the Mediterranean: Problems and Opportunities. *World Archaeology* 9, 12-26.
- Irwin, G. 1992. *The Prehistoric Exploration and Colonization of the Pacific*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fitzpatrick, S. M. 2004. Synthesizing Island Archaeology, in Fitzpatrick, S. C. (ed.) *Voyages of Discovery: The Archaeology of Islands*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 3-20.
- Graves, M. W. and Addison, D. J. 1995. The Polynesian Settlement of the Hawaiian Archipelago: Integrating Models and Methods in Archaeological Interpretation. *World Archaeology* 26, 380-399.
- Guillaud, D. and Forestier, H. 2004. "Techniques, Resources, Networks and Power in the Southeast Asia Island Context: Comparative Approach to Large and Small Island Systems (Province of South-Sumatra, Islands of Nias and Siberut, Indonesia)". Paper read at the 2004 "Global Perspectives on the Archaeology of Islands" conference 8th-11th December, Auckland.
- Keegan, W. F. and Diamond, J. M. 1987. Colonisation of Islands by Humans: A Biogeographical Perspective. *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory* 10, 49-92.
- MacArthur, R. H. and Wilson, E. O. 1967. *The Theory of Island Biogeography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Petersen, G. 2004. "Micronesia's Breadfruit Revolution and the Evolution of a Culture Area". Paper read at the 2004 "Global Perspectives on the Archaeology of Islands" conference 8th-11th December, Auckland.
- Robb, J. 2001. Island Identities: Ritual, Travel and the Creation of Difference in Neolithic Malta. *European Journal of Archaeology* 4(2), 175-201.
- Sheppard, P. and Walter, R. 2004. "The Sea is Not Land: The Geography of Interactions in the Western Solomons". Paper read at the 2004 "Global Perspectives on the Archaeology of Islands" conference 8th-11th December, Auckland.
- University of Auckland 2004. "Global Perspectives on the Archaeology of Islands" Conference Website. [<http://www.arts.auckland.ac.nz/anthro/islands/>] [Accessed July 2005].
- Vayda, A. and Rappaport, R. A. 1963. Island Cultures, in Fosberg, F. R. (ed.) *Man's Place in the Island Ecosystem*. Honolulu: Bishop Museum, 133-144.