

*Archaeological Theory***Islands All at Sea**

By Peter White

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*The Archaeology of Islands* (2007) PAUL RAINBIRD. Topics in Contemporary Archaeology. Cambridge University Press. Pp.xvi + 200. 18 b/w illustrations. Paperback 978-0-521-61961-5. \$25.99. Hardback 978-0521-85374-3. \$80.00.

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Islands are big in academic business these days. The study has its own term, either Nissology or Nesiology depending on your source, but both claiming to derive from the Greek. There are a range of academic journals devoted to them in many fields including archaeology (e.g., *Journal of Coastal and Island Archaeology*). Special issues in many more are common (e.g., *Human Ecology* 25(3) 1997). A recently published *Reader in Island Studies* (Baldacchino 2007) features 16 original articles (one on archaeology) in more than 600 pages. One might therefore think that a slim (200 small pages) volume on the archaeology of islands would be a snap.

But, as Rainbird asks (p.2), “Is there anything special about the archaeology of islands that require a specific set of methodological and interpretational techniques different from that found on continents?”. His answer: ...“a qualified ‘yes’, but for the most part it is a ‘no’”. In his view, this is the wrong question. Rather, our approach should be to decenter dry land as the key geographical element and focus on maritime communities—in other words, an ‘archaeology of the sea’. By page 3 then we are faced with a very different conceptual framework, for maritime communities exist on boats and the edges of continents as well as on islands. What links them is a relationship to the sea. This is not maritime archaeology, with its stress on boats and wrecks, but patterns of behavior in which all maritime communities are similar. In chapter 3, Rainbird uses ethnographic, sociological, and historical insights to understand how an “embedded perception of the sea may be embodied and . . . identified in material culture” (p.46). These societies, often incorporated in larger communities, may be identified by some or all of esoteric language and taboo behavior, house location, diversity of origin, sea-going knowledge, and ritual. Most of these

can have material culture correlates, starting with boats and leading eventually to gender relationships (since seamen are often away for long periods, women’s roles are likely to differ from those whose husbands are there all the time—the theme of a number of novels of course).

Setting up this approach, of course, takes us a long way from ‘islands’ in any sense that would be acceptable to regular geographers. But rather than going along the route he had identified, in the next four chapters Rainbird discusses four ‘real’ islands—Malta, Pohnpei, Gotland, and the ‘Atlantic archipelago’ aka Britain, Ireland, and their attachments—in two oceans and two seas. (How are these differentiated? There’s another problem.) In each of these cases he is at pains to argue that it is the maritime aspect which is notably important in driving history. It is here, I suggest, that we encounter the underlying theme song behind Rainbird’s book—and indeed much of his earlier work (e.g., 1999, where the structure of this book is pretty well laid out and, indeed, chapters 1 and 2 are largely replicated in concepts and language). This is that islands are almost never isolates, but are in relatively constant communication with others.

One is tempted to say ‘Leaping lizards, Mr. Scientist!’ The idea that islands were isolates was probably most extremely expressed in McArthur and Wilson’s *Theory of Island Biogeography* in 1967. Taken up particularly by Pacific archaeologists using the concept of islands as ‘laboratories’ of cultural diversity, it is nonetheless the case that only a few took a view as extreme as the original. By 1986 Kirch was pointing out that while islands were *bounded* they were not therefore *closed*, and that the “laboratory analogy can easily be pushed too far” (p.2). The various studies in that volume nearly all realized this. More recently, in the Discussion and Debate on Rainbird’s paper referred to above (1999) all the various commentators recognized that while islands certainly existed (‘islands are habitats surrounded by radical shifts in habitat’ [Terrell]), island societies always extended beyond their basic habitats and insularity is always a cultural construct. The same theme runs through the contributions to Fitzpatrick (2004). Coming at the problem from a different discipline, D’Arcy

(2006) discusses how closely Pacific Islanders' lives were integrated with the sea at every scale and there are many other accounts with a similar approach—one thinks of Epeli Hau'ofa's 'sea of islands'. In other words, I think that Rainbird's starting point is a dead horse. However this may be, do the four island studies have themes in common and does their analysis from Rainbird's viewpoint improve our understanding of their history? I start with each island.

Malta, in the Mediterranean, almost certainly originally settled from Sicily, is probably best known for its Neolithic megalithic architecture, dating roughly 3600-2500 BC. These temples (rather than mausoleums) are mostly oriented with the apex towards the north and northwest. This is the direction of the original homeland as well as of the most obvious exotic material, obsidian from Pantellaria and Lipari, and Rainbird suggests they "ossify a link with travel" (p.72). However, at the time they were built the amount of obsidian had significantly decreased, and the general interpretation of this architecture is that it was the result of isolation and inward-looking attitudes (e.g., Zohar 1996). Rainbird turns this around, suggesting that the architectural similarities between structures and their imposing size were a deliberate attempt to set up a "cohesive identity to impress outsiders" (p.73). Thus the continuing use of obsidian and absence of metal, already in wide use in other parts of the Eastern Mediterranean, become, in his view, devices for maintaining identity. Malta became a "holy island", to which pilgrims came and where "The deep red wall, sculpted decoration, and statuary would have been illuminated by the flickering flames of fires in hearths, the wood smoke perhaps augmented by a heady mixture of scented herbs" (p.75). The fact, not mentioned here, that most of the statuary was of fat women, suggests a possibly different take on 'pilgrims' as followers of the Earth Mother beloved of some modern archaeologists.

But let's get real for a moment. What is the evidence of such pilgrims, or even contact? The answer is, not much. The fact that many of the carvings in the temples are of grain and domestic animals is used to argue that these might have been brought as offerings. Beyond that, we veer off into analogy with the *hajj* to Mecca and

the holiness of islands in Lake Titicaca. More usefully, some time is spent in discussing the long-continuing and widespread evidence of sea travel in the Mediterranean. From at least the end of the Pleistocene obsidian and domesticated plants and animals were being moved around that sea, parts of which were readily able to function as a 'sailing nursery'. Maritime travels are a major way, for instance, of making sense of the history of agriculture in the region. So people could and did frequently travel by sea. Pilgrims were possible. But I don't see that Rainbird gets much further than that. In terms of his general proposition, the idea that it is the maritime aspect of the society which drives the Neolithic history of Malta seems to be based on a very slim dataset.

Oceania is the theme of chapter 5 with a focus on Pohnpei and the Eastern Caroline Islands. This region is, of course, Rainbird's particular specialty, having written the only comprehensive study of the archaeology of Micronesia (2004). Overall, this chapter is a straightforward, though brief, account of island settlement of the entire Pacific and of the known widespread archaeological and ethnographic contacts between islands and archipelagos. He accepts Anderson's (2000) argument that highly specialized sailing vessels in Polynesia derived from Micronesian technology and were only present from about 1200 AD. He also accepts Forster's account of Tupaia's traditional, pre-Cook knowledge of 83 islands in Central Polynesia. Both of these are the subject of a good deal of on-going debate.

The only detailed discussion in this chapter concerns Nan Madol which, as in the case of Malta, Rainbird argues to have had a role as an 'attractor' of visitors to Pohnpei along with its other, internal, island-specific roles. As with Malta, the evidence of such visitors is thin—the likely importation of pearl shell, the use of new species of shell for adzes, and the adoption of a new type of adze, along with the undated evidences of rock art and the arrival of the psychoactive drug kava. That new material or ideas must have arrived with visitors is, he argues, necessary since, at the time of the main building of Nan Madol, Pohnpeians had no ocean-going seacraft. However, it is the earliest European records which are said to document this. We might thus have only an 'after this' date. But

how certain are we of the data? In 1595 Quiros was the first European to report on Pohnpei and comments (Markham 1904:114):

Natives came in their canoes from the island under sail, others paddling. As they were unable to cross the reef, they jumped on it and made signs with their hands. In the afternoon one single native in a small canoe came round the end of the reef. He was at a distance to windward...

This doesn't seem to me to be very strong evidence of absence.

The fact that other Caroline Islanders, all from atolls, were wide-ranging mariners is well documented and this provides some substance to the argument. Rainbird buttresses his case by reference to the *sawei* system surrounding Yap, but my conclusion is that his argument is more dependent on the model than on the evidence.

The history of Gotland, in the Baltic, seems straightforward, without problematic interpretations of the data. The unusual archaeological features of the island occur in the Late Bronze and Iron Ages, with the occurrence of 'ship-settings' (outlines modeled by rocks) and 'picture stones', which primarily feature ships. Both are almost exclusive to Gotland and Rainbird sees them as expressing a strong island identity which later culminates in the very large numbers of massive mediaeval churches. He also notes that throughout its history Gotland maintained considerable contacts with various shores of the surrounding mainland and imports on a considerable scale have been found. He suggests that the two aspects of society are in fact related, the one (imports) stimulating the other as Gotlanders faced a wider range of people than more land-based societies. Here it might have been useful to compare Gotland with an archaeology/prehistory of one or more of the societies on the surrounding Baltic shores. If Rainbird's idea of an 'archaeology of the sea' has validity, then we should see things comparable in at least some of them. Restricting himself in this book to oceans and specific islands within them doesn't allow him to demonstrate that his overall argument is convincing.

Most archaeologists working in the Atlantic Archipelago do not consider themselves working on islands, yet Rainbird is clearly correct in saying this is so. The archipelago is in fact a

hierarchy of islands, the Orkneys or Isle of Man offshore to larger islands, Ireland offshore to the 'mainland' of Britain, Britain itself almost a peninsula of Europe. He documents the very considerable amount of interaction by sea, not only within the archipelago—notably along the corridor between Britain and Ireland, and beyond to the north—but especially south to Normandy and the Iberian Peninsula. Such traffic has been well described over decades and what Rainbird adds is simply the suggestion that in some ways this could well be considered as a 'culture area'. Is this really a new suggestion?

In the century of the European Union such a diminution of British isolationism is perhaps not surprising. But what Rainbird does in this context is almost a reversal of his approach to the other islands he has discussed: he doesn't try to discover any idea of coastal or island identity. The 'sceptered isle' is foregone, to become part of a larger entity, part of a 'sea of islands'. Interestingly, it seems to me that this is the first case where Rainbird's model is exemplified. While he doesn't show that people on all of these different islands had a common approach to the sea, or even one distinctive from people inland, he here does really elaborate an archaeology in which the maritime aspect drives the history.

Having said initially that there might be at least something distinctive about the archeology of islands, we learn in the conclusion what this is. It turns out to be two things. First, there are 'communities of communication within a maritime context': communication is what links most people on islands to each other. This communication consists of symbolic markers and shared experience. Second, islands make some things *visible*. These are the same as expounded by Fitzpatrick recently: environmental change, colonization, migration and demographic change, and inter-regional interaction (2004: 3-18). Rainbird agrees that, in general, each of these processes is likely to be more visible on islands than in more extensive landscapes. I wonder how much more was ever claimed? □

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