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Chapter 11

The Isolation Metaphor in Island Archaeology

Peter V. Lape

One of the primary goals of island archaeology is to capture what living on islands must have been like. In addition to the normal obstacles facing any reconstruction of the past are powerful metaphors about islands that exist in Western thought, and other cultural traditions. These metaphors lead to a number of assumptions about island societies that we must make explicit and evaluate if we are to truly understand past island life. The most pervasive metaphor, and the one that is the subject of this chapter, is *isolation* (Sahlins 1985; Kirch 1986; Broodbank 2000:18–21). Archaeologists now have little excuse to assume islands are necessarily socially isolated. Many scholars have called to our attention the fact that islands are typically populated by maritime-oriented people, for whom the sea is a corridor rather than a barrier. Some have shown how past island dwellers in dispersed Pacific Islands had the navigational skills and technology to make repeated and purposeful long-distance voyages (Finney 1976; Irwin 1992; Lewis 1992). Others have reminded us of the pervasive anthropological myth of the primitive isolate (e.g., Terrell 1997, 1998). The very biogeographical factors that may make islands isolated places for plants and animals tend to stimulate interisland interaction and reduce isolation for island-dwelling people (Ellen 1979, 1990; Keegan and Diamond 1987). Resource variability between islands and enhanced rates of resource depletion and extinction, among other factors, have influenced people to develop relationships with those on other islands in

order to survive (Nunn 1990; Burney 1997; Dewar 1997; Fitzhugh and Hunt 1997; Kirch and Hunt 1997).

However, simply discarding the idea of *islands as isolated* with *islands as connected* does not do that much to help us understand an island's past, as Terrell (1998) and others have suggested. Drawing from social geography and continental archaeology landscape approaches, island archaeologists have begun to use concept of 'landscape' to consider how space and society are mutually constituted. For island worlds, Gosden and Pavlides (1994) have further refined that concept into the notion of 'seascape.' The purpose of this concept is to help us see the geographical and social factors that created social barriers and corridors on islands. We can no longer think of the boundaries of island worlds as simply their beaches. Instead, social boundaries in a seascape are a human creation, influenced by environmental factors, including differential resource availability, wind and water currents and their seasonal variability, and island intervisibility. These factors are coupled with and influenced by human technologies such as boat designs, navigational and voyaging technologies, and social factors such as ancestral links to other places, like the inherited friendships of the Sepik Coast of Papua New Guinea described by Welsch and Terrell (1998). It is these interacting factors that lie behind the patterns we see archaeologically and historically, including trade networks, linguistic groupings, and material expressions of social identity (Hodder 1985; Stark 1998).

Once we discard the assumption that islands are isolated, it is clear that we can no longer consider a single island the ideal spatial unit of analysis. There are many ethnographic examples of island dwellers having close and frequent interactions with neighboring or even distant islands or mainlands, and little interaction with interior-dwelling people of their own island (Swadling 1996; Goodman 1998; Fox 2000). I was confronted with archaeological evidence of this situation in my own studies of the late precolonial Banda Islands in eastern Indonesia (see Figure 11.1). I found that similarities and differences in foodways, evidence of religious identity, and trade networks from settlement to settlement did not correlate with their simple spatial relationship to each other. Neighboring settlements on a single small island, in some cases, were radically disconnected and, instead, showed evidence of closer relationships with settlements on other islands, often hundreds of kilometers away (Lape 2000a, 2000b, 2000c).

What is particularly interesting about this case is that the ethnohistorical accounts and maps describing the Banda Islands in this

Figure 11.1. Map of Maluku, Indonesia.

period gave few clues that there was such diversity in settlement types and social identity, nor that these long-distance relationships existed between settlements. Evidence for these spatial relationships was preserved only in the archaeological record. For example, at least one settlement tested archaeologically appeared to have been occupied by non-Muslims into the 16th century, when most other places in Banda

were occupied by Muslims. Muslim and non-Muslim settlements had evidence of differing trade network connections, were located on different types of landscapes, and had different burial practices and foodways. However, European and other "foreign" observers did not typically record settlements occupied by non-Muslims, thus masking a historically important cultural diversity (Lape 2002).

In my view, this feature of Banda's ethnohistory suggests that the "island as isolated" concept and related "island as ideal unit of analysis" are not mistakes made for the first time by modern, mainland dwelling archaeologists. Observers in past centuries also held these assumptions. Furthermore, these insular assumptions were not a solely European bias. Evidence of similar biases exists in Javanese, Arab, and Chinese historical descriptions of the Banda Islands from periods predating the first European contacts. Wang Dayuan's 14th-century description of Island Southeast Asia, for example, simplified this vast archipelago into a system that conformed to Confucian ideals of the universe, and used the island as the defining unit (Ptak 1995, 1998). The Javanese Majapahit Empire epic poem *Desawarnana* similarly reduces a complex dynamic of political and trade relationships between Majapahit and surrounding regions to a constellation of island names (Prapañca and Robson 1995), as do Arab descriptions from the 12th through the 16th centuries (Tibbetts 1979). The metaphor of the insular island is quite possibly universal, seducing the minds of all who live on or visit islands. In many respects, islands become an "accident of geography which provides a magnetic metaphor for separation and boundedness" (Robb 1999).

One can take this imagined insularity concept to the next logical step and consider whether island dwellers themselves may have been aware of the power of the island metaphor (as the island dwellers I met in Banda certainly were), and used it in strategic ways to create and navigate social identity. Those of us who live on islands may not live in an insular way at all, but the insularity metaphor is a convenient tool for social action. Robb (1999) utilizes this premise to provide an explanation for the strange fluorescence of temple building in Malta some 5,600 years ago. Archaeologists have explained the temple building episode as either a result of cultural invention in an isolated world (since temples were not being built in neighboring places like Sicily) or as a cultural reaction to the degradation of Malta's island environment. Robb (1999) reports that there is little archaeological evidence to support either theory. Archaeological evidence suggests that Malta and

Sicily were actually well connected by trade during the temple building period (Stoddart, Bonnano, Goudar, Malone, and Trump 1993). The temple building was the result of both internal Maltese ritual development and a new strategy of identity, perhaps initiated by the ruling elite, which used a metaphor of insularity to differentiate the Maltese from Sicilian "others." The island became a powerful orienting metaphor that provided for new island identity formation at the very time there was increased contact with other places. In this case, ironically, insularity is a social construction resulting from less rather than more isolation (Robb 1999).

This explanation strategy fits rather well with my own research on contemporary trade networks and identity in Banda and the wider Maluku world. For example, when I accompanied an ethnic Butonese sago trader from Banda on his sailing *perahu* on a trading round to the neighboring island of Seram in 1998, I watched his extremely skillful use of differing levels of social identity to do his job, which was to buy sago cheaply in Seram and sell it for a higher price in Banda (see Figure 11.1). He traded within a system of villages in Seram that had historical and mythical links to Banda and to Islam. According to oral traditions, these villages were originally settled by refugees from Portuguese-led anti-Muslim persecution during the 16th century. When he visited these villages, sometimes for weeks as he organized sago production there, he used his status as Bandanese and Muslim to his advantage to outcompete roving traders from other islands. He was, in fact, a revered member of these communities in Seram, in some respects resembling a visiting priest from the holy land. On his return to Banda, however, he used his Butonese ethnic status and connections with the Butonese community on Banda, and to the trade network that extended to the west, to gain a strategically placed stall in the market to sell his sago and to obtain the cigarettes and mattresses from other Butonese traders that he then traded for sago in Seram. Thus, for the sago producers in Seram, Banda is a single identity unit—a metaphor for homeland and Islam, and the trader's identity and its social meaning was reduced to *Bandanese*. While he was in Seram, he did not emphasize the fact that he was a second-generation recent immigrant to Banda from an entirely different place. While he was in Banda, his identity took on many other shifting meanings depending on his needs. In many cases, this identity was situated in another island, Buton, which was a metaphor for boatbuilder, seafarer, and trader.

Here we meet a familiar problem. What hope do we have as archaeologists of recovering this version of past island life, with its fascinating layered, complex system of land, sea, sago palm swamps, monsoon winds, and human identity built on ingenuity and shared (but not too shared) histories? Despite the mosaic of issues presented in these case studies, I think we may have some hope. The social processes at work in Robb's (1999) model and in contemporary maritime traders in Indonesia help explain the fractured and diverse archaeological expressions of social boundaries I excavated in Banda (Lape 2002). The challenge lies in coming up with a variety of models of island life, and then collecting data at both the level of detail and proper scale that allows us to then choose the one best fitting the project at hand.

The concept of seascape is a valid framework for localized model building. Broodbank (2000) spells out the level of archaeological research that is required to reconstruct past seascapes, and it is daunting. The first step is to acquire an in-depth understanding of the forces affecting maritime travel, including winds, currents, and seafaring technology. Particularly intriguing is Broodbank's discussion (2000) of mental maps of seascapes and how traditional maps, with their bird's-eye views, are poor representations of the sea level view seen and remembered by seafarers and island dwellers. New computer software that combines time "awareness," three-dimensional representation, and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) may allow further exploration of these aspects of seascape, such as the GIS viewers being developed by Timemap at the University of Sydney (http://www.timemap.net). A more sophisticated use of maps, particularly indigenous maps, may provide some guidance here too (Mundy 1996; Lewis 1998). Additionally, we need a firm grasp of island biogeography and the factors that influence human–environment interactions. This is an area of research that the complexity of island ecosystems cannot be modeled by simply considering islands as plots of land surrounded by water (Nunn 1997; Steadman and Kirch 1998). Finally, we must build a regional analysis of social interaction built on the appropriate spatial and temporal scale that incorporates those factors above (Jones 1997; Stark 1998).

Are islands unique? I think so, though not for the reasons that have, until recently, dominated discussions of island archaeology. Cultural isolation, with some exceptional cases like Rapa Nui, cannot be assumed to be a necessary condition of island life. There are certainly biogeographical conditions unique to islands in which island plant and

animal ecosystems have evolved in varying degrees of isolation. But the cultural response to these ecosystems is to typically *increase* interaction with other places. The powerful metaphor of isolation, however, has always been available and meaningful to both island dwellers and others who observe and study them. There is some evidence that it has affected not only archaeologists, but has a long history of being incorporated into descriptions of islands by others, and identity construction by the islanders themselves. It is here that we can investigate the development of landscape, or more properly seascape, under the powerful presence of this organizing metaphor.

Do islands have something to tell us about the rest of the nonisland world? It is no longer possible to describe islands as "cultural laboratories," which requires cultural isolation as a necessary scientific justification for the many pleasures of doing archaeology in these environments (Goodenough 1957; Evans 1973). However, if we are able to investigate and understand seascapes in their own right, we should be justly rewarded with views into pasts less constrained by metaphors.

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Chapter 12

Mediterranean Island Prehistory: What's Different and What's New?

John F. Cherry

The thrust of this contribution is to suggest that, among island theaters worldwide, the Mediterranean is different—distinct in terms of its "history," the history of its archaeological exploration, and its geographical configuration. These differences, together with certain other factors I will discuss, have resulted in an island archaeology of the Mediterranean that has developed in characteristic directions that single it out from comparable research in other regions. Because the accumulated database is now so vast, my comments here must be limited to prehistory, and more particularly to the earliest prehistory of these islands.

It is good that a chapter on the Mediterranean has been solicited for a volume that focuses on archaeological investigations of insularity, with case studies from the world's major island groups; but it comes as no surprise that the Mediterranean was not originally represented in the 2002 Society for American Archaeology (SAA) session from which this volume arises. Archaeological writing about islands, at least in a generalizing mode, has always been weighted in favor of the Pacific, despite the wealth of data from other island regions and the variety they present for a comparative study of islands. Interestingly, those scholars with a serious interest in the archaeology of Mediterranean islands generally have some passing familiarity with recent archaeological literature from the Pacific, but the converse is far from common.

Voyages of Discovery

The Archaeology of Islands

Edited by
Scott M. Fitzpatrick

To my parents
Anna Christine and Michael James
who, through their patience and guidance,
instilled in me a passion for learning.