

Christy Constantakopoulou. *The Dance of the Islands: Insularity, Networks, the Athenian Empire, and the Aegean World.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Maps. 348 pp. \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-959117-6.



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Published on H-HistGeog (July, 2011)

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Sailing Through Islands and Insularity

Islands have long captured human imagination. Over the past decade, they also seem to have increasingly captured the attention of scholars across a wide range of disciplines, both as geographical objects and as metaphors of the mind. A few years ago, John Gillis showed the centrality of islands to Western culture not only as real places, but also as a way of thinking. Western thought, the American historian argued, “has always preferred to assign meaning to nearly bounded, insulated things, regarding that which lie between as a void.”[1] Yet insularity and islands, Christy Constantakopoulou shows, have not always overlapped. Ancient Greeks used the same word to refer to both islands and peninsulas; they created islands on the mainland; and they regarded coastal stretches of mainland facing islands as an integral part of the latter (rather than the other way around). In ancient Greece, islands were “floating” cultural constructions no less ambiguous than other metageographical categories and no less fluid than the sea surrounding them.[2] Why was this the case?

To answer the question, one simply needs to cast a

look at the map of the Aegean with its myriad of islands, quasi-islands, islets, and capes always in sight of one other. While the idea of “island isolation” can be appropriately applied to oceanic contexts, one can hardly think of Aegean islands as independent units in the same way as, say, Saint Helena or Gough. We need to come to terms with notions of connectivity, exchange, interaction, incorporation, and even interdependence. We need to turn to alternative geographical models: networks, functional regions, areas of influence, and so on. Fourth-century poet Callimachus evocatively encapsulated these ideas in the image of “the dance of the islands,” a topos that endured in the Aegean throughout the late Byzantine period and from which Constantakopoulou’s book takes the title.[3]

The author, a senior lecturer in ancient history, recounts the history of this dance. In particular, she focuses on shifting perceptions of insularity in the fifth century BC, when Athens established a maritime empire bringing the Aegean under the influence of a single power for the first time. Of course, Constantakopoulou is not

the first scholar to have conceptualized this region of the Mediterranean as a network, nor islands as nodes of networks. Almost a century ago, Ellen Churchill Semple in *The Geography of the Mediterranean Region: Its Relation to Ancient History* (1932) drew her readers' attention to the fragmented physical geography of the Aegean and the role of cabotage in shaping what Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell would later call "ecological microregions" in *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (2000). Studies in environmental history, such as Richard Grove's *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860* (1995), have likewise insisted on the tension between island insularity and island connectivity, even at oceanic and global scales. *The Dance of the Islands*, however, is the first book to focus specifically on perceptions of insularity in the ancient Aegean context, combining primary textual sources with archaeological and epigraphic evidence.

Constantakopoulou belongs to a growing group of classics scholars and archaeologists determined to take geography seriously.^[4] The commitment is reflected in the structure of the book. Chapters do not follow the traditional strict chronological (or regional) order; they are rather arranged by scale. The dance starts from the small religious network encircling the island of Delos in the archaic period; it then enlarges to the whole archipelago during Athenian imperial expansion, to zoom in again on the microscale of Athens and of the various mini island or island-mainland networks around large Aegean islands.

The balance of textual and archaeological materials shifts from chapter to chapter, making them often different in focus, style, approach, and, not least, accessibility to nonspecialists. For example, we move from an enlightening and easy-to-read introductory chapter outlining key concepts in the ancient Greek context (what is an island, insularity, connectivity, etc.) to a much more technical second chapter. Here archaic cult networks centered on sacred islands are discussed primarily through archaeological evidence. The casual interdisciplinary reader might feel slightly discouraged by unexplained technical terms and by the relative lack of broader contextual background.

The narrative, however, becomes more accessible (though occasionally repetitive) as the dance moves on. The following chapter argues for a shift from the archaic religious network centered on the island of Delos to an imperial network of political allies. With the transformation of the Delian league into empire, Con-

stantakopoulou argues, "Athens attempted to claim for herself the image of the central island of the Aegean; in other words, to become the new Delos" (p. 62). This, of course, led to the emergence of new perceptions of insularity, which are discussed in the following chapter (one of my favorites). Chapter 4 draws mainly on fifth-century textual sources, especially Thucydides and Herodotus, presenting a variety of contrasting, if not opposed, island imageries: from sites of poverty and misery to utopian cornucopias; from vulnerable locations to inexpugnable fortresses, even "towers"; from bases for military operations to coves of pirates and thus sources of topophobia; and finally, sites belonging to the realm of the exotic and marvelous, and therefore privileged loci for self-othering—a reputation islands have maintained to our days.

The following chapters show how islands in ancient Greece were not the taken-for-granted geographical objects we refer to today. They did not have to be surrounded by water. When during the Peloponnesian War the Athenian countryside was evacuated, the citadel and the port area became islands on the land separated from their surroundings through the construction of high walls. Intriguingly, Constantakopoulou shows, in chapter 5, that the same contrasting island imageries discussed in the previous chapter (from the poor to the utopian) were applied to these new "islands on the land."

The last two chapters of the book take us from the imperial center to large Aegean islands. They show respectively, through literary references and inscriptions, how clusters of smaller islands surrounding Chios, Samos, Cos, and Rhodes, or parts of the mainland facing these islands, as well as Thasos, Samothrace, Tenedos, and Lesbos were perceived "as single units" (p. 177). In other words, they show how maritime space unified, rather than separated. Even though the author interprets these networks as a transposition of the imperial model on a smaller scale, these two chapters appear somehow detached from the narrative developed in the previous chapters. Here the focus seems to be on the functions of these islands and their satellites, in other words, on everyday usages (from pastureland to sites of exile and crime), rather than on shifting perceptions of insularity. This is perhaps a reflection of a deeper conceptual disjunction: between "real islands" and "imaginary islands," which the author treats as separate yet "overlapping spheres" (p. 254). To a certain extent, Constantakopoulou fails to address the mutual interplay between geography and imagination, as she does not always make clear how the microscale of local networks influenced the

macroscale of the Aegean and vice versa.

Ultimately, this is a book about space rather than place. In the text as well as in the accompanying maps, islands are presented as nodes varying in shape and size, but as homogeneously anonymous, and eventually disembodied visions. Little is said about their actual aspect, economy, customs, and local peculiarities, and how these would have made each island different from (rather than similar to) the others, or a distinctive, memorable unit. Sailing through the chapters, we encounter a wealth of evocative tales and everyday practices, such as goat islands and micro-transhumance (p. 201); yet these stories tend to remain evidence, rather than means to convey a sense of place. But I guess a similar point could be made when comparing Horden and Purcell's *Corrupting Sea* to Fernand Braudel's *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1949), that is, when comparing functional regions to formal regions, or networks to places.

While not the comprehensive work classical scholars might have hoped for, *The Dance of the Islands* nevertheless remains an extremely innovative contribution to Aegean history and a most valuable addition to island studies. It is clearly a book more oriented to specialists than to the general public and to classics scholars than to cultural geographers or environmental historians, but one from which all would greatly benefit. Introducing

the book, Constantakopoulou hopes that it might serve as a step toward writing the history of the Aegean. As a cultural historical geographer, I hope that it might inspire other classicists to continue to take geography seriously.

Notes

[1]. John Gillis, *Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 1-2.

[2]. Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

[3]. See, for example, Joseph Kalothetos's description of Mount Athos and its surrounding islands in Demetrios Tsamás, ed., *IAs Aph Kalothōtou Syggrāmmata* (Thessalonica: Kentro Byzantinōn Erevnōn, 1980), 461.

[4]. See, for example, Alex Purves, *Space and Time in Ancient Greek Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Daniela Dueck et al., eds., *Strabo's Cultural Geography: The Making of a Kolossourgia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Susan Alcock, *Archaeologies of the Greek Past: Landscape, Monuments, and Memories* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Claude Nicolet, *Space, Geography, and Politics in the Early Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991).

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Citation: Veronica Della Dora. Review of Constantakopoulou, Christy, *The Dance of the Islands: Insularity, Networks, the Athenian Empire, and the Aegean World*. H-HistGeog, H-Net Reviews. July, 2011.

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