

BOOK REVIEWS

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Review of:

Fitzpatrick, S. M. (ed.) 2004. *Voyages of Discovery: The Archaeology of Islands*. Westport: Praeger. 328 pages; illustrated with figures and tables. ISBN 0275979474. Hardback £45.99.

Introduction

This book is the result of the symposium entitled “The Archaeology of Insularity: Examining the Past in Island Environments”, held at the Society for American Archaeology Conference, Denver, Colorado in 2002. It is the latest in a long line of works that have driven forward discussion about the archaeology of islands around the world. Over recent years, this debate has produced both regionally specific island archaeological studies and wider global syntheses in addition to introducing a number of different theoretical perspectives on the ‘island’ (Bass 1998; Broodbank 2000; Gosden and Pavlides 1994; Kirch 1986; Patton 1996; Rainbird 1999).

Voyages of Discovery draws together a diverse and eclectic selection of research topics that bring different methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks to their unifying subject. Fitzpatrick acknowledges that “the archaeological study of islands and island regions has itself developed in partial isolation compared to other areas of the world or landforms” (p. xiii). He envisages that this book will proactively re-engage archaeologists working in island regions where archaeological research is more established, such as the Pacific and Mediterranean, with those working in less-published areas, such as the Caribbean, the west coast of North America and eastern Asia. The stimulating discussion that emerges from this dialogue is a clear example of why global debates are so useful. This book, for example, reveals some of the complexities of island archaeology, and importantly, it also compels the reader to form their own opinion as to whether the correlation and comparison of the archaeology of islands around the world is justified, and if so what underlying themes and criteria can be used to do so.

Fitzpatrick adopts a thematic approach to his book with four sections:

1. Humans and their Island Environments
2. Island Interregional Interaction
3. Methodological, Theoretical, and Historical Approaches to Island Archaeology
4. The Study of Islands and Island Societies.

This review broadly follows these sub-themes by focusing on how different authors treat the island as an analytical unit and on the resulting implications for island research.

1. Humans and their Island Environments

The first two articles in this section focus on the Northern Channel Islands of California and employ biogeographical approaches that rely on the perception of the island as a bounded entity with finite resources. Kennett and Clifford adopt an agent-based model

to investigate human resource exploitation in the early Holocene and use game theory to predict short-term human decision-making as determined by the limited availability of resources (p. 27). In contrast, Erlandson *et al.* investigate the long term record of environmental change and aim to assess how humans have impacted on their fragile environments (p. 73). Despite approaching the question of the relationship between people and their environment from different angles, both articles use theoretical frameworks that are reminiscent of the ‘island laboratory’ analogy (Evans 1973: 519, 1977: 13; Keegan and Diamond 1987: 50; MacArthur and Wilson 1967). This approach treats islands as relatively circumscribed units of analysis and consequently as “ideal places to examine the processes involved in environmental degradation caused by humans” (Erlandson *et al.* p. 51), due to the limitations imposed by the island environment on human behaviour (Kennett and Clifford p. 32).

Carlson and Keegan’s discussion of comparative resource depletion and subsistence strategies in the Greater Antilles also emerges from a biogeographical perspective. However, they introduce social and cultural variation as key factors in tempering environmental determinism (p. 87-88). The authors locate the island societies and their resource exploitation within a historical context of island interaction, colonisation and migration, and they demonstrate how “all diets are situated along a historical trajectory” (p. 87). Carlson and Keegan implement a multi-scaled approach to their area of study by correlating the regional, where general trends can be identified, with the local, where contingent cultural factors play a more important role.

2. Island Interregional Interaction

Takamiya takes the multi-scaled approach one step further, by investigating – through his research on the Ryukyu archipelago between Taiwan and Japan – how island and mainland cultures can be articulated. Having introduced the archaeology of the area, he draws together linguistic, osteological and archaeobotanical data within a relatively unilinear framework to explain human development and the introduction of agriculture to the islands (p. 124). In contrast to current beliefs of continual occupation and intra-island indigenous development, Takamiya argues for an inter-island colonisation from Kyushu in southern Japan during the Holocene (p. 113). He also cites the overdependence of island archaeology on the regions of the Mediterranean, Oceania and the Caribbean and states his desire to communicate his experiences from working in the Ryukyu archipelago to the global island research community (p. 125).

The next three articles within the sub-theme of Island Interregional Interaction are concerned with cultural definition and explore how social islands can be more relevant for archaeological investigation than physical islands (Rainbird 1999, 2004). Fitzpatrick and Diveley examine the social and cultural life experiences of islanders by reconstructing the biographies of individual megaliths in Micronesia. Their research focuses on correlating evidence of the quarrying, construction, transportation and ownership of stone money and the valuation of these objects by different social groups (p. 131-132, 136-143). By reconstructing and analysing these social networks, the physical islands can be seen as providing the canvas upon which social islands can be visualised and cultural islands mapped out, with changes and fluctuations in the boundaries reflected in the material remains of “this unique exchange system” (p. 144).

The concept of the cultural island and the importance of human decision-making and perception are reinforced by White, who investigates the translocation of animal species throughout the Papua New Guinea archipelago. Although White acknowledges the usefulness of applying a biogeographical perspective to the island as a bounded habitat, he argues persuasively that the cultural island is more important to archaeologists, as he draws cultural interpretations of animal husbandry from the islands' faunal assemblages (p. 157-159). Moss focuses on the cultural island by looking at ethnographic and ethnohistorical evidence from the Alexander Archipelago in Alaska. She explains how these coastal islands often lack definition as they blend and merge with the complex coastline of southern Alaska. The geographical boundaries are less important in Moss' work, as she cites the Tlingit use of the waterways as forming a "connective tissue of social and historical relationships that extend across the region" (p. 180). This cultural perspective is illustrated in fig. 8.2 (p. 172), which shows how the social islands inhabited by the different Tlingit Kuaans appear to form more prominent entities than the physical islands themselves and spill over their terrestrial boundaries.

3. Methodological, Theoretical, and Historical Approaches to Island Archaeology

The articles discussed so far have illustrated a spectrum of theoretical frameworks. The contributions from section 1 are quite phylogenetic in their approach, treating the island as a relatively isolated geographical and social laboratory, framed within an evolutionary paradigm (*e.g.* Kirch and Green 2001). Sections 2 and 3, on the other hand, develop a more reticulate framework, envisaging the island as a cell that is part of a three-dimensional network that allows for the cultural to be superimposed over the physical (Dewar 1995). These theoretical debates are taken up in the articles by Terrell, Lape and Anderson (the latter we feel successfully bridges sections 3 and 4), who all consolidate recent developments in island archaeology and suggest directions for future research. All three of these authors expose the 'myth of the primitive isolate' and show that islands are not necessarily socially insular (Lape p. 223; Gosden and Pavlides 1994). They also demonstrate how important it is that island archaeology is not insular, and argue that it should maintain links with the wider body of academic research. These authors, therefore, all seem to agree that island archaeology is "separable but not separate from the wider discipline" (Anderson p. 267), and that research on islands can contribute greatly to non-island framed investigations of the past.

The benefits of being part of the island archaeological debate are neatly illustrated in the articles by Curet and by Cherry. Both discuss the potential and relevance of comparative island archaeological discussion to their specific island regions, the Caribbean and Mediterranean, respectively. Curet (p. 187) cites "the near absence of the Caribbean in the debate surrounding issues of island archaeology and island societies over the past quarter century" and goes on to show how useful and applicable developments in island archaeology around the world are to the Caribbean. He argues that future research in the Caribbean should learn from comparative work in other island theatres, and that island societies rather than physical islands should provide the unit of archaeological inquiry (p. 198). Cherry talks about the Mediterranean as "having peculiarities of its own" (p. 238) and thus requiring more refined regional study. He argues for the development of a tailor-made island archaeology for distinct areas, but not excessively

concerned with local detail, and aimed at carrying out “fruitful comparisons” between different areas (p. 244). His reflection on the current state of Mediterranean island archaeology since its inception in the early 1970s (p. 244) illustrates that archaeologists working in this area are fully engaged with global perspectives of island archaeology, a stage of academic development the Caribbean has yet to go through.

4. The Study of Islands and Island Societies

Renfrew draws all the sub-themes together and offers a review of his own, picking up on Fitzpatrick’s introduction to complete a synthesis of the book’s contributions to island archaeology and to offer a personal reflection. He explains that island archaeology “implies comparison of insularity at different places and periods”, and is therefore reflective of “the time at which such comparison is carried out” (p. 282). When contrasting different island cultures, he emphasises that it is important not to place islands “out of time” (p. 280) and to be clear about the context of comparison. This context includes both the time when the cultures being compared actually developed and the academic milieu in the present. This realisation leads to a review of past and present approaches to island archaeology and to the conclusion that by combining reticulate and biogeographical approaches it could be possible to “map the worldview of the islanders” (p. 287). Renfrew argues that a cognitive framework could be devised to investigate intra-island interaction and the role of the “outside world” (p. 287) in creating an islander mentality. By locating the book within his own personal odyssey of island research and experience, Renfrew reflects upon the achievements of island archaeology to date, commenting that this book “with the range of geographical examples and the scope of research perspectives that it encapsulates, suggests that there is much more to be achieved” (p. 292).

Conclusions

In many ways, the various approaches to the island illustrated in this book reflect the different research foci of individual authors. These reveal that there is perhaps a risk that the island debate could become excessively polarised between nature and culture, or between biological and social approaches (Anderson p. 255). It appears clear from this book that there currently is not, and perhaps never will be, a universal island archaeological framework that is applicable to all islands and useful to all island archaeologists, as this would obscure rather than highlight the diversity of islands and island cultures. Rather, by engaging in the debate and learning from it, archaeologists can develop their own regionally-specific frameworks, thus creating a ‘separable but not separate’ discipline. Therefore, a main contribution of this book is that, by bringing together different approaches to the island, it urges readers to re-evaluate their own preconceptions and re-assess their own research frameworks.

The traditional definition of the island as a bounded entity is challenged in this book, as the authors create different islands by using alternative categories of boundary. These boundaries do not necessarily constitute a barrier, but rather mark a change in the physical or social landscape. However, some authors’ contributions to this book demonstrate a tendency to assume that their definition of islands will be universally understood, and that readers will visualise them in the same way. We contend that researchers need to

be explicit in identifying the criteria they use to create their island laboratories, be they social, cultural or physical. Only then can they offer valid avenues for future investigation, by expanding and developing the wider island archaeological debate. Indeed, we strongly agree with Moss, who states that she will only have something to contribute if “the island archaeology discourse community” opens up “sufficient space for accommodating the diversity of islands” (p. 181).

This book makes a major contribution towards contextualising the archaeology of islands within a global frame of reference, as it brings together some of the leading thinkers involved in the island archaeological debate and demonstrates the relevance of different approaches. It also shows that island archaeology has become a well-established subject in its own right, by accommodating the growing variety of ways in which the island can be conceptualised. We believe that this book goes a long way towards showing how the world island research community has recognised this diversity and is developing increasingly effective ways of approaching it.

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