



## BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Darley, Rebecca (2019) The island frontier: Socotra, Sri Lanka and the shape of commerce in the Late Antique Western Indian Ocean. *Al-Masaq: Journal of the Medieval Mediterranean* 31 (2), pp. 223-241. ISSN 0950-3110.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/26416/>

*Usage Guidelines:*

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>  
contact [lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk).

or alternatively

The Island Frontier: Socotra, Sri Lanka and the Shape of Commerce in the Late Antique  
Western Indian Ocean

Rebecca Darley

Department of History, Classics and Archaeology

Birkbeck, University of London

Malet Street

London

WC1E 7HX

[r.darley@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:r.darley@bbk.ac.uk)

Abstract:

The islands of Sri Lanka and Socotra *c.* 200-700 provide a useful comparison, both with each other and with islands in the Late Antique and medieval Mediterranean. Using the analytical framework of frontiers as a comparative tool, this study proposes using the parameters of scale and proximity in order to evaluate where the frontier(s) of an island lay (along the shoreline or within an island space, sometimes both) and the difficulty or ease of controlling them from inside or outside the island. In its results, this analysis allows for change over time, but also establishes the diachronic effect of physical parameters. It offers a new way through the insular dichotomy of isolation versus connectivity and indicates a particularity of Mediterranean islands. This exploratory approach also sheds new light on an embargo established in ancient Socotra, suggesting it to have been a much shorter-lived phenomenon than previously thought.

Keywords: Socotra, Sri Lanka, Indian Ocean, Frontier, Mediterranean, Comparative

# The Island Frontier: Socotra, Sri Lanka and the Shape of Commerce in the Late Antique Western Indian Ocean

## Introduction

The historiography of islands veers between positions, whose lineage can be traced equally from antiquity.<sup>1</sup> On one hand, islands are perceived to be geographically predestined hubs, places of hybridity and openness.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, islands are presented as isolated spaces, with the sea in this vision providing a barrier and a bulwark against outsiders. These are perspectives addressed in other articles in this issue with specific reference to the Mediterranean, but a comparative perspective is particularly useful when addressing ideas presented, implicitly or explicitly, as universals, highlighting what is in fact geographically or culturally specific or revealing the precise interactions of ‘universal truths’ and local contingencies.<sup>3</sup>

The examples of Socotra and Sri Lanka are used in this article for three reasons. First, much of the evidence for their role in Late Antique commerce and maritime networks is derived from Mediterranean sources and the experiences of Mediterranean actors. They are, therefore, simultaneously outside and connected, and represented as islands largely in the same languages and using a shared set of cultural assumptions as those applied in

---

<sup>1</sup> L. Zavagno, “‘Going to the Extremes’: the Balearics and Cyprus in the Early Medieval Byzantine Insular System”, *al-Masāq* (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> For example: F. Lionnet, “Cosmopolitan or Creole Lives? Globalized Oceans and Insular Identities”, *Profession* (2011): 23–43, p. 24. K. Kopaka and G. Cadogan, “Two Mediterranean island life modes, two island archaeologies. Crete and Cyprus: how near, how far?”, *British School at Athens Studies* 20 (2012): 17–33, pp. 17–18 contrasts this new view of islands with an equally problematic vision of islands as isolated and peripheral. O. Bopearachchi, “Archaeological evidence on shipping communities of Sri Lanka”, in *Ships and the Development of Maritime Technology in the Indian Ocean*, eds D. Parkin and R. Barnes (Routledge Curzon: London, 2002), pp. 92–127, 92 for Sri Lanka as timelessly connected and hybrid. B. Schnepel and Ea. A. Alpers, *Connectivity in Motion: Island Hubs in the Indian Ocean World* (New York: Springer, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> On comparative history and methods: T. Skocpol and M. Somers, “The Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22 (1980): 174–97; C. Beccalossi, “Comparative Histories”, in *A Practical Guide to Studying History: Skills and Approaches*, ed. T. Loughran (Bloomsbury Academic: London, 2017), pp. 47–63. On Mediterranean-Indian Ocean comparison in medieval studies: A. Wink, “From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean: Medieval History in Geographic Perspective”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44 (2002): 416–45.

textual sources from the Mediterranean, though with important contributions by other voices. Second, the western Indian Ocean provides a valuable counterpoint to the Mediterranean as a physically and historically constructed space. Like the Mediterranean, the Erythreian Sea, or the Indian Sea, as it was widely known to Mediterranean observers in antiquity and the Middle Ages, was perceived to be a bounded or coherent space by most geographers, with the African continent thought by some to wrap around and join with the distant lands to the East, though whether it was contained by India to the East or by more distant lands was, broadly, to change between Late Antiquity (here defined as *c.* 250–700) and the Middle Ages.<sup>4</sup>

[Figure 1 here]

Third, historiographically, the trend in recent scholarship has been to emphasise the Indian Ocean as a maritime unit, which should be seen emically as a seascape and realm of shared cultural connections and practices as well as etically, as defined, and at times divided, by terrestrial power structures - a trend initially borrowed from, then developed in dialogue with, studies of the Mediterranean.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the Indian Ocean is different from the Mediterranean in crucial ways that illuminate the problematic of insularity as a category. In particular, the southern reaches of the Indian Ocean, despite assumptions by ancient geographers, were effectively empty space to ancient and medieval seafarers, giving all movement a strongly east-west, rather than north-south bias, while the sheer scale of this maritime space has defied political unity at any period in recorded history.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> M.W. Lewis, "Dividing the Ocean Sea", *Geographical Review* 89 (1999): 188–214, DOI: [10.2307/216086](https://doi.org/10.2307/216086), p. 191 on the Indian Ocean. For the first- to sixth-century sources examined here, the peninsular of India formed a vertical break and a clear differentiation of the ocean space from that which lay beyond. On the scope and flexibility of the label "Erythreian Sea" in Late Antiquity see P. Mayerson, "A Confusion of Indias: Asian India and African India in the Byzantine Sources", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113 (1993): 169–74. However, by the time Ibn Hawqal wrote in the mid-tenth century, the ocean was visualised as stretching unbroken to China, with India functioning only as a section of shoreline: Ibn Hauqal, *Configuration de la terre (Kitab surat al-Ard): Introduction et traduction, avec index*, ed. J.H Kramers, trans. G. Wiet, 1st ed., volumes I–II (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 1964), I: 42–5 and 48, with map *inter* pp. 44/5.

<sup>5</sup> R.M. Feener, "Hybridity and the 'Hadhrami Diaspora' in the Indian Ocean Muslim Networks", *Asian Journal of Social Science* 32 (2004): 353–72, p. 355 gives a good background to this dialogic bibliography.

<sup>6</sup> While there may have been occasional movement southwards and eastwards (from a Mediterranean perspective) there is no evidence in this period for intentional, long-distance voyaging south from Socotra or Sri Lanka.

In order to unpick the nature of island experience within the Late Antique Indian Ocean, therefore, this article first explores the current view of islands as hybrid – or hub – places, or as isolates, and proposes the analytical framework of frontiers, and their formation within the parameters of scale and proximity, as a means of moving beyond an evaluation of levels of connectedness or separation. It then examines Socotra and Sri Lanka in Late Antiquity through this lens before turning to the possible lessons of these islands for wider debates, including in the Mediterranean. Before turning to this analysis, though, it is also worth commenting briefly on the chronological remit of this article. The periodisation of the western Indian Ocean is extremely variable, rooted primarily in the terrestrial preferences of scholarly communities.<sup>7</sup> Spanning, as these terrestrial preferences might, specialism in the worlds of the Near East across to Australia, and covering regional study areas with diverse internal chronologies and evidence bodies, plurality is to be expected. Thinking only of the Near Eastern specialist, Indian Ocean history might be characterised as Achaemenid, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Islamic, etc., while for a historian of peninsular India or East Africa the same set of centuries might be early historic, ancient or simply “early”, depending on geographical or evidentiary perspective.<sup>8</sup> Only in more recent years, with the turn towards maritime and oceanic history, has there been an effort to describe or define periodisation internal to sea spaces.<sup>9</sup>

The use of the term “Late Antique” here for the centuries *c.* 200–700, and applied to the western Indian Ocean, derives from that focus on maritime spaces as the unit of analysis and this author’s own work. While “Late Antique” is indubitably a label derived from a terrestrial context and a specific geographical origin point, I argue elsewhere that there are

---

<sup>7</sup> On the definition of maritime periods and identities according to terrestrial categories see M. Harpster, “Sicily: A Frontier in the Center of the Sea?”, *al-Masāq* (forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> For example: H. Schenk, “Role of Ceramics in the Indian Ocean Maritime Trade during the Early Historic Period”, in *Maritime Connections of the Past: Deciphering Connections Amongst Communities*, ed. S. Tripathi (Delta Book World: New Delhi, 2015), pp. 143–81; S. Munro-Hay, “An African Monetised Economy in Ancient times”, in *Second International Conference on Indian Ocean Studies, Perth, Western Australia, 5-12 December 1984*, ed. N. Given (Perth: University of Western Australia, 1984), no pagination; C. Allibert, and P. Vérin, “The Early Pre-Islamic History of the Comores Islands: Links with Madagascar and Africa”, in *The Indian Ocean in Antiquity*, ed. J. Reade (London: Kegan Paul International, 1996), pp. 461–70; D.K. Wright, “New Perspectives on Early Regional Interaction Networks of East African Trade: A View from Tsavo National Park, Kenya”, *African Archaeological Review* 22 (2005): 111–40. J.-F. Salles, “Achaemenid and Hellenistic Trade in the Indian Ocean”, in Reade, *The Indian Ocean in Antiquity*, pp. 251–67.

<sup>9</sup> K. Wigen, “Oceans of history: introduction”, *American Historical Review* 111 (2006): 717–21, pp. 720–1.

characteristics of a wider Late Antique political, economic and cultural context that are relevant to almost all societies operating around the shores of the western Indian Ocean in this period, and thereby define its internal dynamics (dynamics separate, in this period, from that of the eastern Indian Ocean).<sup>10</sup> Its application is therefore useful not only for describing qualities common to the whole maritime space but also for examining how those similarities were shared, expressed and responded to: it is a periodisation, in this context, with an inherently comparative purpose, rooted in the identification of structural similarity and difference. It is this structural analysis which here forms the basis for conclusions which, I argue, are of use in other contexts, including the Mediterranean world of the central and later Middle Ages, as represented by the majority of articles in this issue.

### An essential 'islandness'?

Islands enact a dual identity in the literary imagination of present as well as historical societies, with each imaginary having its positive and its negative valence depending on the commentator. This article takes the starting position that the interpretations of islands as spaces of inherent connectivity or as places set apart, cut off or safe from outside influence, are both *a priori* problematic because they deny and obscure the individual and communal agency of island dwellers and island visitors. Trying to place islands on a scale between these two poles offers one solution, and a means of addressing how decisions by groups and individuals cause local shifts. It runs into the problem, however, that, especially where sources are limited or variable over time, evaluating 'how much connectivity' and the importance of that connectivity in a qualitative but meaningful way can begin to look

---

<sup>10</sup> G. Clark, *Late Antiquity: a very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 1–12, provides a background to the use of the term "Late Antiquity". There are studies which use the terrestrial periodisation of 'Late Antiquity' to situate chronologically the particular interest of groups or regions in the western Indian Ocean, such as E.H. Seland, "Trade and Christianity in the Indian Ocean during Late Antiquity", *Journal of Late Antiquity* 5 (2012): 72–86. However, application of Late Antiquity as a period category to the western Indian Ocean itself has mainly been proposed by R. Darley, "Travelling in a Disconnected Sea: the Late Antique Western Indian Ocean", in *Economic Integration and Social Change in the Islamic World System, 800-1000 CE*, eds H. Kennedy and F. Bessard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), pagination TBC.

much like preference and perspective.<sup>11</sup> The present article will therefore make the case for re-situating the experience of islands within the wider problematic of frontiers, insofar as frontiers are meaningful contexts created out of the diachronic dynamic of physical geography and human agency. Such a view, it is here argued, has the potential to sharpen both the analysis of insularity and frontiers.

To begin with physical geography, an island is a piece of land completely surrounded by water.<sup>12</sup> This has immediate implications for human agency, since the quality of being entirely surrounded by water makes islands harder to reach by humans than if they were not. This is an obvious, but not irrelevant point, and not one that should be obscured by generalising and thereby normalising the technological capabilities of late antique and medieval societies. An island in a context of effective shipping technology and nautical experience may indeed be faster and more convenient to reach than somewhere inland over harsh terrain.<sup>13</sup> However, such access depends on material and cultural resources (specifically, boats and the ability to use them), which may change over time and which may be differentially available in any given situation.<sup>14</sup> If such resources are available an island may not just be easier to access than somewhere on land, but may theoretically be accessible from any direction: while currents, winds and harbouring positions may have a pro-

---

<sup>11</sup> See R. Darley, “‘Implicit Cosmopolitanism’ and the Commercial Role of Ancient Lanka”, in *Sri Lanka at the Crossroads of History*, eds Z. Biedermann and A. Strathern (London: UCL Press, 2017), pp. 44–65, a chapter that exemplifies this difficulty in that, while the author firmly stands by the critique of narratives of connectivity which predominate in Sri Lankan studies and advocates for a different interpretation of the island’s ancient links beyond its shores as better fitting a larger emergent picture of Indian Ocean interactions, it is nevertheless easy to see that arguments for and against connectivity, especially when evidence is sufficiently lacunose as to require speculation on what is lacking, will always fall far short of being definitive.

<sup>12</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, consulted online 12 June 2018.

<sup>13</sup> R. Laurence, “Land Transport in Roman Italy: Costs, Practice and the Economy” in *Trade, Traders and the Ancient City*, eds H. Parkins and C. Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 129–48.

<sup>14</sup> It is notable, for example, that while travel by sea does not appear as a barrier in medieval hagiographies, the maritime journeys contained in them, which have been heavily mined by M. McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce, A.D. 300–900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) for evidence of continuity in Mediterranean connectivity, travel by sea is usually prefaced by reference to the finding or boarding of a boat, while landward travel is rarely dwelt upon, with travellers simply setting out for, going to or reaching a place without mention of the means. This strongly suggests a recognition that, while perhaps quicker, cheaper, more comfortable etc., travel by sea for most individuals in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, required mediation by others (boat owners) in a way that was not required for land travel.

found impact, by default, routes around and into an island are more difficult to control, alter and demarcate than will often be the case terrestrially. Here again, the constructed end-points of islandness emerge: total isolation and total openness.

A frontier is, by comparison, far harder to define simply, since it is constituted only out of human perception, even if this in turn gives meaning to a physical feature of the landscape.<sup>15</sup> Here though, a frontier is considered to be the interface of mutually exclusive or mutually distinguishable collective definitions. These may be political, military, cultural, religious, and may entail large or small collectives. They may be fixed, mobile or plurilocal, but are identifiable in the articulation of in- and out-groups and a notion, whether contested or not, that various aspects of life in the frontier “belong” to one collective or another. It is possible in frontiers, therefore, for individuals to express hybrid identities; however, within a frontier context such hybridity remains recognisable because the aspect of life in question can be pointed at and identified by all parties as “belonging” to one collective, even if enacted in a given moment by somebody identified as not belonging to that group. A new collective that (also) owns that aspect of life may ultimately emerge, constituting new frontiers between this and other groups. In examining islands, this article explores the further extension of this definition of frontier, in which a specific zone or point in space becomes associated with the claimed limits of collective ownership of particular aspects of life, from property rights, social habits and collective obligation to a particular political structure.

By this definition of a frontier, the idea of insularity as a historical rather than a geographical category assumes that the frontier of an island – the point of interface between collective identities – is the shoreline. In the idea of the isolated island is implicit the concept of the shoreline as a hard frontier, whether maintained by geographical accident or human enforcement. The historiography of island hubs assumes the shoreline inevitably to have been a porous frontier, but nevertheless a frontier, in the sense that the island community remains distinctive and identifiable as a collective because of its multiplicity of influences in comparison to those outside. Making explicit this assumption of the shoreline

---

<sup>15</sup> For example, *Frontiers in Question: Eurasian Borderlands, 700–1700*, eds D. Power and N. Standen (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999); D. Jones, “The Significance of the Frontier in World History”, *History Compass*, 1/1 (2003), 1–3, DOI: [10.1111/1478-0542.0035](https://doi.org/10.1111/1478-0542.0035); and J. C. Arriaga-Rodríguez, “Tres tesis del concepto frontera en la historiografía”, in *Tres miradas a la historia contemporánea*, ed. G. Gurza Lavalle (San Juan Mixcoac: Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. José María Luis Mora, 2013), pp. 9–47. For my own thinking about this I am indebted to the discussions made possible through the network “Rethinking the Medieval Frontier” and its associated events.



frontier makes it possible to move beyond the simple dichotomy of “closed” and “porous” and to engage more closely with the interaction of the physical geography and the human element in constituting such a frontier. In particular, it opens up the possibility of understanding island spaces in terms of internal frontiers that shaped interactions at the shoreline, of identifying situations in which the shoreline effectively ceased to be a frontier, with clear implications for the concept of insularity, and of examining the agency of island dwellers and visitors to control the shoreline frontier within the parameters of wider constraints, notably scale and proximity.

## Socotra

Socotra has an area of approximately 3,600 km<sup>2</sup>, roughly the same as Mallorca (3,640 km<sup>2</sup>), but with a much more arid climate, such that today its population density is roughly twenty-one times lower than that of the Balearics. It is 240 km from the Horn of Africa and around 300 km from the Hadramaut, and in Antiquity and Late Antiquity it seems to have had the closest connection with the latter; it remains under Yemeni authority today.<sup>16</sup> Throughout this article, scale and proximity should be considered to refer to factors of both physical and human geography. Socotra’s scale, therefore, includes both its absolute size and consideration of the local, very difficult, agricultural conditions, while proximity entails not just an evaluation of absolute distance from other places, but also some consideration of the relative scale of those places (in terms of resources, political organisation, etc.) and their desire for proximity to the island, whether in the form of contact or control. Scale and proximity are, therefore, dynamic and interactive categories that at any given moment might be subject to some, but only limited, control by island communities.

On Socotra there are signs of habitation from prehistory onwards, and possible evidence for migration from southern Arabia from the mid-first millennium BC.<sup>17</sup> The apocryphal accounts of Saint Thomas talk of him converting the island, though this is likely a much later narrative tradition and it is likely that Socotra was in fact Christianised from

---

<sup>16</sup> I. Strauch, *Foreign Sailors on Socotra: the Inscriptions and Drawings from the Cave Hoq* (Ute Hempen Verlag: Bremen, 2013), p. 13.

<sup>17</sup> V.V. Naumkin, *Island of the Phoenix: An Ethnographic Study of the People of Socotra*, trans. V.A. Epstein (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1993), pp. 581–2.

Yemen around the fourth–sixth century.<sup>18</sup> From the seventh century onwards the island retained a Christian character, with clergy supplied from the Church in the East. The contact of this Christian population with visitors to the island and governance imposed from Arabia developed uniquely and in the Middle Ages the island was to be at times considered a nest of pirates, who visited to sell their wares and share in the life of the islanders for months at a time, at other times a trading outpost selling its own wares and at yet other times, a community under nominal governance from Yemen. Since the islanders produced no written records of their own in this period, this is a narrative that must be constructed entirely from outside perspectives.<sup>19</sup>

The only narrative records of the island from Antiquity and Late Antiquity come from Greek and Latin sources, which refer to it as Dioscorides.<sup>20</sup> Very recently, epigraphic remains from one of the deep cave complexes on the island have also been recovered and published, dating in the main from the second to fourth centuries.<sup>21</sup> Archaeologically, there is no conclusive evidence for the nature of population groups in this period, mainly owing to the difficulty in dating physical remains with confidence.<sup>22</sup> The archaeological remains for trade, as will be seen below, are similarly lacunose, with limited ceramic evidence for long-distance contacts with India, Arabia and the Roman world concentrated on a settlement site probably datable to the first and second centuries and then beginning to appear in significant quantities only from the tenth century.<sup>23</sup>

Written testimony concerning the island comes mainly from two sources, namely the *Periplus of the Erythreian Sea* in the first century AD and the *Christian Topography* in

---

<sup>18</sup> Z. Biedermann, *Soqatra: Geschichte einer christlichen Insel im indischen Ozean vom Altertum bis zur frühen Neuzeit* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006), pp. 40–44.

<sup>19</sup> Biedermann, *Soqatra*, pp. 44–61.

<sup>20</sup> Biedermann, *Soqatra*, for a full survey of these pp. 29–40. Also M.D. Bukharin, “The Mediterranean World and Socotra”, in Strauch, *Foreign Sailors*, pp. 495–539, though some conclusions about the nature of the “blockade” are disputed here.

<sup>21</sup> Strauch, *Foreign Sailors*.

<sup>22</sup> Despite suggestions that a building layout in Tsinifiroh resembles San Vitale in Ravenna (B. Doe, *Socotra: an Archaeological Reconnaissance in 1967* (Coconut Grove: Field Research Projects, 1970), p. 43), the dating of several buildings considered to be possible churches fits more clearly into the period following the ninth century (R. Kauz, *Aspects of the Maritime Silk Road: From the Persian Gulf to the East China Sea* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), p. 13), according with the ceramic evidence elsewhere on the island (Doe, *Socotra*, p. 152).

<sup>23</sup> Naumkin, *Island of the Phoenix*, pp. 110–23; Doe, *Socotra*.

the sixth. Both are significant as they were written by authors who appear, from their texts, to have had direct sailing experience in the Erythrean Sea, though the author of the *Christian Topography* asserts that he only sailed past the island, and the first-century *Periplus* does not specify whether information was gathered from others or came from firsthand experience. While the *Periplus* predates the main focus of this paper, it cannot be disregarded in any consideration of Socotra in Late Antiquity. In the text, a description of routes and ports of trade in the first-century Red Sea and western Indian Ocean, the island is described thus:

“...it is barren and also damp, with rivers, crocodiles, a great many vipers, and huge lizards, so huge that people eat the flesh and melt down the fat to use in place of oil. The island bears no farm products, neither vines nor grain. The inhabitants, few in number, live on one side of the island, that to the north, the part facing the mainland [τὴν ἡπειροῦ]; they are settlers, a mixture of Arabs and Indians and even some Greeks, who sail out of there to trade.”<sup>24</sup>

The account goes on to record the importance of tortoise shell for the island’s economy, making up the principle trade good, before commenting thus on the governance of the island:

“The island is subject to the king of the afore-mentioned frankincense-bearing land, just as Azania is to Charibaêl and the governor of Mapharitis. Trade with it used to be carried on by some of the shippers from Muza and also by those sailing out of Limyrikê and Barygaza who by chance [κατὰ τύχην] put in at it; these could exchange rice, grain, cotton cloth [όθόνιον Ἰνδικόν], and female slaves, which found a market price because of a shortage there, for big cargoes of tortoise shell. At the present time the kings have leased out the island, and it is under guard [νῦν δὲ ὑπὸ τῶν βασιλέων ἡ νῆσος ἐκμεμίσθεται καὶ παραφυλάσσεται].”<sup>25</sup>

The next substantial account of the island follows in the sixth century, a very different period in western Indian Ocean interactions from the comparatively bustling period of Roman trade in the first and second centuries or the more geographically limited but busy

---

<sup>24</sup> *The Periplus Maris Erythraei: text with introduction, translation, and commentary*, ed. and trans. L. Casson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 67–9.

<sup>25</sup> Casson, *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, p. 69.

maritime Palmyran trade in the third and fourth.<sup>26</sup> The author of that text, the *Christian Topography*, had the following to say, focussed tightly on the Christianisation of the island:

“In the island, again, called the island of Dioscorides, which is situated in the same Indian sea, and where the inhabitants speak Greek, having been originally colonists sent thither by the Ptolemies who succeeded Alexander the Macedonian, there are clergy who receive their ordination in Persia, and are sent on to the island, and there is also a multitude of Christians. I sailed along the coast of this island, but did not land upon it. I met, however, with some of its Greek-speaking people who had come over into Ethiopia.”<sup>27</sup>

It is a thin set of sources from which to reconstruct several centuries of activity, and to which recent speleological investigation has added surprising new data. Inspection of the Hoq cave complex in the north of the island from the early 2000s, and ultimately published in 2013 revealed over 200 graffiti in the kilometre-long cave, dating from the first to seventh centuries AD, with a concentration in the second to fourth. These inscriptions are, for the most part, very simple, referring to the names of visitors, sometimes their surname, patronymic or occupation and sometimes including prayers or symbols.<sup>28</sup> The majority are in northwest Indian script and Sanskrit, testifying to movement between ports like Barygaza and Socotra.<sup>29</sup> Smaller numbers are in Greek, Ethiopic and south Arabian scripts.<sup>30</sup> Fascinatingly, the longest inscription from the Hoq Cave is totally out of character with the rest. It is on a wooden plaque, in Palmyran – otherwise unattested on the island – probably from the third century AD, and is a prayer from a probably shipwrecked sailor, whose timelessly poignant thanksgiving for reaching the island nevertheless gives every indication that he might have been alone in his encounter, and speaking to other a general and un-

---

<sup>26</sup> R. Darley, “Indo-Byzantine exchange, 4th–7th centuries: a global history”, PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2013, pp. 377–402; M. Gorea, “Palmyra and Socotra”, in Strauch, *Foreign Sailors*, 447–57, pp. 463–85.

<sup>27</sup> *Christian Topography*, ed. and trans. W. Wolska-Conus, *Cosmas Indicopleustes : Topographie Chrétienne*, volumes I–III [Sources Chrétiennes, volumes CXLI, CLIX and CXCVII] (Paris: du Cerf, 1968–73), III: 502–5.

<sup>28</sup> Strauch, *Foreign Sailors*, especially “Catalogue of Inscriptions and Drawings”, pp. 25–218.

<sup>29</sup> Strauch, *Foreign Sailors*, pp. 366–403

<sup>30</sup> C.J. Robin, “Sudarabiques et Aksūmites à Suqutra d’après les inscriptions de Hōq”, and “Suqutra dans les inscriptions de l’Arabie du Sud”, both in Strauch, *Foreign Sailors*, pp. 438–42 and pp. 443–46.

specified audience of future discoverers: “You... who will read this tablet, you will bless me/us and he will leave the tablet in its place”.<sup>31</sup>

Interpreting the cave inscriptions has confronted the historiography of the island once again with the dichotomy of connectivity and isolation. Arguments have been made for it indicating a multi-cultural and hybrid space, yet the graffiti themselves seem to point to quite clearly demarcated ethno-linguistic groups, who may have met on the island, but for whom there is little evidence of the island as a meeting place.<sup>32</sup> The only evidence for bilingualism in the inscriptions comes in the attestation of an Indian sailor who signed his name in both Sanskrit and Bactrian, and who was, therefore, carrying his hybrid identity with him to the island rather than developing it there.<sup>33</sup> The fact that this individual signed in both languages may also suggest that such a dual identity, formed ultimately in the meeting of cultures along the landward routes between Mesopotamia and the Hindu Kush, marked him out as unusual among his companions: it was something worth making a point about. Moreover, although inscribing in the cave seems to have been practised by many different people, the forms of the messages are quite distinct with respect to language, with, for example, prayers in Greek, mainly indecipherable messages in south Arabian script and names with profession or origin in Sanskrit. While graffiti may have been a commonplace in the Late Antique Indian Ocean, therefore, the inscriptions in the Hoq cave do not point strongly to a shared set of practices specific to this location.

To apply the analytic of frontier spaces to this small selection of sources it is worth beginning at the shoreline, the implicit frontier in defining Socotra in insular terms. The coastline is extremely difficult of access, owing to strong winds and currents and limited harbouring locations. The point of greatest access is along the north-eastern edge of the island, and this is more easily accessible to sailors moving northwest with the monsoon winds from India, than for those sailing southeast with the monsoon from East Africa. This north-eastern coastal area is also accessible by sailing directly south from the Hadramaut, at a distance of around four days in good weather conditions. This accessibility by sea correlates with the inland areas most conducive to settlement, with the southern, arid and mountainous regions of the island rarely having been the focus of habitation.<sup>34</sup> The sailing distance from any mainland shore is measurable in days, and combined with the difficulty

---

<sup>31</sup> Gorea, “Palmyra and Socotra”, p. 451.

<sup>32</sup> Strauch, *Foreign Sailors*, p. 540.

<sup>33</sup> Strauch, *Foreign Sailors*, p. 202 (no. 349).

<sup>34</sup> Biedermann, *Soqatra*, p. 4.

in landing a vessel (virtually impossible for several months of the year) effectively makes control of the shoreline frontier possible only from the island.

These geographical constraints make sense of the reference in the *Periplus* to the island having recently been leased out by the ruler of Yemen, so that the island is now under guard. It is implied in the text of the *Periplus* that the nominal connection of the island to Yemen predates this arrangement, but that previously the island was available to visit: no authority based in the Hadramaut could possibly have prevented ships from harbouring on the island. However, in the context of a dramatic rise in the first century AD in Roman shipping in the western Indian Ocean and raised demand for incense and medicinal plants as a result of the economic opportunities presented by the *pax Romana*, it may be that Yemeni authorities wished to tighten this control.<sup>35</sup> This is, perhaps, further supported, as suggested by earlier scholars, by the absence of aloes and frankincense from the product inventory of the island by the author of the *Periplus*, but their occurrence in the export list of Qana', the main port of Yemen, suggesting that perhaps these goods were provided to the mainland in a monopoly arrangement under the terms of the lease.<sup>36</sup> This is, however, an arrangement which can only logistically be imagined through the farming out of control over the island to a local manager, who would in turn be responsible for maintaining a body of guards in excess of what the island could usually support, explaining the ready market expressed in the *Periplus* for grain, as well as female slaves. This is the other side of the scale and proximity calculation in the case of Socotra: its proximity makes the shoreline effectively controllable only from within the island, but the productive scale of the island makes it difficult for it to support a local population with the resources to manage that interface on their own terms.

It has been suggested that the Yemeni leasing arrangement on Socotra lasted for most of Late Antiquity, on the basis of the fact that the author of the *Christian Topography* also did not set foot on the island, but he does not record being prevented from doing so.<sup>37</sup> Given the general inaccessibility of the island and the reduced scale of Roman trading activity in the western Indian Ocean in Late Antiquity, it seems much more likely that the au-

---

<sup>35</sup> R. Tomber, *Indo-Roman trade: from pots to pepper* (London: Duckworth, 2009).

<sup>36</sup> Doe, *Socotra*, pp. 152–4, however, Bukharin, "The Mediterranean World and Socotra", p. 514, points out that Qana' is not listed by the *Periplus* as being in direct contact with Socotra and that frankincense and aloes also grow locally to Qana'. Export from the island might, therefore, be implied and likely, but is not certain in this period.

<sup>37</sup> For example, Bukharin, "The Mediterranean World and Socotra", p. 538.

thor did not stop at the island because of its treacherous coastline, high winds or simple lack of incentive. He certainly makes no reference to products of the island. However, more compelling evidence for the leasing and guarding of Socotra having been a quite temporary affair comes from the inscriptions in the Hoq cave. These suggest that, from the second century to the fourth, and with a tail into the seventh, access to the island was by a very mixed population, dominated by Indian merchants from the north-west of the peninsula, and all of whom had reasonably free movement on the island once they arrived.<sup>38</sup> It has been observed by Robin that, rather than the graffiti in the Hoq cave being imitation by foreign sailors of a local custom, there are few obviously local inscriptions to be found. This has led Strauch to hypothesise that visits to the cave were effectively a touristic impulse.<sup>39</sup> Whether ritual or recreational, however, they suggest an environment in which foreign sailors could and did come and go as they pleased and in which, combined with the absence of any archaeological testament of the local population in this period, except for the first- to-second century settlement site already mentioned with a mixture of pottery from southern Arabia, India and the Mediterranean, indicates that trade was not mediated by any local power base.<sup>40</sup> It is a picture supported by the testimony of the *Periplus*, which apart from referring to the probably temporary leasing arrangement, talks about the population of the island as a mix of traders, Indian, Arab and Greek, who nevertheless retain their distinct identities in the eyes of the author. For him, there was no visible “Soco-

---

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 514, argues that the leasing of the island was probably to Indians, thereby explaining the bulk of Indian inscriptions, and that the leasing continued at least until the time of the *Christian Topography*, but this fails to explain both the comparatively late start of the Indian inscriptions, which concentrate probably around a century after the record in the *Periplus* (here assumed to be c. 40–70 AD) and which largely give out in the fifth century, before the probable *floruit* of the author of the *Christian Topography*. It also does not explain the other inscriptions, which while less common certainly do not suggest that access to the island was entirely restricted. Bukharin’s suggestion that the island was off limits to outsiders but that Socotran traders could move freely relies on the assumption that the leasing arrangement was still in place in the sixth century, thereby explaining why the author of the *Christian Topography* was able to meet Socotrans in Ethiopia. Apart from the objections above to this continuity, the *Topography* does not describe these Socotrans as traders or associate the island with trade in any way. See Strauch, *Foreign Sailors*, p. 341, for approximate dates of the Indian inscriptions. On the dating of the *Periplus* see C.J. Robin, “The Date of the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea in the Light of South Arabian Evidence”, in *Crossings: Early Mediterranean Contacts with India*, eds F. De Romanis and A. Tchernia (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1997), pp. 41–65.

<sup>39</sup> Strauch, *Foreign Sailors*, p. 543.

<sup>40</sup> Naumkin, *Island of the Phoenix*, pp. 110–23, for the settlement.

tran” population to speak of, and no reason to suppose that the arrangement that he describes as recent lasted much beyond his time of writing.

By the sixth century, the brief testimony of the *Christian Topography* offers little to go on, but perhaps provides some indications of the changing relationship of the shoreline frontier to its wider maritime context. The author, as already noted, did not visit the island, but does not say he was prevented from doing so. He makes no reference to trade as either a past or present occupation of the island or a reason for visiting it, and his impression of the island does include the presence of a “Socotran” population. The myth of settlement by the Ptolemies (plausible, but unprovable) gives antiquity and homogeneity to the claims of an island group to belong there, in contrast to the apparent transience and diaspora identities of the Indians, Arabs and Greeks of the *Periplus*.<sup>41</sup> They are, moreover, a population perceived to be settled on the island permanently, and thus requiring priests, and they are seen to have contact with Ethiopia, perhaps reflecting the increased role of Aksum from the fourth century onwards, not only as a participant in Indian Ocean trade but, perhaps more importantly, as a would-be patron and protector of Arabian Christian communities.<sup>42</sup>

In the period immediately following the focus of this article, Socotra was to be a focus for the activity of pirates, with whom the local population seems to have had a partially symbiotic relationship, and the island was periodically to fall under the control of mainland south Arabian governance. Without support from outside, a community based on the island lacked the resource base to control its own shoreline in the face of any concerted effort to overwhelm it, though it remained perpetually difficult to hold by any outside power. By the seventeenth century it appears that an internal frontier had effectively developed between an inland Christian community and a coastal Muslim population, mainly from southern Arabia, of which Sir Thomas Roe observed:

“...the olde inhabitants of the Countrey,...called Bedwines, the same which other Historians have called Jacobits, Christians that have long dwelt there, with these he (the ruler) hath had a warre, as the Arabes report, and dwell in the Mountaines very populous but are now at peace on condition to live

---

<sup>41</sup> On the various settlement myths associating the island with Alexander of Macedon and the Ptolemies, see Biedermann, *Soqatra*, p. 29.

<sup>42</sup> Seland, “Trade and Christianity”, 84–5.



quietly, and to breed children Mahometan, which I perceive they do not, having no manner of conversation with the Arabs.”<sup>43</sup>

That such a situation could develop might be explained by the fact that, if Socotra possessed a shoreline frontier in its northeastern sector, and an internal frontier from at least the fifteenth century onwards and possibly at other times previously when pressure from the coast caused the local population to move inland, the island was also situated along an edge frontier within the western Indian Ocean.<sup>44</sup> South of the island was effectively open space, presenting neither danger nor opportunity for an island community or a mainland power, and which thus provided little incentive for any coastal community to seek to remove or incorporate the inland group. Doing so offered no benefit to the integrity of the shoreline frontier, from which the primary interest was in regulating and participating in east-west movement, and an inland population without access to the coast was likely to be insufficiently wealthy for exerted efforts at taxation to yield much reward.

## Sri Lanka

In comparison to Socotra, Sri Lanka is around twice the size of Sicily, at 65,000 km<sup>2</sup>, and is capable of supporting dense urban systems on the basis of rich agricultural land. In the last few centuries BC and the first millennium AD the capital of the island was based at Anuradhapura in the north of the island. It was a period of wealth, strong state government and carefully managed agriculture, in large part via monastic land grants.<sup>45</sup> The island in this period was also non-monetary and mostly disconnected from long-distance trans-regional contacts, at least until the sixth to seventh centuries.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Quoted from Doe, *Socotra*, p. xviii.

<sup>44</sup> On the concept of an edge frontier, R. Darley, “What is the Difference between a Frontier and an Edge?”, paper presented at Rethinking the Medieval Frontier, University of Leeds, 10 April 2018, will hopefully be published in the near future.

<sup>45</sup> R. Coningham, *Anuradhapura. The British-Sri Lankan Excavations at Anuradhapura Salgaha Watta 2: The Artefacts* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2006); A. Seneviratne, *Ancient Anuradhapura* (Colombo: Archaeological Department of Sri Lanka, 1994); R. Coningham, M. Manuel, C. Davis and P. Gunawardhana, “Archaeology and Cosmopolitanism in Early Historic and Medieval Sri Lanka” in Biedermann and Strathern, *Sri Lanka at the Crossroads*, pp. 19–43, especially 31–9.

<sup>46</sup> This is a contested position. For arguments and a detailed survey of the surviving evidence see Darley, “Implicit Cosmopolitanism”. The conclusions of that analysis are used as the basis for comparison here, but

Sri Lanka undoubtedly was connected to peninsular India, however, and always has been.<sup>47</sup> Its proximity is sufficient to suggest that without extremely expensive, concerted and continuous effort by government, it could not have been otherwise, but until the tenth century AD, beyond the limits of this paper, it was certainly capable of maintaining political independence and, for most of this time, a far more complex social system than further north in the tip of peninsular India, which was, by contrast, characterised by quite simply structured chieftaincies. In terms of scale, no collective on the mainland had the resources to challenge those possessed by Sri Lanka, or the apparent desire to do so.<sup>48</sup> However, while peninsular India in the first and second centuries, and to a lesser extent in the fourth to seventh centuries, was deeply involved in trade with the Roman world, Sri Lanka does not seem to have participated. Roman coins and pottery are hardly found on Sri Lanka, Roman texts do not speak of Sri Lanka as a destination for sailors, except anecdotally by accident, and Pali script does not feature in the Hoq cave inscriptions. What Roman goods do appear on the island would seem to have come there via India.<sup>49</sup>

To the east, connections with China also seem to have been largely absent. It is in the middle Anuradhapura period, in the fifth century, that Fa-hsien journeyed to Sri Lanka to gather definitive books of Buddhist law, but when he did so, his memorialisation in China suggests this to have been an arduous, adventurous and, above all, unknown, journey.<sup>50</sup> It was not until the seventh century that I-Tsing, a later Buddhist pilgrim, was able not only to journey to and from Sri Lanka substantially by piggy-backing on sea-trade between Sri Lanka and the Malay Archipelago, but also to write a set of short biographies of

---

cf. U. Thakur, "Some Aspects of Corruption in Early Indian Trade", in *D.D. Kosambi Commemoration Volume*, ed. L. Gopal (Varanasi: Banaras Hindu University, 1977), pp. 24–40, which explains Sri Lanka's position outside early Roman trade connections by means of Indian monopolisation of this trade.

<sup>47</sup> Coningham, Manuel, Davis and Gunawardha, "Archaeology and Cosmopolitanism", pp. 26–9.

<sup>48</sup> R. Gurukkal, *Rethinking Classical Indo-Roman Trade: Political Economy of Eastern Mediterranean Exchange Relations* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016) and for changes to this social system towards the end of the period under study, R. Gurukkal, "Shift of Trust from Words to Deeds: Implications of the Proliferation of Epigraphs in the Tamil South", *Indian Historical Review* 34 (2007): 16–35.

<sup>49</sup> Darley, "Implicit Cosmopolitanism", p. 50.

<sup>50</sup> J. Legge, *A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms, being an Account of the Chinese Monk Fa-Hien of his Travels in India and Ceylon (A.D. 399–414) in Search of the Buddhist Books of Discipline* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886, reprinted New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1973).

other travellers to the west who had gone before him.<sup>51</sup> And even by the seventh century there are no finds of Chinese coins or ceramics which would suggest that Sri Lanka's connection with China was primarily commercial rather than religious.<sup>52</sup>

There is little indication of Sri Lanka's connection with anywhere beyond India until the sixth century, when the *Christian Topography* talks about it as a place where Chinese, Indian, Ethiopian and Greek ships harbour, and whence Lanka sent ships of its own, though their destinations are unspecified.<sup>53</sup> There is reference to a local Christian church with a Persian priest, perhaps also evidenced by the discovery of a stone carved cross found in Anuradhapura, though this reveals little about the many potential identities and allegiances which such a community might have entertained.<sup>54</sup> This appearance in the *Topography* may relate to an assertion of greater autonomy from Anuradhapura by the southern, Ruhuna, region of Sri Lanka, which had been wealthy and somewhat urbanised, as well as closely connected to peninsula India since at least the first century AD.<sup>55</sup> It is, for example, in the fifth and early sixth centuries that the use of Roman copper coins, probably obtained via India, and significant quantities of local imitations, appear to have been used for a short period as "special purpose" money around Anuradhapura and the southern coast of the island, perhaps pointing to a sudden surge in competitive ritual display between these areas, and leading to a quest for new, even external, sources of wealth.<sup>56</sup> The fact that the *Christian Topography* speaks in the sixth century of the island having two kings who were at war with one another further suggests the development of an internal frontier, and consequently different ways of managing the shoreline frontier in various parts of the island, including an opening up for trade.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> J. Takakusu, *A Record of the Buddhist Religion as Practised in India and the Malay Archipelago (A.D. 671–695)* by I-Tsing (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896).

<sup>52</sup> I.C. Glover, "The Archaeological Evidence for Early Trade between India and Southeast Asia", in Reade, *The Indian Ocean in Antiquity*, pp. 365–400.

<sup>53</sup> *Christian Topography*, III: 344.

<sup>54</sup> P. Mihindukulasuriya, "Persian Christians in the Anurādhapura period", in *A Cultured Faith: Essays in Honour of Prof. G.P.V. Somaratna*, ed. P. Mihindukulasuriya (Colombo: CTS Publishing, 2011), pp. 1–24.

<sup>55</sup> H.-J. Weisshaar, H. Roth and W. Wijeyapala, *Ancient Ruhuna: Sri Lankan-German Archaeological Project in the Southern Province* (Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern, 2001).

<sup>56</sup> R. Walburg, *Coins and Tokens from Ancient Ceylon* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2008), pp. 57–80 on dating, pp. 312–14 on special-purpose use.

<sup>57</sup> *Christian Topography*, III: 348–50.

The implication is, thus, that Sri Lanka chose to open itself as a new “hub” of contact and connection at a time when it became advantageous for a regional power base within the island to cultivate external sources of wealth and influence. The *Christian Topography*'s famous story of a Roman and Persian merchant impressing the king of Lanka by comparing their coins, for example, emphasises first the separation of the foreigners from the local population in their treatment by the king and then the interest by the king in further differentiating the foreigners, who are only too happy to play hostile one-upmanship. It also suggests that foreign visitors may still have been uncommon enough to be worthwhile entertainment at the royal court.<sup>58</sup>

If the frontier is once again used, rather than insularity, as the lens through which to analyse difference and similarity, scale and proximity provide a perspective through a thin, but intriguing body of evidence. Sri Lanka's scale is such that it has always been possible to maintain both internal and shoreline frontiers, though in Late Antiquity significant internal divergences do not seem to have affected management of the shoreline until the sixth century. Moreover, Sri Lanka's proximity to India engendered a highly porous frontier with respect to this particular relationship, along which, nevertheless, distinguishable collective identities separated Lanka from any of the groupings in the subcontinent. It is the interplay of these factors which served to detach and then to engage Sri Lanka with the wider flows of the western Indian Ocean, because of who controlled which frontiers in the island environment. Specifically, in the first centuries AD, the island seems to have maintained a coherent shoreline frontier, with trade with India managed by grants of profits at trading ports to local villages or monasteries.<sup>59</sup> This coastal frontier surrounded a comparatively tightly controlled state which, even if including heavily autonomous sub-regions, such as Ruhuna, was regulated by monastic centres and grants of produce to monasteries and royal courts, alongside farming for the needs of local communities. Non-monetisation and limited marketisation reduced the potential attraction of external long-distance trade in low-bulk, high-value items. A shift is seen in this balance in the fifth century with the use of special-purpose money around Anuradhapura and Ruhuna, as well as the testimony of the *Christian Topography* of war between two kings on the island, pointing to the emergence of alternative and possibly competitive centres of resource concentration, and possibly a desire in the southern areas of the island to open up contact with foreigners as a means of ac-

---

<sup>58</sup> *Christian Topography*, III: 348–50.

<sup>59</sup> For the best example of which: H. Falk, “Three Epigraphs from Godawaya, Sri Lanka”, in Weisshaar, Roth and Wijeyapala, *Ancient Ruhuna*, pp. 327–34.

cessing alternative sources of prestige to Anuradhapura's religious significance and antiquity.<sup>60</sup> External connections thus developed as a way of supporting newly developing internal frontiers, while proximity and the contemporary state of south Indian politics meant that there was limited risk, in this strategy, of control of the shoreline frontier falling out of the hands of island communities altogether. This situation would only change with the rise of the Chola empire in south India, whose sudden expansion radically, but temporarily, altered the relative scale of regional powers.<sup>61</sup>

Despite the inherent differences between Sri Lanka and Socotra, their role in narratives of the western Indian Ocean has been strangely similar, including a similarity across time framed in terms of the qualities common to all islands: they have both been identified as hubs, and points of meeting and multiculturalism, from ancient times to the present, thus enfolding, though rarely dwelling on, the period here termed Late Antiquity, *c.* 200–700 AD. And yet, as the foregoing analyses have demonstrated, the relationship of both of these islands' communities (permanent or temporary) changed over time, in relation to neighbouring powers, foreigners passing through for trade, religion or by accident, and in the case of Sri Lanka, in relation to the choice of elements of the island's own population about their engagement beyond the island's shores, for Socotrans a choice more likely to be determined on the grounds of scale and proximity by outsiders.

## Conclusion

Within the historiography of insularity, the pole of isolation has been subject to the most stringent challenge. It is demonstrable in the case of all of the islands examined in this issue that interaction with seafaring communities and with lands adjacent to them was a more-or-less constant state of affairs in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Disproving isolation, however, is a methodologically easier task than understanding connectivity, and

---

<sup>60</sup> The so-called Jetavana treasure from Anuradhapura, comprising a hoard of foreign and locally-produced "imitation" objects, manufactured *c.* 2nd century BC to 3rd century AD, further suggests that prior to this point accessing foreign goods was not impossible on the island, but simply not a priority. H. Ratnayake, "The Jetavana Treasure", in *Sri Lanka and the Silk Road of the Sea*, 2nd ed., ed. S. Bandaranayake (Colombo: Sri Lanka National Commission for UNESCO and the Central Cultural Fund, 2003), pp. 37–52.

<sup>61</sup> G.W. Spencer, *The Politics of Expansion: the Chola Conquest of Sri Lanka and Sri Vijaya* (Madras: New Era, 1983).

here the historiographical language of islands as hubs and spaces of hybridity runs into difficulties. That contact with the outside is demonstrable does not in turn show that an island or its communities were defined by such contact, or sketch the shape of that definition. The language of island “hubs” suggests ambiguities that connectivity conceived in opposition to isolation rarely explores: a hub constitutes a meeting point, but at the centre of a wheel a hub is where spokes are held together in a fixed, rather than dynamic, relationship, a place of meeting yet also enforced separation, and where the pressures exerted at the rim are transmitted and redistributed. While all of the contributions in this issue recognise that not all connectivity need be pacific, there remains a difficulty in evaluating significance which dogs much discussion of pre-modern connectivity. In the absence of quantifiable data, it becomes easy for one commentator to argue that a place is not isolated because there is evidence for contact outside and for another to argue that this is true, but does not address the comparative insignificance of that contact to the core functions of the society in question.

This article has attempted, as an alternative route through this problem, to propose the analytical framework of scale and proximity as determinants of the location and management of island frontiers. In this respect, it shares the interest of Harpster in exploring the creation of meaningful space out in the context of specific physical features.<sup>62</sup> Establishing who might exert primary control over a frontier, where and how far provides one means of examining the inequalities, consequences and significance of connectivity in any given situation. It suggests that in any insular context the capacity of an island community to have primary control over its own shoreline, as a result of distance from (or weakness of) a mainland claimant and sufficient size to sustain a community able to constitute and defend itself, will either diminish connectivity, as the island community reduces potential threats to local stability, or produce a connectivity on the islanders’ own terms that is vital to their maintenance. This latter may be considered a potentially fragile situation, since either piracy by islanders or control over a valuable and monopolised trade product is likely at some point to encourage concerted efforts by outsiders to overwhelm the shoreline frontier and claim control (as in the examples of *Fraxinetum* and Chios in this volume).<sup>63</sup> By contrast, an island which is unable in any particular set of circumstances to maintain pri-

---

<sup>62</sup> Harpster, “Sicily”.

<sup>63</sup> See Jonathan Jarrett, “Nests of Pirates: the Balearics and la Garde-Freinet Compared”, *al-Masāq* (forthcoming), for *Fraxinetum*, and Nicholas Bakirtzis and Xenophon Moniaros, “Mastic Production in Medieval Chios: Economic Flows and Transitions in an Insular Setting”, *al-Masāq* (forthcoming), for Chios.

mary control over its own shoreline frontier may either, in the case of significant distance from elsewhere, become a place of passing through – a connectivity of separation, in which discrete journeys pass through a place but do not constitute a new local culture, or from which the local culture retreats and isolates itself to some extent – or in the case of close proximity to a mainland, may find that its insularity to some extent dissolves completely, with its level of connectivity, inter-dependence and replication of local cultural practices neither higher nor lower than other areas.<sup>64</sup> Control of the shoreline frontier may also become a bargaining chip in negotiation of internal frontiers.<sup>65</sup>

Within this general framework, however, the comparison between Socotra, Sri Lanka and the other islands discussed in this issue also reveals a specificity of the Mediterranean, not newly, but expressible in more formally comparative terms. In the Indian Ocean islands discussed, scale and proximity may be variable over time, depending on shipping technologies, farming techniques and the political will and capacity of mainland powers. In the Mediterranean, proximity emerges as more of a constant: no island in the Mediterranean in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages was usually far from a mainland power that, simply by virtue of having a larger resource base than an island, would be in a position to overwhelm control of the shoreline frontier. As such, it was a given that islands would be spaces of constant competition between mainland powers, in which the capacity of local populations to control their connectivity was limited, with the exception of brief periods when mainland political structures were unusually fragmented or contested. Mediterranean islands could, thus, at one extreme, attempt an aggressive connectivity that relied on geographical inaccessibility, the temporary distraction of mainland powers and their own military capabilities, that constituted ultimately short-lived piratical bases on small islands, or they could, like the populations seen here of Cyprus and Sicily in particular, attempt to exert some agency in connectivity by projecting the hybridity born of absorbing the pressures exerted by the meeting of aggressive mainland powers as a resource of value to both sides, and thus becoming the third space of experimentation and diplomacy.<sup>66</sup> They could not usually operate as the unclaimed, transient meeting point that was Socotra, or the largely self-determining political structure that was Sri Lanka. It is this particular constraining of possible options for island populations that arguably gives Mediterranean islands their unique character.

---

<sup>64</sup> See Jarrett, “Nests of Pirates”, on the variably “insular” status of *Fraxinetum*.

<sup>65</sup> As in, for example, the case of Cyprus as discussed by Zavagno, “Going to the Extremes”.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

Finally, however, this framework is not unique to islands, and calls into question the utility of island as a category with much to tell the historian. Instead, islands emerge as places from which the framework is easiest to discern because of the fixed and visible limits of their geography, and the clear parameters they thus present to us and presented to the people who interacted with them centuries ago. As *Fraxinetum*, and its variable interpretation by highlights, though, once the parameters of evaluation have been extrapolated, the simple quality of being surrounded by the sea no longer appears as the key determinant and instead, “island” can serve just as well as a shorthand for a particular set of qualities of connectivity, or be abandoned entirely in favour of an exploration of the formation of frontiers in relation to the constraints of scale and proximity that could easily include a mountain stronghold, a peninsula, plateau or desert oasis. The sea, in this model, becomes simply the clearest means of visualising the question of whether the frontier is most easily controlled from inside or outside a porously bounded space. The important category, therefore, is not insularity but boundedness itself.



## Figure Captions

Figure 1: The Western Indian Ocean, showing Socotra and Sri Lanka (image rights owned by author).