MEDIEVAL ISLAND SOCIETIES:
REASSESSING INSULATION IN A CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN CONTEXT

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One of the effects of nuclear age environmentalism in the social sciences has been to help widen the focus from straightforwardly economic and political processes in human history such as global economic integration and socio-economic peripheralisation of the underdeveloped world. The establishment of the environment as an autonomous category in the political arena, as well as the filtering of ecological concerns from scientific research bodies through different social and age groups, has led to a new appreciation of the underlying relationships between human society and the environment with which it constantly interacts.¹ The study of this interaction across time had already been firmly established within the new historical orthodoxy founded by Annales historians and Fernand Braudel's classic thesis on the Mediterranean. Even if most of the historical studies produced at an academic level today are still conceived in anthropocentric terms, Braudel's work led successive generations of historians to realize that man's changing relationship with the environment is also part of his history.

This academic backdrop has important implications for those who choose to study human society across time in particular geographic contexts. Most scholars will probably agree that small islands provide special environments for human life: this is a fact which not even today's global village has managed to cancel totally. It also seems to be commonly accepted that islands tend to become hot-houses for idiosyncratic social growth and ways of life. "Insulation", as well as "isolation" (a back formation from the Italian for "island") has lexicalised and transferred to scientific discourse this quality of being, or becoming, an island, of possessing or obtaining the features which are normally associated with an insular existence: physical separation from the rest, the mainland, the "other" side; relative immunity from outside influences,
with its potentially xenophobic consequences; a self-contained reality; as John Donne would put it, a state of being "entire of itself".

For the historian of medieval commerce, the smaller islands are vital stepping-stones, indispensable stages along the medieval trading super-highways; yet they will probably interest him or her primarily for their external role within that context. In studying the rise and decline of empires or spheres of influence, political historians may look at islands if these fall within their chosen imperial or dynastic framework; yet they can hardly afford to devote too much attention to peripheral insular possessions. Finally, historians who have specialised in the history of major islands habitually assume that the minor islands attached to their particular case-study are either appendices to the mother-island or else that they are so unrepresentative of it that they relegate them to a footnote existence.

1. The World from an Insular Perspective

Beyond these historiographical hurdles which often represent predetermined categories of historical thought, there is also the familiar challenge of applying concepts, developed by modern social scientists to come to grips with today's world, to past contexts. In other words, contemporary "island studies" do not automatically offer the student of medieval island societies the right conceptual package or set of analytical tools. What is clearly an anachronistic pitfall should not prevent the historian from acknowledging a wider historical reality. Contrary to the idyllic and simple image of life transmitted by most island literature, past island societies, like pre-industrial contexts in general, were, admittedly, much simpler technologically than the modern world but definitely no less complex socially and mentally.

This implies that a proper study of the internal dynamics of medieval island societies, particularly in spatially-confined contexts, should recognize how they represent a distinct human experience which should be studied in its own terms. This awareness of common denominators which run across the startling diversity of insular realities is the first basic step towards any comparative historical exercise of this nature. One likely objection to this approach will be that such a focus on island societies, cutting across economic, political and cultural frontiers, is insensitive to the differences resulting from belonging to such different human contexts as Latin Christianity, Maghribi Islam, the Byzantine Greek world and so on. However the "island" approach leads precisely to a fresh evaluation of familiar sets of differing, as well as common, features between different contexts through the less-utilised insular medium, where a particular geography makes such features stand out in sharper relief than in wider contexts. Ironically, in the smaller insular contexts the differing features of opposite social and cultural systems actually seem to become even more starkly defined than in major islands. While the latter might afford social and cultural differences to pass, by degrees, into each other, smaller islands often host unpleasant contrasts which at times defy all but the most heterodox, even paradoxical, of solutions. When this way out proves impossible, the resulting alternative might only be the wholesale replacement of the population or the end of human settlement.

This approach is not geographically deterministic, as some might suspect. Beyond the intrinsic value of studying the evolution of human relationships and institutions in insular situations across time, the common factors deriving from insular geography should actually help the historian in partly overcoming an important stumbling block in comparative history. The inevitable awareness of stark geographical contrasts is frequently seen to mitigate against an equitable comparison of civilisations and cultures. By concentrating on small island societies from different regional frameworks, or even from different civilisations altogether, the historian will at least have brought down those differences to a manageable field of action.

This does not mean that island societies necessarily follow set patterns of historical development, but it does mean that any importation and/or local evolution of structures and institutions is, in any case, likely to face common challenges imposed by an insular geography. Several factors will normally determine the manner and extent to which an island attains or retains its own microcosmic personality. Foremost among these are, undoubtedly, its size and location, how far it lies off the mainland, as well as the resources useful to human habitation. It also normally makes a difference whether the island is on its own or belongs to an archipelago. Needless to say, islands are not only different from the rest of the world, but they are also different from each other, due to these intervening factors. One should not, however, lose sight of the realities they share in producing different contexts for social life.
2. The Central Mediterranean Case-study

My present work is largely focused on the later medieval experience of the smaller islands in the central Mediterranean region. Malta, Gozo and Pantelleria, the Aeolian, Egadi and Pelagian islands, Djerba and the Kerkennah, formed an “outer” ring of insular landmarks delimiting a region which, for centuries, was subjected to direct or indirect political and economic intervention by whoever had a stake in Sicily. One of Braudel’s “miniature continents”, Sicily did not simply lie on the paths of general history; as the distinguished historian emphatically pointed out, like other big islands, it shaped them. As in the case of Pisan Corsica or Genoese Sardinia, Catalan Majorca or Venetian Crete, the big islands were too big not to affect the flow of events, ideas and institutions, even if no island was too small to attract attention. Sicily, like the rest, was drawn within the wider political and economic spheres of influence radiating from major mainland urban centres like Genoa, Venice and Barcelona. On the other hand, it was also able to affirm its own regional identity, in tune with regional developments all over Europe, and not simply act as a “colonial” outlet or springboard for dominant distant cities.

The minor island groups around Sicily could not preserve their structures of life intact as their mother island went across from Islam to Latin Christianity. As substantial parts of Sicily were gradually resettled by peninsula and transalpine immigrants from the twelfth century onwards, the northern maritime republics, particularly Genoa, were eager to exploit this so-called “ethnic revolution” to their own advantage. On the minor islands where it had managed to implant itself, Islam found it had to coexist, soon to compete, at a strategic disadvantage, with immigrant Christians, settling under the aegis of the new Sicilian kingdom. This development attracted modest waves of settlers to the Aeolian islands, where the failure of Islam to establish some form of continuity with the preceding Byzantine Greek settlements practically left the archipelago uninhabited until the late eleventh century. The eleventh century native Muslim communities on the Maltese and Egadi islands, as well as on Pantelleria, were possibly removed from their preceding Byzantine Greek inhabitants by two or three centuries. These communities survived outside their established political context on Malta and Gozo for more than a century after the definitive Norman conquest of the islands in the 1120s; on Pantelleria, medieval Islam survived into the early modern period. The political roots established by Sicily in these

outlying territories in the twelfth century developed to varying levels of administrative and institutional integration, but Sicilian-overlordship there was not, as a rule, in question. The same cannot be said of Djerba and the Kerkennah. After the failure of the Norman African experiment, which lasted only from the 1130s to the 1160s, the nearest Sicily ever came to re-establishing its political presence there was by the conquest of Djerba and the Kerkennah in the 1280s and their government as a maritime lordship vaguely subsumed within the Sicilian kingdom until the 1330s. This brief Christian interlude hardly affected the internal structures of these island societies, which retained their Maghribi character and identity down to modern times.

In spite of the unique political compromise reached between the Sicilian kingdom and Hafsid Tunisia for Pantelleria, lying half-way between the two, this island, together with Malta and Gozo, found itself on the Christian side of a political and military frontier which seemed to cut right across the central Mediterranean region, facing the islands on the Muslim side. In spite of common ethnic, linguistic and religious elements present, to varying degrees, in all of them, they became the outposts of two rival civilisations. Their common Muslim past, variably evident in language and religion, did not prevent the establishment of this frontier passing right through them. On the other hand, their insularity imposed on them a particular “ecology of smallness” which meant, effectively, that they would have to face some common challenges on whichever side of the frontier they found themselves. This ecology is defined in terms of the tendency towards ethnic homogenisation, a parallel trend of self-governing isolation, and a physically restricted context offering scarce resources.

One might argue that these features were not peculiar to the smaller islands: by the later Middle Ages, Sicily had become the seat of a substantially homogenised people, and self-governing isolation had perhaps found one of its classic expressions in Sardinia. However, in these cases, as in that of other large islands, the level of analysis is no longer insular, but regional. The ecology of smallness provided the right context, through the sheer difference of scale in distances and resources between the major and minor islands, for the rise of structural diversities seen at work in the process of insulation. In this light, insulation is not just a set of static conditions resulting from a particular geographical endowment. It is an ongoing process in which the character of social and economic interaction, political and cultural dynamics, is influenced by the
way the people are forced to share a spatially limited (and psychologically limiting) environment. In its wider sense, insulation is not only applicable to geographical islands, but also, as Swinburne would call them, to 'inland islands', places which are self-contained enough to defy the pace of historical events and live with their own internal rhythms. This becomes particularly true of places which, like small islands, had to face, more or less regularly, the challenge of meagre or inexistant resources. The backward state of road and communication networks in the pre-industrial period in most countries in practice gave an edge to those societies which had access to maritime transport. Braudel's "islands which the sea does not surround" were also to be found, on a much smaller scale than Greece, southern Italy or the Maghreb, wherever difficult access helped to created the right framework for the growth of autonomous social institutions.

This autonomy of social and cultural experience fluctuated, in Braudel's terms, between "the two poles of archaisms and innovation", the two characteristics defining the heterodoxy of certain phenomena in small insular contexts. A very important dimension of insulation was the retention, across the centuries, of cultural elements from the past which had failed to survive in their larger regional contexts. Given the sheltering effects of their smallness, minor islands have long been recognized as conservatories of archaic cultural forms, as anachronistic bastions in the midst of a changing world.

In the central Mediterranean context, the people of Pantelleria, with a cultural tenacity not unlike that of the Greek insular world, spoke Arabic until the early seventeenth century, five centuries after the Norman conquest, and retained their Muslim faith at least until the end of the fifteenth century. Malta and Gozo still possess a language which is morphologically Arabic, and a toponymy which reflects the islands' past belonging to the Muslim world. This linguistic patrimony proved resilient and dynamic enough to meet the requirements of a fundamentally different social and political context from the one in which it had been originally introduced to express, given the substantial changes in social structures and values which accompanied the cultural shift. Malta continued to represent, in the late medieval and early modern central Mediterranean, the unrealisable project of extending the victorious forces of reconquest from southern Christian shores to central North Africa. For late medieval Sicily, it was a constant reminder, in an evanescent world of political events, of the superior ambitions of a lost golden age, when Roger of Sicily ruled over a central Mediterranean which had become a political reality.

The ecology of smallness had equally dramatic effects on Muslim Djerba, even though it is roughly twice the size of Malta. The fruitless political efforts to integrate it within the Christian political sphere contrasted with the island's disproportionately important role as a cross-cultural emporium for central Mediterranean trade. Whether under Christian or Muslim governors, it retained strong features of an autonomous Berber identity, with a heavily polarised population deriving its ancestry from two chief tribes, speaking their own Djerban Berber language and clinging to their Kharjite Muslim heresy down to modern times. Beneath this superstructure of an independent cultural identity, there lay more basic physical and climatic realities: Djerba was a living example of an Africa as the Romans must have known it, with its fertile olive-growing plains and its benign microclimate sheltered by its inland sea.

While emphasizing the stronger presence of social and cultural continuities on minor islands than in other contexts, one should not underestimate the remarkable powers of adaptation exerted by these societies on cultural systems and institutions. Like Malta's pygmy elephants, institutions were, as far as possible, indigenised to match the islanders' outlook on life, as well as the resources at their disposal. Home-grown compromises, like Malta's Arabic language, a heavy borrower from the Romance tongues, could only have sharpened the paradoxical image of this frontier Christianity in the eyes of a Mediterranean so sensitive to cultural and religious affiliation.

Just as Djerba deservedly earned the name of an olive island, other islands, whether lying along the chief sea routes or not, similarly tended to follow a general monocultural direction and specialise in producing a particular product for foreign markets. This had, to a certain extent, always been an important economic factor in the ecology of smallness, even if the Muslim contribution in agriculture had enabled their small economies to diversify, sometimes in spite of the dictates of geography. The central Mediterranean islands, notably the Maltese and Aeolian islands, penetrated the international market for technical products, producing ever increasing quantities of cotton which were shipped to the southern European ports. As for Pantelleria, besides producing its modest amount of cotton and flax, it re-exported African leatherwares northwards. On the other hand, as in the case of over-emphasizing the
cultural archaism of small islands, it would be equally misjudged to exaggerate this trend towards a monocultural production into an overwhelming external force which undermined completely their internal balance and delicate ecosystem. In fact, the production of particular commodities for export had necessarily to coexist with a more basic and diversified agrarian regime which was primarily designed to satisfy the islands’ own needs, particularly in times of crisis when their food supplies and other imports were threatened.

One last factor I would like to refer to is the violent insecurity which haunted these small insular societies, caught as they were in the tectonic pressure of frontier history. Small islands were periodically ravaged, sacked and pillaged by privateers and vengeful kings alike. In various cases, the whole island population was carried off into slavery, if not put to the sword. Whether this was done for profit, or to deliver a message of strength to a rival state by hitting it in its Achilles’ heel, the consequences would normally be equally devastating. The islanders reacted by developing, on both sides of the frontier, a remarkable tradition of corsaing and privateering, undoubtedly encouraged by the almost endless state of war at sea between the two clashing civilisations.

The central Mediterranean case-study reflects how a microcosmic personality does not develop in isolation but in the context of an ecology of smallness. This development, which we have called insulation, results from the interaction of multiple forces, the principal of which include cultural archaism and innovation, military insecurity and aggressiveness, abject poverty and insistent economic enterprise. The medieval experience of such small “lands of hunger” also yields a valid insight into the plight of small communities who had to adapt their structures of life in an effort to survive in the midst of giants. They portray succinctly, as under a magnifying glass, the daily task facing their wider encompassing region to sustain its people, as well as its remarkable ability to provide the space for independent strategies in an increasingly interdependent world.

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1 For an “ecosystems” approach to island ecology see I. Thornton, *Krakatau: the Destruction and Reassembly of an Island Ecosystem* (Harvard, 1996) with bibliography; for the “equilibrium theory” of island bio-geography the classic work is by R. H.

2 A substantial part of the modern theoretical work on islands and small states is produced with management and administrative objectives. Cf. the various contributions in *States, Microstates and Islands*, ed. E. C. Donnen and P. L. Hein (London, 1985).


9 The best source for this period of Christian rule on Djerba and the Kerkena is undoubtedly the work by arguably the most famous of their governors: R. Muntaner, *Crónica*, volumes I-II (Barcelona, 1979).

10 By virtue of a 1221 treaty between the kings of Sicily and Tunisia, the tribute paid annually by the inhabitants of Pantelleria was to be divided equally between the two governments; however, as H. Bresc notes, political authority on the island was exercised solely by Sicily. See H. Bresc, “Pantelleria entre Ismus et la Chrétienté” in his *Politique et société en Sicile, XIIe-XVe siècles*, volume IX (London, 1990), p. 106.
This concept, of recent formation, has been applied mainly to modern administrative strategies in education, labour formation and so on: see G. Baldacchino, "Labour formation in small developing states: a conceptual review", Compare, 25, iii (1995): 263-278.

12 H. Bresc, "La formazione del popolo siciliano", in Politique et société en Sicile, chapter 1, pp. 243-265.

13 Braudel, op. cit.


17 Bresc, "Pantelleria" (see n. 10).


19 H. Bresc, "La course méditerranéenne au miroir sicilien (XIIe-XVe siècles)" in his Politique et société en Sicile, chapter XI, pp. 91-110.