

BOOK REVIEWS

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Review of:

Waldren, W. H. and Ensenyat, J. A. (eds.) 2002. *World Islands in Prehistory: International Insular Investigations. V Deia International Conference of Prehistory. BAR (International Series) 1095. Oxford: Archaeopress. ISBN 1841714739. xvi+ 553 pages; illustrated throughout with figures, maps, plans, drawings and photographs. Texts in English, French, Italian and Spanish. Paperback edition £65.00.*

The proceedings of the fifth Deia International Conference of Prehistory, which was held in Mallorca (Spain), cover a wide array of topics, encouraging reflection both on the current state of Island Archaeology and on its future. William Waldren's foreword to the volume spells out his ambitions as a researcher and conference organiser, namely to bring "Balearic Prehistoric investigation and research out of insular and regional contexts and into the mainstream of Continental European Prehistory", the title betraying an even wider ambition. The evolution of the Deia Conference illustrates this endeavour: the first tome, which came out in 1984 (also edited by Waldren), focused on the early settlement of the western Mediterranean islands. This was followed by a volume dedicated to the Bell Beaker phenomenon in the western Mediterranean in general (Waldren and Kennard 1986), and by a conference dealing with questions relating to archaeological techniques, technology and theory in prehistory (Waldren *et al.* 1991). A volume concerned with ritual, rites and religion in prehistory followed (Waldren *et al.* 1995), and with this fifth and latest volume the Deia Conference has come full circle to return to the question of islands (Waldren and Ensenyat 2002). One cannot help but notice how closely the topics chosen for the conferences follow the mainstream evolution of archaeological discourse.

It is impossible to comment on each individual contribution, and I must admit to a personal bias in selecting certain articles for this review. As the volume is a collection of conference papers, overall quality varies a great deal with each contribution. Many geographical areas are considered, including, in no apparent order, the Aegean, Anatolia, Denmark, Madagascar, the Isle of Man, Fiji, Easter Island, the Balearics, the Canary Islands, Malta, Sicily, Sardinia, Cyprus, and Crete. However, overall coverage is uneven, and the Mediterranean still provides the main focus, with Cyprus, Sardinia and the Balearics as the traditional favourites.

Important advances in Cypriot prehistory are discussed in a number of articles. Among these, Simmons deals with the site of Akrotiri Aetokremnos (which is among the oldest documented sites on any of the Mediterranean islands), and emphasises important evidence pertaining to the pre-Neolithic occupation of Cyprus and its implications. A few papers succeed in contextualising the islands within a broader frame of reference, such as the article by Peña on the colonisation of the Canary Islands. Peña discusses a "*hipótesis Mediterránea*" (p. 340), in which cycles of colonisation are linked to the

Neolithic revolution, to Sherratt's (1979) Secondary Product Revolution, and to the rise of 'international' commerce in the Bronze Age. The claims echo a paradigm that has recently been expounded by Patton (1996), and that is not without its problems, since these 'cycles' cover periods that are simply too broad to offer strong explanatory models for island colonisation. Nonetheless, Peña adapts this model, and – by adopting a series of increasingly finer lenses – links the colonisation of the Canary Islands to a specific cultural process: the economic changes brought about by a Phoenician presence in the North African coast of the Mediterranean. Another paper by Nash is interesting in that it addresses possible similarities between the Kula ring of Melanesia and the Danish Mesolithic Ertebølle ring (p. 20), thus presenting us with the question of whether local cultural dynamics can be understood by recourse to ethnoarchaeological parallels.

Not surprisingly, the Balearics receive a great deal of attention in the book, although it is perhaps unfortunate that at the end of the volume we are left no closer to solving the question of the earliest settlement of the islands; the matter thus remains contested. To summarise briefly an intricate history of research, the debate is between Waldren himself (1982: 112-4; 1992: 3), Lewthwaite (1989: 545) and Guerrero (2001) on the one hand, and Ramis and Alcover (2001) and Ramis *et al.* (2002) on the other. The former argue in favour of an earlier colonisation (either in the fourth to fifth millennium Cal BC, or as early as the eighth millennium Cal BC), while the latter have recently revealed supposedly serious flaws in the evidence used by Waldren to support his chronology and argue for a much later colonisation horizon in the second half of the third millennium Cal BC. An intermediate position is taken by Lull *et al.* (1999), who argue for a colonisation horizon in the fourth millennium Cal BC.

Waldren's interpretation of the process of colonisation of the Balearic islands has been widely accepted and unquestioned until very recently (Cherry 1990; Patton 1996; Vigne 1999). Unfortunately, so far there has been no direct confrontation between researchers supporting conflicting chronologies (the debate is only on printed paper). In this volume Waldren mentions with clear resentment the work of "certain, recent investigators" who "tear down what has been laboriously built on available evidence", and laments a division into two camps "perhaps even personally motivated" (p. 68). He accuses these researchers of using the evidence selectively to best suit their arguments, exactly the same line of attack taken by the other front. Waldren is rightly resentful that 40 years of research have been so severely put to the test by Ramis *et al.* (2002), but he also openly attacks those who prematurely "welcome, even encourage, change at the least provocation until more evidence becomes available" (p. 69). In saying this, he comes across as a reactionary, while he should have risen to the challenge. Indeed, this conference would have provided the ideal arena for a constructive debate among these researchers.

The question of the earliest Balearic settlement thus remains open until more evidence is brought forward. I accept Waldren's plea that the chronology at the two key cave sites of Muleta and Matge was established under the strictest stratigraphic control, but I do not believe that the earliest levels (sixth and fifth millennia Cal BC), particularly those containing the highly controversial 'butchered' remains of *Myotragus Baleari-*

cus (an endemic gazelle) (p. 74), can be linked beyond doubt to a human presence. Waldren, however, would be pleased to know that he has managed to persuade at least one of his readers that a phase of visitation would have preceded actual settlement, and that fully organised settlements with architecture, which are dated to 2500 Cal BC, could not appear overnight (p. 307). Unfortunately, both the length and the origin of such a phase remain elusive, and the general impression is that the problem is merely being shifted.

Early settlement is but one aspect of island studies, and what happened after colonisation is just as interesting as when, how or why people got there in the first place. In this respect, the volume contains many stimulating contributions. The papers by Estez *et al.* and Lull *et al.* discuss important concepts such as the “island factor” (p. 107) or “social insularity” (p. 117) respectively. Lull *et al.* claim that “insularity was a social construction” and that geographical limits could be overcome and even enhanced, as well as pointing out differences between the perceptions of local populations and those of visiting people (p. 124-5). The paper by McKechnie, entitled “*Islands of Indifference*”, claims that “when we think about islands, our imagination is coloured by organising assumptions, which are never fully articulated, and therefore not amenable to analysis” (p. 127). I am intrigued by this contrast between the objective and subjective nature of island studies. According to European Union legislation, “an island is a naturally formed area of land, surrounded by water, which is above water at high tide, inhabited by more than 50 people, not linked to the mainland by a permanent device (*i.e.* bridge or tunnel), distant at least one kilometre from the mainland, and with no capital of an EU member State”. The United Nations also set the limits and breadth of the territorial sea and contiguous zone of an island in accordance with the provisions applicable to other land territory: this is up to a limit not exceeding 12 nautical miles measured from baselines determined in accordance with the Convention (Part VIII, Regime of Islands, Article 121/1-2, in Baggioni and Hache 2000). These rigid definitions are in stark contrast to recent interpretations of islandscapes, but such characterisations serve a purpose (in this case, the designation of geopolitical entities everyone can relate to in constructing ‘Europe’ – incidentally, Ireland is not an ‘island’ in legal terms since it hosts the capital of an EU Member State). McKechnie emphasises that, despite the apparently hard objective nature of islands, conceptually “islandness” is vague, yet some categories are routinely adopted in studies of islands, such as the ideas of community or marginality (p. 128). Ultimately, we should not exclude the possibility that “islandness” may not have been a primary issue to prehistoric exploration, but rather a natural and obvious component of the considerable maritime dimension of cultural transmission in the Mediterranean area (as well as elsewhere).

Overall, the range of contributions in this volume is remarkable, but somehow the parts simply do not add up. The volume lacks a clear internal structure (there are no section headings), which would have made it easier for the reader to navigate through some 50 contributions and identify themes of interest. Papers dedicated to perceptions, symbolic meaning and identity of island people and landscapes, both in the past and in the present, are interspersed among others dealing with environmental studies. The volume would also have benefited greatly from a good deal of editing, the first typo-

graphical errors appear in the foreword in an escalation of editorial mishaps, some quite entertaining, such as the mysterious transformation of Sardinia into Sicily in the map on page 463. Still, one might argue that the chaotic structure of the volume acts as a pleasant reminder about the nature of the subject: islands offer such variety that forcing them into watertight thematic sections would be artificial. Indeed, in her contribution, Jacqueline Waldren reveals part of the rationale behind the volume: rather than presenting a self-contained section of anthropological papers at the start, it was preferred to split the papers among the panels since they seemed relevant to issues presented by other scientists (p. 1). This was certainly a noble intent, but while it may have been evident at the conference, this interdisciplinarity has not been capitalised upon and has sadly been lost in the publication, which would have benefited from a more explanatory editorial.

A good editorial would also have served the important purpose of contextualising some very significant advances in island studies (*e.g.* Cyprus); instead we have the feeling that these are left hanging like loose threads. This is possibly the biggest weakness of this publication, which comes across as an ‘archaeology of islands’, or a catalogue of case studies, rather than an ‘island archaeology’. The late Gabriel Camps (1998: 129) once pointed out that “*les îles méditerranéennes ne peuvent être étudiées globalement*”. He may have been right, in the sense that Mediterranean islands display such a huge variety of differing characteristics that it may be counterproductive to consider them collectively. Similarly, Bass has claimed that “all insular settings will have unique aspects that may not correspond with models derived from other areas” (1998: 175). With this in mind, we may empathise with Sand and Valentin, who in their contribution to the volume candidly use a case study from Cikobia (near Fiji) “as an example of what happened sometimes in the Pacific” (p. 91). Nonetheless, a balance must be struck between a study of islands on a global and an individual scale, and this volume dedicated to “world islands” appears to strike a chord in favour of the former, without losing sight of the detail. No island or island cultural event or process can ever be taken as paradigmatic, making the ordering of such a wealth of archaeological data a challenge, but this challenge is hardly attempted by the editors of this volume. In the Mediterranean, the idea that islands are discrete entities (MacArthur and Wilson 1967: 3) is clearly an imposed view, a realisation that has made labelling islands as “natural cultural laboratories” (Evans 1973) unfashionable. Nevertheless, I see nothing intrinsically wrong in treating islands as distinct units of study, provided that islands are not considered to be geographically or culturally bound. In the past, considering islands individually has meant adopting a rather myopic approach and overlooking the fact that islands may be part of wider networks. Instead, “island systems are unique laboratories to gain knowledge and understanding of people, culture and environmental relationships in local, international and global terms” (p. 1), something that several contributors to this volume strive to achieve.

As a final note, even though the volume would benefit from some revision, it is redeemed by several good points. The authors should be praised for supporting, through their efforts, the centrality of islands within world prehistory, while the organisers should be complimented for keeping the conference going, and for their declared intent to make sure that living populations and governments of the various islands place the right value

on archaeological remains and research. But above all, it is with its breathtaking range of topics that the volume renders true justice to islands, and with its ambitious design to include almost anything you can think of: human perceptions of island environments and seafaring, island identities in the past and present, centralisation and marginality, colonisation, migration, cultural continuity vs. discontinuity, insularity vs. isolation, social interaction, landscape articulation, as well as more than a dozen contributions on island palaeoenvironments, dealing with important questions such as changing sea levels and the possible cause of Pleistocene faunal extinctions, as well as the nature of human resource management and the relationship between humans and the environment. Jacqueline Waldren pointed out that “the *raison d’être* of this conference was to share the many interpretations of the effect of insularity on human and animal populations and the impact that these have on islands” (p. 2). We can safely say that some sharing has been achieved, and that more questions have been created as a result.

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