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Islanders: The Making of the Mediterranean (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, UK, 24th February–4th June 2023, curated by Anastasia Christophilopoulou)

What does it mean to be an islander? What do island identities and cultures have in common? And have islanders through time faced inwards to their own communities, or looked outwards across the seas? These and other questions are thoughtfully and creatively addressed in the new exhibition *Islanders: The Making of the Mediterranean*, held at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge from the 24th of February until the 4th of June 2023.

Focusing on three of the largest islands in the Mediterranean—Cyprus, Crete, and Sardinia—this exhibition explores cultural evolution over 4000 years of island life from the Early Bronze Age to the late Roman period and through more than 200 objects. Many of these have come to the UK for the first time and have not been displayed together before. The

exhibition therefore offers an unprecedented opportunity for a UK audience to see objects such as Iron Age bronze votive figurines from the Nuragic civilization of Sardinia and Archaic terracotta figurines from the sanctuary of Agia Eirini in Cyprus. Indeed, one of the greatest strengths of this exhibition is the remarkable variety of objects brought together through generous loans from partner organisations, most notably the Heraklion Museum, Crete, the Cyprus Department of Antiquities, and the National Archaeological Museum, Cagliari, providing a modern-day example of the cooperation and interchange between the islands it explores and celebrates.

The central theme of the exhibition is that, although fluctuating through time in intensity and degree, the archaeological evidence indicates that islanders have

always looked outwards towards the wider world, which is demonstrated by their adaptability and openness to new ideas. Connection rather than separation, and mobility and change rather than stasis are the keynotes of this exhibition's interpretation of island identity. This is explored through aspects of everyday life, such as food and drink, writing, and hunting, as well as funerary rituals, the representation of fantastical beasts, and the creation of art. Objects speak eloquently to these themes, making connections and highlighting difference, for example allowing comparisons between palace feasting at Knossos, archaeological evidence for Bronze Age diet at Marki Alonia, Cyprus, and miniature vessels left in graves in Cagliari, Sardinia.

With a light touch, attention is drawn to the affordances and constraints of these island landscapes, in both practical and symbolic terms, from copper and glass produced from natural resources found on Cyprus, to the ubiquitous use of clay on Crete, in the absence of large deposits of metal to draw on. Large scale images of land- and seascapes, including the sites of sanctuaries and tombs, help to create a sense of key island locations. Time takes a back seat to place in the exposition, though dates are clearly communicated through object labels, and an effective display of dated pottery sherds from the three cultures at the exhibition's entrance helps to convey its diachronic range to visitors.

Through their lighting and layout, accompanied by soundscapes of the sea, the three galleries of the exhibition create a peaceful and evocative Mediterranean sensory experience which unobtrusively complements the objects on display. Gauzy white drapes between vertical pillars evoke Classical architecture, part of a Mediterranean palette of blue, white, ochre, and deep terracotta. Objects are

mounted in groups on low, round plinths, so that visitors island-hop between them. There is less emphasis on 'showstopper' objects—though there are several of these—than on combinations of objects and dialogues between them. Gallery text and labels situate the visitor in time and space, and direct attention to key aspects of the objects, without insisting on any one interpretation; indeed, ambiguity and open-endedness are often emphasised, leaving space for the visitor to contribute their own views.

Archaeological interpretation of large Mediterranean islands has long drawn attention to islanders' creative adoption and adaptation of outside influences, while maintaining and expressing their own unique culture (see, for example, Antoniadou & Pace, 2007). What is distinctive about this exhibition is the way that this theme is explored through the combination of material from these three islands, holding in tension ideas of distinctiveness and hybridity, and its accessible and thought-provoking exposition for museum audiences. The movement of peoples is a major focus, demonstrating that journeying over the seas, whether for trade, cultural contact, refuge, or longer-term migration, has always been a central part of island experience. At the exhibition's entrance, bronze and terracotta models of boats from Sardinia and Cyprus underline the importance of sea travel to early societies, a means of connection rather than separation. Many objects speak to the movement of materials and technologies as well as people, such as the presence of Egyptian scarabs in Crete, and gold and silver brought to Sardinia through Phoenician trade networks. The metaphor of island identity as an ongoing journey, a constant process of renegotiation and adaptation, is employed throughout the interpretation. At its close the exhibition comes full circle in

displaying modern poetry by Christina Peri Rossi, Constantine P. Cavafy, and Giorgos Seferis. These poems all take journeys across the sea as a central theme, emphasizing the continuity through time of the islander experience of trusting themselves to the waves and finding new ways of living beyond their own shores.

Cross-cultural comparisons are encouraged by the display of figurines representing roles common across societies, such as mother, warrior, worshipper, and child, while the diversity of social and cultural identities is expressed through mythological figures such as a Cypriot centaur and a bronze warrior with four eyes from Sardinia (Christophilopoulou, 2023a, Fig. 10, p. 50). The combination of strangeness and familiarity—from Cypriot plank figurines whose uses and iconography are still obscure, to an instantly recognizable crawling baby of around a year old, from Crete (Christophilopoulou, 2023a, Fig. 13, p. 53)—encourages visitors to make personal connections to what they see, while never losing sight of the distinctiveness and distance of these cultures.

For those not familiar with these three island cultures, the exhibition offers a beguiling introduction, while those for whom some of these objects are old friends will benefit from the chance to see them in new combinations. Loans from the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford can be seen from new angles, thanks to the design of the island plinths, such as a horse-shaped Late Bronze Age rhyton from Cyprus, whose rider forms the handle. The ability to see complex objects such as this from all angles is a great advantage of the exhibition design.

While the exhibition wears its scholarship lightly, it is underpinned by extensive multidisciplinary research. For example, the interpretation of ancient food cultivation and consumption is informed by current research in archaeobotany

(Christophilopoulou, 2019), which is used as a lens to explore everyday food preparation as well as ritual feasting in a range of contexts. As well as bringing loaned objects together, the Fitzwilliam team have taken the opportunity to work with partners from different disciplines across Cambridge University to investigate their own collections in greater depth. This has produced outstanding results such as an image of a Hellenistic Cypriot gold earring taken with a 3D microscope, providing insights into its intricate metalwork to complement the view through a vitrine, and comprehensive analysis of an Iron Age bronze sword from Tamassos in Cyprus (Christophilopoulou, 2023a, Fig. 42, p. 85), research which is reflected in the interpretation as well as being presented more fully in the edited volume which accompanies the exhibition (Pancaldo, 2023).

Objects revealing cross-cultural influences, such as Phoenician-style metalwork from Cyprus, speak of an open, creative exchange of knowledge and skills. It is not difficult to detect the resonance of this theme with Britain's own political identity, at this point in our island history. The gallery text invites visitors to consider 'what does it mean to be an islander today', and the exhibition curator, Dr Anastasia Christophilopoulou, has drawn parallels between the comparison of island and mainland cultures in the ancient past, and 'current perceptions of and discourses about island versus mainland cultural identities [...] including Britain's own, debated island identity' (Christophilopoulou, 2023b). Overall, the exhibition downplays the notion of exceptionalism, and emphasizes the importance of connection and exchange to islanders since their earliest history, but does not provide more overt political commentary, leaving the implications for the visitor to consider.

While a fully-formed experience in its own right, the exhibition sits within a

broader research project exploring the cultural identities of islanders in the Mediterranean, now and in the ancient past, and comparing them to mainland experiences. This includes the production of an award-winning documentary *Being an Islander* (Bouras, 2023), based on anthropological and archaeological investigation of island identity and community engagement on Siphnos in the Cyclades. It is complemented by an extensive public engagement programme, and the commissioning of contemporary art, all focused on themes of insularity and identity. The edited volume produced alongside the exhibition, also titled *Islanders: The Making of the Mediterranean* (Christophilopoulou, 2023a), includes contributions on multidisciplinary research into Fitzwilliam's ancient Cypriot metalwork and contemporary artistic practice. It also presents fifty-five highlight objects, though it functions less as a catalogue than as a scholarly expansion on themes introduced by the exhibition. For those whose academic interests intersect with the research programme's topics of investigation, there is much more to engage with than the exhibition itself.

Will the exhibition prompt British visitors to take a broad perspective in exploring their own island identity and their views on connection, migration, and culture? That probably depends on the ideas and attitudes they bring with them but this thoughtful consideration of ancient island pasts, carried out through a stunning array of objects, will undoubtedly make an impact.

Yannis Hamilakis, ed. *The New Nomadic Age: Archaeologies of Forced and Undocumented Migration* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2018, xiv and 253 pp, colour and b/w illustr., pbk, ISBN 978-1-78179-711-2

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edited by Yannis Hamilakis, published in 2018, contains many articles that I first