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

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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 speculated.

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Introduction
The historiography of islands veers between contrasting positions, whose lineage can be traced equally from Antiquity. On one hand, islands are perceived to be geographically predestined hubs, places of hybridity and openness. On the other, islands are presented as isolated spaces, with the sea in this vision providing a barrier and a bulwark against

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outsiders. These are perspectives addressed in other articles in this issue with specific reference to the Mediterranean, but a comparative view 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.4

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 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 Erythrean Sea, or the Indian Ocean, as it was widely known to Mediterranean observers in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, was perceived by most geographers to be a bounded or coherent space, 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.5

Third, historiographically, the trend in recent scholarship has been to emphasise the Indian Ocean as a maritime unit that 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.6 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.7


7 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. From the seventh century onwards, though most clearly from the tenth to eleventh centuries, the development of a strong set of connections running from the Persian Gulf, down the East African littoral, and testified to by Arab and Persian geographical sources, as well as Swahili archaeo-linguistics and the archaeology of sites like Kilwa in
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. It is also, however, 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. Spanning, as these terrestrial preferences might, specialisms 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. 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.

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 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 those of the eastern Indian Ocean). 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 that 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

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8 On the definition of maritime periods and identities according to terrestrial categories, see M. Harpster, “Sicily: A Frontier in the Center of the Sea?”, this volume.


11 N. Pigulewskaja, Byzanz auf den Weg nach Indien (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1969), pp. 310–22, comes close to defining the narrower band of the fourth to seventh centuries as a specific period with respect to the western Indian Ocean, but this is ultimately not fully articulated due to the tension between the phase of historical development outlined and the requirement to situate it within the larger narrative of transformations from an ancient to a feudal economic mode.

12 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”. Some studies 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 S (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”, submitted to the Journal of Late Antiquity November 2018; R. Darley, “Byzantine Coins and Peninsular India’s Late Antiquity”, Journal of Ancient Civilizations 33 (in press, 2019).
the commentator. This article takes the starting position that 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 much like preference and perspective. The present article will therefore make the case for re-situating the experience of islands within the wider discourse 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, and provides a means by which to evaluate the aims and agency of local communities in the context of both geographical parameters and the competing agencies of individuals and groups beyond the island.

To begin with physical geography, an island is a piece of land completely surrounded by water. 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. 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. 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 profound 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 endpoints of islandess 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

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13 See R. Darley, “‘Implicit Cosmopolitanism’ and the Commercial Role of Ancient Lanka”, in *Sri Lanka at the Crossroads of History*, ed. Z. Biedermann and A. Strathern (London: University College London 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 that 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.


16 It is notable, for example, that, while travel by sea does not appear as a barrier in medieval hagiographies, the maritime journeys contained within 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.
landscape. Here though, a frontier is considered to be the interface of mutually exclusive or mutually distinguishable collective definitions. These may be political, military, cultural or religious, and may entail large or small collectives. Frontiers may be fixed, mobile or pluri-local, 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 and social habits to 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 with those outside. Making explicit this assumption of the shoreline 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 km², roughly the same as Mallorca (3,640 km²). Its position and generally arid climate, however, have tended to support a much lower population density than the latter, 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 Hadramawt, and in Antiquity and Late Antiquity it seems to have had the closest connection with the latter; it remains under Yemeni

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17 For example, *Frontiers in Question: Eurasian Borderlands, 700–1700*, ed. 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; 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.
authority today. 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. The apocryphal accounts of St Thomas talk of him converting the island, though this is probably a much later narrative tradition and it is likely that Socotra was in fact Christianised from Yemen between the fourth and sixth centuries. From the seventh century onwards, the island retained a Christian character, with clergy supplied from the Church of 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.

The only narrative records of the island from Antiquity and Late Antiquity come from Greek and Latin sources, which refer to it as Dioscorides. 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. 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. 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

22 For a full survey of these, see Biedermann, *Soqotra*, 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.
23 Strauch, *Foreign Sailors*.
a settlement site probably datable to the first and second centuries and then beginning to appear in significant quantities only from the tenth century.25

Written testimony concerning the island comes mainly from two sources, namely the *Periplous of the Erythreian Sea* in the first century AD and the *Christian Topography* in the sixth. Both are significant as they were written by authors who appear, from their texts, to have had direct sailing experience in the Erythreian Sea, though the author of the *Christian Topography* asserts that he only sailed past the island, and the first-century *Periplous* does not specify whether information was gathered from others or came from first-hand experience. While the *Periplous* predates the main focus of this article, 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 [ἡ παραπόλεμος] they are settlers, a mixture of Arabs and Indians and even some Greeks, who sail out of there to trade.26

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 Charibael 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 [κατάτυχην] put in at it; these could exchange rice, grain, cotton cloth [οθόνον 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 [καὶ παραφυλάσσεται].27

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 era of Mediterranean–Indian Ocean trade in the first and second centuries or the more geographically limited but busy maritime Palmyran trade in the third and fourth.28 The author of 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

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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. 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. The majority are in north-west Indian script and Sanskrit, testifying to movement between ports such as Barygaza and Socotra. Smaller numbers are in Greek, Ethiopic and south Arabian scripts. 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 by 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 a general and unspecified audience of future discoverers: “You ... who will read this tablet, you will bless me/us and he will leave the tablet in its place”.

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. Members of these groups may, indeed, have coincided on the island, but there is little evidence of the island as a meeting place at which regular, expected or sustained interaction took place or at which these incoming identities were transformed and hybridised. 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. 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.

31 Strauch, Foreign Sailors, 366–403
33 Gorea, “Palmyra and Socotra”, 451.
34 Strauch, Foreign Sailors, 540.
35 Strauch, Foreign Sailors, 202 (no. 349).
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, accessible to sailors moving with the monsoon winds between East Africa and India. This north-eastern coastal area is also accessible by sailing directly south from the Ḥadramawt, 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 regions of the island rarely having been the focus of habitation.36 The sailing distance from any mainland shore is measurable in days and, combined with the difficulty 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 Periplous 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 Periplous 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 Ḥadramawt 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.37 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 Periplous, 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.38 This is, however, an arrangement whose logistics can only 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 Periplous 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.39 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 author did not stop at the island because of its treacherous coastline, high winds or simple lack of

36 Biedermann, Soqotra, 4. The inland mountainous region has also, at times, served as a stronghold for populations on the island, as well as producing a number of the island’s export crops, including aloes and dragon’s blood.
38 Doe, Socotra, 152–4; however, Bukharin, “Mediterranean World”, 514, points out that Qana’ is not listed by the Periplous 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.
39 For example, Bukharin, “Mediterranean World”, 538.
incentive. He certainly makes no reference to the island’s products. 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, all of whom had reasonably free movement on the island once they arrived. 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. Whether ritual or recreational, however, they suggest an environment in which foreign sailors could and did come and go as they pleased. 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, this indicates that trade was not mediated by any local power base. 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 “Socotran” 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. For the author of the Topography, the island dwellers 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

40 Ibid., 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 to this continuity outlined above, the Topography does not describe these Socotrans as traders or associate the island with trade in any way. See Strauch, Foreign Sailors, 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, ed. F. De Romanis and A. Tchernia (New Delhi: Manohar, 1997), pp. 41–65.

41 Strauch, Foreign Sailors, 543.

42 For the settlement, see Naumkin, Island of the Phoenix, 110–23.

43 On the various settlement myths associating the island with Alexander of Macedon and the Ptolemies, see Biedermann, Soqotra, 29.
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.

In the period immediately following that covered by 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 the island remained in turn 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 quietly, and to breed children Mahometan, which I perceive they doe not, having no manner of conversation with the Arabs.

That such a situation could develop might be explained by the fact that, if Socotra possessed a shoreline frontier in its north-eastern 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. 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 km², 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 official capital of the island was based at Anuradhapura in the north of the island. Late Antiquity and the centuries preceding it constituted a period of wealth, strong government and carefully managed agriculture, in large part via monastic land grants, though it was also a period of increasing autonomy by the southern region of the island from the political and economic sphere of Anuradhapura. The island in this period was also either completely or predominantly non-monetary in the sense of a large-scale, regulated and widespread currency used in transactions
beyond only high-level, elite exchange. It was also mostly disconnected from long-distance trans-regional contacts, at least until the sixth to seventh centuries, coinciding with internal conflict between the kings of Anuradhapura and the southern, Ruhuna region.48

Geographically, Sri Lanka is characterised by great ecological diversity, with the northern arid region contrasting starkly with inland mountain regions and southern forested areas. As a consequence, internal communication poses significant challenges, especially between the northern and southern regions, which requires passage over or around the central mountain range. Most rivers on the island are not easily navigable far inland, and in any case, most run directly from the centre to the coast, thus not ameliorating the problem of north–south communication or inland travel. A coastline marked by natural harbouring areas and river estuaries provides ample possibilities for docking ships, but circumnavigation, both around the exposed east coast of the island, and through the Palk Strait between Sri Lanka and India, is dangerous. The consequences of this geography for management of access to the island are explored below, but it is worth highlighting two perennial features. One is the tension between mutually somewhat inaccessible, and agriculturally very different, northern and southern zones. The other is the comparatively greater significance historically of the western and southern coast in comparison with the east coast, in terms of documented settlement or harbourage and political influence. This is perhaps most obviously explicable by means of the steep mountains that meet the east coast, in comparison with the gentler shoreline to the west, the proximity of the west coast to India, and the larger number of rivers that flow westwards and south on the island.

Westwards and northwards, Sri Lanka undoubtedly was connected to peninsular India and always has been.49 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 article, 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.50 However, while peninsular India, both the urbanised and powerful states of the Deccan plateau and the smaller political agglomerations of the southern region that

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48 The disconnection of the island from trade in this period 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 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. The precise nature of monetisation on the island is also complex, on which R. Walburg, Coins and Tokens from Ancient Ceylon (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2008) is most significant. I am also indebted to Reinhold Walburg for sharing with me some brief, as-yet unpublished remarks on the way that his interpretation of this picture is shifting as a result of excavations at Anuradhapura, Tissamaharama, Mantai and Sigiriya. However, this does not challenge the impression of the island as a space without any circulating precious metal currency, and in which base metal “token” coins were not widely used in day-to-day transactions, or distributed in non-urban environments.


50 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, see 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.
most closely neighboured Sri Lanka, 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 on Socotra. What Roman goods do appear on the island would seem to have come there via India.51

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.52 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 other travellers to the west who had gone before him.53 And even by the seventh century there are no finds of Chinese coins or ceramics that would suggest that Sri Lanka’s connection with China was primarily commercial rather than religious.54

There is little indication of Sri Lanka’s commercial 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.55 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 that such a community might have entertained.56 This appearance in the Topography may furthermore relate to an assertion of greater autonomy from Anuradhapura by the southern, Ruhuna, region of Sri Lanka. This had been a wealthy and somewhat urbanised region, as well as closely connected to peninsular India, since at least the first century AD, but from the fifth century signs of increasing competitive assertion against Anuradhapura begin to be visible archaeologically, numismatically and textually.57

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, especially its regional capital, Tissamaharama, 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.58 Also around the

51 Darley, “Implicit Cosmopolitanism”, 50.
55 Christian Topography, III: 344.
58 Walburg, Coins and Tokens, 57–80 on dating; 312–14 on special-purpose use.
sixth century, it has been noted that building work at the inland, mountain centre of Sigiriya shifted from using mainly dressed limestone, mostly found in the northern regions of the island, and along its west coast, towards using dressed gneiss, found locally and throughout the central and southern areas of the island. Though not conclusive, this may further suggest a fracturing of direct lines of political and economic influence from the north across Sri Lanka, though it may also be connected to a widespread use of dressed gneiss across the island, including in Anuradhapura, in these centuries.62 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.63

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, and thereby to challenge the fundamentally agricultural hegemony of Anuradhapura.61 It is perhaps significant that, in the fifth century, major works were undertaken at Anuradhapura to develop irrigation channels and canals from the large tanks constructed over four centuries earlier.62 When fully managed and irrigated, the agricultural potential of the arid northern zone outstrips that of the south, and this intensified investment seems to have been geared towards such maximisation. By contrast, the relative position of Anuradhapura and the site of Mantai, often considered its coastal port in this period, despite minimal archaeological evidence supporting this contention, indicates the comparative peripherality of maritime connections to the northern capital in this period.63 Mantai is located over 100 km, or around 23 hours of continuous walking, from Anuradhapura, with no navigable riverine route between the two that could mitigate this distance. In comparison, the southern capital of Tissamaharama, with its citadel of Akuragoda, is located a mere 10 km from the coast. It has been the subject of extensive excavation by a German-Sri Lankan team that has revealed evidence for development from the first century AD, and links with local coastal harbour sites, including at Godavaya, also associated with an inscription referring

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63 Christian Topography, III: 348–50. Current publications have favoured the view that the author of the Topography is mistaken in his assertion of two warring kings, and simply means to indicate by his two centres the political capital at Anuradhapura and the nearby coastal site of Mantai (for example: P. Francis, “Western Geographic Knowledge of Sri Lanka and Mantai ca. 325 B.C. to 1170 A.D.”, in Mantai: City by the Sea, ed. J. Carswell, S.U. Deraniyagala and A.J. Graham (Aichwald: Linden Soft Verlag): 53–60. The present author, however, strongly agrees with the suggestion by Wallburg, Coins and Tokens, 292, of interpreting the text more literally and tentatively identifying the second king as the political leader of the Ruhuna region. This accords well with the numismatic and archaeological evidence for Tissamaharama emerging at this time as a significant, and possibly competitive, centre. Even if the identity of the warring kings is not certain, however, it certainly seems clear that it testifies to political fragmentation on the island. Interpreting the description of two conflicting kings to mean that the island was under single, uncontested rule, with the author simply misunderstanding the relationship between an inland capital and a coastal emporium, supposedly, though not archaeologically demonstrably, of great significance in this period (see Darley, “Implicit Cosmopolitanism”, 62-5) does unsupportable injury to the sense of the surviving source.
61 See also Darley, “Implicit Cosmopolitanism”, 66.
64 On the archaeology of Mantai, see Darley, “Implicit Cosmopolitanism”, 62–4.
to maritime trade (probably with India) and with the earliest shipwreck yet discovered in the western Indian Ocean, datable to the first centuries BC/AD.  

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, and in Late Antiquity significant internal divergences seem by the sixth century to have affected management of the shoreline at least with respect to the south of the island. 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 that 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 emporia to local villages or monasteries.  

By contrast, from the late fifth or sixth century onwards, the southern Ruhuna region seems to have cultivated an expanded and intensified relationship with external trading partners, including for the first time regular visitors from further afield than India. Nevertheless, the reasons for doing this are perhaps explained better in terms of the need to assert and maintain an internal frontier with Anuradhapura, rather than by any inevitability of insularity. Prior to this period, there is little indication of Sri Lanka being inherently connected far beyond its shores because of its island status, any more than the difficult terrain of the centre of the island meant that largely autonomous southern and northern regions of the island were politically inevitable. In both cases, the inscription and alteration of meaning with respect to geographical features in Late Antiquity reveals the creation and modification of frontiers.

The coastal frontier of Sri Lanka surrounded, for most of Late Antiquity, a comparatively tightly controlled state which, despite 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. Comparative 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 accessing alternative sources of prestige to Anuradhapura’s religious significance, antiquity and agricultural capacity.  

65 For the best example of which, see H. Falk, “Three Epigraphs from Godawaya, Sri Lanka”, in Ancient Ruhuna, pp. 327–34.
66 The so-called Jetavana treasure from Anuradhapura, comprising a hoard of foreign and locally-produced “imitation” objects, manufactured c. second century BC to third 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 edn, ed. S. Bandaranayake (Colombo: Sri Lanka National Commission for UNESCO and the Central Cultural Fund, 2003), pp. 37–52. That the Ruhuna region had long-term connections beyond...
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 later Chola empire in south India, whose sudden expansion radically, but temporarily, altered the relative scale of regional powers.  

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 relationships of both of these islands’ communities (permanent or temporary) changed over time, 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 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 of 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

the island, which it was capable of engaging with and exploiting independently of the northern zone, is further suggested by occurrence of the so-called “lion and swastika” types of Mahārathi coins, dating from the first century BC and found only at Ruhuna metropolis, Tissamahārāma, Walburg, Coins and Tokens, p. 28, catalogue 186.6 and 189.4-6. It is possible, therefore, that the southern area of the island went through phases of reduced and increased autonomy, with the fifth to sixth centuries constituting such a period of separation from Anuradhapura and the north. 67 G.W. Spencer, The Politics of Expansion: The Chola Conquest of Sri Lanka and Sri Vijaya (Madras: New Era, 1983).

68The need for more critical approaches to connectedness for narratives of later Sri Lankan history is also argued for in Z. Biedermann, (Dis)connected Empires: Imperial Portugal, Sri Lankan Diplomacy, and the Making of a Habsburg Conquest in Asia (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). My thanks to Zoltán Biedermann for making me aware of this in advance of its publication.
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 in the context of specific physical features. ⁶⁹ 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, or indeed, other island population, 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 by significantly closing its frontier, 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). ⁷⁰ By contrast, an island that is unable in any particular set of circumstances to maintain primary 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, it may find that its insularity to some extent dissolves, with its level of connectivity, inter-dependence and replication of cultural practices neither higher nor lower than other areas. ⁷¹ Control of the shoreline frontier may also become a bargaining chip in negotiation of internal frontiers. ⁷²

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 new, 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. ⁷³ That being the case, it was a given that islands

⁶⁹ Harpster, “Sicily”.
⁷¹ See Jarrett, “Nests of Pirates”, on the variably “insular” status of *Fraxinetum*.
⁷² As in, for example, the case of Cyprus, as discussed by Zavagno, “Going to the Extremes”.
⁷³ An interesting direction for future comparison, not attempted here, would be with islands in the eastern Indian Ocean, where scale and proximity parameters more closely mirror the western Indian Ocean than they do the Mediterranean, but in which the far greater number of islands and their proximity to one another will potentially yield new and distinctive permutations of the frontiers outlined here.
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, which 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. 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, and serves in a Mediterranean context to foreground certain kinds of connectivity as inevitable, in ways that are not as clear elsewhere, nor inherently associated with insularity.

Finally, therefore, 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 Jarrett (this volume) 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 porous bounded space. The important category, therefore, is not insularity but boundedness itself.

**Disclosure statement**

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74 Ibid.