

CONCEPTS, THEORIES, & INTRODUCTIONS

Sacred Isles: Islands as Sites of Religious, Spiritual or Supernatural Exception

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The articles in this inaugural publication of the periodic section on ‘Sacred isles: Islands as sites of religious, spiritual or supernatural exception’ in *Folk, Knowledge, Place* examines the complex interplay between sacred isles, geography and human experience. Through empirical research, theoretical analysis and comparative studies, the papers contribute to island studies by revealing the layers of meaning embedded in island landscapes and their roles in spiritual and cultural life. The three articles in the present issue discuss diverse locations, covering distinct small island settings with sacred connections in England (St Michael’s Mount), Guernsey (Lihou) and the river islands of Guangzhou in China. Drawing from a rich body of scholarly work across island studies, folklore studies, religious studies and geography, this periodic section foregrounds how the inherent spatial characteristics of islands—such as isolation, defined coastlines and unique environmental conditions—imbue them with mystique and sanctity. Such attributes foster a heightened sense of space and intimacy with the environment and enhance their appeal as sacred sites. While highlighting how islands can embody cultural heritage and religious devotion, the articles also explain some of the ways sacred isles can transcend island space, moving between and across islands and related revered settings where a consideration of sacred interconnections becomes necessary for comprehending islands on their own terms.

Introduction

Small islands across the globe have long held a mystique, sometimes becoming sites of religious, spiritual or supernatural exception (Bartolini et al., 2017; Brinklow, 2015; Gillis, 2004). This distinctiveness is commonly derived from their inherent spatial attributes: relative size, well defined coastlines and being isolated or detached from a mainland (large or small, near or distant). Such characteristics, which can imbue islands with a sense of intrigue and allure (Baldacchino, 2012), and in some instances produce a sense of spatially-defined utopian islands (Lin & Su, 2022), make them particularly attractive as sacred isles. As expressed in the growing scholarly literature on sacred isles, small islands create a heightened awareness of space,

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there is a distinct intimacy with the environment and sea (Petts, 2019), and isolation or dislocation from other land masses are a sought-after attraction for the island, all of which further enhance the perceived sanctity of islands, positioning them within a liminal framework removed from the mundane and suspended between disparate space (Luo & Grydehøj, 2017).

Small, remote islands, such as those housing centrepiece European monasteries or sacred Japanese Shintō shrines, have long been revered as spiritual places that have become central to religious devotion, attracting pilgrims seeking solace, enlightenment or divine intervention (Bouet, 1973; Dugdale, 1846; Johnson, 2021a, 2021b, 2022; Stokes, 1891; Suwa, 2017). Such islands are not passive locations of sacred significance, but they help shape religious belief and practice due to their unique environmental conditions, including coastlines and interiors, often becoming integral to mythology and ritual (Bowman, 2005). Further, the natural and cultural heritage of such island sites provide layers of meaning that enrich the spiritual experience for those who engage with the island, whether residents, pilgrims or tourists, as well as those who distantly connect with the island (Kelman, 2007). For these reasons, sacred isles become liminal locations that transcend the boundaries of earthly existence.

‘Sacred isles’ is a periodic section of *Folk, Knowledge, Place* and will publish articles on some of the many ways in which islands serve as sites of religious, spiritual or supernatural exception. This inaugural section presents three peer-reviewed articles that engage with empirical research, theoretical analysis and comparative study, aiming to make a start at expanding scholarly understanding of the complex interplay between island spatiality (intra- and extra-island), sacred place-making and (trans-)local epistemologies (Relph, 1976). By shedding light on such important areas within the field of island studies, including island folklore and island geography, as well as related scholarly fields, such as history and religious studies, these papers and the periodic section more widely illuminate new perspectives for this important aspect of human experience. In this context, and reinforcing a statement often reiterated in island studies, islands are understood “on their own terms” (McCall, 1994a, p. 104). This notion must necessarily include not only spatial, geographic and cultural considerations on and of islands, but also locations between, across and beyond islands and related sites (Pugh, 2013; Stratford et al., 2011).

Sacred isles not only serve as focal points for religious devotion, but they also embody the collective identity and heritage of island communities and those who connect with these locations. Such intertwining of religious and cultural values underscores the multifaceted significance of sacred isles, which serves as testament to the intricate interplay between human belief systems and human geography (Grydehøj, 2018).

For example, within the vastness of the Pacific Ocean, islands and archipelagos such as Rapa Nui (Easter Island) and Hawai‘i are revered for their sacred landscapes (McCall, 1994b; Sponsel, 2001). The monumental

monolithic statues, or *moai*, of Rapa Nui are not only artifacts of archaeological study, but also visually stunning displays under the touristic gaze, so that colonial imaginings in “popular articles, books, and films represent Rapa Nui as remote and mysterious” (Porteous, 2004, p. 15). Similarly, in Hawai‘i, sacred Polynesian sites such as *heiau* serve as ceremonial platforms for offerings and prayers to the gods (Flexner & McCoy, 2016). These *heiau* are not only religious sanctuaries, but also repositories of traditional island knowledge, passed down through generations of islanders, and thereby deeply connected to island place.

In Northwestern Europe, other apposite examples of sacred isles include Lindisfarne off the coast of northeast England, St Michael’s Mount in the southwest of England, and Skellig Michael in southwest Ireland. While varying in terms of their relative insularity, each has long served as an island haven for spiritual retreat in the Christian world (Adam, 2009; Borlase, 1769; Hull, 1967). The natural setting of such islands, which might be accompanied by harsh environmental or social conditions, presents an ideal context for religioners seeking solitude and affinity with the divine. Today, such island sites continue to attract pilgrims, with the ritualistic process also culturally transformed into the tourism sector for an industry driven by the search for authentic experiences inspired by the allure of sacred sites, liminal space and remote or insular locations (Papantoniou et al., 2022; Ronström, 2021; Royle, 2001).

There are numerous other examples of sacred isles on a global scale, connecting to various belief systems with distinct local meaning. Whether associated with the religions of the Igbo or Yoruba in the Caribbean islands, the sacred symbolism of the island of Raiatea (Ra’iātea) in French Polynesia, or the significance of the local belief system in the Bijagós (Bissagos) islands in Guinea-Bissau off the west coast of Africa, islands and sacred connections take numerous forms and practices. Islands might also have a certain historical symbolism with religious connections, such as the idea that the Ark of the Covenant was moved to Elephantine (river) island in Egypt, and later to Tana Kirkos (lake) island in Ethiopia, the locations of which highlight geographically remote locations (Oestigaard & Firew, 2013). Further, the notion of a sacred island has also been used metaphorically, such as with Park’s (1994, pp. 161, 164) references to cultural and ethnic islands and territories with an “Arab enclave surviving as an island within a sea of Jewish residences” (Park, 1994, p. 184). As Luo and Grydehøj (2017) note, within ancient and imperial China, the island and archipelagos as abstract geographies were seen as possessing a sacred character, and Johnson (2021a) shows how small islands were of mythic and cosmological significance to the construction of the idea of Japan.

Islands may also hold strategic importance in geopolitical conflicts. They may serve as markers of territorial sovereignty and exist in contested political realms, such as the disputed status of the Senkaku/Diaoyu/Tiaoyutai Islands in the East China Sea, or the Falkland Islands/Islas Malvinas in the South

Atlantic; both groups reflecting the complexities of cultural politics – near and distant (Baldacchino, 2017; Royle, 2006). As a result, the conflicts surrounding contested island sites can disrupt and diminish their perception as sacred spaces. Instead of being revered solely for their cultural or spiritual importance, they become focal points of nationalistic and militaristic interests, thereby complicating the notion of sacred, an issue that Hadjimichael et al. (2020) have explored in the context of the Greek islet of Ro.

When looking at sacred isles, it is important to consider their temporal and spatial dimensions. That is, the sacred phenomenon of such small island sites reflects the dynamics between social, cultural and environmental factors. For example, some islands are well known for their archaeological sacred sites (Terrell, 2008), and the continuity of pilgrimage to such islands is testament to their enduring importance not only within the sacred world, but also within the contemporary tourism industry (Bingenheimer, 2016; *Destination Mont Saint-Michel – Normandie*, 2023; Dubois, 1967; Gillis, 2007; Long, 2008). The extent of tourism to these islands raises questions about the commodification of sacred space, revealing the sometimes contested nature of the heritage industry.

This inaugural edition of *Folk, Knowledge, Place*'s periodic section on 'Sacred isles', sheds light on some of the complexities of sacred isles exploring select case studies concerning the cultural significance of such islands. Including interdisciplinary inquiry, the articles foreground the nuanced interplay between sacredness and island space, offering original contributions for enriching our understanding of these unique cultural locations. Drawing primarily from the field of island studies, folklore and related disciplines, the three articles in this section uncover layers of meaning embedded within island landscapes and sacred sites, bridging disciplinary boundaries and weaving together diverse perspectives on island spirituality and its relationship to space and place.

Philip Hayward's (2024) article studies St Michael's Mount, a small tidal island in the county of Cornwall in the southwest of England. The island serves as a scenic tourist attraction and holds significance in Christianity, local folklore and, more recently, New Age mysticism. During the 12th to 14th centuries, it was an important site for Christian pilgrimage and had strong ties to the Benedictine order at Mont-Saint-Michel, a similar tidal island in northern France, across the English Channel. In Cornish folklore, St Michael's Mount is a location where two 'ley lines' (lines of spiritual power) converge. One of these lines extends northeast through England from the island to Bury St. Edmunds, and the other runs from Ireland to Bethlehem in a south-easterly direction. Hayward examines these cultural elements, portraying the island as a meeting point of mythical and spiritual significance across historical, New Age and tourism perspectives.

Adam Grydehøj's (2024) paper explores how scholars can "fruitfully and respectfully approach traditions of the sacred" (p. 1). He uses autoethnography as a research method to engage with the Chinese sea goddess Mazu at Nansha Tianhou Temple on an island in Guangzhou, China, and combines perspectives from folklore and human geography in his study of religion and the supernatural. In doing this, he maintains that an experience-centred, autoethnographic approach to encounters with the sacred can help in comprehending how such phenomena influence people. Central to the paper is Grydehøj's experience of Mazu as a complex, multifaceted figure who represents at the same time a young woman, a tutelary deity and the imperial Tianhou (Queen of Heaven).

The small tidal island of Lihou in the Bailiwick of Guernsey in the British Channel Islands is the focus of Henry Johnson's (2024) article. Exploring Lihou's cultural and spiritual significance from a historical perspective, the author reveals how the island has a sacred history that extends beyond its own shores, linking to other tidal islands and related isolated locations across the English Channel. In this context, Johnson studies Lihou through a multi-sited archipelagic approach to island studies, examining the island and its sacred associations across physical, aquatic and cultural space. Such an approach not only reveals unique knowledge about Lihou in the broader religious history of the Channel Islands, but it also shows how island studies can expand its archipelagic approach to apply a multi-sited paradigm that transcends physical and aquatic boundaries.

These three articles contribute to the field of island studies by discussing the diverse ways in which islands serve as sites of spiritual significance and cultural complexity. They also contribute more specifically to studies at the intersection of folklore and human geography by illustrating the complex manner in which place and culture create one another. Each article explores the relationship between geography, spirituality and human experience, showing how island sites such as St Michael's Mount, the archipelagic cities of the Pearl River Delta, and Lihou are imbued with layers of sacred meaning. While the first and last articles discuss islands that have a relatively close geographic and spiritual connection, all three sites share a common theme of transcending physical boundaries with their spiritual connectivity and cultural exchange. Moreover, these locations underscore the importance of combining methods from different scholarly fields to gain a deeper understanding of island cultures and their sacred significance. By highlighting these similarities and differences, the three papers enrich discourse on island studies by emphasising the need for new perspectives in understanding the interplay between landscape, spirituality and human agency in shaping island identities and experiences.

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