

## Between the Seas

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Paci, Deborah. 2023. *Between the Seas: Island Identities in the Baltic and Mediterranean Seas*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 257 pp.

In September 2022 I visited Saaremaa Island in Estonia. As part of the visit, I took a littoral hike to the island of Suur-Vilsandi, the westernmost island of Estonia. At the western point of the island is a lighthouse from czarist Russian times. Apparently, we were only one of the few tourists who visited the place, and for the lighthouse warden, it was a chance to practice speaking. As it turned out, there are only seven permanent residents on the island 6 km long and 2.5 km wide with very limited connection to the outside world by boat or a lengthy tough littoral hike. It was a place living its own life even during the darkest times of the Soviet Union. The life and identity of islanders there is completely different in experience from the rest of the country. Still, of these seven people, we met three of them, and all spoke English very well. The island has its own fire station, people are pretty much aware of what is going on in the world, you can pay contactless on your credit card here, and mobile data and signal are stable here. The warden of the lighthouse leaves the island only once in two months for big shopping in the city of Kuressaare at Saaremaa Island and the last time he visited mainland Estonia was twenty years ago.

Despite my own land-locked cultural background, my over decade-long research is orientated on insular society and its identity in Taiwan. Islandness is also a significant precursor to creating Taiwanese identity as well; however, in Suur-Vilsandi, the ubiquitous islandness and isolation were almost touchable. Therefore, when I saw the newly published book on island identities by Deborah Paci, I had to read it.

I must say that at the beginning the book was rather a disappointment for me. Despite its title, there is relatively little about identity. The book is not based on any ethnographic study and is a historical and political analysis of the integration of islands of the Baltic and Mediterranean Seas.

The author presents two research questions:

1. Whether there are similarities in the ways Mediterranean and Baltic Sea islandness is constructed.
2. How in the era of European integration, the EU has represented Mediterranean and Baltic Sea islands and determined the goals of its regional politics with regard to these islands. (p. 1)

It is important to note that the work done is impressive in detail and scope. The introduction and preamble by Godfrey Baldacchino were probably the two most inspiring chapters for me. There is a major theoretical framework, including terminology such as insularity, islandness, and insularism. The author goes beyond the standard definition of these terms as the physical condition of isolation, the perception of isolation felt by islanders, and the attitude of insularist elites calling for autonomy by virtue of their insularity, and links these phenomena to global issues of environmentalism, humanitarianism, marginalization, and integration.

In the following chapter, she focusses on the historical development of both areas. The historical analysis goes back to antic Greek 'civilizational' conceptualization of the Mediterranean Sea and the 'merchant' Hansa conceptualization of the Baltic Sea. It is very clearly illustrated that islands in the past were not the margins of Europe but its centers and that islandness is a marginalizing concept related to the nationalist rebordering of Europe since the nineteenth century. As Baldacchini wrote in his preamble, "there is something quite naïve, even dangerous, in assuming that maps are neutral and objective: no map is." (p. VIII). By drawing the national borders of Europe, islanders suddenly found themselves at the fringes of societies and countries. Marital societies came to an end more or less.

European integration brought new concepts and perspectives to the islands, which again became the meeting points between societies and regions. Although I am not very interested in European integration processes and European institutions, this chapter and the following case studies are very educative and explanatory. The 'reborn' Hansa and European integrative interregional policies discussed in these chapters gave context and meaning to what I witnessed in Suur-Vilsandi. The otherwise marginalized region is fully incorporated and inclusively co-created not only in a matter of economic support, but also of identity creation. The Åland Archipelago became the junction between Finland and Sweden, Saaremaa and Hiiumaa became bridges for cooperation across Suomenlahti (the Gulf of Finland) cooperation, Corsica, Sardinia, and Sicily became a new transnational Mediterranean cultural 'chain'. Still, the Mediterranean experience is different from those of the Baltic islands, especially due to its position as the

EU frontier. The migration crisis, Arab spring, EU policies on illegal migration, these all topics outweigh the integrative role of these regions, which is not the case of the Baltic islands.

In conclusion, the book by Deborah Paci is an excellent insight into how insularity and islandness were developing throughout history and how policies and institutions of the European Union are reestablishing their cultural role, spatial, and societal position within Europe. However, if you are interested in field-research-based identity studies, this is not the book that I would recommend.

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