

## The Historical Review/La Revue Historique

Vol 9 (2012)

Seas, Islands, Humanists

The *H*istorical Review  
La Revue *H*istorique



VOLUME IX (2012)

Département de Recherches Néohelléniques  
Institut de Recherches Historiques / FNRS

Department of Neohellenic Research  
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### Seas, Islands, Humanists

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doi: [10.12681/hr.285](https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.285)

#### To cite this article:

Tolia, G., & Arnaud, J.-L. (2013). Seas, Islands, Humanists. *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique*, 9, 9–10.  
<https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.285>

# *Special Section / Section Spéciale*

SEAS, ISLANDS, HUMANISTS

## Preface

The encounter of scholarship and exploration shaped the early modern worldview. In recent years, many studies have been produced on this significant topic, and many will follow, since this meeting involved a series of challenges between learned traditions and practical experience, and initiated extensive and varied transformations in the perception of the world and the development of science. The five essays that form this special section of *The Historical Review / La Revue Historique* are part of this discussion. They all focus on the confrontation between formal geography and empirical knowledge during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, an era of rapid maritime expansion, radical geopolitical reorganization and conceptual adjustments. The essays were originally presented in a summer seminar entitled “Island Cartographies: Knowledge and Power”, coordinated by Jean-Luc Arnaud and George Tolia in Ermoupolis, Syros, in July 2007, an event conceived and organized in the framework of the RAMSES2 Network of Excellence activities for 2006-2010.

The seas and the islands, always present in the human understanding of nature, acquired a novel status in late medieval and early modern occidental geographical culture. This originated in vernacular contexts, associated to trade and the Crusades, and was initially inspired by the Western Mediterranean infiltration of the Levant and the Black Sea. The awakening of maritime activities in the Mediterranean produced new knowledge and modified the perception of maritime space. New modes of representation appeared, the sea charts or portolan charts, which summarized in cartographic form the practical nautical knowledge of compass navigation, and portrayed coasts, harbours and islands under the sea winds. The discovery of the Canary Archipelago in the fourteenth century and, later on, of new sea routes around Africa and towards the Pacific and Caribbean Archipelagos upset the image of the world: the increase of mercantile, colonial and communication networks in the inner seas and, soon, on the oceans

imposed the image of an open world, scattered yet interconnected. The seas and their islands ceased to pertain to a fragmented, unstable and marginal geography and became the centre of attention. A growing awareness of coherence and connectivity gradually overlapped the notions of uncertainty, danger and oddity.

As dense communication networks increased over extended island-paved sea routes, Humanists reconsidered their concepts. Initially perplexed, they sought information in sacred, antique and medieval records, assessed explorers' accounts and made ample use of such vernacular tools as sea charts, *roteiros* and treaties of navigation. They discussed the seas and islands extensively in their erudite cosmographic compilations and proposed a novel geographical genre, dedicated to islands. This new device first appeared in the form of an antiquarian geographical dictionary in late fourteenth-century Florence and from the early fifteenth century onwards in the form of the "Book of Islands", or *isolario*, an insular cartographic encyclopaedia that called attention to the multitude of isolated microcosms, their position in the seas and their inhabitants, their present state, history and wonders.

At the seminar in Ermoupolis, questions about the relation between knowledge and power were central. These inquiries resonate within the specific political and economic contexts of each time, and could be addressed to any cultural production. During the fifteenth century, power in the Mediterranean shifted from Christianity to a double authority, due to the expansion of the Ottoman Empire. The two blocs became increasingly homogeneous. Less than half a century after the conquest of Constantinople, the Kingdom of Aragon beat back the Muslims from the Iberian Peninsula. Spatial knowledge therefore established a means of appropriation and assessed the necessary tools to control or dominate. Geographical information held a particular place, as it could be transmitted not only through texts, but could make use of additional ways of expression: cartography and iconography, two communication methods situated on the border between art and craft which required particular know-how. We know that art has always had a close relationship with power, the latter always trying to control the production of the first. That is the basis of the negotiation between issues of knowledge, promoted by the geographers, and issues of power, represented by the sponsors.

The five essays presented in this section attempt to investigate the varied efforts of the learned to comprehend maritime space during the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries. They explore some aspects of the Humanists' efforts to merge theory and practice, doctrine and experience, to enclose seas and islands in a renovated worldview and give shape and meaning to the open horizons of their age.

George Toliaas and Jean-Luc Arnaud