

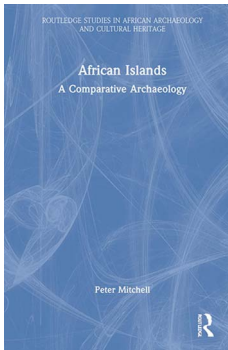
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PETER MITCHELL. 2022. *African islands: a comparative archaeology*. Oxford: Routledge; 978-1-032-15691-0 paperback £35.99.



Although numerous islands exist along the African coastline and across two major oceans, archaeological research on African islands is rarely included in discourse on Island Archaeology. Seeking to illuminate and address this gap, *African islands* provides a significant contribution to both African Archaeology and Island Archaeology. The author, Peter Mitchell, highlights a particular characteristic of African islands overall: despite Africa’s massive continental size, its islands are few and widespread compared with other regions (p. 3), while showcasing an impressive diversity of ecologies and histories. The introductory chapter sets the stage for the examples that follow throughout the book, demonstrating not only how African

islands contribute to current theoretical frameworks of island research, but also how African islands can help reshape established frameworks, which have been dominated by research in other regions, such as the Pacific, Caribbean and Mediterranean.

The second chapter takes the reader on a tour of African islands, showcasing the wide range of ecological and geographical features that shape their unique histories. The following four chapters focus on a comparative approach guided by a series of major themes in Island Archaeology: ‘Arriving’, ‘Altering’, ‘Being’ and ‘Colonising and resisting’. The richness of the African island archaeological record is evident in many examples, which often combine various forms of evidence, such as biochemical, botanical, faunal, ceramic, lithic and architectural. In many cases, the interpretation of archaeological data is enriched by linguistic, palaeobiological and historical records. Colour images give readers a glimpse of the diverse landscapes and material culture of African islands. Readers are further aided by tables and maps, which summarise the vast amount of information that each chapter presents.

An illustrative example of how all these elements work together is the discussion of the Canary Islands, which claim the longest history of archaeological research among African

islands (p. 54). The archipelago, located to the west of the Moroccan coast, displays a diversity of landscapes across its islands. These range from the dry and relatively flatter terrain of Fuerteventura on the eastern end of the archipelago to the mountainous pine forests of La Palma in the west (illustrated in fig. 5.30). In the chapter on ‘Being’, the archipelago provides a fascinating case study, exploring isolation and connectivity to the African mainland and between islands. European historical sources, for example, document the use of “rafts made from inflated skin” (p. 168) and boats made with palm leaf sails to navigate between islands; however, archaeological evidence of inter-island contact is very limited.

Although a shared connection to the African mainland is evident in the existence of North African crops and livestock on most islands of the archipelago, isotopic studies of human remains, along with botanical and faunal analyses, indicate that diets varied substantially from island to island, reflecting the variable landscapes and choices of island inhabitants (neatly summarised in tab. 5.1). Other types of evidence, including burials and the production and distribution of food and artefacts, indicate variation in the social and historical trajectories among the Canary Islands. The enduring differences among the Canary Islands poses an interesting question: to what extent did island populations choose to limit inter-island contact?

The book ends by emphasising the importance of heritage in African Island Archaeology. Heritage is tightly intertwined with the sustainability of people’s livelihoods on islands, which are particularly susceptible to the social and ecological impacts of climate change. A highlight of the last chapter is the short section about ‘Islands, climate change, social justice, and archaeological responsibilities’, which describes recent research that aims to decolonise archaeological practice through collaboration with local communities (p. 261). These final points merit additional discussion and integration across previous chapters to contextualise the impact of the long history of colonial approaches in African Island Archaeology. Recognising the value of locally driven research agendas is critical as the future of African Island Archaeology takes shape by considering which questions to prioritise, how to conduct research and for whom it matters.

Overall, the book effectively illustrates the value of archaeological research on African islands, highlighting the rich and variable material record of people’s engagement with islands around the continent, as well as possibilities for future research. The book’s many examples of existing and potential research on African islands are analysed through comparisons with other African islands and, more broadly, with other island regions. This approach provides a comprehensive overview of current research on African islands and offers Africanist archaeologists and Island archaeologists alike exciting opportunities to reimagine their current research.

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