Chapter 4

Scoasse Islands. The ordinary case of the 'waste islands'[1]

Luca Bonardi, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia

Abstract

The article focuses on the theme of the recurring and composite geographical relationship between islands and 'waste'. An endless geographic literature is centred on these two words and their conceptual derivations; on the other hand, the relationships triggered by their encounter appear, outside the theme of complex waste management in the island context, as little explored terrain. Here we will consider both islands in the strict sense – the destination of organic and inorganic waste from production and consumption systems, but also as spaces dedicated to total institutions – and in metaphorical meaning (floating waste islands, heat islands, "ecological island", in the Italian sense of a waste collection platform). Through a series of examples relating to micro-islands, I propose an initial taxonomy of the recurring situations that sees entire islands or considerable portions of them, frequently created or enlarged on purpose, destined to 'host' waste, sometimes with singular, physical and historical overlaps or juxtapositions.

Keywords: Small islands, Waste, 'Social Dumping Ground'.

Riassunto

Il contributo indaga il tema della ricorrente e composita relazione geografica tra isole e 'rifiuti'. Presi singolarmente, i due termini e loro derivazioni concettuali sono al centro di una sterminata letteratura geografica; per contro, le relazioni che si innescano dal loro incontro appaiono, fuori dal tema della complessa gestione dei rifiuti in ambito insulare, come un terreno poco esplorato. In questa sede si considereranno sia le isole in senso stretto – destinazione degli scarti organici e inorganici dei sistemi di produzione e consumo, ma anche nella loro funzione di spazi dedicati alle istituzioni totali – sia gli utilizzi metaforici del termine (le isole di rifiuti galleggianti, le isole di calore, le isole ecologiche). Attraverso una serie di esempi relativi agli spazi microinsulari viene proposta una prima lettura e classi-

[1] The title choice is intended to reflect the dual nature, both local and global, of the geographical issue addressed here. It also refers to the central role played by the Venetian lagoon in this contribution. I am particularly grateful to Davide Boscolo, whose knowledge of the Venice lagoon contributed to the writing of this article.

ficazione della ricorrente realtà che vede intere isole o considerevoli porzioni di esse, di frequente create o ampliate appositamente, destinate a 'ospitare' i rifiuti, talora con singolari sovrapposizioni o giustapposizioni fisiche e storiche.
Parole chiave: Piccole isole, Rifiuti, 'Discarica sociale'.

1. Introduction

An unspecified number of small islands or significant portions of them have been used, in every area of the planet, to gather the waste from – and more broadly, what is rejected by – human societies. It can be observed that this purpose applies both to the material waste from processes of production and consumption of goods, and, in a sense only partly metaphorical, to unwanted social portions. In other words, small islands have often functioned both as material landfills, in the sense most commonly referred to as waste, and as social 'landfills', as spaces 'reserved' predominantly and almost exclusively for those who are, for various reasons, banished from society (Goffman's total institutions, 2010, and Foucault, 1975). In this direction, there exists a geographical continuity between a phenomenon of a socio-political nature and one of a socio-environmental character. Framed this way, the issue thus appears as a specific declination on an island scale of the speculative parallelism between material waste and human waste proposed by Bauman (2002). A declination which, despite its numerous expressions, seems to have until now escaped – save for partial exceptions (Scarpino, 2011) – a comprehensive overview; especially since, as we will see, the two purposes sometimes physically overlap on the same patch of land.

The distance separating waste islands – often newly-built islands constructed specifically for this purpose – from other islands or the mainland, guarantees not only their relative inaccessibility but also a certain invisibility, as is socially appropriate for any type of waste.

If for material waste the distance is explained mainly by sanitary and environmental reasons, for social waste we can refer to what Anthony Santilli (2022) highlighted when he emphasizes how «the relationship between insularity and relegation in the world testifies to a need that power has always shown since ancient times: that of moving subjects deemed undesirable and dangerous away not only from societies but also from sight»[2].

Starting from these considerations, and with further semantic extensions emerging from the combination of island and waste, it is possible to construct a sort of classification of this widespread geographical reality.

[2] Comunicato stampa del 19 febbraio 2022 in <https://commissariocissantostefano.governo.it/it/comunicazione>.

As will be easy to see, this is an initial and partial proposal, both in terms of the outlined categories and, above all, in the composition of the cases that comprise them, mentioned here for exemplary purposes.

2. The Island as a Social Landfill

Since ancient times, many small islands have been destined for the location of prisons, practices of confinement, and the most diverse forms of isolation, to which, in more recent times, island portions reserved for migrant 'reception' centres have been added.

The theme of the relationship between insularity and, broadly speaking, incarceration has been the subject of various analyses, both of a general character (Fougère, 2002; 2004; Maffi, 2012; Salle, 2016: in particular pp. 87-90; Calzolaio, 2022) and relating to specific cases (see for example the essays on island imprisonment and confinement in Simonetta, 2015)[3]. In a 2013 contribution, Federica Cavallo specified the different possible declinations of this relationship, starting precisely from the significance that the physical fact of the island can assume, that of «a place not only finite but closed, without a way out, a physical and mental prison [that] lends itself better than others to being transformed, by precise human will, into a place of reclusion (sometimes self-reclusion)» (Cavallo, 2013: 193). In her writing, the author reconstructs and exemplifies the uses of islands as places of:

1) Exile, banishment, political confinement (starting from the Roman *deportatio in insulam,* up to the well-known case of Napoleon). This category involves, among others, many small Italian islands: Pantelleria, Ustica, Ventotene, the Tremiti islands, to name just a few.
2) Health and sanitary confinement (the Venetian lazarettos; the one in the port of Mahon, in Menorca).
3) Mental asylums (San Servolo and San Clemente in the Venetian lagoon).
4) Outposts for the segregation of slaves (Gorée, in Senegal; Prison Island in Zanzibar, Tanzania).

[3] In particular, the contributions by Simonetta, Mazzerbio and Graglia.

5) Prison (Alcatraz, obviously, but, staying in the United States, also the cases that will be cited in the next paragraph; Sakhalin, in Russia; in Italy, among many examples, Asinara, Santo Stefano, and Gorgona)[4].
6) Selection and/or segregation of migrants (Ellis Island and Angel Island on both sides of the United States; more recently Pantelleria and Lesbos in the Mediterranean).

This set of categories defines islands as a privileged location for total institutions. From a historical-chronological point of view, it can be noted how the substantial disappearance today of the first four categories and the progressive dismantling of the fifth is countered by the expansion of the one that sees islands as spaces for the forced containment of migrants. The geographical location of the islands contributes to this: front-line lands, placed in a position of political outpost of the mainland.

To the categories mentioned, one should finally add the very common form of 'self-reclusion' in island monasteries. A widespread phenomenon (just think of the cases of high concentration of this phenomenon on the islands of Lake Tana in Ethiopia, the Venetian lagoon, and the White Sea in Russia) which is explained by the fact that for monks and nuns, islands symbolize «leur retrait du monde géographique et du monde sensible, suivant l'image du Christ qui s'est retiré dans le desert»[5] (Bernardie-Tahir, 2011: 306).

3. Waste-Islands

A second type of waste-island is one that links its existence and/or its primary function to the material waste produced by contemporary society. The fundamental issue of waste management is omnipresent, as obvious, but it tends to take on specific characteristics in island spaces. In these contexts, the issue is also burdened by specific problems, whose degree of complexity increases as the available land surface decreases. On one hand, there is the problem of limited space, but on the other, there is also the

[4] Numerous cases, accompanied by a social and cultural analysis of the topic, are examined in Calzolaio (2022).

[5] «their withdrawal from the geographical world and the sensible world, following the image of Christ who withdrew into the desert».

strong tourist attractiveness exerted by many small islands. The combination of these factors means that waste production is often high relative to the available land area, while management options are limited and expensive. A problem that, like others, is amplified in the small islands of developing countries (see the review of cases presented in Mohee *et al.*, 2015). On the other hand, landfills and incineration plants can lead to a loss of environmental quality that reflects on tourist attractiveness, while transferring waste to the mainland is usually very costly. Therefore, the choice has often been directed towards hidden island portions, which become an 'island within an island', to be designated as a landfill or, as in the cases that will be described, towards the identification of entire, sufficiently concealed islands for this purpose, or even towards the specific construction of new islands.

Within a highly articulated framework[6], two partially distinct island models are included here: on one hand, islands that originated from the deposit of leftover, clearance, or excavation materials in shallow waters; on the other, regardless of their origin, those used for the disposal of all kinds of waste. These types are often concomitant or, indeed, literally overlapping; they see at their base the island generated by the input of solid waste and backfill material, and, superimposed on it, the landfill for municipal waste, in a process that can be the product of distinct choices over time or, in other cases, of a unified planning intention. A category upon which, according to a particular stratigraphic model, the social landfill (usually for prisoners) is sometimes further superimposed, placed at the apex of an unhealthy process of territorialization.

In short, inhabited centres of all sizes have used islands to remove their waste and the byproducts of infrastructural processes from urban (or tourist) contexts, permanently transforming their appearance and soils, and

[6] This includes, for example, cases of islands that have been chosen or have become dumping grounds for highly dangerous war material. One example is the micro-island of Trimelone, on Lake Garda, which has been used on several occasions since the 1930s as a dumping ground for explosive war material (see Mauro Vittorio Quattrina's documentary, *Trimelone, l'isola che c'è*). Or, with a much broader meaning, the former island of Rinascita, on the Aral Sea, which has now disappeared due to the drying up of the basin and has been incorporated into the Aralkum desert. The parable that affected it passed through an initial function as a prison camp, its subsequent transformation into a military base for the testing of chemical and bacteriological weapons, and, after its abandonment following the fall of the USSR, into the world's main anthrax dump (now cleared) (Colangelo, 2023).

limiting their subsequent settlement possibilities.

Here, three emblematic cases will be analysed for the worldwide significance, in various ways, of their reference contexts; those of New York, Venice, and the Maldives.

3.1. Rikers Island (New York)

The first example is situated in a context – it is worth remembering – largely governed by the logic of 'island production' linked to the deposit and disposal of earth materials and waste. It is enough to recall how a third of Manhattan was developed on land and wetlands previously used for the dumping of materials and sewage, both domestic and industrial. A similar story to that of the small, neighbouring Governors Island. Likewise, on Staten Island – another entity that originated, starting from the second half of the nineteenth century, from the landfilling of enormous quantities of material from various areas of New York Bay – lies the large Fresh Kills landfill (fig. 1), currently undergoing reclamation, considered «one of the largest landwork structure ever built in the history of humankind» (Nagle, 2007: 11).

The story of Fresh Kills is linked to the one of interest to us. Starting in 1939, this landfill began receiving waste that was previously sent to Rikers Island (just south of the Bronx), from whose urban landfill fumes emanated and fires broke out almost daily due to methane emissions. Concurrently, what would become one of the most significant (and infamous) prisons in the United States over the decades was already operational on Rikers Island.

This cohabitation gave rise to the large prison-landfill complex, which was further marked by additional 'mental institution' facilities throughout the island's twentieth-century history. The historical research of Shanahan and Mooney (2019) highlights what made the cohabitative link between these two functions dramatically tight. In fact, starting as early as 1903 – three decades before the prison's official opening in 1935 – the island had been steadily populated by inmates – mostly immigrants and Black people – employed in waste processing. The inmates «were forced to unload an unending stream of festering trash from flat-bottomed garbage barges called "scows"» (Shanahan and Mooney, 2019: 16). After being unloaded, the waste was sifted by hand, separating decomposing organic material

from dry waste and ash. It is easy to imagine the environmental and sanitary conditions in which these activities took place. Through this mechanism of landfilling and forced labor, the island almost quintupled its surface area, from the initial 36 hectares to the current 178. Therefore, it is largely a newly-formed island based on the dual and concomitant constituents of the social landfill and the material landfill. Subject to a long debate, the issue of Rikers Island prison seems to be heading towards a slow resolution, with the progressive closure of the prison and the repurposing of the area (Podolsky, 2024).

Fig. 1 – Aerial view of the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island (NY) (photo by W.O. Davies, 1951; Collection of Historic Richmond Town).

3.2. Sacca San Biagio (Venice)

The case of Venice concerns the island of San Biagio, or more properly Sacca[7] San Biagio, locally nicknamed the 'isola delle *Scoasse*' (the island of garbage). It's almost a title of territorial significance in a city where the theme of *scoasse* (rubbish) is a constant in conversations, conflicts, objects (from the *scoassera*, the boat – obviously changed over time – destined for garbage collection, to a specific smartphone application named 'scoasse'[8]), and even in toponymy itself: besides San Biagio, the Isola di San Secondo also boasts the name 'isola delle Scoasse' (in this case, for the waste that more or less 'naturally' accumulates there), to which Edoardo Sanguineti also dedicated a poem (*Scoazera*, from 2005), as does the 'Canale delle Scoasse' (Garbage Canal) along the Lido in the direction of Malamocco.

Clearly visible from the southern coastline of the historic centre, the island constitutes the westernmost tip of the Giudecca sub-archipelago, to which it is connected via another island (Sacca Fisola). While the two *sacche* (land reclamation areas) share a common origin, derived from the accumulation of sludge from canal dredging and waste materials, the Island of San Biagio has the particularity of having been specifically built to accommodate, once as a final destination and now only temporarily, the city's waste.

Used as a landfill since 1909 with the activation of the 'Urban Sanitation Station', aimed at producing organic fertilizers, it also saw, starting in 1969, the construction of an incinerator (clearly visible in rare historical photos), decommissioned in 1984 and subsequently demolished (Vianello, 1987). The island, whose partially equipped shores, together with those of a contiguous portion of Sacca Fisola, continue to serve as a storage and maintenance area for the watercraft of the company that manages waste collection and disposal in the city, has been the subject of various repurposing projects. Setting aside the dreamy green and smart design proposals with their improbable caves and organic markets[9], the debated hypothesis – now abandoned – of locating a 'Veniceland' on the island, a sort of mini-

[7] Artificial island.

[8] However, inactive as of March 2025.

[9] <https://archive.dpa-etsam.com/projects/sacca-san-biagio>; but also, <https://www.jefferson.edu/institute-for-smart-and-healthy-cities/venice-biennale-2023/venice-2050/adapting-to-the-tides.html>.

Disneyland centered precisely on an amusement park (2012)[10], deserves mention.

Nor, indeed, is the outcome known of the project approved by the City Council in 2019 for the part that envisaged the creation of a public green space[11]. The already initiated redevelopment of the Veritas[12] operational centre buildings seems rather to be heading in the more concrete direction of reinforcing the current purpose of the southern part of the island. It must be noted, however, that no project has seriously addressed the key problem, prerequisite to any redevelopment: the necessary remediation works for soils contaminated by toxic substances (dioxins and heavy metals) that accumulated during the years of the incinerator's operation (Comune di Venezia, 2004-2005) and beneath whose surface lies waste accumulated for decades (fig. 2).

3.3. Thilafushi (Maldive)

A third case, of great media relevance, concerns the Maldives archipelago, a context where the problem of waste is often at the centre of political debate and is the subject of an extensive literature with both environmental and social focuses (e.g., Malatesta *et al.* 2015; Kapmeier and Goncalves, 2016). Here, starting in the early 1990s, the coral lagoon space of Thilafushi was transformed into the large landfill for the Maldives and their dozens of resorts. In this case as well, part of the waste is used for the progressive expansion of the island (Pucino, 2016).

The environmental impacts of the landfill are varied, affecting both the atmosphere and the marine area, and extend far beyond the island's borders. The hundreds of tons of waste deposited there every day – processed mainly by immigrants from Bangladesh and India – in a context

[10] There are, moreover, several cases of more or less spontaneous repurposing for tourism of island spaces affected by previous events of a different nature and by a "negative" image. Examples include the well-known cemetery of migrant boats in Lampedusa and the life jackets in Lesbos, micro-tourist destinations with an ethical background of 'unauthorized' island landfills. Another example of this is the island landfill in Semakau (Singapore), which will be mentioned later, which has been the subject of innovative waste treatment and ecological management since its inception, to the extent that it has become an educational and recreational space.

[11] <https://live.comune.venezia.it/it/2019/03/giunta-comunale-libera-al-progetto-di-riorganizzazione-del-cantiere-sacca-san-biagio-alla>.

[12] Veritas is the society for the waste management and water services in Venice.

Fig. 2 – Sacca San Biagio or the 'Isola delle Scoasse' (Garbage Island). Although greened over, the island's profile still reveals the existence of the mounds generated during its years as a landfill. (Author's photo, 2025).

that was essentially uncontrolled until a few years ago, produce contaminating effects on the surrounding waters and, by releasing methane, give rise to more or less deliberate, almost permanent fires. The resulting fumes significantly compromise the air quality of the capital and other islands. Although declared ceased as early as 2021, emissions nevertheless continued in the subsequent years (Scott *et al.*, 2023).

The remediation plan desired by the state authorities, within a broader program that includes stringent action against the spread of plastic (Schulte and Busch, 2024), should lead to the construction of an incinerator (reproducing, half a century later, the Venetian case).

Paradoxically, in a context burdened by the problem of sea-level rise – so much so that the archipelago has been included in the WTO's list of «disappearing destinations» (Basaglia *et al.*, 2021) – the landfill-island, with its maximum elevation of 15 meters above sea level compared to an island

average of 1 m, has a good chance of being the last to survive the submersion of the archipelago.

The geography of waste-islands obviously does not stop at the cases mentioned above. Also for the purpose of possible future in-depth studies, other rather well-known cases are worth noting: the very famous case of Pulau Semakau island, whose eastern side is Singapore's only landfill (Chen *et al.*, 2011; Chua, 2016), also created in this case through the expansion of the island's surface area; the Osaka Bay Phoenix Center in Osaka (Japan), yet another case of creating an offshore space for urban waste management using waste materials; and, with a different set of purposes, the large Bohai Bay landfill (China), considered the largest in the world in an island context (Martín-Antón *et al.*, 2016).

4. Great Garbage Islands and other waste-islands

To the islands built and/or designated for waste collection, two particular types of waste-islands have been added in recent times. In both cases, the term 'island' is used with a partly figurative meaning, while the 'waste' component is concrete, albeit to be carefully quantified.

The first type is that of floating plastic islands, the most famous of which is the 'Great Pacific Garbage Patch' in the North Pacific. The physical reality of this floating island, and its counterparts found mostly in the subtropical ocean convergence zones (where there are five of them), is very different from what is often imagined and depicted. Rather than a huge (1.6 million km^2) compact mass of floating plastic materials, it is in fact a vast area with high but non-uniform densities of plastics and microplastics (Howell *et al.*, 2012; González Amador and Zavala Sansón, 2012).

A second, particular declination of the waste-island is the heat island effect that affects urban areas of every size. This phenomenon can be ascribed to the varied world of waste-islands, as it is primarily produced by the concentration of emissions from fossil fuel combustion. It is a tangible physical reality that produces average temperature differences of between 1 and 3° C compared to extra-urban areas (Gaglione, 2022). It is worth noting, also in this case, the possible 'wasteological' overlap that occurs

(not only in island contexts) between urban heat islands and landfills. The latter can indeed cause an increase in the heat island effect, sometimes with significant values (Plocoste *et al.*, 2014).

The common thread linking these two types, which are only seemingly distant, is their shared origin in the uncontrolled dispersion of waste: plastic materials in one case, and materials resulting from energy consumption (for transport, heating, cooling, etc.) with their climate-altering outcomes, in the other. What associates them, and at the same time distinguishes them from the others, is their common 'unintentional' nature (which, incidentally, obviously does not make them any less concerning).

5. Conclusions

In these lines, we have sought to account for the diverse forms assumed by the recurring geographical intersection of islands and waste. It is quite clear that this is a heterogeneous relationship, starting from the different meanings ascribed to the two base terms.

However, at least two elements reconnect the different types of waste-islands. Firstly, the fact that the 'attractiveness of isolation' has made most of them an internally global space, long before tourism took on that role. The immobility that apparently characterizes them hides a pronounced mobility of people, ideas, and goods (here in the form of waste) directed from everywhere towards them, and towards their isolation, to the point of composing their social, material, and non-material essence. It is even difficult to imagine the billions of kilometres stored within the waste of Thilafushi or the Pacific Garbage Island, the infinite productive and social relations, the accumulation of value that has been amassed in them during their journeys. Yet this is a real mobility, not even too implicit. In a less explicit, but not dissimilar way, monks and nuns who voluntarily found refuge on the dozens and dozens of monastery-islands across Europe translated thoughts, ideals, construction models, and much more into them, within a framework where the island is often the final stop. The islands of political, health-sanitary, and mental confinement, the prison islands, the islands for the segregation of slaves and migrants, all hold the same content of spatial dynamics. It does not seem forced to assert that, precisely starting from

their most obvious geographical peculiarity, small waste-islands have represented the exceptional space of an imposing, albeit mostly unidirectional, covert mobility.

In a perspective that is only seemingly opposite, but upon closer inspection foundational to the one described above, lies the key dimension of the boundary – aquatic in this case – with waste on one side and the world purified of it, whatever it may be, on the other. Upon closer examination, it is a separation that mends the tear between insularity and isolation, a pair that in these cases rediscovers its unity. The island, that is, due to its physical specificity as land surrounded by water, within this particular relationship with waste, exploits and enhances the condition of isolation – which is not inherently given by nature (as already noted in Brunhes, 1910).

The option of dedicating a specific small island to waste appears as a choice repeatedly implemented even outside archipelagic contexts far from the mainland (where there are no practicable alternatives). The precise will to circumscribe the world of waste within the confines of an island exploits the condition, precisely that of being an island, which best guarantees the application of the 'out of sight, out of mind' model.

On the other hand, even that implicit competition which sees islands around the world striving to become the first island (or archipelago) without final waste production, and thus to boast the coveted 'zero waste island' label, re-proposes, in an inverse key, a by now very tight and recognizable lexical link.

In light of this, it is legitimate to ask whether, with the support of the 'figurative islands' we discussed in the previous paragraph – to which the only partially different semantic formula of the 'ecological island' (recycling centre) could be added – they unconsciously translate a new imaginary of the island, one that precisely links it to waste, broadening a repertoire of mental images, more or less conscious, that is already very extensive.

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