INSULARITY, SOVEREIGNTY AND STATEHOOD: THE REPRESENTATION OF ISLANDS ON PORTOLAN CHARTS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE TERRITORIAL STATE

by

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ABSTRACT. This article investigates the cartographic origins of the idea that the territorial state is a unified, bounded, homogeneous and naturally occurring entity, in a world of equivalent but unique entities. It is noted that this image of the territorial state closely resembles the representation of islands on sixteenth-century portolan charts, and this suggests a historical link between the Renaissance-era imagination of islands and the modern imagination of states. The article posits that the concept of territorial unity and boundedness, which appeared on portolan charts to signify islands as obstacles amidst maritime routes of movement, migrated in the late sixteenth-century to form the basis for representing the emergent concept of the territorial state. It is suggested that the conceptual and aesthetic links between these representations of islands and states has led to an ongoing dilemma for those who seek to comprehend (or cartographically represent) islands that are divided between multiple states.

Key words: history of cartography, islands, portolan charts, sovereignty, state territoriality

During my first semester as a university geography instructor, I was assigned to teach World Geography, a general education course for non-geography majors that presents a survey of the world’s regions. Assuming ignorance on the part of my students, I began the section on the British Isles with a basic orientation. The British Isles, I explained to the class, consists of two major islands (Great Britain and Ireland) and two sovereign states (the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland). The United Kingdom, I continued, consists of three political units on the island of Great Britain (England, Scotland and Wales) plus a portion of the island of Ireland, known as Northern Ireland. The remaining portion of the island of Ireland, I explained, is the Republic of Ireland.

At this point in the lecture, I was interrupted by a student who asked, with a naïveté that might inspire Gerry Adams to issue a new call to arms: ‘If there are two countries and two islands, then why doesn’t Great Britain just give Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland so that each country can have its own island?’ Suppressing a chuckle, I informed the student gently that indeed this very point had been raised by others and, in fact, the status of Northern Ireland was a matter of considerable debate (to put it mildly!).

However, after the students had shuffled out of the classroom, I was left to wonder: Was the student expressing an idealized conception of the relationship between physical and political geography that, in fact, we all share but are too sophisticated to articulate? To what extent are the forces advocating the unification of divided islands (such as Republicans in Ireland) implicitly or even explicitly building on (and reproducing) ideas that an island – as an apparently distinct and naturally bounded physical entity – is also a ‘natural’ political unit? Conversely, to what extent are those urging the creation of separate entities on islands (such as the Sri Lankan Tamils or the Turkish Cypriots) forced to contend with the iconic image of an island as a distinct territory, and hence as one that ‘naturally’ should be unified politically?

In this article, I approach these questions indirectly by investigating the genealogy of the idea that islands are naturally unified entities and that, therefore, they should be governed as single, political units (i.e. as sovereign states). To trace this genealogy, I first consider the idea of ‘naturalness’ as it has been applied to landforms (including islands), nations and territories. In particular, I focus on how these constructions of ‘naturalness’ came together to support the idea of the unified, distinct and naturally bounded (and hence naturally occurring) territorial state. In the next section, I discuss the portolan chart, a cartographic genre from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries. In the section that follows, I focus on the representation of is-
lands on portolan charts. Here I make this article’s central argument: that the representation of islands as distinct and unique, but generic (and hence equivalent) entities amidst a world of interaction foreshadowed the idea of the sovereign, territorial state that was to dominate political thinking in the centuries which followed. This argument is made, in part, by focusing on the representation of con-tranormative islands – such as the modern-day island of Ireland – that are divided among multiple sovereign states. In this historical analysis, I focus on the case of Great Britain, which, at the time, was divided between the sovereign kingdoms of England and Scotland. The penultimate section, in which I discuss the landward drift of this representation of bounded socio-territorial units, from the sixteenth century to the present, is followed by a conclusion that connects this genealogy to current problems of representation and state identification on islands that are divided into multiple sovereignties.

Islands as social constructions

At first glance, few geographic entities seem more distinct and uncontestable than islands. What, after all, could be clearer than the definition of an island as a body of land surrounded by water? Yet even this simple definition reveals a multitude of ambiguous cases. When an island is bisected by a canal, are two new islands created? When a small island is located near a large island, does the large island take on the properties of a mainland? When a canal is constructed at the base of a peninsula, is the peninsula transformed into an island? These questions surrounding the creation and designation of islands are paralleled by similar questions surrounding their destruction: When an island is connected to the mainland by a shift in sands or by artificial landfill being placed on the ocean floor, does it cease to be an island? What if the connection with the mainland is constituted by something less substantial, such as a narrow causeway, a bridge, a tunnel, or even a regular ferry service? At what point is a connection significant enough that it trumps the condition of being ‘surrounded by water’ that defined the island as an island in the first place?

As Royle notes, the debate about what precisely is an island ‘is not necessarily as arcane as it might seem’ (Royle, 2001, p. 9), given the legal status bestowed upon islands in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. None-the-less, my aim here is not to propose a definition. Rather, much as Lewis and Wigan (1997) assert with reference to the construction of the concept of the ‘continent’ (and the subsequent division of the world into continents), I argue that the ambiguity as to what precisely is an island suggests that the very existence of an ‘island’ as a distinct and generalizable category is itself a social construction. As Gillis notes in his history of islands in the Western imagination:

The distinction between islands and mainlands is... an arbitrary one, good to think with but difficult to demonstrate from physical geography itself. Islands and mainlands belong to the same geological, biological, and cultural continuum.

(Gillis, 2004, p. 118)

A suite of social properties typically is associated with island essences; in contrast with mainlands, islands are seen to be frozen in time, isolated, homogenous and pristine. However, once one accepts that the distinction between islands and mainlands is an arbitrary construction of humans rather than a condition of nature, then it becomes clear that all of these supposed island essences are also social constructions, rooted in specific historic contexts. As Gillis demonstrates, the image of islands as uniquely pure and isolated entities, inaccessible and trapped in history, was an invention of mainlanders. In pre-modern times, mainlanders (at least in Europe) used this image of the island to differentiate their own prosaic and sin-filled lands from the edenic paradises-on-earth that were believed to be just beyond reach. In more recent times, mainlanders have used the image of the isolated, backward island to differentiate themselves from the provincial and backward ‘others’ whom they wished to visit, study or colonize (see also Edmond and Smith, 2003).

Gillis acknowledges that islanders sometimes construct themselves as inhabitants of places that are ‘special’ because of their enclosure behind watery protective barriers. However, he asserts that this self-identification of ‘islandness’ is a relatively recent invention (perhaps first evoked by English males in the early nineteenth century) and that it has always been the result of encounters with mainlanders and their perspectives on the distinction between mainland, island and sea. Furthermore, island dwellers have applied their island identities selectively, alternately stressing or denying their territory’s insularity and revising the social implications of insularity, depending on the occasion.
Thus, for instance, nineteenth-century British writers emphasized their homeland’s island purity when asserting the difference between Great Britain and continental Europe, and tropes of islandness were drawn upon to support the unity of Britain’s archipelagic empire. At other times, however, insularity was recast as isolation as the British sought to distance themselves from the decadent societies of its island colonies (Ellis, 2003).

Indeed, island imaginaries played such an important role in British idealizations both of itself and its colonial ‘others’ that island designations were sometimes invented for colonial territories that, by no stretch of the imagination, met the physical definition of an island. For instance, after 300 years of exploration and colonization in the Caribbean region, the British were still sometimes referring to British Guiana as an ‘island.’ In Britain’s colonial ordering framework, the label ‘island’ (along with all of the imagery associated with colonies that bore that label) was used to characterize places that were viewed as isolated, backwards, controllable, and valuable primarily as sites for plantation production, for extraction of raw materials, or for military outposts in Britain’s ongoing geostrategic competition with other European powers. The fact that British Guiana could not be circumnavigated by ship was simply ignored by British colonialists who sought to construct this colony within the colonial ‘island’ category (Burnett, 2000).

This discussion reveals that physical geographic formations – seemingly the most unassailable of geographic classifications – are in fact socially variable. Hence they are not based on strictly ‘natural’ divisions or categories. None-the-less, despite the socially variable character of these categories, the seemingly natural character of physical geographic formations has been used to lend an aura of timelessness and ‘naturalness’ to institutions that are clearly social creations, such as nations and states. By equating social institutions with (seemingly natural) physical territories, nations and states appear as organically occurring, transhistorical units, defined by their unchanging, ‘natural’ boundaries. As Agnew and Corbridge (1995) note, this conflation of social processes (which continually cross and construct boundaries) with territories themselves (which, although socially constructed, appear to be natural) frequently leads social analysts into a ‘territorial trap.’ When one falls into the ‘territorial trap,’ the seemingly fixed and natural boundaries of territory are applied unquestioningly to the historically contingent (and always imperfect) boundaries of social units.

Numerous scholars of European political history have noted that this association of a state (a social unit) with a bounded swathe of territory (a physical unit) is a relatively recent invention. Prior to the late sixteenth century, the scope of a European sovereign’s power was defined by the people that (s)he ruled (perhaps through complex hierarchies of fealty and personal property), and there was little imperative to consolidate one’s power over a contiguous swathe of land. It was only in the sixteenth century that an equation began to be made between, on the one hand, the domain under the control of a sovereign (i.e. a state) and a bounded unit of land (i.e. a territory). Beginning in the late eighteenth century, this equation of state and territory received a third leg of support through the idea that a distinct human community (a nation) shared the same territory as the state. The supposedly organic character of a nation and its ‘roots’ in a specific territory served to validate the appropriateness of territorial boundaries, and the state then emerged as the ‘natural’ institution to rule both the territory and its people (Agnew and Corbridge, 1995; P. Anderson, 1974; Biersteker and Weber, 1996; Gottman, 1973; Jönsson et al., 2000; Ruggie, 1993; Strayer, 1970; Tilly, 1975). Put another way, the modern, or Westphalian, ideal of the state as territorially bounded, unambiguously governed by a sole authority and culturally homogeneous is a profoundly insular vision. This vision joins the legal norm of the sovereign, territorial state with the modern ideal of the unified and isolated island.

The legitimacy of the state thus came to rest on both the land and its people being perceived as distinct and internally unified. Cartographically, techniques such as readily discernible state boundary lines and monochromatic shading of state territories played a significant role in constructing this correspondence between the ideal of a naturally occurring, bounded landmass and that of a distinct, unified people who rose out of the bounded land (Akerman, 1995; B. Anderson, 1991; Biggs, 1999; Broton, 1998; Buissereit, 1992; Carter, 1987; Pickles, 2003; Sahlins, 1989; Thongchai, 1994; Vandergeist and Peluso, 1995). The cartographic construction of the territorial state was made easier when the ‘naturalness’ of such a unit could be supported by pointing to an evident physical geographic feature. Conversely, cartographers’ efforts were sometimes confounded by nearby physical features that failed to provide for simple lines of division (Gillis, 2004; Sahlins, 1989). Thus, as Gillis (2004,
p. 114) writes, islands served as paradigmatic examples of territorial states:

Nothing seemed to objectify the existence of territories better than so-called natural boundaries—rivers, seas, and mountains—so it is not surprising that islands would emerge as the most clearly marked territories of all, with island nations like Britain making the strongest claims to being internally cohesive and racially pure.

In this article, I accept Gillis’ argument that islands were paradigmatic examples of cartographically constructed state territories, but I take Gillis’ argument one step further. I also contend that the cartographic construction of islands amidst oceanic routes of movement served as a historic precedent for the cartographic construction of mainland territorial states that was to follow. Put another way, the problems inherent in representing islands on portolan charts, a specific genre of maps that pre-dated the contemporary discourse of sovereign state territoriality, led cartographers to develop a grammar for representing islands. This grammar subsequently provided the grammar for representing the mainland territorial state that, to this day, remains the dominant political-territorial unit of human society. Thus I argue that the representation of islands on portolan charts not only exemplified an emergent imagination of the territorial state, but that it shaped subsequent state imaginings.

The portolan chart

Portolan charts began to be produced in the late thirteenth century to accompany portolans, lists of directional headings and distances between communities along the coasts that were frequented by Mediterranean sailors. Originally single-sheet maps that were produced on rolled scrolls of sheepskin, these were soon joined by portolan atlases, typically containing four to six maps depicting distinct subregions of the Mediterranean and Black Seas and adjacent areas of the Atlantic, as well as one composite regional map. Evidence suggests that the portolan charts were used primarily for trans-Mediterranean voyages. Sailors travelling coastwise were more likely to use the written directions, which contained greater detail on coastal features and hazards. Indeed, it appears that the first portolan charts were made by ‘connecting the dots’ between plotted coastal settlements (Lanman, 1987).

Over time, the area covered by portolan charts and atlases extended beyond the Mediterranean and Black Seas to the Atlantic coasts of Europe and North Africa and the Baltic Sea as well. After 1500, this perspective was extended to maps of other regions and world maps as well, even though the portolan charts’ key navigational features were of limited utility outside the Mediterranean context (as discussed below). As late as 1700, many maps retained at least some characteristic portolan chart features.

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of a por-
The portolan chart is the network of rhumb lines that cross over ocean space (and in some cases continue across land space). If one wished to travel from a point on one shore to a point on the opposite shore, a sailor could simply find the rhumb line that paralleled the desired course, set the ship’s compass to that course and proceed by dead reckoning, adjusting the course as necessary as one detected the ship’s heading being influenced by winds or currents. The rhumb line is the only device presented on such maps for marine way-finding; bays, gulfs and seas are almost always unnamed, implying that the ocean is a placeless space, punctuated only by vectors of travel that end at points on land. Way-finding by rhumb line was not perfect, but when one reached the opposite coast one could consult the detailed listing of settlement names that appeared on the coastlines of the portolan chart. Then, using the more detailed guide of the written portolan, the sailor could proceed along the coast until reaching the destination.

A second key attribute of the portolan chart is that its projection fails to account for the distortions inherent in depicting a spherical globe on a flat plane. Indeed, Thowrer (1996) cites what he considers to be an absence of systematic projection as the defining characteristic of a portolan chart. This projection made the portolan chart uniquely suited to Mediterranean voyages. Because of the relatively insignificant north–south span of the Mediterranean, errors due to navigating as if longitudinal lines were parallel were relatively minor. In addition, because of the Mediterranean’s relatively short distances, its generally clear skies during the summer sailing season, and its gentle currents and insignificant tides, the risks of sailing by maintaining a single heading were minimal. By contrast, in the open seas, even if a chart was adjusted to account for the convergence of longitude lines at the poles, sailing by compass bearing would leave one vulnerable to errors caused by currents, winds, magnetic variation and the errors inherent in ‘eyeballing’ headings. Furthermore, all these errors would be compounded as the area travelled expanded and the scale of the map shrank.

Given these limits to portolan chart-based navigation, the presence of rhumb lines on non-Mediterranean maps should be viewed more as symbolic (indicating that a map was intended to be viewed in the tradition of navigation epitomized by the Mediterranean sailor) than functional. Even in the case of atlases that cover only the Mediterranean and adjacent areas of the Atlantic, it seems likely that many were intended as status symbols for land-based merchants and nobles, given the richness of their ornamentation (Campbell, 1987). The continued occurrence of rhumb lines on some world maps as late as the mid-eighteenth century (at which point they were certainly not being used for navigation) is testimony to the power of the symbolic association between early European oceanic exploration, accumulation of scientific knowledge and the continuing process of European expansion. This association is (unwittingly) affirmed by Beazley, when he writes: ‘[Portolan charts] guide and accompany the faltering steps of our race in the outward, oceanic movement of European life; in them true cartography, the map-making of the civilised world, begins’ (Beazley, 1904, p. 161). This predominance of portolan-inspired aesthetics on maps that failed to serve a navigational function presents further justification for considering portolan charts not only as navigational tools but also as signifiers of emergent conceptions of space.

A third aspect of portolan charts is the manner in which mainland coastlines are portrayed. As Carter (1999) notes in his discussion of coastlines, sailors encounter coasts not as lines but as points at the ends of routes. It is precisely this conception of the coast that one sees on portolan charts. The coastlines themselves are barely drawn in at all; rather, they appear to serve as anchors for the settlement names that line the coasts. The placement of each settlement is drawn with outstanding accuracy relative to the coastal settlements on either side of that settlement, but the coast between two named settlements (i.e. two potential nodes at the ends of routes) is either obscured or drawn as a stylized abstraction. The portolan chart’s representation of the world as one of marine routes and terrestrial destinations is also reflected in the fact that portolan charts have no fixed orientation. One simply turns the chart around, until it is facing in the same direction that one’s ship is heading, and then follows the chart until one reaches one’s destination. In effect, the chart becomes an extension of the ocean one is sailing on (or, conversely, the ocean becomes an extension of the chart); one navigates across the chart as one navigates across the sea.

A fourth aspect of portolan charts is that they are replete with political symbols. Characteristically sparse Italian charts (like that portrayed in Fig. 1) typically contain nothing except a thinly drawn coastline, names of coastal settlements, rhumb lines and flags rooted in the larger coastal cities. Iberian charts are generally more ornate, with ref-
ferences to inland topography and settlements as well as the standard coastal depictions, but these charts also typically feature ‘national’ flags rooted in coastal cities.

This prevalence of political signifiers on portolan charts is surprising. The central purpose of a portolan chart is the practical task of navigation, and even when a cartographer places portolan-style attributes on a map that is not functional for maritime way-finding it may be assumed that the cartographer is attempting to emphasize a lineage of navigation. In other words, one would expect political signifiers to be extensive on maps without portolan elements (i.e. maps devoted to making statements about power, or declaratory maps) but rare on those that seem to have their heritage in aiding navigation. However, exactly the opposite is true for maps of this era.

The usual explanation for the preponderance of coastal city flags on portolan charts is that they were placed there so as to advise sailors regarding the political affiliation of a port city that they might be about to enter. Campbell, however, questions this interpretation, noting that the positioning of flags often represented the cartographer’s wishes rather than political reality in the year when a given chart was produced: ‘Many a Christian sailor would have ended up a galley slave had he relied on his chart to distinguish friend from foe’ (Campbell, 1987, p. 401). If the placement of political signifiers was more symbolic than practical, then one is left to consider anew why these signifiers were so much more prevalent on maps bearing portolan-style notations than on other maps of the same era.

It seems to me that the most likely explanation for the abundance of political signifiers on portolan charts lies in these maps’ overall signifying function. Portolan charts – whether or not they were actually functional for navigational purposes – idealized a world where the primary space that mattered was the ocean, a space of movement. The ocean was a space characterized by vectors of movement (represented as an empty space crossed by rhumb lines). At the ends of these vectors of movement were coastal points, represented by place names (indicators of social presence) and, for larger settlements, flags (which were even clearer indicators of social presence). The world of the portolan chart was one of routes and destinations, a world very different from that of contiguous, bounded territories that could be governed and developed by exclusive sovereigns (as characterizes the modern state system). None-the-less, portolan chart-makers inadvertently played a role in developing the representational grammar that was then used to signify the modern, territorial state. This occurred as portolan chart-makers were forced to confront a category of space that was characterized neither by routes nor by destinations. These were islands.

**Islands on portolan charts**

While modern maps (and non-portolan maps from the era of the portolan chart) make little distinction in representation of mainland space and islands, the representation of islands on portolan charts is jarringly different from that of the mainland. Representations of mainland locations on portolan charts are typically heralded for their scientific accuracy, leading Beazley to praise portolan charts as ‘the first true maps [of the modern era]’ (Beazley, 1904, p. 159). Islands, however, are drawn almost as metaphysical abstractions. Their bays appear as stylized, rounded abstract shapes while their peninsulas are similarly stylized as perfectly shaped outcrops (see, for instance, the Aegean islands depicted in Fig. 1). The dramatization of islands’ coastline extends beyond shape to scale, as islands are typically made much too large, in contrast to the rigid attention to scale that characterizes points along the mainland’s coastline. This exaggeration of island space is replicated in other representational devices as well. While spaces on land are almost never shaded or coloured in, the space of an island is typically represented in a garish colour or its coast is highlighted by drawing a coastline with a thick, coloured brush. While political status on the mainland is typically denoted only through a flag rooted in a capital or port city, islands are represented as bounded political territories in which a sovereign has control over a unified space or territory. In some cases, the name of a kingdom or its coat of arms is placed across the expanse of the island’s territory, while in other cases the representation of the island itself is drawn in the colours of the ruling crown (see, for instance, Rhodes on Fig. 1).4

One’s initial impression from viewing a portolan chart is that islands must have been very important spaces: they are oversized, dramatically coloured and generally treated as unified, whole spaces, as opposed to the individually demarcated points of habitation on the mainland coast. Beazley (1904), who celebrates the accuracy of portolan charts, makes just this claim when attempting to account for the exaggeration of island size on maps that oth-
erwise are remarkable for their precise representations. He holds that the enlargement of islands could only have been a conscious distortion, made for practical purposes, because these islands were ‘vital to the coaster’ in navigation. Washburn, by contrast, argues that portolan chart-makers misrepresented islands precisely because of their lack of importance, ‘treating small islands in an arbitrary form on the assumption that the concern of the person reading or using the map would be primarily with the existence of the island rather than with its precise configuration’ (Washburn, 1989, p. 202; see also Lamman, 1987).

These contradictory interpretations lead to the obvious question: Were islands important or not in Mediterranean society (and, more specifically, were they important to the Mediterranean sailor whose traversing of ocean space was represented/enabled by these charts)? Braudel addresses this issue at two separate points in *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, and his discussion is revealing. At one point he stresses the relative insignificance of Mediterranean islands, noting that ‘the islands of Sardinia and Corsica, for example, were virtually outside the main flow of Mediterranean trade’ and that many islands had subsistence economies with almost no imports, exports or cash exchanges (Braudel, 1972, p. 382). Elsewhere, however, he writes:

> The Mediterranean islands are more numerous and above all more important than is generally supposed….Large or small, their significance lies in providing indispensable landfalls on the sea routes and affording stretches of comparatively calm water to which shipping is attracted, either between islands or between island and mainland coasts.

(Braudel, 1972, pp. 148–149)

Braudel’s analysis seems to support Washburn’s point that islands were important not as *places* (or, to be more precise within the framework of a portolan chart, as destination points at the ends of routes), but as elemental *spaces*, bounded bodies of land within the watery transit-surface of the Mediterranean. In this sense, the representation of islands on portolan charts was close to that found on medieval mappamundi, where islands were viewed as solid but conceptually mobile elements that were *part* of the ocean-sea rather than as distinct and permanently located swathes of land space that happened to be surrounded by ocean (Lestringant, 1989). As Casey writes, islands are represented on portolan charts as ‘abstract but not literally abstracted shapes’ (Casey, 2002, p. 177).

Like the image of an island on a mappamundi, a representation of an island on a portolan chart is meant to be suggestive of an element-in-time rather than either a photograph-like image of the island or a mathematical statement regarding its coordinates in a sea of other islands.

This island imagery attains its ultimate expression in the isolario. These ‘coffee table books of the Aegean islands’ (Turner, 1989, p. 209), published primarily in Italy in the fifteenth century, present highly stylized pictorial maps of the islands, with one island per page and with no attention to scale or any reference to relative location. Islands exist solely as elemental spaces, bounded territories that through their very presence resist the construction of the ocean as a placeless space characterized only by vectors of movement.

To conclude this discussion of islands on portolan charts, it appears that islands were represented as elementally distinct, naturally bounded entities located amidst a functionally designated space of movement, but they were not represented as functional to that space’s vectors of movement. Islands were spaces encountered through movement but they were also perceived of as antithetical to the processes of maritime movement that were foregrounded on (and enabled by) portolan charts. Although represented (or, perhaps, overrepresented) on portolan charts, islands were ‘off the grid’ (or, more literally, off the system of rhumb lines with their destination points and spaces of movement). Therefore, portolan chart-makers represented islands as natural territories, unified in their elemental nature as bounded *spaces*, in contrast to the mainland coastline which was an assemblage of *places* and in contrast to the ocean which was an assemblage of *routes*. Like the islands on the pages of the isolarii, these islands were each depicted as generic representatives of an abnormal ideal-type. Each island was equivalent, yet unique. Designation of islands as a conceptual category was achieved through the construction of a characteristic aesthetic, such as caricatured coastlines and exaggerated size. At the same time, uniqueness was represented through territorial signification of national identity. Thus, a distinctive representation emerged for islands on portolan charts; islands were conceived of as equivalent but individually unique, organically occurring, bounded spaces that exhibited temporal stability, territorial indivisibili-
ty and socio-political homogeneity amidst a world of interaction and movement. This conception of the island foreshadowed the almost identical conception of the sovereign, territorial state that was to be applied to the mainland in the centuries which followed.

From insularity to sovereignty

Even as they developed a grammar for representing islands as bounded, homogeneous entities, cartographers were faced with a challenge when portraying Great Britain. On the one hand, Great Britain was an island and thus it normally would be represented as a unified political space. On the other hand, Great Britain was divided into two sovereignities (England and Scotland). Cartographers could have chosen to represent Great Britain as if it were mainland space, drawing the island’s borders in the usual, faint, mainland coastline hue and limiting political signifiers to flags rooted in urban centres. Few, however, chose this option. Instead, in the sixteenth century, many portolan chart-makers ‘solved’ this dilemma of one island being split between two sovereigns by simply dividing Great Britain into two islands (see Fig. 2). The specific technique of representation varies from chart to chart, but typically on these portolan charts the two islands of Great Britain are each represented in standard portolan chart island form, with England’s borders shaded in one colour (and with a large English seal and the word ‘England’ or ‘Anglia’ covering its area) and, across a narrow strait, Scotland (or ‘Scotia’) represented in a similar way. Shirley attributes this ‘widespread misconception’ that England and Scotland were two separate islands to cartographic ignorance (Shirley, 2001, p. 47), but this seems unlikely given that already in the early fourteenth century representations of Great Britain were drawn with a high level of accuracy on some portolan charts, and given that it would be extremely important for sailors to know if there were a ‘short-cut’ through the centre of the British Isles (Campbell, 1987). Andrews (1925–1926) offers the more convincing explanation that a stylized depiction on fourteenth century portolan charts, where the border was frequently portrayed as a mountain out of which two rivers flowed, had by the sixteenth century evolved into what one might call ‘Hadrian’s Canal.’ This interpretation – that the division of Great Britain into two islands had less to do with ignorance than with the specific embedded aesthetics and meanings of the portolan chart – is supported further when one views two world maps created by Laurent Fries in 1522 (both of which were appended to an edition of Ptolemy’s Geography). One map, whose rhumb lines are presumably intended to imply a connection with the portolan chart genre, shows Great Britain as two, abstractly shaped islands. The other map, with no rhumb lines, presents a unified Great Britain with a relatively accurate shape (Figs 3 and 4).
The Fries maps demonstrate that the division of Great Britain into two islands was not due to ignorance. Rather, the association of ‘islandness’ with territorial unity was apparently so strong within the medium of portolan charts that it ‘made sense’ to the chart-maker to perpetuate this misrepresentation. It should be stressed that this ‘problem’ (and its ‘solution’) was particular to portolan charts. Even during the sixteenth century, when two-island representations of Britain were the norm on portolan charts, it was rare for other maps to divide Britain into two islands. For instance, a review of sixty-one printed world maps from the period between 1500 and 1580, the height of the era when Britain was represented as two islands on portolan charts, reveals only six instances where Britain was unambiguously divided into two islands. Furthermore, of these six, four (one of which is the map by Laurent Fries that appears in Fig. 3) contain rhumb lines, indicating perhaps a conscious attempt to mimic the aesthetic of the portolan chart. In addition, a number of other maps from the era appear to be attempting to represent a middle ground between the two-island and one-island images of Britain. On these maps, a distinct channel is drawn between the two islands but it fails to go all the way from one coast to the other, or, in other cases, there is a narrow isthmus that bisects the channel and joins the two would-be islands.

This analysis suggests that on non-portolan
maps there was no implication that islands were distinct territories, and thus there was no need to find a solution to the ‘problem’ of one island divided into two states. It was only on portolan charts, which were maps of movement, that islands, as distinct spaces that stood out from the maritime routes of movement, emerged as a distinct category of territory, characterized by an idealized homogeneity and unity. Hence, it was only on portolan charts that cartographers were faced with the split-island dilemma, and it was only on portolan charts that cartographers were left to ‘solve’ this dilemma through the creative (if, to the modern viewer, counterintuitive) solution of depicting Great Britain as two islands.

Between the late sixteenth century and mid-seventeenth century, the idea that states were naturally bounded political-territorial units, an early feature of islands on portolan charts, became the norm for organizing mainland society. In the process, the mapping of movement receded into the background on popular maps, while the territorial states that were conceived of as the building blocks of modern world society moved to the foreground. Cartographers seeking to depict territorial states as equivalent, unified and unique entities adopted some of the techniques that they had already used on portolan charts for constructing similar depictions of islands. State boundary lines on eighteenth-century printed maps were typically indicated by faint, dotted lines, which were then frequently coloured by hand, producing lines which were clearly distinct from those that signified rivers, mountains or lower level administrative divisions. Thus, cartographers of the era produced monochromatic, bounded units that looked remarkably like islands on portolan charts. Often this shading of state boundary lines was accompanied by monochromatic shading of the interior, producing the representation of state territory that prevails to this day on contemporary world maps.

As with the coastlines of islands on portolan charts, the evident standardization of these lines indicated that the territories enclosed by these lines were all of a similar (and fundamental) type, while the selection of a different colour for each unit’s boundary lines indicated uniqueness. Although some maps still retained rhumb lines to indicate the significance of movement and/or the continuation of the spirit of exploration and commerce that had been embodied in the portolan chart, the ideal of the world as consisting of routes of marine movement (with mainland destination points and outlier island spaces) was beginning to be overtaken by an ideal of the world as a space of bounded territories on land. A review of 119 printed world maps produced between 1581 and 1650 reveals that twenty-eight maps, almost 25% of the maps from this era, contained rhumb lines. However, on none of these maps (nor on any of the ninety-one maps without rhumb lines that were reviewed), was Britain divided into two islands. On fourteen of the 119 maps, however (none of which had rhumb lines), there was a line that could be construed as a territorial boundary line between England and Scotland (but that did not appear to be a channel dividing Britain into two islands).8 Significantly, this is exactly when, according to Akerman (1995), state boundary lines began to appear regularly in atlases. Indeed, from 1650 onwards, the majority of printed world maps contained at least some state boundary lines on the mainland.9 By 1650, the concept of territorial boundedness had freed itself from its identification with islands and its iconographic role as a foil to maritime routes of movement. Instead, it had taken on a new form in the concept of the territorial state, which was coming into its own as a fundamental organizing principle for human society.

As Carter (1987, 1999) notes, the era of European expansion was characterized by a project of drawing coastlines around the world. Lines were constructed between points so as to signify firm separations between elemental land space (the space that could be enclosed, invested in and developed within the boundaries of sovereign states) and ocean space (the unenclosable, unmappable space in between). Similar lines were drawn on the mainland to demonstrate distinctions between the ‘insides’ of states (their territory) and their ‘outsides’ (the anarchic environment across which states interacted). I have suggested here that these lines had their origins in the representation of islands on portolan charts. On portolan charts, the purpose of these coastlines was to divide the bounded and therefore unimportant islands from the all-important maritime space of routes. When these coastlines migrated to the mainland, they underwent a transformation. Now, rather than separating the enclosed space (the island) from the external environment that mattered (the ocean), the purpose of coastlines was to separate the controllable and developable internal space of the state from the unimportant outside that was beyond the sovereign’s control, whether this ‘outside’ lay in the non-territory of the ocean or the territory of another state. The construction of terrestrial territories as bounded entities, contained by lines and hence ame-
nable to control, was soon complemented by the drawing of internal divisions, which further facilitated the control and organization of these quintessentially social territories (Rubenstein, 2001). Thus, the drawing of lines, which began with the drawing of coastlines around islands and migrated to the coastlines of the mainland, eventually led to the further drawing of lines that facilitated and characterized the internal territorial organization projects of the era of development.

Conclusion
In summary, although portolan charts were intended neither to map islands nor political territories, their mapping of islands, as organic socio-physical units within oceans of movement, inadvertently established a grammar for the imagining and mapping of the territorial state that was to emerge in later years. Through the drawing of abstract coastlines, whose purpose was to divide the spaces that mattered (the ocean) from those with little relevance for the ocean voyager (islands), portolan charts contributed to the idea that the world consisted of unique but equivalent units, with distinct insides and outsides. Thus, the first representation-al signs of the sovereign territorial state – as a bounded, unified and homogeneous unit existing amidst a world of equivalent units – emerged on the islands of portolan charts. In later map-making, as cartographers shifted from depicting movement across the seas to depicting stable territories on land, the grammar that had been used to depict islands was adopted to depict a world of stable, bounded, equivalent, land-based societies characterized by exclusive sovereignty and control of space. Thus solid, coloured boundary lines, drawn on portolan charts to distinguish ‘inside’ space (the space of the ocean, where the routes of movement that were the subject of portolan charts were found) from ‘outside’ space (the space of islands, which were relatively insignificant except as obstacles) were transformed to divide the ‘insides’ of states from their ‘outsides’. States came to be depicted as examples of a category, with each state defined by solid, definite boundaries, like islands.

While modern concepts of statehood continue to rely on making parallels with islands that are idealized as isolated and homogeneous, the relationship between states and islands today has its own contradictions. On the one hand, the image of the island, with its readily apparent heritage in naturally occurring physical differentiation from its environment, remains the paradigmatic exemplar of the qualities that are usually associated with states. On the other hand, the modern state claims a super-organic quality that transcends empirical verification; a state’s boundaries are represented as being over-determined by a host of ‘differences’ between itself and its neighbours, and these cannot be reduced to one distinction so simple or physically apparent as that between land and sea.

Islands are thus represented both as paradigmatic of the state ideal and as simplistic pre-state formations that the modern state has moved beyond. Hence, the multi-state island (like modern-day Ireland) presents a crisis of representation not unlike that presented by seventeenth-century Great Britain. On the one hand, according to the post-island territorial logic of the state, territory on an island is no different from territory on the mainland, since state territorial boundary lines can be drawn anywhere, wherever a ‘natural’ division between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ can be asserted. On the other hand, the island remains the paradigmatic example of this division, and thus the drawing of a non-evident boundary line across a ‘naturally’ bounded unit (like the boundary line between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland) appears as an insult to the idea of territorial holism.

Multi-state islands pose additional problems because both the ideal of the homogeneous, isolated, territorial state and that of the homogeneous, isolated island are, in fact, unachievable. Both islands and states are constructed through ongoing processes of interaction or, to use Deleuze and Guattari’s (1988) term, ‘reterritorialization’. Yet the unattainable ideal of the state as an insular unit gives its paradigmatic spatial form (the island) even more iconic value. The contradiction between the reality of the state (as a porous unit) and the imagination of the island (as an isolated and ‘pure’ unit) becomes particularly apparent in the case of islands that are divided among more than one state.

Confronted with this contradiction, some have misrepresented islands as divided landforms. Others have fought nationalist struggles for island reunification. And still others, like my World Geography student, have appealed to an ahistorical spatial logic and simply requested that the offending (and unnamed) party who disrupted the natural order of geographic neatness make things right by restoring the one-island–one-state rule. None of these ‘solutions’ is adequate, however, because the ‘problem’ itself is non-existent. Nationalism, of course, is very much real and (arguably) builds...
upon genuine grievances. However, nationalist claims for island unification that appeal to the 'natural' condition of island–state unity point to a non-existent predicament. Since the 'problem' of lack of correspondence between the boundaries of an island and the boundaries of a state is itself based on idealized characteristics of both islands and states, there is no 'problem' to be 'solved'. The challenge is neither one faced by statespersons who need to 'make things right' nor by cartographers who need to find new ways of representing social division amidst physical unity. Rather, the challenge is faced by readers of maps who need to accept that neither the boundaries between island and sea nor those between state and state represent 'natural' social orderings.

Notes
1. This paper is based on research funded by the American Geographical Society Collection at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the Newberry Library, the Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library, and the History of Cartography Project at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I am grateful for their support, and for the comments and support of my colleagues at the Eighth Biennial Meeting of the International Small Islands Studies Association, where an earlier version of this paper was presented.

2. Although Beazley's actual intent was to demonstrate that portolan charts were 'the first true maps' because they eschewed metaphysical symbolism in favour of the scientific presentation of facts gathered through direct observation, his language unintentionally reveals the powerful symbolism underlying this enterprise.

3. Casey (2002) observes that coastlines are prominently displayed on portolan charts, but this is not entirely correct. On small-scale maps, such as those covering the entire Mediterranean, the lines separating the ocean from the mainland typically are not drawn at all or are drawn very faintly. Only rarely are mainland coastlines coloured on these small-scale maps, despite the prevalence of colouration for highlighting other aspects of portolan charts. For mainland coastlines on large scale maps (and for island coastlines on all maps, as is discussed elsewhere in this article), however, Casey's description holds true. In any event, whether obscured or stylized, coastlines are portrayed on portolan charts not as actual physical formations but as cartographic conventions that join actually encountered points.

4. On many portolan charts, Mallorca is also depicted in its ruler's royal colours. See, for instance, the representations of Rhodes and Mallorca on Petrus Roselli's chart at http://bell.lib.umn.edu/map/PORTO/ROS/medit.html.

5. The English and Scottish crowns unified in 1603, but legislative union did not occur until 1707, in the waning days of the portolan chart era.

6. This analysis is based on a review of the 126 entries for this time period in Shirley's (2001) cartobibliography of printed world maps. Of these 126 entries, only sixty-one were analysed. The other sixty-five were disqualified either because Shirley failed to produce a reproduction of the entire map, or the map contained no names or other political signifiers for Great Britain or any of its constituent parts, or Great Britain was absent or obscured on the map. In addition, a small number of maps whose primary purpose was to reproduce a historic map type, demonstrate a historic worldview, depict a biblical or fantastic view of the world or map the physical geography of the oceans were also disqualified.

7. The four maps with rhumb lines and a two-island representation are maps number 42 (1516), 48 (1522), 56 (1525) and 81 (1544) in Shirley's (2001) dataset, and the two with a two-island representation but no rhumb lines are maps number 62 (1530) and 69 (1534). Four maps that approximate but do not quite achieve a two-island representation are maps number 50 (1522), 62 (1530), 107 (1561) and 114 (1564). None of these maps contains rhumb lines.

8. As with the representation of the maps produced between 1500 and 1580, the set of 119 maps from between 1581 and 1650 excludes Shirley's entries that do not meet the criteria detailed in n. 6.

9. This is based on a further analysis of the Shirley dataset.

References
INSULARITY, SOVEREIGNTY AND STATEHOOD