Smallness and Islandness: Whither the Twain Shall Meet

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Abstract

Using a global analytic framework, this paper reviews the concept of islandness and its associated concept of smallness, using the islands of Germany as the point of departure. It proposes experiential and conceptual definitions of what is a small island and contrasts these with more rationalist and materialist approaches. It also appeals for a deeper understanding of the role of the sea and of transportation networks in island life.

Introduction

To the German public, a national conversation about islands need not grapple with matters of size. The largest German island is Rügen, in the Baltic Sea, with a year-round population of seventy thousand. Part of the state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, it has a land area of a mere 926 square kilometres. Connected as it is by road and rail with the mainland hanseatic city of Stralsund via a bridge and causeway, even its enduring "islandness" is somewhat in doubt. But if we turn our sights across the North Sea to the United Kingdom, a sharper and keener ambivalence presents itself. The United Kingdom, a sovereign nation currently made up of four "countries" – England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – is composed of a sprawling, one-thousand-plus-island archipelago, of which the island of Britain – also known as Great Britain – is its largest physical component.

Britain is the largest island in Europe and the ninth-largest non-continental island in the world. For almost a thousand years, Britain has successfully resisted invasions, thanks to its island status and its formidable navy. Bearing a resident population of just over sixty million people, Britain is the third-most populated island in the world, after Java (Indonesia) and Honshu (Japan), each with over one hundred million residents. Is Britain, then, a small or large island? Above all, is it an island?

The less obvious approach

I wish to develop this chapter in the less obvious way. A strictly physical, geographic approach would seem to be the natural way to go. It is easy to propose various seemingly absolute measures of size: land area, population, gross national product and (increasingly of late) the country's exclusive economic zone. On all these counts, Britain would score well above

E.g., Wilson, Francesca M. (ed.): Strange Island: Britain through Foreign Eyes, 1395–1940. London: Longmans 1955.

average; whereas Rügen, along with all the other islands in Germany, would score well below average. Population seems to be the preferred statistic. In that case, should one line up all the world's states and/or territories in ascending order today, starting with Vatican City/the Holy See (the world's smallest country by population) or Pitcairn (the world's smallest self-governing territory by population), and ending with the People's Republic of China (the world's most populous state), then the median population count would be around 5.5 million (think Finland and Kyrgyzstan).² Any state above that median figure could be considered large, and any below could be considered small, but the threshold will always be arbitrary. The London-based Commonwealth Secretariat, which advances the interests of "small states" - most of which are islands - on the world stage, uses a tally of 1.5 million population as a ceiling, although "the Commonwealth also includes some larger member countries which share many of the characteristics of small states [...]: Botswana, Jamaica, Gambia, Lesotho, Namibia and Papua New Guinea"3. Such quantifiable parameters look scientific, but their numerical nature is cheap camouflage for their fickle and malleable nature.

The United Nations-supported Small Island Developing States (SIDS), the world's best known small state lobby, includes members that are not small (Cuba, with a population of 12 million; and Papua New Guinea, with a sub-continental land mass, and a population of close to 7.2 million); not developing (Singapore); not states (Montserrat, Puerto Rico); and not even islands (Guinea-Bissau, Suriname). The relativity of the figures is also self-evident when one looks back in time and realises how the definition of small states has changed: almost fifty years ago, David Vital had suggested an upper population limit of 30 million. Even today, the Forum of Small States (FOSS), an informal grouping of states at the United Nations, is composed of member states which have populations of under 10 million each. Bangladesh is a qualified small state, though its

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Baldacchino, Godfrey: Meeting the Tests of Time: Small States in the 21st Century. In: Current Issues in Comparative Education 15.1 (2012), p. 16.

³ Commonwealth Secretariat: Small States: What Are Small States? URL: http://secretariat.thecommonwealth.org/Internal/180407/ (accessed 13 July 2014).

⁴ UN-SIDS: Small Island Developing States. URL: http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?menu=203 (accessed 13 July 2014).

Vital, David: The Inequality of States: A Study of the Small Power in International Relations. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1967.

O Súilleabháin, Andrea: Small States Bring Big Ideas to the United Nations. In: Global Observatory: Analysis on Global Issues, 11 June 2013. URL: http://theglobalobservatory.org/analysis/517-small-states-bring-big-ideas-to-the-un.html (accessed 15 July 2014).

population is more than 160 million; but Israel, with a population of about 8 million, is a qualified large state. Indeed, such fundamental disagreement over what constitutes a "small state" may have provided a welcome conceptual flexibility to this field of inquiry; perhaps more than one definition of the small state does and should exist.

So: I will trade one rather capricious approach to determining the nature of places qua islands, and of people qua islanders, for another.

I would argue that being a small island is a function of conceptualisation; it is the result of a psycho-social and political assessment which aligns the island with a marginal or peripheral position with respect to a metropolis: a mainland, a continental power, but possibly also another, but larger, richer or stronger island. In this dynamic tension of coreperiphery relations, don't be surprised to find that the same island is, and feels, small in relation to a mainland; but is, and feels, big and fulsome in relation to an even smaller entity. I remember how Malta, my birth country - with a land area of 316 square kilometres, and a population of 420,000: small by most counts - was once scheduled to play a football match against the Faroe Islands in a FIFA World Cup qualifier, at home, in 1997. The local media were enjoying this rare opportunity for the national football team to play an opponent from a much smaller country, with a population almost a tenth of Malta's. Against this "nation of fishermen" victory was assured. Alas: so much for bravado and foregone conclusions. It was not to be: Malta took the lead in the first half, but lost 1-2. The national embarrassment was palpable.

Islands, like mainlands, go through periods when particular fictions about themselves are especially current and dominant. Even mainlands have projected themselves (or have been regarded) as island spaces, although their physical features suggest otherwise: Israel must feel like an island when it is isolated during voting at the United Nations⁸ Palestine looks like a fragmented archipelago.⁹ Russia feels, much as the Soviet Union had felt before it— and these two entities are not small—islanded, encircled by NATO powers and other US allies¹⁰ It is indeed quite easy

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Maass, Matthias: The Elusive Definition of the Small State. In: International Politics 46.1 (2009), p. 65–83.

E.g., Munayyer, Yousef: All Alone on Israel Island. In: Aljazeera.com, 18 September 2011. URL: http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/09/201191785718812831.html (accessed 15 July 2014).

Busac, Julien: The Palestine Archipelago. 2014. URL: http://lawrenceofcyberia.blogs.com/photos/maps/palestine-archipelago.html (accessed 15 July 2014).

E.g., Ptichkin, Sergey / Chichkin, Aleksey: Afghan Operation Leaves Russia "Encircled" by US and NATO. In: CDI Russia Weekly 190, 2002 January 25. URL: http://emperors-clothes.com/analysis/encircle.htm (accessed 15 July 2014).

(though perhaps unadvisable and deceptive) for an island jurisdiction to forget its all-embracing geography. An island consciousness often implies smallness: Consider it an appeal for international sympathy in the face of a putative aggressor. Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, the Maldives and Tuvalu have been stubbornly vociferous in reminding the world that they are *small* island states and *therefore* especially vulnerable to global warming and sealevel rise.¹¹

But a country can trade its island consciousness for alternative conceptualisations of itself; and these often imply a larger-than-life projection of the subject.

In the contemporary British psyche, much as in the respective Indonesian and Japanese conceptions of Java and Honshu, the island of Britain is not considered an island. In spite of its self-evident island geography – a piece of land surrounded by water that is larger than a rock but is not a continent, and is visible at high tide – (Great) Britain (again, like Java and Honshu) is conceptualised as a mainland; and the Channel Tunnel that has linked Britain to mainland Europe since 1994 is not really to blame. The conflation of the name of the island with the name of the country – a common mistake, since the name of the state is actually the United Kingdom, not Britain – goes a long way to show that the conceptualisation of the place is muddied and problematic.

Multiple identities

Many island assemblages¹², also referred to as "aquapelagos"¹³, habitually use the name of the largest island in their midst to signify the whole group: Åland, Australia, Chatham, Greenland, Hawai'i, Iceland, Madagascar, Madeira, Malta, Montreal, Pitcairn, Socotra, Svalbard, Tasmania and Zanzibar are some examples of this confusing, yet revealing, practice¹⁴. It is as if there were no need to distinguish between one island and the plurality of islands that compose the jurisdiction. This conflation must be seen in a historical context; particular episodes or situations would trigger a specific conceptualisation by those inhabiting a group of islands as redolent of an archipelago, an island, sometimes even a continent or an empire.

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E.g., Farbotko, Carol: "The Global Warming Clock Is Ticking So See These Places While You Can": Voyeuristic Tourism and Model Environmental Citizens on Tuvalu's Disappearing Islands. In: Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography 31.2 (2010), p. 224–238.

Deleuze, Gilles / Guattari, Felix: A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

Hayward, Philip: Aquapelagos and Aquapelagic Assemblages. In: Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures 6.1 (2012), p. 1–10.

Baldacchino, Godfrey: Editorial Introduction. In: Baldacchino, G. (ed.): Archipelago Tourism: Policies and Practices. Farnham: Ashgate 2015.

These imaginations are typically mutually exclusive, and they are contested and championed – as much as constructed and pedalled – by scholars, the media, and/or those wielding political or economic power: to partake in nation-building, to capture or propel a sentiment that holds people together and generates civic and national pride, while creating a convenient "Other".

References to Japan as *shimaguni*, a self-conscious island nation, are relatively recent; they are "premised on a mixture of political and indigenous images of territory" This is a meta-geographical process of territorialisation that equates the nation with an island physicality that naturally extends beyond the four, large "mainland" islands of Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu. Japan's control over the Senkaku islands, a few barren rocks along a disputed border, may now put it on an dangerous collision course with its power-flexing and irredentist neighbour, China. The relative process of territorialisms of the process of territorialisms.

For multi-island units, offshore islands can thus be a "source of grave insecurity" and "extreme vulnerability" ¹⁸. This is also the case for Australia, whose self-identification as a (small) island continent and island nation is facilitated by being the world's only continent in which resides, since 1901, only one sovereign state. ¹⁹ A tough populist policy stance against would-be asylum seekers arriving by boat – a policy that has included an explicit excision of national space, deemed as "non-Australia" ²⁰ – has consolidated an imaginary that reinforces a neo-imperial nationalist persona,

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Suwa, Juni'chiro: Shima and Aquapelagic Aassemblages. In: Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures 6.1 (2012), p. 13. Cf. also Pelletier, Philippe: Shimaguni, modernisation et territorialisation au Japon. In: Ebisu 44.1 (2010), p. 157–184.

LeBaron, Michelle / Pillay, Venashri (eds.): Conflict Across Cultures: A Unique Experience of Bridging Differences. Boston: Intercultural Press 2006.

E.g., McCormack, Gavan: Small Islands, Big Problem: Senkaku/Diaoyu and the Weight of History and Geography in China-Japan relations. In: The Asia-Pacific Journal 9.1 (2011).

URL: http://www.japanfocus.org/-Gavan-McCormack/3464 (accessed 13 July 2014).

McMahon, Elizabeth: The Gilded Cage: From Utopia to Monad in Australia's Island Imaginary. In: R. Edmond / Smith, V. (eds.): Islands in History and Representation. London: Routledge 2003, p. 194.

Baldacchino, Godfrey: Only Ten: Islands as Uncomfortable Fragmented Polities. In: Baldacchino, G. (ed.): The Political Economy of Divided Islands: Unified Geographies, Multiple Polities. New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2013, p. 1–17; McMahon, Elizabeth: Australia, the Island Continent: How Contradictory Geography Shapes the National Imaginary. In: Space and Culture 13.2 (2010), p. 178–187.

²⁰ Baldacchino, Godfrey: Island Enclaves: Offshoring Strategies, Creative Governance, and Subnational Island Jurisdictions. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010, p. 37–38.

which protects its territory from undesirable and suspicious invaders²¹. This political rendition is also a reminder that the nation is archipelagic; composed, according to the 2014 reckoning of Geoscience Australia, of no less than 8,222 islands, islets and rocky outcrops.

Turning to Indonesia – a name that means "Indian islands" – one is confronted by a robust nation-building programme that is loath to acknowledge island specificities. The world's most populous archipelago, and possessing considerable ethnic diversity, Indonesia fought a bitter war of independence with its former Dutch colonial masters and in its wake has consolidated state power and pursued a centralist policy – all the more so with secessionist movements that have called into question the country's national boundaries, themselves a legacy of the Dutch colonial era²². One of these movements has already successfully wrested sovereignty from Indonesia's former territorial space: East Timor²³; and elsewhere similar hopes are high: think Aceh, the Moluccas and Irian Jaya²⁴. Do not expect much political recognition of archipelagicity here, although the discourse of official tourism generously promotes not only natural variety but also a "tamed cultural diversity"²⁵.

But let us return to Britain, one of various islands that calls itself "great" – historically, to distinguish itself from Brittany, now part of France, but for many years an integral component of the same Norman empire²⁶. References to the British as "an island race" were famously made by UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher, appealing to an elusive consanguinity to justify the deployment of the British military to expel the Argentine forces that had invaded the Falkland Islands in 1982.²⁷ Britain

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Perera, Suvendrini: Australia and the Insular Imagination: Beaches, Borders, Boats and Bodies. New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2009.

Webster, David: From Sabang to Merauke: Nationalist Secession Movements in Indonesia. In: Asia Pacific Viewpoint 48.1 (2007), p. 85–98.

²³ Soares, Anthony: Timor. In: Baldacchino (ed.): Political Economy, p. 79–101.

Aspinall, Edward / Berger, Mark T.: The Break-Up of Indonesia? Nationalisms after Decolonisation and the Limits of the Nation-State in Post-Cold War Southeast Asia. In: Third World Quarterly 22.6 (2001), p. 1003–1024. May, Ron et al.: New Guinea. In: Baldacchino (ed.): Political Economy, p. 34–57. Tanasaldy, Taufiq: Borneo. In: Baldacchino (ed.), Political Economy, p. 58–78.

E.g., Adams, Kathleen M.: Touting Touristic "Primadonnas": Tourism, Ethnicity, and National Integration in Sulawesi, Indonesia. In: Picard, Michel / Wood, Robert E. (eds.): Tourism, Ethnicity, and the State in Asian and Pacific Societies. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 1997, p. 155–180.

E.g., Tourisme Bretagne: Links between Brittany and Great Britain. URL: http://www.brittanytourism.com/about-brittany/brittany-through-the-ages/links-between-brittany-great-britain (accessed 13 July 2014).

²⁷ Dodds, Klaus: Pink Ice: Britain and the South Atlantic Empire. London: I. B. Tauris 2002; Law, Alex: Of Navies and Navels: Britain as a Mental Island. In: Geografiska Annaler 87B.4 (2005), p. 267–277.

shares only with Crete, Japan, Tonga and Venice the historical claim to have controlled an empire with an island heart. References to Britain-asisland and associated metaphors – being a "container", or having "porous borders" – continue to bedevil current (especially right-wing) political discourse, particularly in relation to the allegedly invading waves of immigrants to the UK, as well as the UK's fraught relations with the European Union²⁸; UK Prime Minister David Cameron has indeed pledged a referendum on the latter issue, glaringly identifying an island-mainland rift, should his Conservative Party win the 2015 general election²⁹. Strangely enough, the only two jurisdictions that have left the European Union are both islands: Greenland in 1985³⁰ and St Barthélemy³¹. Secession, and political fission, is very much an island matter.³²

But there is one other, now globally famous referendum, which took place in September 2014 and put into question the very fate of the United Kingdom. After just over three hundred years, the Act of Union between Scotland and England (1707) was nearly unravelled, with Scotland going to the polls in an overwhelmingly large turnout to decide whether it would become (again) an independent country. Had the independence referendum passed, the island of Britain would have become the world's eleventh inhabited island divided between at least two countries.³³ The prospect of independence (an issue which may well re-emerge in the near future) may offer Scots, and Britons, an opportunity to shift their self-image from that of insular islanders to co-inhabitants of an Atlantic archi-

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²⁸ Charteris-Black, Jonathan: Britain as a Container: Immigration Metaphors in the 2005 Election Campaign. In: Discourse & Society 17.5 (2006), p. 563–581; Rumford, Chris: Theorizing Borders. In: European Journal of Social Theory 9.2 (2006), p. 155–169.

Copsey, Nathaniel / Haughton, Tim: Farewell Britannia? "Issue Capture" and the Politics of David Cameron's 2013 EU Referendum Pledge. In: JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies (2014).

URL: http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/%28ISSN%291468-5965/earlyview?start=1&resultsPerPage=20 (accessed 15 July 2014).

Gad, Ulrik P.: Greenland: A Post-Danish Sovereign Nation State in the Making. In: Cooperation and Conflict 49.1 (2014), p. 98–118.

³¹ Council of the EU: Draft European Council Decision on Amendment of the European Status of the Island of Saint-Barthélemy. 2010.
URL: http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/10/st15/st15224.en10.pdf (accessed 15 July 2014).

Fazal, Tanisha / Griffiths, Ryan: State of One's Own: The Rise of Secession since World War II. In: Brown Journal of World Affairs 15.1 (2008), p. 198–210.

Burnett, Ray: Britain: The Fractured Island. In Baldacchino (ed.): Political Economy, p. 228–245; Cartrite, Britt: The Impact of the Scottish Independence Referendum on Ethno-Regionalist Movements in the British Isles. In: Commonwealth & Comparative Politics 50.4 (2012), p. 512–534.

pelago.³⁴ Meanwhile, Scotland is itself composed of some 800 islands, and some of these would not have looked forward to seeing their capital city shift from London to Edinburgh: If Scotland has the right to contemplate secession, then what about the islands of Shetland, Orkney and the Western Isles?³⁵ A periphery, it seems, can double as the unloved metropole to its own outlying peripheries.

But then, Britain itself has been described dismissively as just a "small island that no one listens to"³⁶, by no less than a top Russian official at a G20 meeting in St Petersburg. In that case, should it not be occupied by just one nation, and governed as just one state? It remains difficult to justify more than one government "co-habiting" the same, single island: Note historical tensions in places such as Cyprus³⁷, Hispaniola³⁸, Ireland³⁹ and Timor⁴⁰, all of which have experienced movements that have sought to get the single island maintained as, or transformed into, a single, unitary state.

Returning to the island

To conclude, I wish to propose an additional (and just as fickle) definition of an island. It is a community whose life depends totally on the sea. It is not just a piece of land surrounded by water that is larger than a rock but is not a continent, and is visible at high tide; it is a piece of land that is constructed – economically, environmentally, socially, politically, culturally – by the water that surrounds it. When an island is small enough to feel this all-embracing aquatic destiny, then it really comes into its own as an "island world".

In such a scenario, we first need to come to better terms with the sea and what it portends. The multiple powers, impacts and resources of the aquatic medium – which is boundary, highway, protection, pleasure playground, food source, mineral resource, and more, rolled into one – needs

http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/10290243/Russia-mocks-Britain-the-little-island.html (accessed 13 July 2014).

Morris, Michael: From Island Nation to Atlantic Archipelago: Re-Assessing Scotland, Britain and Atlantic Slavery. In: Our Kingdom, 25 June 2014. URL:

Scottish Parliament: PE01516: Referenda for Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles. Lodged: 29 April 2014.

 $[\]label{lem:url:likelihood} \begin{tabular}{ll} URL: & http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/GettingInvolved/Petitions/islandgroups (accessed 13 July 2014). \end{tabular}$

³⁶ Kirkup, James: Russia Mocks Britain, the Little Island. In: The Telegraph, 5 September 2013.

URL:

³⁷ Sözen, Ahmet: Cyprus. In: Baldacchino (ed.): Political Economy, p. 102–118.

Redon, Marie: Hispaniola. In: Baldacchino (ed.): Political Economy, p. 157–175.

Royle, Stephen A.: Ireland. In: Baldacchino (ed.): Political Economy, p. 119–136.

⁴⁰ Soares, Timor.

to be better understood and respected.⁴¹ As a land-based, and land-biased, albeit coastal species on Planet Ocean⁴², we humans still need to get our feet wet⁴³ in order to come to better and fuller terms with the "everywhere-swirling-churning ocean"⁴⁴. Our past reveals it; our present neglects it; and our future may depend on it.

Second, we need to fathom the considerable dependence of islands on their on/off-island transport infrastructure. In simpler language, an island is an island – and therefore a small island, by definition – if its tempo depends on the comings and goings of its daily ferry run, or its weekly flight. The natural rhythms of island life consist of a series of leavings and arrivals⁴⁵; or of "tidalectics", in the evocative words of Barbadian poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite⁴⁶. For a small island community, nothing is probably more substantial, and emotional, than the human and material cargo anticipated, or feared, on/off the airport runway, or on/off the seaport quay.

I will return where I started, with Rügen. Being connected to the German mainland via a causeway since 1935 (replacing ferry shuttles), and then a road bridge since 2007, the island no longer qualifies as an island according to the European Union definition, which disqualifies all spaces that have "fixed links" to mainlands.⁴⁷ Its future is now sealed to that of the mainland to which it is joined. It is no longer an island world, where notions of scale and size are problematic: It is now a decidedly small peninsula stuck to the German/European land mass. Germany's second larg-

⁴¹ Hay, Peter R.: What the Sea Portends: A Reconsideration of Contested Island Tropes. In: Island Studies Journal 8.2 (2013), p. 209–232.

⁴² Dolman, Anthony J.: Book Review. In: Development and Change 19.2 (1988), p. 173–176; Gillis, John R.: The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2012.

⁴³ Baldacchino, Godfrey: Getting Wet. In: Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures 6.1 (2012), p. 22–26.

⁴⁴ Holloway, Greg: Moments of Probable Seas: Statistical Dynamics of Planet Ocean. In: Physica D: Nonlinear Phenomena 133.1 (1999), p. 199–214.

⁴⁵ Thomas, Suzanne: Nissopoesis: A Spatializing and Narrativizing Practice. Paper delivered at conference entitled Finding Their Place: Islands in Social Theory. Islands Commission, International Geographical Union (IGU) with the Department of Human Geography, Lund University. The Island of Ven, Sweden, August 2010.

Reckin, Anna: Tidalectic Lectures: Kamau Brathwaite's Prose/Poetry as Sound-Space. In: Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal 1.1 (2003), p. 5.

According to EUROSTAT, an island is defined as a piece of land with an area of at least 1 km², located at a distance of at least 1 km from the continent, that has a permanent resident population of at least 50 people, has no permanent link with the continent, and does not host an EU capital. On the basis of this definition, the European Commission's DG REGIO has identified 286 EU islands. Together, they are home to almost 10 million people occupying an area of 100,000 km². Their population varies from fifty people to five million in Sicily.

est island, Usedom, is similarly compromised, connected to the mainland via at least three land crossings; moreover, it is a divided island, shared with Poland.⁴⁸ Fehmarn, Germany's third largest island, has been connected to the German mainland by a road and rail bridge since 1963. Sylt, island #4, has been connected to the mainland by the Hindenburg causeway since 1927. Only when we come to Föhr, island #5, with a land area of 83 kilometres, do we come across a German island which is accessible only by ship: a proper island at last. Only with Föhr can one start to discuss the full implications of small-island living in Germany.

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⁴⁸ Jędrusik, Maciej: Usedom/Uznan. In: Baldacchino (ed.): Political Economy. p. 137–156.

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Council of the EU: Draft European Council Decision on Amendment of the European Status of the Island of Saint-Barthélemy. 2010. URL: http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/10/st15/st15224.en10.pdf (accessed 15 July 2014).

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