

RESEARCH ARTICLES

The Roundabout at the Edge of the World: Subsea Tunnels, the Sea and the Islands

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This paper is based on the thesis that there is a ‘sea change’ in the Faroe Islands (Faroes) of the twenty-first century, and that this multi-layered transformation in more than a symbolic understanding is brought about by the sea. Submarine space is being appropriated in futuristic infrastructure projects continentalising the Nordic Atlantic society. The relationship between the world above and the world below the sea is reconfigured, and the new vertical landscape gives us the opportunity to reassess images of island communities and ask the question: what is an island? The resurgence of the aquatic space in the lives of the islanders, soaking their cultural identities, is explored through the landscape of roads and tunnels in the Faroe Islands, with special focus on the subsea roundabout between the islands of Eysturoy and Streymoy. The paper argues that the tunnels not only connect previously separated islands, and centre with periphery, but also represent an avenue to a new water-land symbiosis in society. Life might be dryer than it was in the old days, but water continues to be the main source of cultural imagination, wealth, health, and futurity among island dwellers. Drawing on anthropological island studies, this paper represents an island perspective on what it means to conquer the sea-land frontier and to build a future through underground passageways.

Going underground

One of the key developments in island studies scholarship since the turn of the century has been the progressive expansion of the spatial zones considered relevant to the study of islands. Islands comprise much more than the confined territory depicted on conventional two-dimensional geographical maps. Different strands of critique of continental and colonial representations of islands emphasizing smallness, remoteness and timelessness – small dots interrupting the smooth oceanic landscape – have been at the heart of island studies since it became an established field of research (e.g., Baldacchino, 2008; Grydehøj, 2017). The first move was to give life to the ocean. It is not empty and meaningless space, monochromatic and isotropic in the atlas (Fleury, 2013, p. 1), between ‘real’ places, and it cannot be ignored when the world of islanders is being discussed and explored. Small islands

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are, seen from this aquatic perspective, often large ocean countries (Hau'ofa, 2008). The minimising narratives on islands, mirroring the 'paternalism of mainlanders' (Ma, 2020), have thus been refuted in critical explorative island studies endeavours pointing at the complex and multilayered nature of island worlds. This spatial amplification has first and foremost been horizontal, incorporating the surrounding sea into the island world. There has up to now been very limited interest in research boosting a vertical expansion of the domain of islands, inquiring what is far above and deep below the surface of the earth, even if a growing curiosity about unexplored submarine territories seems to inspire contemporary discussions about islands and islandness (Fleury, 2013).

Island studies scholarship has first and foremost examined (small-scale) land surrounded by water, to a lesser extent also its adjacent sea surface, but what lies beneath, in the underground, has rarely been studied. Humankind, Ellcock claims, has:

barely scratched the ever-shifting surface (...) we inhabit a world that is almost completely unknown and alien to us. We share the Earth's surface with the seas and vast oceans, and yet 95 per cent of their depths remain unexplored and unseen by human eyes. (Ellcock, 2023, p. 6)

In this article, I will dig deeper into the underground. I will extend the strata of island studies by including the space below the seabed that has been influenced by human activity. This vertical expansion of the compass inspires new perspectives on the sea-land frontier. The meaning of an island dissolves in this remote deepness because all continents become part of the same land beneath the oceanic seafloor. I am using futuristic interisland subsea transport tunnels as main case of a subterranean corridor penetrating the rock below the seabed in this article. This is not subterranean fiction, as in Jules Verne's science fiction novel *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1867/2020), but a study of the meaning of the sea and new subsea territory in discussions about islands, islandness, and the sea-island nexus. I am not going to discuss economic colonisation of the land beneath the sea, except as regards transport infrastructure. Because of the sea barrier, it is difficult for an island to grow, but the subterranean corridors materialise a colonisation of the underworld leading to territorial expansion. In the new Atlantic below the seafloor, people are neither situated on land nor in the sea, but does this obscure spatiality remove the barrier between islands? Drawing on scholarship from island studies, and more specifically on the concept of the aquapelago premising holistic and processual investigation of the many layers of the island universe, this article highlights the need to outline islands vertically as well as horizontally in the quest of understanding their situated islandness.

Aim and focus

My aim is to explore how the tunnels, bridging the surface and the subsurface and facilitating ‘dry’ (ferry-free) interisland transportation, influence the islandness of the people inhabiting the islands. The subsea tunnels, constructed by and for humans, are fascinating technologies adding a layer to the conventional above-and-below-the-sea mirror, but they also represent ultramodern endeavours requiring detailed knowledge about the subterranean landscape and vertical aesthetics: visualisation of the seabed – its hills and banks, its rifts and gorges, its mud and rocks – and its forces and energies in computerised models. The subsea tunnels invite us to rethink territoriality along the lines of the aquapelagic assemblage, and to introduce subterranean optics to “render visible subterranean spaces” (Hawkins, 2020, p. 225). Subsea tunnels are not only connecting previously separated islands, and centre with periphery, because they also represent an avenue to a new water-land symbiosis in society. They make place out of non-place in the newly opened and penetrable underground. Life might be dryer than it was in the old days, but water continues to be the main source of cultural imagination, wealth, health, and futurity among people from small-scale island societies.

Drawing on anthropological island studies, this article represents an island perspective on what it means to conquer the sea-land frontier and to build a future on underground passageways. The article analyses the sea-land symbiosis in relation to societal change driven by futuristic transport infrastructure projects. I have structured the article in this way: I start with an introduction to theoretical concepts employed in the analyses. This is followed by a short presentation of the context – the Faroe Islands. The following part is presenting and discussing the tunnels and the roundabout under the sea. The political infrastructure projects and visions are thereafter examined and analysed in relation to the central themes of the sea-land symbiosis and role of the ocean in the lives of the Faroese today. The conclusion points at the role of the subsea tunnels, the sea and the islands in three-dimensional island studies.

Deep structures

One of the original and inspiring ideas about the land-sea continuum in island studies is to be found in concepts of aquapelago and aquapelagic assemblages. The aquapelago, comprising “an integrated land and aquatic space” (Hayward, 2012b, p. 2), is a concept developed by Hayward in the quest of expanding our understanding of the role and meaning of aquatic spaces in the lives and cultures of people living in island societies. The aquapelago is, in brief, “an assemblage of marine and land spaces of a group of islands, and their adjacent waters” (yet it can as well refer to a *single* island or even to an isolated peninsula), says Hayward (2012a, p. 5). It embraces the island universe in a holistic manner:

The air above the waters and land, the weather that occurs in it, the windblown seeds and species that are born by it and the birds that inhabit the air, sea and land are just as much part of the integrated space of the aquapelago (...) Indeed, it is the multiplicity of *submarine depths* [emphasis added], of regions of water and currents, of seafloor surfaces and their interactions with topologies of land and of aerial and weather systems, and of flows of materials between them, that produces an aquapelago. (Hayward, 2012b, pp. 2, 12, my italics)

The aquapelago is a performed entity produced when people occupy and interact with integrated land and sea spaces. It is grounded on human interaction with what Hayward calls “vibrant matter” (defined as the vitality of non-human things) of the environment in particular settings (Hayward, 2012b, p. 12). As performed entity, therefore, the aquapelago incorporates the “spatial depths of its waters” (Hayward, 2012a, p. 5). It includes underwater ‘scapes’ influenced by human activity (e.g., fisheries) in its land-ocean continuum resonating the indivisibility of society and nature (Hayward, 2012a). Aquapelagic assemblages, as particular “products of ongoing processes in actual locations,” have also been described as spaces “where landscape and personhood merge” (Suwa, 2012, p. 15), as well as spaces where – besides humans – animate (biological) and inanimate (geological) impulses activate the (aquapelagic) environment (Bremner, 2017). What we now need, says Fleury (2013), is a broader three-dimensional view of the aquapelagic assemblage.

While Hayward, as illustrated above, from the beginning pointed out that aquapelagic research should represent more than a surface model, and encouraged scholars to dive into the hidden depths of the sea, it is the surface of the sea that most people (people not working at sea) seem to be interested in. The French term *merritoire* (a portmanteau of *mer*/sea and *territoire*/territory), developed by French geographers specialised in island/sea studies, represents a contribution to aquapelagic research filling a gap of scholarship on the deep submarine space (Fleury, 2013). We need to look at the “three-dimensionality and multifunctional verticality” of the aquapelagic assemblage, says Fleury (2013, p. 2) in an article discussing the sea, the seabed and its subsurface. Fleury discusses the new interest in the deep territories subject to a colonial race among nation-states. He explains: “But the growing importance of the two lower marine levels along continental shelves, the seabed and its subsurface, represents a new factor that highlights a range of the marine issues. Akin to land in physical structure but part of the marine realm in terms of position, these levels have been the subject of various claims to ownership by states in recent decades, mainly due to the hydrocarbon resources they are likely to contain” (Fleury, 2013, p. 3) The subsurface of a body of water is indeed at the edge of the aquapelagic assemblage, hence ephemeral and difficult to define in discussions about the nature of island living.

Another important pair of theoretical concepts informing my article is the place and non-place concepts from anthropological and geographical studies of place, mobility, and transportation. As a non-place, the tunnel is a symbol of placelessness, it could be anywhere in the world and there is no difference between summer and winter, or between day and night, and nobody really feels ‘truly at home’ in the tunnel (Bauman, 2000). Like airports, shopping malls, and other emblematic non-places, the tunnel might give the tunnel-travellers a sense “and passive joy of identity loss” (Augé, 2008, p. 83). The roundabout, with its colours and arts, is creating a place out of a non-place. This is, as critics of Augé’s original definition of non-place have stressed, is what happens in most non-places: people give them meaning and transform them to non-non-places. There is, in principle, no friction in the tunnel. It represents a symbolic milestone of future imaginaries in the open-ended project of taming the untamed nature of the islands.

The Faroe Islands

The Faroe Islands (Faroes) is an island society in the northeastern part of the Atlantic, midway between Iceland and Norway, with a population of roughly 55,000 inhabitants. It is an autonomous country within the Kingdom of Denmark, which has been self-governing since 1948. The Faroe Islands were colonised by Norse Vikings in the start of the ninth century AD, but people from Ireland and Scotland are believed to have lived in the archipelago for shorter or longer periods of time since the seventh century. The Faroe Islands consists of eighteen islands, around 800 islets and skerries, and more than one hundred villages and towns. The Faroe Islands were part of the Kingdom of Norway until 1814, when the Treaty of Kiel transferred the Faroe Islands to the Kingdom of Denmark (which had been in a union with Norway since 1380). During the Second World War British troops occupied the Faroe Islands while Denmark was occupied by Nazi Germany. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Faroe Islands developed a modern welfare society with a large export-oriented fishing industry. The Faroe Islands is still very dependent on fisheries, as more than 90 percent of the export income is derived from fish products. The sea continues to play a central role in the lives of the islanders – economically, culturally, and as space for wayfaring and transportation (Gaini, 2013).

The aquatic Faroe Islands (the Faroese part of the North Atlantic) covers an area of no less than 275,000 square kilometres, a territory the size of Romania, of which only 1,399 square kilometres are dry land rising above sea level. In some areas, the depth of the sea is more than 2,000 metres, hinting the enormous volume of Faroese territorial waters. The Faroese region in the ocean is “among the most diverse in the world” (B. Hansen, 2006, p. 117). Maps of the islands reveals a snaking coastline counting almost 1,300 kilometres. Because of its geographical complexity, the Faroe Islands “come to feel like a continent” (Wylie & Margolin, 1981, p. 13).

The country's road system consists of approximately 500 kilometres of national roads (between settlements), of which 30 kilometres are tunnels. In addition to this, the Faroe Islands has 23 kilometres of subsea tunnels. In 2024, there are 22 regular and four subsea tunnels in the country. Several new tunnel projects are in progress. Seven of the 18 islands comprising the Faroe Islands are connected by road bridges and tunnels. The country has approximately 38,000 motor vehicles, of which 28,000 are passenger cars (Sosialurin, 2022). Roughly 13,000 inhabitants are under the age of eighteen, while 42,000 inhabitants are eighteen or older (Statistics Faroe Islands, 2024). There have been cars on the islands since 1922, and tunnels since 1963. Until the end of the 19th century, transport in the Faroe Islands depended on "sailing in open boats, walking and horse riding" (Bærenholdt, 2007, p. 113). Who would have believed a century ago that a roundabout located far beneath the seafloor would be constructed in the Faroe Islands? "Roads will never play a major role up here, as the sea is our country road," the politician Frederik Petersen concluded in a parliamentary debate in 1905 (Gaini & Jacobsen, 2008). He was horribly wrong. The last existing ferry routes are between islands not (yet) connected by tunnels or bridges.

The new Atlantic

Circular destinations

The most famous place below the floor of the sea in the Faroe Islands is the roundabout between the islands of Streymoy and Eysturoy. It is part of an interisland subsea tunnel system. It represents the 'capital' of the Faroese underworld with round-the-clock circulation and passage of people in motor vehicles. It has become a tourist attraction and motif of postcards and posters. What is a roundabout? Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1987) explains that it is "a place where three or more roads meet, which has a circular area in the middle round which the traffic must go" (p. 911). This is the concise definition. It is a smart solution for a safer, smoother, and more regular flow of (motorised) traffic. In large cities with broad avenues with heavy traffic, the roundabout will often be combined with a square attracting large numbers of pedestrians searching for cafes and markets besides the motorists. The modern roundabout takes much space and is more common in peri-urban and rural areas than in old city centres (Paris representing an iconic exception, because of its web of boulevards), but it can at the same time, together with the roads that it connects, be taken "as the paradigmatic infrastructure of the twenty-first century" (Dalakoglou & Harvey, 2012, p. 459). Roundabouts offer a freedom to choose direction, but they also facilitate U-turns or circular movement leading nowhere, and, therefore, expose ambivalence in car friendly societies – between collective and individual trajectories and intersections in the landscape, and between accelerated and decelerated transportation for work and leisure. Revolution

is a movement, says Virilio (1986), “but movement is not a revolution” (p. 43). You can move without changing anything but your spatial location for a limited time.

The sleepless cacophonous roundabout of big cities, which oftentimes looks more like a carousel toured by enervated drivers struggling to find a way out of than as a hub for smooth and safe circulation of motor vehicles. In Jacques Tati’s film *Playtime* (1967), the very amusing roundabout scene serves as brilliant ironic comment to the modern urban society dogma relying on an image of efficient organisation of complex realities in transit spaces with special rules and norms for behaviour and communication. In *Playtime*, the passengers of a private car cruising the heavily trafficked streets of Paris get stuck in a roundabout, orbiting the small island in the centre of the ‘carousel’ with rows of cars on the outer lanes keeping them away from the exit, and nobody really knows how to stop the absurd merry-go-round gyration of tooting cars.

The roundabout symbolises the choice of the rational and responsible driver aiming to minimise risk (it is for instance not a good place for illicit street racing) and to avoid any unexpected incident on their journey. Like a ball in a pinball game, the car is kept in motion, moving from one roundabout to the next, hence also giving the driver the sense of cruising in a much larger landscape than what is the case. Entering the roundabout, the driver savours a timeout on his joyride, situated in liminal space between two sections of an undefined journey, and a moment for the exercise of agency.

The roundabout is a non-place for transit from A to B, a place to enjoy in motion, and a structure handling increasingly intelligent cars with computerised driving functions. It is a material expression of the image of a frictionless and individualised society with a culture of automobility (Urry, 2000) relying on the car as the “avatar of mobility” (Thrift, 1996, p. 272).

Where does the circle start?

Where does the circle start? Where does it end? The circle – or wheel – echoes an idea of repetition and infinity. In his novel *The Tower at the End of the World*, the Faroese author William Heinesen (1976/2018) writes:

In the days when the Earth was not yet round, but had a beginning and an end, a splendid tower could be seen at the furthestmost edge of the world (...) On clear evenings, you could see the tower’s beautiful light shining out in the darkness over the sea, and then you could be caught by an irresistible urge to reach this shining tower rising in isolation out there towards the vast unknown areas where the world ends and begins and the spirit of God hovers over the water. (p. 1)

This shining tower, in the faraway place called the Faroe Islands, lighted the bottomless darkness of the ocean. The new roundabout is a tower on the other side of the ocean’s surface, shining in the land below the seafloor.

It is in the new Atlantic, which is below the sea, and which is magnifying the territory of the aquapelago. While the deep sea has been inhabited by natural and supernatural dwellers – water-spirits, selkies, monsters, and other protagonists of the polyvalent legends shaping folklore – as long as people have been living in the Faroe Islands, and therefore has been a place in the aquapelagic culture and imagination of the islanders, the territory below the seafloor was beyond the boundaries of the island universe (Gaini, 2022). From this perspective, it represents virgin land without meaning (non-place) and without hidden dwellers.

The news about the Eysturoy Tunnel and its subterranean roundabout, which represent the paradigm for 21st century Faroese infrastructure, crossed the globe when the ultramodern submarine construction opened a few days before Christmas in 2020. In a French article published in the *Huffington Post* (Duperron, 2020), for example, it was announced to readers from the province of Quebec (Canada) that the esteemed Louis-Hippolyte Lafontaine Bridge-Tunnel in central Montreal is nowhere near the Eysturoy Tunnel – with its underwater roundabout “that is (really) out of the ordinary” (Duperron, 2020) – when we talk about futuristic aesthetic design. It makes rival tunnels envious, says the *Huffington Post*. *Fox News* published this headline on its website: “Incredible underwater roundabout to open” (Rogers, 2020). The colourful jellyfish-shaped roundabout, which is positioned close to the geographical centre of the archipelago, is the main curiosity in international news stories about the tunnel. The roundabout, located 73 metres below the surface of a large fjord, links three two-lane tunnel sections to each other – leading to (a) the southern part of Streymoy (just outside of the capital Tórshavn) and to the (b) western and (c) eastern shores of the fjord (inlet) of Skálafjørður dividing the southern part of Eysturoy. The subsea tunnel, connecting the two largest and most populous islands in the country representing the centre of the Faroese mainland, is more than eleven kilometres long and ducking 189 metres below the surface of the sea (and almost 100 metres beneath the seabed) at its deepest point. The Eysturoy Tunnel, described as a “feast for the senses” by the website Atlas Obscura (atlasobscura.com) (which is presenting itself as a guide to the worlds hidden wonders), is indeed one of the longest subsea tunnels in the world today.

The gigantic blue jellyfish-shaped roundabout under the seabed is decorated with an 80-metres steel artwork by the prominent Faroese sculptor Tróndur Patursson. The artwork stretches around the roundabout’s centre and depicts the silhouettes of people engaged in the traditional Faroese chain dance. From afar, the life-size dancing islanders resembles the huldufólk, supernatural beings from Faroese folklore living in a parallel world, yet behaving like humans. Colour-changing lights on a central structure illuminate the artwork. “I hope that I have succeeded in making the art really simple and easy to understand,” says Patursson humbly in an article discussing the art of the tunnel, “so that it appears timeless and can be

understood by all people now and always” (Poulsen, 2021, p. ?2). Timeless, and hence also, in a sense, placeless. Patursson is reflecting on the soul of the rock in a Faroese documentary about his submarine artwork titled *The Ring in Atlantis* (H. P. Hansen & Niclasen, 2021), which has given the subterranean ride a marvellous visual touch. The subsea tunnel even has its own music – a soundscape created by Faroese composer and sound engineer Jens L. Thomsen, who recorded all sounds during the construction of the tunnel – to be enjoyed by drivers tuning in on FM radio 97.00. “The idea of adding a piece of art came up after the story of the roundabout became widely known,” says Teitur Samuelson, CEO of Eystur- & Sandoyartunlar (Tyril, 2022, p. 21).

Tunnelogics

The tunnels are making the country larger, seen from inside, at the same time as the surrounding ocean continues to represent ‘the big Other’, as they say in the Maldives (Knoll, 2017), that nobody in the Faroe Islands can keep at a distance of more than five kilometres. It is always there. When you cannot see it, you feel it, smell it, and taste it. In the deep tunnels, probably, people feel most separated from the ocean, even when you travel the subsea tunnels betraying the ocean. The underground corridor is a breakthrough in centuries of struggle to tame and bypass the dangers of the ocean. It paves the way for autopia, the perfect landscape for a car-driver’s utopia, where nobody gets seasick and is hampered by ferry schedules subject to change due to weather conditions (Gaini, 2024). In the tunnel, the traveller is moving in space without the usual misguided sheep, heavy rain, mountain fog, snowstorm, or simply disturbing pedestrian. It could be in Tokyo, Chicago, or anywhere. The subsea tunnel is nowhere and everywhere at the same time. Down there, deep below the seabed, new territory has been reclaimed. “Deep under the sea all land masses meet,” the reader is told in the Danish/Faroese novel *Island* (Jacobsen, 2021, p. 70). The technological access to the underworld introduces endless future projects opportunities. In the future imaginaries of the most dedicated Faroese tunnel-enthusiasts, the paramount subsea roundabout would represent a junction of roads going to all the islands of the continentalised aquapelago.

There is no landscape in the subsea tunnel, except of the carefully crafted artistic simulacrum, for example, the artwork at the roundabout and other lighting art. The art is forcing place into the imagined placelessness, drawing Faroeseness into a dark and ‘meaningless’ space. You could also say that the human touch in the subsea tunnel is mirroring the world above the sea. From this perspective, the question about the start and the end of the island comes back to us: how is the Faroese aquapelagic assemblage connecting its islands? Deep in the underground, landmasses meet and “tectonic plates converse in mumbling dialogue,” writes Siri Ranva H. Jacobsen in her novel *Islands* (Jacobsen, 2021, p. 162). Tunnels permeate through virgin territory generating new reflections on the boundaries of islands and islandness.

The subsea tunnels are obviously not made for walkers, but for motor vehicles, and the car is the new ferry for interisland movements. After housing, “cars are the largest single item of consumer expenditure” (Urry, 2004) and they will stay among us for some time because “too many people find them too comfortable, enjoyable, exciting, even enthralling” (Sheller, 2004, p. 236). The Faroe Islands is today a society base on automobility with a shifting landscape of roads, bridges, and tunnels intersecting the islands and the fjords between them. “Whole parts of the built environment are now a mute but still eloquent testimony to automobility,” says Thrift (2004, p. 46), and the modern private car has accompanied a process of intense time-space compression in society (Harvey, 1990).

For the tourist, the subsea tunnel is a fast lane to their upcoming exotic destination. For the local it is more than a smooth connection; it is also a journey through a non-place activating a sense of being beyond their homely environment. Such hypermodern non-places “do have social significance, cultural dimensions and relations to reveal” (Dalakoglou & Harvey, 2012, p. 464), and the Faroese subsea tunnels “do become familiar places and homes-from-home for individuals such as commuters” (Merriman, 2009, p. 28). It is, in other words, important not to overemphasise the contrast between place and non-place, because most non-places “are more contingent, open, dynamic and heterogeneous than Marc Augé proposes” (Merriman, 2004, p. 162). Most people traveling on or through spaces of mobility, like roads and tunnels, also experience “boredom, isolation and detachment” emerging from ‘spacing’ (Merriman, 2004, p. 162). As a place, which can be defined as “space infused with meaning” (Tuan, 1977, p. 4), the tunnel is a construction that its users feel an attachment to as part of the same national developmental project.

The relatively small island world of the Faroe Islands is possibly also at risk of becoming too full of cars, trucks, roads, roundabouts, tunnels, bridges, parking lots, gas stations, quarries, automobile graveyards, and so on. Tunnels are now also constructed to serve as cold storage (fish), carparks, hydroelectric power, museum (e.g., the planned museum honouring the writer William Heinesen), and other spatial needs.

The mother of all tunnels

The subsea tunnel that everybody is talking about in the Faroe Islands is the tunnel to the southernmost island of the country, Suðuroy, which is the last main island without road connection to the Faroese ‘mainland’ and capital Tórshavn. This tunnel has gone from being outlandish fantasy to be a serious political priority with large support across the spectrum of political parties. It is no longer a question of if but when it will be realised. The political discussions are about the estimated price and geographical alignment of the tunnel. The tunnel’s length will be approximately 26 kilometres, and the construction is expected to cost at least 3 billion Danish Kroner, but new (2024) estimates (with many reservations) suggest a cost of between 3,8 and 4 billion Danish Kroner (KvF, 2024).

“What is lacking (...) is to get the Suðuroy Tunnel built (...) we start drilling before this (election) term in halfway through,” explained a very eager and satisfied new minister in Faroese radio news just before Christmas 2022 (KvF, 2022). The coalition agreement had been signed the day before, so Dennis Holm, the Minister of Fisheries and Transportation, had barely gotten the position before causing turmoil in the Government. The first term elected politician from Vágur, a town in Suðuroy, could not help but making a promise about the big tunnel. Six weeks later, a new directive ordered the Prime Minister to alone administer “all matters concerning the Suðuroy Tunnel” (KvF, 2023). While the Government is positive about the grand project, the new Minister had been too hasty in talking to the media.

The planned subsea tunnel to Suðuroy is “the vision of the ultimate goal” (Tyril, 2022, p. 21) of the ‘tunneling nation’ using tunnel-kilometers as “yardstick for measuring all infrastructure” (Bennett, 2018). The subsea tunnels, with the roundabout below the seabed as chef-d’oeuvre, “have become a huge factor in the Faroe Islands, indeed changing the geographical and socio-economic face of the island nation,” says Tyril in the glittering magazine FAROE Business Report (Tyril, 2022, p. 20). In a report with the guiding title *Removing the Island Barrier*, which presents basic facts and recommendations concerning the future Suðuroy-tunnel project, Uni Rasmussen, the Minister of Infrastructure, says:

The continuously improving road grid has tied the country together, improved mobility – socially, commercially and not least for the working power [...] Despite the discussion, there seems to be politically concord that the country should be tied together so that most Faroese can travel in an easy, quick and safe manner in the Faroe Islands. (Rasmussen, 2022, p. 3)

Despite ‘the discussion’, he says referring to the public debate about the extraordinary twin-tunnel project with a total length of 30 kilometers, the Faroese politicians seem to agree that the project is inevitable. “Societal game changer: The subsea tunnels” is the headline of an article praising the subterranean tunnels and the men constructing them. The article considers the tunnels to be a manifestation of the (will)power of the islanders: “Arguably (...) those engineering marvels may well in themselves have served to inspire and further galvanize the sense of achievement and empowerment that the islanders already have been blessed with from earlier” (Tyril, 2022, p. 21).

The tunnels symbolise, hence, a new chapter in a story about centuries of struggle for survival in the remote Nordic Atlantic. “These really are tunnels for society,” says Teitur Samuelsen, Managing Director of Eystur-og Sandoyartunlar, and the islanders “have great trust in their tunnels” (Samuelsen & Grøv, 2018, pp. 26, 30). He also reflects on past achievements in relation to the infrastructural magnum opus: the Suðuroy Tunnel, the mother of all tunnels. “Challenge to challenge solved, the tunnel has now

emerged from fantasy to the drawing table” says Sigurð Lamhauge, CEO of Landsverk. Nevertheless, he adds in the language of a warrior heading for the frontline, “we dream, and we know we will succeed” (Lamhauge, 2022, p. 4).

The new route to Suðuroy will break the last barrier (at least before the imaginaries of a tunnel to Scotland or Iceland) in the continentalisation of the Faroese aquapelago. While some young people in Suðuroy are critical towards the plan of constructing a subsea tunnel, Hayfield and Nielsen explain, “the majority we spoke to had complex sentiments” (Hayfield & Nielsen, 2022, p. 207). It will, obviously, make it easier to travel quickly to the capital, but it will also affect the special identity and islandness of the people of Suðuroy. “If the subsea tunnel is constructed, it will no longer be special to come to Suðuroy,” young people explain, because then “it will be possible to decide yourself what time you leave home” (Hayfield & Nielsen, 2022, p. 207).

Amphibious island worlds

Frictionless movement

Increasingly, connectivity is becoming “a fact of island life” (Hay, 2013, p. 216) with tunnels “contributing to the creation of continuous and unified urban space” (Santana et al., 2022, p. 18). Here, in space not accessible for the ‘feet-only-user’ (Beckmann, 2001), we have the jellyfish roundabout facilitating submarine transportation to the “Navel of the World” as the Faroese writer William Heinesen famously called the capital of the Faroe Islands (Heinesen, 1950/2007, p. 1).

In the Faroe Islands, the “unexplored demonic underworld” (Franceschi & Heinesen, 1971, p. 38) is now part of the network of underground roads connecting the islands, and the car is the passport to the interisland journey. The car, a symbol of freedom, is nevertheless forcing the driver to follow strict traffic rules steering their action. “The essence of automobilization is that it destroys the liberating effects of spatial mobility the very moment that it creates them,” says Beckmann (2001, p. 602) critically, and this is also reflecting a difference between the boat and the car. The tunnel triggers the fast and unwavering transport, while the sea is an unpredictable avenue for interisland journeys. The “ways, means, and purposes of and for overcoming space have changed – and with them the formation and meaning of both time and space” (Beckmann, 2001, p. 597), and the enormous investments put into the project of breaking ‘island barriers’ does not always result in faster transport, because there are new bottlenecks and queues at different traffic junctions and peri-urban roads.

The celebrated roundabout under the seabed symbolises the culmination of the human struggle to penetrate aquatic frontiers in extravagant innovative projects fuelled by what some have called an “obsession with speed” (Gebauer et al., 2015, p. 8) and thirst for unlimited frictionless mobility. Yet, in the abyss of the subsea tunnel, enjoying “car-only-sights” (Beckmann, 2001, p.

598), the driver does not have a visual-emotional experience of speed, the “beauty of speed” as Filippo Marinetti called it (cited in Wollen & Kerr, 2002, p. 3), that is a characteristic of driving under open skies.

Excavating the underground – building a nation

There is, obviously, societal prestige in the construction of a state-of-the-art tunnel. It is a message to other island societies, as well as to large continental nation-states. It demonstrates how the small aquapelago punches above its weight and colonises its unexplored territories. In an article about the Confederation Bridge linking Prince Edward Island to the rest of Canada, Baldacchino says:

Continuous improvements in engineering, technology, and the temptation of crafting mega-projects that taunts politicians, business investors and contractors of all ideological stripes, mean that there is likely to be some interest and pressure to eventually link all ‘bridgeable’ islands to mainlands. (Baldacchino, 2007b, p. 328)

There is a large literature about the bridges in island studies, but very few studies have looked at the tunnels. The tunnels are coming to more and more societies. The Faroese learned how to make subsea tunnels in Norway, now they are exporting know-how to other societies in the Nordic Atlantic. The Confederation Bridge, which was contested by many Prince Edward Islands residents in the beginning, has now become an “essential island artefact” and “icon,” wrote Baldacchino (2007b, p. 328).

Today, 11 percent of the entire Faroese main road system is underground (Landsverk, 2022, p. 7), and there is (if we include the future Suðuroy Tunnel) “nearly 2 metres of tunnel for each of the 50 000 inhabitants (...) most likely the highest figure worldwide” (Samuelsen & Grønv, 2018, pp. 25–26). The vision of Landsverk – the state institution building, maintaining and administering public buildings and the transportation network of the Faroes – is to create a society where nobody is more than one hour of travel from the capital Tórshavn. The institution’s report *Infrastructure Plan 2018-2030* has this text under the headline “The Faroes – One City:” “One of the main goals during the last years has been to connect the islands. Societal changes through the last 70 years have significantly shortened the travel times in the country” (Landsverk, 2019, p. 4). Saving travel time is an important political tool in evaluation of future infrastructure projects. The subsea tunnel between Streymoy and Eysturoy reduced the Runavík-Tórshavn travel time from 64 minutes to 16 minutes and the Klaksvík-Tórshavn travel time from 68 minutes to 36 minutes (www.estunlar.fo). The islands of Streymoy and Eysturoy were connected by bridge in 1973, before the subsea tunnel with the famous roundabout opened.

The construction of a subsea tunnel is an extremely large financial investment, regular maintenance is also costly, and we know that infrastructure projects “become a particularly heated site of politics and reflexivity when they fail to work in the way initially intended or promoted” (Kanoi et al., 2022, p. 9). Keeping the tunnels dry is also a challenge, as “anywhere between 600 and 1,300 cubic meters of water a day are evacuated from each of the Faroe Islands” subsea tunnels (Bennett, 2018). “It would be an infrastructure revolution to be able to be able to drive ferry-free from Suðuroy to the islands in the north,” says Samuelsen (Samuelsen & Grøv, 2018, p. 30), but islands will also be “at risk of suffering from an increased human footprint” (Santana et al., 2022, p. 17). What to do with all the rock that is dug out of the underground? “Large-scale infrastructures like roads, railways, and dams have often been infused with a potent aura of modernity” (Kanoi et al., 2022, p. 9), but who is benefitting from the new infrastructure in society?

The islanders are engaged in continentalisation of the archipelago through road and tunnel projects enlarging the mainland and shrinking the periphery. The ceremonial opening of a new Faroese tunnel is usually an event with a special set of activities. In my own words from my fieldnotes, it can be illustrated in this way:

It was a real day of celebration. Long queues of cars wound their way into the mouth of the tunnel. Dignitaries were giving speeches, tying the present to olden days without cars and paved roads, and choirs had outdoor concerts. The newspapers and national television were there, doing news reports about the historical moment. The oldest citizens in the village were interviewed and asked about the history of the local community. Sometimes, the oldest among the elderly would be invited to cut the cord at the opening ceremony. How would the new connection influence the local community? Cake and sweet drinks to the children. New hope for the future. A new connection to the rest of the Faroese ‘mainland’. Tourists expected to come. The old ferry route to be shut down. A dangerous mountain road becoming avoidable. Another natural ‘barrier’ removed. (Gaini, unpublished fieldnotes, 2023)

Among islanders with poor road connections and poor prospects of a tunnel to the main road grid, especially in the case of the remote outer islands, there is a growing sense of “left-behind-ness” (Gensauer et al., 2024, p. 393). “There is no speeding up without slowing down,” says Beckmann (2004, p. 82). Mobility and immobility go hand in hand. It is also important not to make yourself too dependent on a single route – for example a subsea tunnel – off your island, in case of infrastructural and environmental problems (Santana et al., 2022).

Presented as a kind of masculine symbol of potency, the fruit of resilient men's struggle against the power of nature, the tunnels are the technological face of societal progress. Discussing the strength of a small society in the Nordic Atlantic with focus on its maritime culture and fishing industry, Anthony Jackson says: "The combination of nationalism and material progress enables them to cope with the problems facing a small group of people trying to compete for a place in the world scene" (Jackson, 1979, p. 63). The income from export of fish-products is also the key to the futuristic tunnel projects of the Faroe Islands, a community "resilient, both in discourse and practice" (Hokwerda, 2017, p. 45).

Islandness and the new passageways

Fixed links in the form of interisland tunnels, bridges, cable cars, dams and other transportation solutions has always been at the centre of island studies discussions, not least because this form of connection mitigates isolation and insularity and, therefore, is a key characteristic of islandness (Royle & Brinklow, 2018). In the Faroe Islands, long and tall bridges are not an option because of the harsh weather conditions with recurrent gales and storms, and the subsea tunnel is therefore the islanders' favourite alternative to the ferry journey. Tunnels give people a feeling of stability and eternity, even if the long-term maintenance of a tunnel of course is not without financial expenditures. When people get used to a fixed connection, they feel incapable of returning to the old temporal and spatial regime associated with the slow and relatively unpredictable ferry transportation. Discussing bridges connecting the small islands of Trondra and Burra to the mainland in Shetland, Jennings says:

It might have been possible in the past to live with cancelled ferries, but today a closed bridge causes great annoyance, because the existence of the bridges has provided the community with an immediacy of access, which they have become used to in all aspects of their lives. (Jennings, 2024, p. 42).

It is therefore relevant to ask in which degree the islands that are connected by tunnels and other fixed links will be deprived of their islandness (Ronström, 2021). Islandness has in island studies been linked to identification with and sense of (local) place (Hay, 2006). The continentalisation of the island society, in the form of a growing dominating mainland, is indeed influencing the local cultural identities of islandness, but the nature of this transformation depends very much on the geography of the aquapelago: is it remote and in the open ocean or is it central and adjacent to large continental countries? How large is the distance – socially, culturally, and spatially – between the islands belonging to the same aquapelago? In the Faroe Islands, people continue to talk about their place-based identities and

belonging in the same way as they did before the tunnels were built, even if the infrastructure developments have changed the labour market, housing market, and mobility patterns in general.

Concerning islandness, it has been argued that sea boundedness might be a component in islanders' "maintaining distinctive cultural assets against a tide of globalization" (Foley et al., 2023, p. 1804). With new tunnels, the special ferry-based islandness of the islanders will disintegrate. "Belonging in the island is practiced on the ferry, and island life continues during the ferry journey," Hayfield and Nielsen (2022, p. 208) explain in a study about the island of Suðuroy, which is the largest island without tunnel connection to the Faroese mainland today. From ferry to subsea tunnel (auto)mobility is a shift indicating a deep transformation of the special aquapelagality of the Faroe Islands. Talking to young people in Suðuroy, they learned that "the struggles of ferry schedules and irregularities left some feeling immobile and disconnected," but that people in Suðuroy also "described the ferry journey as relaxing and pleasant" (Hayfield & Nielsen, 2022, pp. 205–206). The ferry trip makes the island special. The advantage of a tunnel, says Uni Danielsen, the previous managing director of the tunnel company Vága-Norðoyatunnill, commenting on the temporal predicaments of isolated islands, "is that it's open 24 hours a day, there's no waiting for the ferry, there's more mobility – it's getting more dynamic" (Bennett, 2018). No need to wait for the ferry for interisland transportation, and no need to let the waves of the sea rock you. The subsea tunnels extend the process of mainlandization– urbanisation, centralisation, increased everyday automobility – of the island community, but they are also destabilising the meaning of place and distance in discourse on centre-periphery divisions (Hokwerda, 2017). The transformation of the thalassic landscape is sea-oriented, but at the same time also subterrestrial.

At the water's edge

The feeling of being at the water's edge, between the vast ocean and a narrow strip of land, makes it hard to forget that you are an island-dweller living an island life dependent on the sea. "When an island is small enough to feel this all-embracing aquatic destiny," wrote Baldacchino, "then it really comes into its own as a 'island world'" (Baldacchino, 2015, p. 38). The Faroe Islands is also an unusually watery place, constantly waterlogged by the warm transatlantic Gulf Stream. "It is like living at the bottom of the sea," says Minervudóttir, "even daily speech is low and soft (...) almost like an underwater language" (Minervudóttir, 2003, p. 23). Through their practices, creating the islandness of their islands, islanders negotiate the boundaries and connections between the sea and the land (Nimführ & Otto, 2020).

Water "moulds society and culture" (Paerregaard & Uimonen, 2021, p. 13) in intricate ways and can undeniably serve "as an image of spiritual essence, social identity, and belonging" (Stang, 2012, as cited in Uimonen & Masimbi, 2021, p. 36). The land-sea relationship is also a meeting between island-dwellers and water-dwellers and between natural and supernatural creatures in the aquapelagic assemblage. Islands have often been presented

as mythical spaces, “places ‘away’ where anything can happen” (Boon et al., 2018, p. 2), with islanders navigating in “liminal terrestrial-aquatic locales” (Hayward, 2018, p. 8). The seashore is a symbol of the liminal space between land and sea, as the Faroese legend about the amphibious humanoid Seal Woman, for example, is revealing (Gaini, 2022). The selkies (seal folk in Nordic mythology) could change from seal to human by shedding their skin when they went ashore on the beach. The Seal Woman lost her skin, which was stolen and hidden by a man who wanted to marry her. Hybridity, says Gillis, “was most easily imagined” on coasts (Gillis, 2012, p. 61), and islanders now need to rethink the relationship between land and sea, yet also to reinterpret the relationship between humanity and nature because the sea is being rediscovered as an embedded part of the archipelago.

Ireland is greater than its (relatively small) size because of its world literature, says Wulff (2017), but the Faroe Islands, with its population of roughly 55,000 inhabitants, is magnifying its smallness through its sensational roads, ports, and tunnels annexing and demystifying the untamed ocean. The aquapelagality of the Faroe Islands is also traced in myths about the origin of the islands, as for example in the story about the floating islands:

On some of the Faroe Islands the story goes that in the beginning they were ‘flotoyggjar’, floating islands, drifting aimlessly around the ocean. They would appear in the fog, but disappeared as soon as it cleared up. Only if iron chanced to be thrown onto these ghost islands did they stick fast on the ocean bed. (Franceschi & Heinesen, 1971, p. 39)

This image illustrates the water below the land, while the ultramodern subsea tunnels are a testimony of the solid land below the sea. The sea is never far away. “I am drinking my eyes full of ocean this morning”, says the Faroese poet Christian Matras, and the sea of the aquapelagic assemblage is probably also a breeding ground for ideas on “the condition of nature, humankind or simply for ideas for their own sake,” says Baldacchino (2007a, pp. 16–17), a sea-based perspective making the islanders “*visionary* in their own way” (Hokwerda, 2017, p. 48).

“The sea always drew the Faroese,” says William Heinesen (Franceschi & Heinesen, 1971, p. 10), and the seacoast continues to nourish the islanders with innovative and creative visions of the future, but islanders “have shown little tendency to romanticize [the sea], leaving that to mainland landlubbers” (Gillis, 2014, p. 160).

Rediscovering the ocean

We need, as I emphasised above, to focus more on the sea to understand the life of the islanders. “Land-based is land-biased (...) we really need to get wet,” argues Baldacchino, laconically (2012, p. 22). While the sea has always been an integral part of life in the aquapelago, the nature of the sea-land

relationship changes through time, and that is why I am talking about a marine turn in the Faroe Islands. Islanders “are not just land-lubbers, but Argonauts of their respective seas,” Baldacchino underlines (2012, p. 23).

Island assemblages have different scopes and characters, but a small island community’s life “depends totally on the sea” (Baldacchino, 2015, p. 38). We need to “come to better terms with the sea and what it portends” (Baldacchino, 2015, p. 38), and that is the aim of this paper looking at the new Nordic Atlantic from the subsea perspective. As discussed above, you can say that contemporary islanders “have taken the plunge, replacing once treacherous journeys by sea with effortless drives beneath the waves” (Bennett, 2018), but the sea is also felt and imagined when Faroese people are walking on dry land. The crucial meaning of the ocean, historically and today, in the assemblage of Faroese marine and land spaces is unmistakable. Aquapelagality, Hayward emphasises, is not only about sea-surface ‘scapes’, because it also “encompasses the spatial depths of its waters” (Hayward, 2012a, p. 5).

The sea, especially close to the shore (with visual sight of the islands), is a part of the mental and physical geography of the islanders, and the seafarer is relying on old invisible alleys and paths when they navigate between the islands and beyond. They are ‘at home’ at sea. What we have seen in this paper is that the relation between the sea and the land is shifting because of the new Nordic Atlantic: most noticeably in the form of subterranean thoroughfares escaping the sea. The sea is the inspiration, but at the same time it is easier to stay dry, in a motor vehicle in a tunnel, than it used to be. This affects the aquapelagality of the Faroe Islands, yet “neither cartography nor Google Earth services (etc.) can identify an aquapelago on their own – analysis of human inhabitation of space is central” (Hayward, 2012b, p. 2).

The subterranean ‘bridge’, connecting islands from below, is a technology reconfiguring the smallness-largeness and centre-periphery divides with a new dimension. The ocean was never a vast empty space, it was a part of the home for the islanders, but its meaning is changing. The sea is also a new part of leisure and lifestyles among many islanders. Sea swimming, for example, is gaining popularity. It is, says Inga Poulsen, “cosmic sensation” (Bjarnastein, 2023, p. 17). She talks about seajoy as something empowering in a life, which otherwise is spent on dry land. “In truth we experience both seajoy and life joy in the ocean,” she explains (Bjarnastein, 2023, p. 17).

Conclusion

In my article, contributing to the “significantly underworked” (Hay, 2013, p. 212) theoretical discussion on the land/sea border, and contesting myths of island isolation (Hay, 2013), I have demonstrated the need to not only look at the land (above the sea) and the sea, but also at the land below the seabed.

Islandness is commonly associated with the notion of the edge, the edge in the form of a coastline, but it is important to emphasise that isolation is not a defining characteristic of island life (Hay, 2006). In the case of the Faroe Islands, we have seen that the islanders, for example, in relation to the

extraordinary roundabout under the sea, do not accept the idea that their aquapelagic assemblage is resonating an insular postcolonial nation with small ambitions. Rather, the masculine engineering visions demonstrate a will to be on the cutting edge of infrastructure development. The roundabout at the edge of the world is the materialisation of the islands' expertise and success in the search for new land for new interisland transportation. A roundabout does not have an edge, and this makes the aquapelagic imaginary of the sea-land symbiosis more continuous in time and in space.

The roundabout at the edge of the world, as the writer William Heinesen possibly would have called the Eysturoy Tunnel with reference to his novel *The Tower at the End of the World* (1976/2018), as well as the future Suðuroy Tunnel symbolising the final piece of the puzzle turning an island society into a micro-continent (or a ferry-based community to automobile-based Autopia), reveals the transport infrastructure visions of a society that is pushing the limits of the transformation of an aquapelago in the Nordic Atlantic. We have seen that a stronger focus on the three-dimensional landscape of the aquapelago facilitates analyses of the connection between the sea, seabed, and its subsurface in studies exploring transportation systems and small-scale island societies. The new links between islands, in the form of tunnels, is neither situated in the centre nor in the periphery, because the islanders embrace it as new shared space extending the scope of both of them.

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