

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Islandness of Sveti Stefan: A Collection of Particular Manifestations Through Time

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Sveti Stefan, a tiny Montenegrin island with a rich historical and cultural background, remains underexplored in academic research. Considering its physicality (shaped by nature and human intervention), circumstances that determined and directed its development (its settlement foundation from a seized Turkish treasure, its role as a small capital for surrounding villages, its gradual abandonment, its radical transformation into a luxury hotel), and its social structure (the original islanders later replaced by seasonal tourists), the paper investigates the islandness of Sveti Stefan, acknowledging both its literal and metaphorical meanings. Through a case study and literature analysis, combining theorization on islands and islandness with documentation on Sveti Stefan, this research explores the change of islandness of a particular place over time, as well as the contradictory nature of different manifestations of islandness, depending on external circumstances. The differentiation between general islandness and particular islandness—the former is seen as a shared potential among islands, the latter as a time-bound collection of qualities specific to each island—tends to reconcile the opposing sides of islandness manifestations and justify their coexistence. Susceptible to further change and redefinition, the islandness of Sveti Stefan represents a collection of every particular islandness that has manifested through time as an accomplished expression of general islandness.

1. Introduction

Montenegrin islands, scattered along the coast as isolated landmasses, and little known to the general public, have received limited scholarly attention. The most famous among them, the island Sveti Stefan, despite its rich historical and cultural background, remains insufficiently present as a focal research subject. The popular interest in Sveti Stefan primarily links to its unusual transformation from an abandoned settlement into a luxury hotel during the mid-twentieth century (Edwards, 1974). Although its exclusive status and unique tourism model have contributed to the region's economy, the utilitarian focus has overshadowed its other aspects worth investigating. This study approaches Sveti Stefan holistically, considering its permanent

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and temporary characteristics, to comprehend its islandness. The research conceptualizes the island as a “multirelational phenomenon,” acknowledging both its physical dimension and its figures of thought (Ronström, 2021, p. 292) but privileging neither (Fletcher, 2011). The analysis begins with geographical features to set the stage for historical events and cultural processes over the six-century period. Observing different qualities of islandness through four pivotal events—the foundation of the settlement, the abandonment, the transformation into a luxury hotel, and the current dispute—the study interrogates whether to define the islandness of Sveti Stefan as something permanent that transcends all the change or as an encompassing system, a summarizing result of events and their consequences.

The island’s proximity to the coast and its limited size provided a defensible space during the medieval period, when physical protection equaled survival. Members of the Paštrovići tribe, through a gradual and unintentional process, permanently inhabited the island, developing a closed traditional society. The observation of the island’s settlement development, from an initial cluster of twelve houses to over one hundred buildings (Luketić, 1966), demonstrates that the human-initiated physical reshaping of the island substantially depends on historical events and social behaviors. The shifts in political and economic situations rendered the island’s boundedness an unfavorable quality, leading to its abandonment. The view on the islanders relies on historical documentation since the expropriation in 1952 left the island without its permanent inhabitants (V. Mitrović, 2014). The privileged tourists—affluent guests, celebrities, and politicians—entirely replaced the island’s original social structure, fundamentally changing the island’s image. Thoroughly renovated and adapted to serve the tourism purpose, Sveti Stefan represented a successful business model until the civil war of the 1990s in Yugoslavia (S. Mitrović, 2014). To restore former accomplishments, the Montenegrin government leased the island to foreign companies in 2007. However, the unsatisfactory results have triggered unfavorable circumstances, redefining the meaning of islandness.

Approaching islandness as a cumulative and conditional construct, the study problematizes the temporal multiplicity of island identities, proposing to view the islandness of a specific place not as a fixed attribute but as a collection of particular manifestations arising from general potentials common to islands globally. By examining the conditional nature of islandness in the case study, both as a consequence and a catalyst of change, this research aims to reconcile contradictions and differences in its manifestations across time and space, leading to some general conclusions. The miniature world of Sveti Stefan embodies a diverse array of metaphorical images, offering distinct identities and spatial experiences in an increasingly homogenous and placeless world (Baldacchino, 2007; Connell, 2003). The core qualities of islandness, such as smallness, remoteness, boundedness, isolation, and relationship with the mainland, acquire new meanings and relevance in different contexts and times. Making Sveti Stefan both “locus

and focus” (Ronström, 2012, p. 158), through open and free inquiry into islandness (McCall, 1994), this paper initiates a discussion on Montenegrin islands, unjustifiably exempt from research. Although the islandness of a resident differs from that of a visitor (Gillis, 2007), and the general preference leans towards the native islanders to conduct the research (Grydehøj et al., 2015), the narration of the story of Sveti Stefan remains the obligation of the non-islanders, since for the past seventy years the island has existed without permanent residents. The question arises whether the responsibility to research an uninhabited island should rest primarily with the descendants of former residents. As noticed by Baldacchino (2008), islanders may demonstrate greater partiality in researching their own islands than external scholars, therefore, the involvement of the ‘islander-as-subject’ is important but not exclusive. The recent trend of decolonizing island studies raises concerns of non-Western scholars’ inclusion being unfavorably affected by the Western pursuit of diversity (Nadarajah et al., 2022). Grydehøj (2018) calls for the receptivity of both metropolitan and Indigenous perspectives, provided that the authors and readers remain aware of their own positionality. The present study acknowledges the researcher’s position as a non-islander responding to the island’s representations. Nevertheless, “no science has ever been constituted in such a way that the place of birth or residence of the researcher is relevant and even decisive for the constitution of a discipline” (Baldacchino, 2008, p. 48). The analysis of changing manifestations of Sveti Stefan adds a non-Anglophone island context to the predominantly Pacific and Atlantic island narratives.

2. Methodology

Pursuing understanding of the islandness of Sveti Stefan, the author observes the island in its totality, through a case study, as a unifying phenomenon of place, culture, history, and tourism. Literature that directly or indirectly researches the island and its different aspects divides into several categories: historical documentation, academic studies, storytelling, popular media that deals with the island as a place of consumerism, guidebooks, encyclopedias, and video material. Field research enhanced the comprehension of the island’s physical characteristics and architecture, supported by documentation and maps from the Administration for Protection of Cultural Property of Montenegro. The analysis of the collected data used the theorization on islands and islandness, much relying on the island studies discourse (e.g., Baldacchino, 2004, 2006a, 2008; Hay, 2006; Luo & Grydehøj, 2017; Ronström, 2011, 2021). The research observes the conditional nature of islandness to determine how the change of circumstances (political, social, and economic) created conditions for or directly produced a new sort of islandness. It further questions whether it is achievable to make general conclusions on islandness and its qualities through a particular case of Sveti Stefan. Since it is impossible to control the outward circumstances that determine the manifestations of islandness, is there anything permanent to islandness unaffected by time?

Table 1. Different area size definitions.

Area Definition	Area in m ²	Percentage
Total Area	12902 m ² (0.0129km ²)	100%
Streets and Stairs Area	4244 m ²	32.9%
Area Under Buildings	5276 m ²	40.9%
Green Area	2126 m ²	16.48%
Water Area	135 m ²	1%
Fortification Wall and Parapet Walls Area	1284 m ²	9.9%

The main findings follow chronological time frames, reflecting significant changes in the island's manifestation. The earliest impressions of Sveti Stefan encompass its geographical features, initial religious importance, and the foundation narrative, without a definite starting time up to the mid-fifteenth century. The following sections discuss the development and the decline of the organized society and its settlement (the islanders, the settlement, and the abandonment) until the mid-twentieth century. The revival chapter covers the last seventy years of the island's existence, divided into two phases of transformation from a traditional village to a luxury hotel, comparing the different management approaches.

Sveti Stefan connects to the mainland by a narrow causeway. Currently, architectural elements such as houses, staircases, and parapet walls occupy most of the island, leaving only sixteen percent for potential cultivation ([Table 1](#)). A group of physically connected houses makes a property of the same family, adding one more household to the existing cluster with every new generation (The Directorate for the Protection of Cultural Heritage, 2017; J. Vukmanović, 1960). At one point in its existence, the island likely achieved a high level of self-sufficiency, providing safe shelter, enough food, and drinking water. However, as the number of residents grew, the arable land decreased, making Sveti Stefan a small, picturesque town. Starting as an emergency refuge and spontaneously turning into a permanent settlement (Luketić, 1966), it progressively gained significance in the social life of the Paštrovići as a small capital of their rural territories (Edwards, 1974). The abandonment phase began at the end of the nineteenth century and concluded with land nationalization, a common practice in the communist era, transforming the entire island into a luxury hotel. Economic priorities have suppressed the island's cultural value and the need for its research, except in tourism promotion. The past two decades of questionable management and the island's recent absence from the tourist offer prompt a reassessment of its historical and cultural significance.

The literal and metaphorical meanings of Sveti Stefan, viewed through the discourse on islandness, form an idea of the island's totality, not as a definite product, but as an ever-changing system vulnerable to external factors. Therefore, the question of defining the islandness of a particular place that changes through time appears as the central concern of the research.

3. Geographical Features and the Name Origin

Islands possess the capacity for both physical alteration, through natural processes and human intervention, and metaphorical modeling, as a part of the thought process. Geographers classify islands by their origin as either continental, gradually separated from the coast, or oceanic, formed of corals or emerged from the depths (Deleuze, 2004). The formation of the continental island Sveti Stefan resulted from coastal recession (Luketić, 1966). Although islands occur in a wide range of shapes and sizes (Baldacchino, 2005), “smaller islands evoke the greatest fascination and affection” (Gillis, 2004, p. 150), as smallness is more appealing in our “era of giantism” (Gillis, 2007, p. 279). Sveti Stefan, with an area of approximately thirteen thousand square meters, challenges conventional definitions of small islands (Baldacchino, 2008) and may be more accurately described as a tiny island. Given that the larger nearby island of Sveti Nikola remains uninhabited to this day, the exaggerated smallness and relative vicinity to the coast appear as necessary preconditions that determined the habitability and usefulness of Stefan since the earliest times. Researching the nature of high dependence of small offshore islands on external transport linkages in the case of the small island communities of Western Ireland, Cross and Nutley (1999) noticed the unexpected diversity in regard to population trends and economic well-being, not necessarily determined by the islands’ peripherality. For Sveti Stefan, the direct link to the mainland, the permanent terrestrial passage, has created a potential for continuation and integration, against the inevitable exhaustion of the resources and ever-growing demands of modern life.

Well-defined shape and minute size make it almost an archetypal island, coming close to Baldacchino’s circular idealization (2005). The inability of natural limestone to retain water has resulted in a rocky landscape with autochthonous shrubs and small patches of arable land. The local flora, though scarce and homogeneous, reflects the coastal circumstances (Baldacchino, 2020; Vujović, 2009), with rare tall trees serving as spatial landmarks (e.g., the fig tree at the entrance signified a place of meeting and trade).

Located near the coast, the island most probably had strategic significance since the the region’s earliest inhabitation (J. Vukmanović, 1960). Wave action gradually deposited sediment, forming a narrow causeway and adjacent beaches (Editorial Board of the Yugoslav Lexicographical Institute, 1966). As the only physical connection to the mainland, the causeway remained unreliable during high tide and especially winter months until permanently paved in the early twentieth century (Luketić, 1966) with the first signs of organized tourism, which aligns with the observed tendency of permanently connecting near shore islands to the mainland for tourist purposes (Baldacchino, 2020).

Several reasons support the categorization of Sveti Stefan as an island rather than a peninsula. Firstly, it once undoubtedly existed as a physically detached landmass. Secondly, the periodical submergence of the causeway maintained

its insular status until relatively recently. Thirdly, a single entrance gate makes the island prone to complete physical isolation from the mainland. Finally, collective memory and literary representations reinforce the perception of Sveti Stefan as an island.

The naming of islands after saints, while often associated with Columbus's discovery of the Caribbean, also occurred in the Montenegrin part of the Adriatic, as the majority of the fourteen islands bear names of Christian figures (S. Mitrović, 2014). Water surrounded insular space provided a well-protected location for a church or a small monastery. The island would later take the name after the church, as in the case of Sveti Stefan. Conkling (2007) saw islandness as "a deeply held feeling of sacred connectedness to place that blurs the sense of time since the connections to the past feel so omnipresent" (p. 199). Luo and Grydehøj (2017) gave an image of islands as "heavenly mountains" (p. 28) in ancient China. Montenegrin islands, once seen as natural sanctuaries, offered psychological comfort for seafarers. Numerous legends recount sailors who, life-endangered, found safety on an island and built a church in gratitude (Denham, 1967; Zonn et al., 2021). The personification of islands into religious figures translated their physical uniqueness into the structure of religious thought.

4. The Foundation of the Settlement

The trajectory of the island's development prioritizes certain possibilities of modification over others, converting some of the island's general potentials into reality. Narratives and legends about the origin of historically and culturally significant places often tell of the protagonist's struggles, ending with the founding of a town, such as the story of ancient Budva (Buthoë) on the Montenegrin coast (Graves, 1955). The sliding between physical and metaphorical (Ronström, 2021), already established at the island's settlement foundation, blurs the division between fiction and facts: "fact is fictionalized, and fiction is turned to fact" (Schalansky, 2014, p. 25). The folk tale of the settlement Sveti Stefan, built from Turkish treasure on a small island near the coast, passed down through direct oral narration, starts with an incident of a conflict and coincidental circumstances that followed (Joksimović, 2017; Ljubiša, 2022). The town of Kotor (now a UNESCO World Heritage Site), attacked by the Turks, called upon neighboring communities for assistance. The Paštrovići tribe intervened, helping the citizens of Kotor achieve victory. On their return, they discovered inadequately protected Turkish boats, seized them, collected all the valuables on the most beautiful vessel, and sank the rest. Considering how to divide the treasures without causing conflict among the members, but also concerned about possible revenge, the Paštrovići decided to build one house for each of the twelve tribes on a small rocky island near the coast, providing refuge for vulnerable community members and their assets (Ljubiša, 2022; S. Mitrović, 2014).

The fifteenth-century account aligns with the first historical mention of Sveti Stefan as a site of resistance against the attack of the Bosnian duke (Jireček, 1952). The early temporary settlement featured a fortification wall,

the twelve houses, and the small church built at the island's highest point (The Directorate for the Protection of Cultural Heritage, 2017). Sveti Stefan has four churches, constructed from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, on three different corners of the island. Building new churches relates to the increasing number of houses, assuring that the sound of church bells reaches every part of the island. The selection of church sites, based on prominent landscape features, influenced the distribution of residential buildings.

5. The Islanders, the Paštrovići

Recognizing the island's distinguishing physical features and the specific relationships with its surroundings, the islanders shape its particular manifestations through direct usage. Organized societies make islands places of personal importance, increasing their distinction from other islands worldwide. Likewise, the insular condition generates specific human characteristics and behaviors to take place. The founders of Sveti Stefan, members of the Slavic Paštrovići tribe, inhabited a narrow twenty-kilometer stretch of the Montenegrin coast (Luketić et al., 1990). The juxtaposition of the narrow shore with refined beaches and the remarkably high hinterland creates the impression of mountains rising directly from the sea. The first Paštrovići settlements appeared in the hinterland, approximately halfway between the sea level and the mountain peaks (Vuković, 2013). Difficult to reach, the location provided a better defense from the neighboring rivals and excellent coastal visibility. Coastal settlements emerged relatively recently with shifts in sociopolitical conditions (Vuksanović, 1998). However, the fortified island of Sveti Stefan offered a secure environment for a settlement that has persisted for nearly six centuries. Bourgeault (1997) applies the term "intentional community" (p. 8) to inhabited islands, referring to purposefully developed social groups within finite borders. The first islanders of Sveti Stefan came from the hinterland as temporary refugees. Limited food and water resources constrained their stay until the establishment of a higher social organization. They built water wells all over the island and, in addition to fishing as the primary food source, every house had a small vegetable garden (S. Mitrović, 2014). McCall (1994) identifies the dual nature of refuge, comfortable safety versus the bitterness of defeat. The transition of a temporary refuge into a permanent residence alleviated the humiliation of fleeing in front of an enemy. No written records discuss differences between the islanders and the hinterland inhabitants. On the one hand, the population structure on the island presented a mixture of relatively homogenous brotherhoods and tribes of upper villages, whereas, on the other, all members of the Paštrovići shared the same fate of isolation and life under a constant threat. In other words, the islanders appear as a representative group of the broader tribe, not any different from the tribe itself.

The term Paštrovići stands for a collection of smaller tribes, further divided into brotherhoods and families (Božić, 1979). They have survived throughout history by accepting the authority of powerful rulers, functioning as their

military unit, and thus receiving the privilege of remaining a self-governing region (Karadžić, 1977). Most documentation of their “autonomy” originates from the four centuries of service to the Venetian Republic (J. Vukmanović, 1960, p. 268). By concluding a contract with Venice, they managed to avoid Turkish conquest. The strong influence of the medieval Serbian state in the judicial system and daily life enabled the preservation of traditional features in social organization despite the Venetian efforts to spread Catholicism and the constant Turkish attacks (Božić, 1979). The common trope of islandness on an ahistorical dimension (Farinelli, 2017) applies in the case of Paštrovići, considering they lived outside the regular courses of history. Kovačević saw the tribe’s religion as synonymous with their national identity, serving as an instrument of unity and survival rather than an expression of fanaticism (2024).

Grydehøj’s (2015) observation of small islands as historically ideal for seats of power and trading posts, applies to the miniature island Sveti Stefan since it gradually became an administrative and commercial center (Martinović, 1964; J. Vukmanović, 1960) and thus a symbol of pride that Paštrovići used “to establish and express social identity” (Boomert & Bright, 2007, p. 13). At the town’s gate, the tribal leaders gathered and judged social and political matters (Kovačević, 2024). The administrative body of their court, “Table of Justice” (in original: “Stol od Pravde” or “Bankada”), well familiar with the people’s lives and re-elected every few years, judged democratically (Božić, 1979, p. 137).

An island is a convenient setting for both “possessive instincts” and “generous communitarian impulses” (Gillis, 2007, p. 286). According to Vukmanović, the frequent conflicts with neighbors made the Paštrovići suspicious, reserved, and prone to revenge (1960). They considered the moral offense of an individual as an embarrassment to the entire tribe, so they judged it as a collective matter. The tribal patriarchal way of life led to a strong sense of pride and dignity, with a strict respect for social hierarchy and the given word. Heightened feelings of brotherhood and mutual assistance, accompanied by the introverted behavior of women, maintained order and decency among the members. The general characteristics of Paštrovići described in the anthropological study by Vukmanović (1960) differ little from those offered by Putz: loyal, proud, dexterous, modest, traditional, community-oriented, patriarchal, etc. (1984). The collective hardship strengthened the identity of people, which Matheson et al. (2024) observe as a significant constituent of islandness. Organized as a closed society, Paštrovići developed an original dialect, captured by Stefan Mitrov Ljubiša in his collection of folk tales (Ljubiša, 1924). Still, the influence of a maritime lifestyle made the Paštrovići relatively tolerant towards other religions and nations (Kovačević, 2024). Many of them, working as sailors and merchants, traveled to far parts of the world, but, in challenging times, they also engaged in piracy, intercepting merchant ships from Sveti Stefan (Luketić, 1966).

6. The Settlement

The tendency to identify an inhabited tiny island with its settlement appears almost inevitable, rendering it vulnerable to human intervention. A thorough understanding of the island's physical attributes has enabled centuries-long construction on Sveti Stefan without compromising the original island's setting. Comparative analysis of hinterland and island houses reveals the influence of geography and climate on vernacular architecture. Responding to the impact of downward blowing cold wind, the builders made a lean-to roof a characteristic defining element of the house shape in the hinterland (Keković, 2001). However, gable roofs appeared more appropriate for the island houses, whose location demanded different responses to the weather conditions. The functional organization by floor of hinterland houses (first-storage, second-living/sleeping, third-kitchen) (Keković, 2001) appears more flexible on the island, with fewer floors and annexed kitchens or storage areas. Each floor typically comprises a simple cubical room with lightweight interior partitions to divide the different functions.

Weale (1991) pointed to the topography and landscape as a source of islanders' imagination, whereas Putz (1991) emphasized site features and "builder's eccentric preferences" (p. 11) in settlement design. The limited space of Sveti Stefan required the builders' sensitivity to establish appropriate relationships between neighboring buildings (Koprivica, 2024). The physical safety that provided reliable psychological security allowed the development of vivid imagination. The builders logically followed the terrain lines and directions to pave the streets and small piazzas, took advantage of the slope to connect levels through a delicate net of staircases, and arranged the houses in appropriate formations, usually in rows, but also other, more visually appealing, architectural compositions (S. Mitrović, 2014). The natural rock formation dictated the predominant northeast orientation of residential buildings.

Péron (2004) finds that "a small island asks to be inventoried," so the newcomer, to establish a symbolic ownership, first evaluates its physicality "in all its twists and turns" (p. 331). As Fowles and Godwin wrote, "It is the boundedness of the smaller island, encompassable in a glance, walkable in a day, that relates it to the human body closer than any other geographical conformation of land" (1978, p. 12). The settlement of Sveti Stefan appears as an organic extension of its natural surroundings, described by Vuksanović (1998) as the "crystallization of a landscape" (p. 75). Despite its gradual and spontaneous development, the settlement looks like a well-planned project by a single intelligent mind ([Figure 1](#)). The human-scale architecture engendered a sense of care and compassion towards the land and its people.

The reality of small islands' physical limitations becomes quickly apparent to the possible psychological detriment of islanders. Noticing the resourcefulness of small islands, Baldacchino concludes that "necessity is the mother of invention" (2000, p. 68). Desiring to transcend spatial constraints, the builders of Sveti Stefan created a complex street network with a staircase

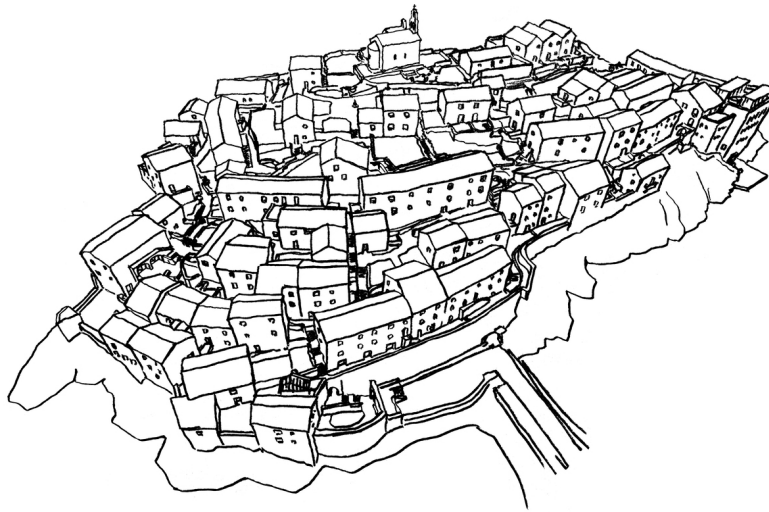


Figure 1. The settlement of Sveti Stefan (drawing by the author).

maze, vaulted passages, and small piazzas, enhancing the variety of visual impressions (Koprivica, 2024). Additionally, the inaccessible southern slope restricts the view of the vast open sea, preventing a constant reminder of being surrounded by water.

The daily life of Sveti Stefan unfolded around outdoor spaces due to the island's safety and isolation, unlike in any other village of Paštrovići. Comparative pattern analysis of different settlements of Paštrovići (B. Gregović, 2007), indicated that the island's physical limitation maximized the creativity of the builders while causing high building density.

7. The Abandonment

The reach of physical limitation signifies a stagnation phase, uncovering the problem of tiny island's inclusion into regular socioeconomic processes. With the quintessential nature weakened, the island becomes a subject of contradictory metaphorical manifestations. In a context of persistent conflict, the island's isolation seems like an idealistic concept of much-desired physical protection and psychological security. However, the modern political and social circumstances shifted survival strategies towards economic advancement, prompting migrations of inhabitants, especially from isolated rural areas. As the connection has become a metaphor for modern and the isolation a metaphor for backwardness (Ronström, 2021), the island Sveti Stefan lost its significance. Graovac (2004) found the primary reason for the depopulation of Croatian islands after the Second World War in poor traffic connectivity with the mainland, regardless of the islands' sizes. Several events led to the gradual emigration from Sveti Stefan at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries.

After the decline of Venice, the Paštrovići lost their right to regulate their territories as a relatively autonomous region (J. Vukmanović, 1960), weakening the sense of community and familial connection. With four hundred people overcrowding the island and little chance for economic improvement in the vicinity of a developed trading center, the town of Budva, the abandonment of Sveti Stefan seems long anticipated. General dissatisfaction with the Austrian authorities (Kovačević, 2024) drove young people to different parts of the world (Luketić, 1966). To cite McCall (1997), “An Island controlling itself is a powerful engine for creativity; an island controlled by continentals is an island to abandon” (p. 4). Messina (2021) noticed the contribution of contact with ‘otherness’ in the development of island identities of the Sardinians. The established maritime tradition facilitated mobility, as water for the islanders posed no “barrier to exodus” (Gillis, 2001, p. 54). The islander’s inevitable urge to leave and develop “glocal” identities (Baldacchino, 2008, p. 47) culminated in permanent departure. The resulting desolation rendered Sveti Stefan a symbol of uncertainty, regression, and transience. With its central administrative role reduced to a simple fishing settlement (Zonn et al., 2021), the island exuded modesty, poverty, and melancholy (Milićević, 1932).

Despite scholarly efforts to avoid romanticizing islands, Grydehøj (2014) notices the tendency to believe “that the true character of islandness lies in rural, remote, and out-of-the-way places” (p. 185). As such a place, Sveti Stefan quickly becomes viewed as charming, dreamy, and idealistic. The romantic quality of a decaying settlement on a lonely island attracted student colonies seeking adventure (Medigović-Stefanović, 2013). For Baldacchino (2005), (different) islands are both gulags and paradise. Gössling and Wall (2007) pointed to opposing sides of the island’s territorial definition, confining to islanders but attractive to tourists. The islanders’ feeling of imprisonment, contrasting with the outsiders’ enthusiastic impression, created a contradictory state of Sveti Stefan’s islandness, whose expression depended on the experienter. The students and their supervisors enjoyed the island’s charming ambiance. Kažić (1924) described it as a place where one falls into deep thoughts confronted with the magnificent forces of nature. Dorđević (1924) wrote about the sudden change in the island’s appearance with the arrival of student colonies, crowded rooms, rich improvised entertainment, and a friendly atmosphere.

Even though the students’ arrival marked the beginning of tourism, the region’s remoteness led to insufficient promotion by tourist agencies (Plaže Najjužnijeg Primorja, 1934), thus limiting the number of visitors and the need for additional tourist accommodation. The influx of youth from different parts of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia attracted secretly operating communists to disseminate new social ideas (Medigović-Stefanović, 2013). The area’s history of resistance fostered a rebellious social environment, producing several significant personalities heavily involved in national liberation and the politics of communist Yugoslavia (Luketić, 1966), some

of them born on Sveti Stefan. Communist leaders intentionally operated in their places of birth (S. Vukmanović, 1971), which, in Paštrovići, following the past tradition, guaranteed a better reception (J. Vukmanović, 1960), later to produce the first elected communist municipality on the Adriatic (Luketić et al., 1990). Its short existence, interrupted by the predominantly anti-communist political environment, announced the beginning of the social revolution.

The island's natural beauty attracted writers and artists, reinforcing its status as a source of inspiration. "The creative spirit finds resonance in the state of being islanded," (Brinklow, 2013, p. 40) preferring smaller islands as more authentic environments for inspiration, "the smaller the island, the better" (p. 39). Comparing Sveti Stefan to a "beautiful rosy shell by the seashore," Crnjanski (1927, p. 57) assured his readers that those who had a chance to visit always returned to the sunshine, waves, and magical nights. The construction of a royal summer residence just outside Sveti Stefan signaled further regional tourism development (M. R. Mitrović, 2016). However, the Second World War entirely changed the perspective of things as the Italian invaders repurposed the accommodation buildings on the island and at the coast for military use (Duletić, 2010).

The first to rediscover Sveti Stefan after the war, painters adopted the island's outer appearance as a favorite motive (S. Mitrović, 2014). Recognizing the metaphysical sensation intensified by physical isolation (Conkling, 2007), they advocated for an art colony on the island, making the houses into art studios for renowned international and local painters (Brailo, 1980). The general attitude to save the island from further decline led back to tourism, in search of an appropriate balance between the delicate inheritance and economic gain. After all, the economy of many islands relies primarily on tourism (Baldacchino, 2006b; Mota et al., 2021).

8. The Revival?

Tiny islands show great potential for subordination to a single specialized function, indicating a probability of a profound change, dependent on the assigned purpose. Baldacchino noticed that the fascination with islands originates from viewing them as "potential laboratories for any conceivable project, in thought or in action" (2006a, pp. 5–6). As the revival of Sveti Stefan required alignment with its unique attributes, Edvard Kardelj, a prominent political figure in post-war Yugoslavia, suggested the most luxurious hotel on the Adriatic coast, modifying the charming houses into accommodation units (Duletić, 2010). By the law of expropriation, the communist regime nationalized the private property of the islanders, providing them with newly built houses on the coast and some compensation (V. Mitrović, 2014). The island ceased to exist as a "nervous duality" between "roots" and "routes" (Baldacchino, 2005, p. 248; Dodds & Royle, 2003). Vujović wonders if, without its townsfolk, we should still think of Sveti Stefan as a town (2009). Just the same, one must question the meaning of an island without its islanders.

The radical action, justified as a common good for society, coincided with the first mention of Sveti Stefan as a cultural heritage (The Assembly of the Municipality of Budva, 2023). Therefore, the monument of culture, deprived of its original inhabitants through an ultimate “island gentrification” (Clark et al., 2007, p. 503), now serves as a tourist complex, targeting affluent international visitors. Although to Putz (1984), such treatment of islanders would seem utterly inappropriate, the employment of the islanders’ descendants as the hotel’s managing and service staff shows a certain level of consideration towards them (S. Mitrović, 2014; Slavković, 1984). Satariano (2019) emphasized the importance and therapeutic value of the coastal environment for the well-being of the Maltese. The institutional protectorate of Sveti Stefan considered the preservation of the coastal natural environment as an essential part of the cultural landscape. However, reality saw many violations, illegal construction, and forest destruction over the years.

The five-year reconstruction (1955-1960) sought to preserve the original ambiance (Sveti Stefan – Grad-hotel, 1963), although sacrificing some craftsmanship details (Edwards, 1974). The greening of the island’s interior started to modify the original rocky streetscape, whereas the addition of a skillfully incorporated citadel-like building completed the quasi-urban form of the settlement ([Figure 2](#)). The demolition of a church from the cultural settlement, to provide additional restaurant space, reflected broader ideological shifts (Rađenović, 1982; The Directorate for the Protection of Cultural Heritage, 2017). The hotel catered to affluent clientele, often celebrities or politicians (Duletić, 2010; V. Mitrović, 2014), with remoteness enhancing privacy and appeal (Ronström, 2021). Additionally, organized visits of students and sightseeing tourists occurred almost year-round. Among many prestigious national and international recognitions, the town hotel Sveti Stefan received the Golden Apple award for exceptional service and unique ambiance, granted by the World Federation of Travel Journalists and Writers (Duletić, 2010; Savović, 1972).

Islandness often appears as an economically positive feature, although contributing to environmental and social vulnerabilities (Jackson, 2006). Although the exclusivity of Sveti Stefan contradicted the communist glorification of ordinary people, the economic success and thoughtful reconstruction of the settlement justify the transformation decision (V. Mitrović, 2014). In her research on Bruny, Jackson (2006) recognized a stronger environmental ethic as a positive consequence of gentrification. The tourism expansion of the Montenegrin coastal region, followed by extensive construction of accommodation facilities, would hardly bypass Sveti Stefan, irrevocably deteriorating its vernacular heritage and authentic ambiance. Describing islandness as something experienced, observed, or learned, Platt (2004) suggests the necessary existence of the experiencer, observer, or learner, questioning whether islandness exists without the islanders. Additionally, Putz (1984) might be right about the growth of seasonal tourism betraying a sense of place, however, in the case of Sveti Stefan, tourism extended the

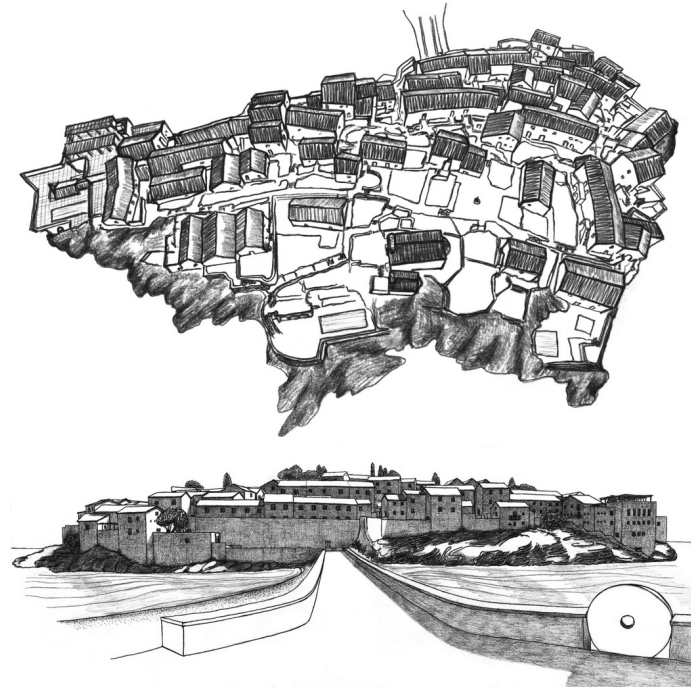


Figure 2. The island's rocky streetscape (drawings by the author).

life of the settlement, on the one hand, radically changing the island's reality, but on the other, preserving a high level of its authenticity. Therefore, even without islanders, "enough remains constant for the island to persist" (Hay, 2006, p. 24).

"The association between small islands and tourism is one of the best branding exercises in the history of marketing," according to Baldacchino (2005, p. 248). Taking advantage of the dominant island trope "island equals warm" (Baldacchino, 2008, p. 40), Sveti Stefan appeared in all the regional tourist brochures, emerging as a symbol of Yugoslav tourism. *Life* magazine described the island as "poetic and picturesque" (Leatherbee & Rougier, 1966, p. 53), publishing its picture on a two-page spread. The genuine ambience presented the main attraction for guests, who often saw the island as "pristine" (Krieg, 2018, p. 55). Secretary-General of the World Tourism Organization ranked Sveti Stefan at the top of the most imaginative hotel management forms (Rekli Su o Svetom Stefanu, 1983), whereas British actor Peter Ustinov named it "a paradise on Earth" (S. Gregović, 1982, p. 4). Soviet-Russian cosmonaut Alexei Leonov described it as the most magical place in the world that should belong to humanity (S. Gregović, 2001).

The civil war of the 1990s, which concluded with the division of Yugoslavia into separate republics, rendered the Budva Riviera a "discarded destination" (Duletić, 2010, p. 181) for the next decade, disrupting the thirty-year international success of Sveti Stefan. To restore the island's exclusivity, the government decided to lease the town hotel to Adriatic Properties, with the managing support of Aman Resorts (Đurašević, 2015), well-known in the hospitality industry for superior service and impeccable choice of locations. The lessees upgraded the size and comfort level of the accommodation units

by internally connecting the row houses, reducing the number of beds by two-thirds (S. Mitrović, 2014). The service offer, insignificantly different from other Aman hotels, left an impression of an elite commercial resort located by chance on an island. Just as the town was previously synonymous with the island, now the town hotel and the island make one. The hotel label, “Aman Sveti Stefan,” fails to inform that the destination indicated is, in fact, an island. Since emphasizing the word “island” can endorse the island brand, a prime factor for developing island tourism (Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2018), “Aman Sveti Stefan Island” appears as a more appropriate name. Aman’s management demanded complete privacy, denying access to any non-hotel guests, except for occasional visits of cultural heritage protection officials or local Orthodox Christians during the religious holidays (Kisic et al., 2024).

Insufficient acknowledgment of the history and culture, paired with high commercialization in service and offer, transformed ‘island tourism’ into ‘tourism on islands’ (Butler, 2016). The emphasis on service and facilities, offered as principal drivers of tourism (tourism on islands), compromises the potential of islandness manifestations beneficial for the successful hotel operation (island tourism). The vibrant atmosphere of meeting, touring, and organized international activities, replaced by the quiet seclusion of the affluent guests, made the island appear generally empty even when fully booked. Progressing seventy years, the lush green cover turned the rocky island into a green oasis, obstructing the visual corridors and obscuring the authentic architectural features. Reflecting on the concept of ‘tourist gaze,’ Tsilimigkas and Derdemezi (2017) claim that what is visible in tourist destinations may impact their economic situation. That which should be visible but remains hindered by overgrown greenery could have the same effect. Since sharing photos online has become part of the tourist experience, it must be disappointing for visitors to realize the difficulty of making memorable photos on the island.

With the island’s rich entertainment content, the guests had little reason to explore other places on the coast, which negatively influenced Montenegrin tourism in general (Kisic et al., 2024). Therefore, functioning as a self-contained tourist unit, the island became an isolated neo-refuge of the modern age. Furthermore, the lessees showed less consideration toward the islanders’ descendants by randomly choosing the hotel’s working staff. Ten years of low earnings and questionable replacement of the official tenants brought much suspicion to the people of Montenegro. Learning about the hotel’s company shares appearing on the stock exchange additionally complicated the circumstances (CIN Crna Gora, 2021). In a demonstration of dissatisfaction, the local people breached the island’s private beach fence, triggering the hotel closure and the legal dispute (Kisic et al., 2024). Although the matter remains unresolved, the case of Sveti Stefan contributed to reducing the influence of the dominant political party followed by the government’s replacement after thirty years in charge.

9. Discussion and Conclusion

Defining the islandness of Sveti Stefan, its causes and consequences, the author observes the island as a totality, its physical features and a mental construct. Analyzing the island over time, its qualities of islandness manifest differently: i.e., resilience turns into vulnerability; positive and negative influences of isolation on the island's development alternate. Therefore, what is the true islandness of Sveti Stefan, the one to begin with or the current one? That which changes through time, is it a new kind of islandness, or different aspects of the same islandness? And finally, throughout all the change, is there anything permanent?

Reacting to Ronström's (2012) question, whether it matters which island to study when you end up with "just about any island" (p. 154), this research uses the case of Sveti Stefan to make some general conclusions. The paper suggests a difference between a general, shared islandness and a particular, manifested islandness. Similar to Baldacchino's "intervening variable that does not determine, but contours and conditions physical and social events in distinct, and distinctly relevant ways" (Baldacchino, 2004, p. 278), the general islandness, as a potential of an island to develop or appear a certain way, represents a shared quality among islands, whereas its manifestations that produce the particular islandness make each island unique. The potential of the general islandness remains a constant, however, the dependence on the external circumstances makes the particular islandness susceptible to change. As seen in this study, one island can have various manifestations of islandness at different times. Therefore, to define the islandness of a specific island, one must see it as a collection of particular manifestations of the shared islandness. In other words, the shared islandness creates a frame for qualities of the particular islandness to take shape. Accordingly, the particular islandness appears as a consequence of the manifestations of the general islandness. For example, the defendable smallness and isolation of Sveti Stefan, as shared qualities of many small and tiny islands, presented a potential (among others) for building a safe refuge. The coincidental events led to such potential fulfillment, which would otherwise remain dormant. The settlement afterward provided an environment for the development of an organized society and the island's new metaphorical meanings. Distinguishing between the general and the particular islandness reconciles the opposing views of islands. Hennesy and McCleary (2011) point out the paradox of modern thought that simultaneously positions islands as "isolated spaces outside of march of history" and "microcosm of modernity" (p. 140). As the potential of an island to take the shape of either of the two, the shared islandness allows the contradictions to coexist, transforming them into possibilities. Just the same, Hay's (2006) question of resilience versus vulnerability might have some resolution after all. In the case of Sveti Stefan, the centuries-long resilience, transformed into vulnerability due to abandonment, returned as a new kind through economic success, only to weaken again through confusing management. The island is both resilient

Table 2. Conceptual outline with the main findings.

Time Frame	N/A	Mid-fifteenth century – End of the nineteenth century	End of the nineteenth century – 1950	1950 –
Category	Geography	Settlement	Abandonment	Revival
Main Findings	- tiny continental island (~13000m²) - made of limestone and covered with Mediterranean shrubs and rare trees - connected to the mainland through sediment layering	- the settlement foundation based on a legend - temporary refuge in the fifteenth century (12 houses, the old church Sveti Stefan, and the fortification wall) - administrative and commercial center for the surrounding villages - mature form of the settlement by the end of the eighteenth century	- massive migration from the end of the nineteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth century - reduced to a simple fishing settlement - arrival of student colonies in the second decade of the last century - the slow beginning of tourism halted by the Second World War - artists rediscovering the island in the mid-twentieth century	- expropriation of the island's residents - transformation of the traditional settlement into a luxury hotel - first reconstruction (FR) 1955-1960: residential buildings transformed into accommodation units; addition of a citadel to complete the settlement's design; islanders managing the hotel all year round; three decades of the awarded business model - the civil war of the 1990s making stop to the international success - second reconstruction (SR) 2006-2012: foreign lessees; commercial resort with exclusive access; accommodation units internally connected and transformed into large suites; overgrown green cover - dissatisfaction with the hotel management leading to public demonstrations and hotel closure in 2021
Social Structure	Temporary residents	Islanders: self-administrated patriarchal society with elements of democracy; warriors; sailors	Remaining islanders; fishermen; visitors: student colonies, artists, adventurers, revolutionaries	FR: elite hotel clientele and visiting tourists; islanders as permanent workers SR: exclusive access for the hotel guests; randomly chosen working staff
Metaphorical Images	Religious personification as psychological comfort	Physical and psychological safety; heroic past	Decline and poverty; adventure and romanticism	FR: economic success, symbol of tourism SR: conflict and uncertainty
Dominant characteristics of islandness	The island's physical aspect	Isolation and remoteness as positive qualities, resilience	Vulnerability, smallness; remoteness as a negative quality	FR: regained resilience; smallness as a positive quality SR: Isolation through exclusivity, vulnerability

and vulnerable, just not simultaneously. Future expectations certainly see the island as resilient again. As close to ideal as can be, a metaphorical island realized, Sveti Stefan may serve as a reference point for further research, a primal island. Even though “smallness is [just] a state of mind” (Hau‘ofa, 1994, p. 201), an island needs to be “quite small, before it feels like an island” (Lawrence & Wilson, 2021, p. 393). The islandness of Sveti Stefan changed over time, influenced by the island's physical preconditions and metaphorical images ([Table 2](#)).

From the island's settlement foundation until the peak of its development, isolation appeared as a desirable quality, agreeing with Ronström's (2011) claims that the pejorative connotation of the words related to isolation has a relatively recent origin. By providing physical and psychological safety, the island created conditions for a closed society to cherish traditional morals and values, and remained unchanged for centuries. Fowles (1999) names the island communities as "the original alternative societies" (p. 27). Responding to the geographical characteristics of the terrain, the settlement evolved into a well-balanced and harmoniously proportioned miniature town, becoming synonymous with the island. However, people tend to say 'on' Sveti Stefan instead of 'in' Sveti Stefan, in order to "reduce the object, and enlarge the subject by placing it above the object" (Ronström, 2011, p. 227), therefore, thinking of it first as an island and only second as a town. Without the necessity for physical protection, the remoteness from the coast and physical limitation limited further economic development, leading to gradual emigration. The maritime lifestyle brought new perspectives and open-mindedness, which made the abandonment of Sveti Stefan a natural process. The romantic quality of the deserted island attracted adventurers, artists, and revolutionaries, indicating the beginnings of tourism. Saving the island from further deterioration but also anticipating economic gain, the government decided on a radical transformation into a luxury hotel, capitalizing on the island's privacy and exclusivity.

The rich construct of thought created mental images of Sveti Stefan, whose relevance shifted over time. Gillis finds (2004) "islands of the mind" continuously acting as "valuable symbolic resources" (p. 3). The story of the stolen treasure has stimulated the imagination for centuries, fostering an image of a heroic past, later used in tourism propaganda. As a religious symbol, the island provided psychological reassurance during periods of existential threat, whereas, abandoned and forgotten, it symbolized mass migrations from rural regions. Reconstructed and operating as a place of business, Sveti Stefan became a central image of Yugoslav tourism to the extent that the mental construct overpowered the reality. However, the recent development of events—the island managed by foreign agencies, functioning as an isolated tourist unit, and only accessible by hotel guests—spoiled the positive reputation, leading to a dispute and the hotel's closure. The mental image of fame and success, replaced by uncertainty and conflict, has contributed to the island's gradual decline as a tourist destination.

Small islands provide circumstances of uniformity and resistance to change, however, when it happens, it acts quickly and thoroughly. Five centuries of traditional society development, decelerated by five decades of gradual abandonment, completely ended in five years of the island's transformation into a place of business. The island, with its literal and metaphorical definitions, often appears caught in contradictions: island/peninsula, village/town, limitation/creativity, resilience/vulnerability, desirable isolation/imprisonment, traditional society/world travelers, cultural

monument/place of tourism, fame/fall into oblivion, etc. New circumstances showed an immediate effect. The abandoned island became more accessible to non-islanders and susceptible to dramatic seasonal change. The island serving as a luxury resort reserved only for privileged visitors, reintroduced the concept of a temporary refuge, although now motivated not by a search for physical safety but by psychological relaxation. The role of the sea shifted from providing sustenance and connectivity with the outside world to serving as a recreational amenity.

The islandness of Sveti Stefan, rather than a definite state, evolves in response to the outward circumstances influenced by different dominant factors. Without the islanders, it relies on external perceptions to give it a definition and meaning. Small and tiny islands, with their clear physical definition, appear susceptible to concretizations into metaphorical images, especially when involving economic gain. Taking the example of Gozo, Azzopardi (2015) demonstrated that limiting conditions of smallness and islandness strengthened the resourcefulness, producing a successful business model founded on self-reliance. Such self-reliance, recognized as the business model basis of Sveti Stefan in the mid-twentieth century, created a tourism phenomenon that served as an example for and a magnet to other tourist destinations. However, reduced to an average tourism site and managed by a foreign party, Sveti Stefan demands a renewed engagement with its islandness, inclusive of the island's historical and cultural significance, and accessible to Montenegrin citizens. Without the older islanders to perform the role of "creating and sustaining islander identities" (Burholt et al., 2013, p. 1), the inclusion of islanders' descendants in future decisions on the exploitation of Sveti Stefan appears necessary. The solution may be a more participatory approach oriented towards creative tourism, emphasizing a "connective and relational dimension" between hosts and visitors (Baixinho et al., 2023, p. 2). Razović and Tomljenović (2015) identified the unique natural and cultural heritage of Croatian islands as a determinant of optimal tourism development, a principle applicable to Sveti Stefan. The island's recognition as both a premier travel destination (National Geographic, 2009) and one of Europe's most endangered cultural places in 2023 (7 Most Endangered, 2023) highlights its global significance. Taking the island as a small laboratory of events, even though unable to control all its parameters (Crouteix, 2024), the author acknowledges the study limitations, being a non-islander, and due to the absence of the original islanders to witness the ongoing processes.

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