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THE ISLAND OF SAN GIULIO: A “HEIGHTENED” HETEROTOPIA

Introduction

Islands have long fascinated both the geographical and the symbolic human imagination, emerging as places that are at once detached and connected, remote and central. This inherent ambiguity has rendered islands a sort of “privileged category”, for reflecting on the construction of space and meaning.

One particularly effective lens for interpreting such spaces could be that derived from Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia, which frames certain sites as “other spaces” that exist alongside – yet distinct from – ordinary spatial and social orders, occupying a condition of “alterity” in relation to space and time (dell’Agnese, 2018a, p. 95).

Beyond being interpretable as heterotopias in their own right, islands have frequently hosted various types of “other spaces”, such as prisons, hermitages or seasonal retreats. Within this context, monasteries stand out as paradigmatic examples: enclosed and regulated environments whose specific codes and routines establish a symbolic order distinct from that of the external world. This is particularly evident in cloistered monasteries, where seclusion is intensified to create a radically different spatial experience (Bartolomei Romagnoli, 2013; Sebastianelli, 2024, p. 25).

This article explores the small lacustrine Island of San Giulio (fig. 1), located in Lake Orta, in Piedmont, as a case of contemporary heterotopia. San Giulio, which has hosted a long-lasting religious and spiritual tradition since Late Antiquity, is now home to the female Benedictine Mater Ecclesiae abbey, founded in 1973. As a living and inhabited place, this island allows to observe how a heterotopic space should not be considered as a “marginal” spatial category, but rather as an active, dynamic and even central one, that shapes with its wide symbolical influence today’s cultural and territorial surroundings.

The research question of this work is how can the Island of San Giulio – already imbued with layers of symbolic and spiritual meaning – be interpreted today as an “heightened” heterotopia, as it is reinforced by the ongoing monastic experience. One might even speak of a form of layered or “doubled” – in some ways – heterotopia, insofar as two geographical entities endowed with

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heterotopic meaning are present here, one enclosed within the other, generating a process of symbolic reinforcement. The aim is to examine how this space functions as an “other place” yet fully embedded in a web of historical, spiritual and territorial relationships.



Figure 1. The Island of San Giulio as seen from the ferry pier in Orta San Giulio. Photo by Roberta Rodelli

This reflection on San Giulio has adopted a combined methodological approach, integrating theoretical exploration, historical analysis and direct observation. To address the research question the study has begun with an in-depth engagement with the existing literature about the island. Firstly, various references documenting San Giulio’s religious and cultural evolution were examined, providing the foundation for the following historical overview. In parallel, recent debates in Island Studies were explored, in order to understand how insularity and other factors shape both perception and social interactions. The theoretical lens of heterotopia provided, however, the primary perspective for this study. A careful reading of Michel Foucault’s discourse on heterotopia, alongside contemporary geographical scholarship that applies the concept to specific places (Vallega, 2004) and islands in particular (dell’Agnese, 2018a; 2018b), in fact, constituted the basis through which to interpret San Giulio as a dynamic and relational “other place”.

Direct observation complemented these theoretical inquiries. An interview with the abbess of the Mater Ecclesiae was conducted and her contribution provided valuable perspectives on the ongoing monastic life, its spiritual and social significance and its broader influence on the surrounding lakeside communities. Additionally, informal conversations with local residents confirmed that the abbey could be considered as a territorial and cultural driver,

reinforcing the island's centrality within its regional contexts, pointing towards questions that would deserve further reflection and more detailed investigation.

Building on this method, the article is structured as follow: first, a theoretical framework is presented to situate the work; then an historical overview traces the key moments that wrote the island's cultural and religious identity and its connection to the present-day monastic community; finally, the analysis applies Foucault's six principles of heterotopia to the case study, highlighting how the island may effectively functions as that category of an "other place". Conclusions will try to synthesize the findings to argue in support of a positive answer to the research question, showing how San Giulio functions today as a heightened and active heterotopia.

Islands and heterotopia

Islands have long attracted scholarly attention. While often associated with isolation, they frequently operate as points of interaction and exchange between diverse geographical, cultural and political realms. This paradoxical nature as circumscribed entities, separated yet connected to the mainland by water, has led many to interpret them as symbolic microcosms: small worlds of their own.

Such fascination, among other factors, contributed to fostering the development of Island Studies, a field that in recent decades has sought to understand islands on their own terms. This perspective, which Grant McCall (1994) termed *nissology*, invites scholars to move beyond viewing islands merely as peripheral or isolated spaces.

Among the most influential voices in this shift is Godfrey Baldacchino (2003), who introduced the notion of *islandness* as a conceptual tool to *capture* the intrinsic tension between openness and closure in island settings. Rejecting the view of islands as circumscribed laboratories, Baldacchino proposed instead that islands be seen as dynamic places, simultaneously connected to and distinct from the wider world. In the same vein, Suzanne Thomas urged scholars to abandon the notion of *boundedness*, emphasising the idea of islands as «fluid and permeable – a shifting liminality» (Thomas, 2007, p. 23). From this perspective, islands began to be understood as relational and networked places.

Philip Hayward's concept of *aquapelago* further advanced this view by foregrounding the interdependence between island communities and their surrounding waters and, possibly, other islands in an archipelago. Rather than considering water as a barrier, the "*aquapelagic* approach" emphasizes its role as an active medium of connection, sustenance and also as a shaper of cultural meanings. Specifically, an *aquapelago* is defined as an assemblage of terrestrial and aquatic elements produced by human activities. Its coherence derives from the ongoing relationship between people and water, through which the aquatic realm becomes an integral part of everyday life and meanings (Hayward, 2012, p. 2; 2025, pp. 4-5).

Rethinking islands in different terms, therefore, questioned their very definition as portions of land completely surrounded by water, which increasingly appeared too reductive and whose «edges started to blur» (Hayward, 2016, p. 1). Numerous cases challenge such a static definition: islands now connected to the mainland by bridges, causeways or tidal movements, whose “isolation” fluctuates depending on natural or artificial conditions. Some islands have been “de-islanded” through sustained connectivity and integration, while other territories not traditionally considered as islands – in strict geographical terms – have come to be experienced or presented as insular – e.g. remote mountain villages (Hayward, 2016; Kelman, 2020). These examples allow to reflect on how such places are shaped by their geographical characteristics and also and mainly by human perception.

One of the most recent theoretical contributions in this direction is the concept of *islandscape*, which radically rethinks the island as something produced through social practices, mobilities, and relationships. Islandscape offers a way to see the island as a dynamic node between the local and the global, land and sea, presence and absence. In this perspective, insularity cannot be considered as an objective condition but rather as a shifting and often contested construct that emerges from the interactions of human and non-human agents (Nimfür, Otto, 2020, p. 196).

In the rich and diverse panorama of Island Studies, this work attempts to focus on a specific theoretical perspective – namely, that of heterotopia – as a distinct interpretive framework through which to explore and understand an individual case of lacustrine island. This aims to offer a focused lens to explore the island’s multifaceted nature as an evolving and historically layered cultural and spatial construct (Mountz, 2014, p. 5).

If it is true that every island carries within itself a form of territorial “otherness”, an alterity, that – for instance – is perceptible in the need of approaching it by water, the possibility of circumnavigation, and the moment of landing (Cavallo, Bonardi, 2006, p. 74), Foucault’s concept of heterotopia may effectively offer a powerful theoretical lens. In this light, it could be possible to associate the idea of heterotopia with certain insular spaces: those that, due to a combination of historical, cultural, religious, identity-related or physical factors, could be read as “other spaces” characterised by complex and layered relationships of meanings that visibly differentiate and set them apart from their surrounding context.

Taking as a starting point its philosophical definition, heterotopia could be considered as a localised, concretely existing utopia: a “place” that operates under its own symbolic and functional logic, distinguishable from its surroundings. Differently from utopias, heterotopias are real and existing places that can be found in an earthly space.

«There are, first of all, utopias. Utopias are spaces that are devoid of real space. They maintain a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space

of society. They are societies itself perfected, or on the contrary, they are societies turned upside down, but in any case, these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces.

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places – real places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are a kind of counter-sites, a kind of effectively realised utopias in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. These spaces, which are absolutely different from all the sites they reflect and speak about, I shall call “heterotopias”. These heterotopias are somehow outside of all places, even though they may be actually localisable» (Foucault, 2011, pp. 23-24; my translation).

As Foucault describes them, heterotopias are characterised by restricted or ritualised access, spatial and temporal discontinuities and the capability to juxtapose multiple, incompatible realities. They may be spaces of deviation or crisis, sacred or disciplinary, isolating or hyper-connected.

Geography has adopted and expanded this concept, particularly through the work of scholars like, among others, Adalberto Vallega (2004) and Elena dell’Agnese (2018). Vallega took Foucault’s notion of heterotopia and developed it further, analysing and transforming it into a geographical category: a typology of places where distinct codes of conduct, values and symbols define an experience of alterity (Vallega, 2004, p. 40). Dell’Agnese, on the other hand, applied this conceptual framework to specific empirical cases, such as resort islands in the Maldives. In discussing them, she uses heterotopia to explore the spatial dynamics and socio-cultural implications of tourism in insular contexts, where restricted access, artificial landscapes and confined spatial regulations create clearly bounded spaces detached from everyday life.

Other scholars also drawn upon the concept of heterotopia to analyse insular spaces: Deriu (2020) explores the insular settings of the *Odyssey* as an archipelago of hybrid spaces intertwining utopic and heterotopic elements; Lago (2016, p. 2) while focusing on “the ship” as a heterotopia, also points to islands as part of a broader space of alterity.

This same lens of reflection could be employed as a means of analysing religious communities – particularly monastic ones. They could indeed be examples of many among the conditions Foucault attributes to heterotopias (Bartolomei Romagnoli, 2013; Sebastianelli, 2024, p. 25). Access is regulated; life is structured around a different rhythm and symbolic order; separation from the external world is both material and ritual (Melville, 2020, p. 331).

These features may become more pronounced when the communities are located on small islands. In such cases, the island itself, the surrounding water and the enclosed monastic institution “work together” to reinforce the symbolic layered condition of alterity – hence they can be considered as co-constitutive of the insular heterotopic identity.

Within this particular framework, one might therefore speak of “heterotopia within heterotopia”: a doubled condition, where the physical boundaries of the island (natural) and of the monastery (artificial) reinforce the symbolic borders of the insular religious enclosure.

As it will be proposed in this paper, the island of San Giulio could offer a contemporary example of such a reinforced heterotopia. Unlike other similar places that have lived a transition from a past religious history to a heritage site of memory, San Giulio has undergone an evolution, by periodically discontinuing, resuming and re-discovering its spiritual significance. And it is now a living, inhabited and religiously active space. Its current monastic community has reshaped and intensified its symbolic legacy.

The Island of San Giulio: religious and historical overview

San Giulio is located in Lake Orta, within the Province of Novara, Piedmont, Italy. The lake, also referred to as Cusio, has a prevailing North-South orientation and covers an area of approximately 18 square kilometres. Its surface is at an elevation of 290 metres above sea level, and it reaches a maximum depth of 145 metres. It is considered as the westernmost of the pre-Alpine lakes and is surrounded by shores sloping towards the basin and hills with moderate elevation, that alternate with valleys. Historically, its geographical position placed it along the Via Francisca, a route connecting France to Italy. It therefore represented an important stopover in the Middle Ages for pilgrims travelling either toward the central regions of the peninsula or toward Venice (Bertani, 2004, p. 77).

San Giulio, which spans just over 25,000 square metres, hosts today the Mater Ecclesiae abbey. Deep historical importance in the context of early Christianity can be attributed to the island². During the 4th century, it emerged as a key place for the spread of Christian religion, primarily due to the eponymous

² It was during the time of Diocletian’s Tetrarchic reform, when Mediolanum became one of the empire’s capitals, that settlements in the northern part of the peninsula, centred around the city, experienced a prosperous phase. The later events of the 4th century affecting the region of Lake Orta, including the island, are the background to the tradition related to Saints Julius and Julian. The two brothers initiated the evangelization of the area, in the broader context of a fight against paganism and Arianism promoted by Theodosius (Beghelli, 2011, p. 162). In exploring the history of the island during the Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, historians have obviously relied on a range of narrative sources. Among the most important ones is the manuscript of a *Vita*, dated to the 9th century, which details the lives of the two saints. Paul the Deacon offers insights into the Lombard-era events, occurring in the region. Finally, the writings of Bishop Bescabé and the scholar Lazaro Agostino Cotta (from the early and late 17th century respectively) provide information about the structures existing on the island at that time, before archaeological excavations took place (Ibidem).

saint, Julius, who is traditionally associated with the construction of an initial Basilica. His tomb, located on the island, became a pilgrimage destination (Caldano, 2014, pp. 118-119). The popularity of the site grew steadily in the centuries following his death, to the extent that, by the 1600s, regulation of access became necessary (Canestro Chioventa, 1963, pp. 10-11).

According to tradition, Saints Julius and Julian were two brothers native of Thessaly who, having been baptized at birth, devoted their lives to fighting heresy. It is reported that Emperor Theodosius issued a decree allowing them, with the support of imperial authorities, to demolish pagan temples and to replace them with Christian sanctuaries, while baptizing local populations. More detailed accounts of their mission are provided by elaborate narratives regarding the phase when the two brothers moved to the Novara region. Here, several miraculous events are attributed to them in the context of the construction of numerous Christian buildings.

It is then said that, after leaving his brother in Gozzano, Julius embarked on a quest to find the location for building their hundredth church and chose the island in Lake Orta as the right place. Using his cross, he drove away the island's only inhabitants – a multitude of snakes – and began the construction of a basilica dedicated to the apostles, while his brother would continue to build the one in Gozzano (Canestro Chioventa, 1963, p. 10).

The ancient veneration for Saint Julius and Julian, along with the legends surrounding the construction of the churches, holds profound significance within the religious traditions associated with the island and its *environs* (Abbazia Benedettina Mater Ecclesiae, 2016, pp. 42-43). The stories of these saints are closely intertwined with the Christianisation of the Novara region and have played a role in shaping the island's spiritual identity. Over the centuries, these veneration practices have contributed to the development of narratives that continue to define the island's character today. The enduring importance of the cult of Saint Julius is evidenced by the fact that for an extended period of time the lake itself was referred to as “Lago di San Giulio” (Beghelli, 2011, p. 167).

During the Early Middle Ages, the Island of San Giulio emerged as an important religious centre. Archaeological investigations conducted in the late 20th century identified several construction phases within the current basilica. The initial ones can be related to an early medieval church, the one believed to be founded by Saint Julius (Canestro Chioventa, 1991, p. 67)³. Subsequently, a new church was erected, this time with an East-oriented apse and the presbytery

³ The remnants suggest the existence of an earlier building with the distinctive feature of a North-facing apse. These traces can be dated to the period between the late 4th and late 5th centuries. The building, probably already Christian, represents one of the earliest on the island. In fact, it does not appear to have been an imperial Roman residential building; rather, it was likely a place of worship built by local artisans (Beghelli, 2011, p. 168).

located in a position consistent with the current one⁴. A noteworthy aspect is the discovery of fragments of decoration in opus sectile from a cenotaph, suggesting that the building can be traced back to the time of the inhumation, in 553, of Bishop Filacrius (Bertani, 2004, pp. 89-90).

Inscriptions, epigraphs and other kinds of sources suggest that many bishops may have chosen San Giulio as their residence. The island was presumably viewed as a safer refuge than the mainland cities, providing protection from barbarian raids. Luisella Pajrani has even suggested that the Novara episcopate might have temporarily relocated to the island during the 6th century, due to the instability caused by the Gothic-Greek wars (Ivi, p. 107).

In the Gothic and Lombard eras, the island appears to have gained particular significance because of its strategic position, both for religious and military purposes (Beghelli, 2011, p. 167). Its natural configuration, besides providing shelter, would have offered a strategic vantage point for military operations in the area.

With regard to the Early Middle Ages, under Gothic and later Lombard rule, it is difficult to fully comprehend the settlement configuration of the island. It is certain that the central area, developed around the basilica, was recognized as the most important complex. Nearby, there must have been a number of service and representative buildings, possibly including the episcopal palace, along with common dwellings, probably made of perishable materials. The only structure detached from the main nucleus was at the top of the rocky promontory, as shown by the remaining foundation of an octagonal building, which is presumed to have been part of a castle. The image of this structure has been preserved through prints made before 1841, the year it was demolished to make room for the grand seminary ordered by Bishop Morozzo (Bertani, 2004, pp. 110-113).

After the defeat of the Lombards and Charlemagne's restitution of the island to the Bishop of Novara, the history of San Giulio becomes more closely tied to the Canonical Statutes, making it easier to trace. For instance, it is possible to establish that by the 9th century, a college of canons already existed, along with a parish organization that included a Chapter and the presence of a baptistery. The parish was established to administer sacraments and provide spiritual care to the surrounding villages, which paid tithes to the canons. Sources indicate the presence of 16 priests (12 canons and 4 acolytes) as early as 1026, a number that would vary in time⁵. Each canon was assigned a house, with its structure precisely

⁴ This second construction phase is characterized by a more refined technique, with portions of the perimeter foundations and an oblique wall (probably parallel to the façade) still remaining. The wall likely had a defensive function, integrating the church into the island's fortification system.

⁵ Nevertheless, in 1231 Bishop Oldebertus of Novara set a minimum number of four resident canons at San Giulio. The requirement for the canons to reside on the island, however, was not enforced until 1578.

regulated and each dedicated to a saint. The religious' sustenance was based on prebends and tithes paid by the territories under the parish's care, with additional funds provided by the pilgrimages commonly made to the island (Dell'Acqua, 1977, pp. 19-21).

In 1581, a seminary was established on the island for the education of clerics. By 1767, the House of Savoy, which had assumed control over the region, confirmed the bishop's full authority over the island. However, in 1814, when the island came back under Savoyard rule, after a period of being among Napoleon's conquests, the bishop maintained the title of Prince of San Giulio and Orta, but he had to abandon the diocesan feudal and jurisdictional rights. Later, in the mid-19th century, the island was chosen as the site for the new Major Episcopal Seminary, which, as previously noted, led to the demolition of the ruins of the structures on the rocky promontory (Ivi, p. 23). The Seminary was relocated to Novara in 1947 and its facilities on the island were completely shut-down (Cànopi, 2009, p. 15).

The island today

It can be said that the Island of San Giulio and its church maintained some degree of a material and functional, if not spiritual, continuity from the Early Middle Ages to the present day (Caldano, 2014, pp. 130, 135). A de facto geo-historical continuity can be also recognised in the development of the immediate surroundings.

According to Dell'Acqua (1977, p. 23) unlike other cases in which the history of the religious presence had interruptions also due to distance from major centres, the aforementioned endurance could be explained based on the spiritual importance of the place of worship, along with the distinctive fascination of the island. In any case, it is certainly true that the figure of Saint Julius has consistently attracted – and continues to attract – pilgrims over centuries. This religious significance has helped to sustain the island's historical narrative by continuously drawing attention and visitors. Furthermore, the island's appeal as a fascinating place, currently characterized by ancient houses, a single traversing road and buildings rich in history, maintains its allure.

As a demonstration of the enduring charm and genius loci, numerous contributions by both Italian and foreign authors and intellectuals have been inspired by the atmosphere of Lake Orta and its island (Alberti et alii, 1983). One notable example is Ernesto Ragazzoni, a poet and a writer with secular perspectives that portrayed the island of San Giulio as inherently tied to its religious heritage:

«A neat and blooming islet lies in front [the town of Orta San Giulio], once a crag that was a nest of serpents, then a rugged stronghold, later a castle of bishops and a haven for peaceful canons, and today, softened in grace, a place of villas and

gardens, mirroring the village almost like its own reflection» (Ragazzoni, 1919, p. 50; my translation)⁶.

The preservation of the historical legacy and island's meanings is undoubtedly supported by the efforts of the monastery that is currently active on the island. On August 22, 1973 Pope Paul VI signed the decree in Castel Gandolfo that established the *Mater Ecclesiae* Community of San Giulio, formally recognized as an autonomous *sui iuris* monastery. On October 11, six nuns from the abbey of Saints Peter and Paul in Viboldone (province of Milan) chose to live in San Giulio, which was uninhabited at the time. Since the seminary had been relocated, the island had gradually become depopulated, eventually falling into complete abandonment.

The foundation of the new Benedictine monastery on the island was encouraged by Aldo del Monte, bishop of Novara, who envisioned a revival of its religious significance. Under the leadership of Anna Maria Cànopi, the first abbess, the community began to take root.

The accounts of Abbess Maria Grazia Girolimetto⁷, recalling the first arrival of the nuns on the island, describe a quiet and isolated place, that was found in a state of complete decay, cluttered with garbage. There was no telephone line, and the sole source of drinkable water was an outdoor tap in front of the former seminary. Recalling the long Benedictine tradition of “taming” inhospitable sites, she likens their coming to the island to the classic monastic work of reclaiming and transforming a desolate landscape into a living, inhabited space.

Initially the nuns lived in the buildings “Casa Antica” and “Casa San Giuseppe” adjacent to the Basilica. Over time, their number grew and they obtained permission to relocate to the former seminary, which was subsequently renovated and adapted to their needs (Cànopi, 2014, pp. 193-202). Additional structures on the island were annexed and connected, enabling the nuns to maintain their lifestyle without breaking the boundaries of monastic enclosure.

Today the community counts approximately seventy members and has become a vital presence on the island, contributing in various ways to the preservation of cultural and religious heritage. Their active presence also opened new forms of communication and even seems to have fostered local sense of belonging and tourism, as the community's engagement quickly stimulated activity along surrounding lakeside over the course of a few years. The island, perceived before as remote and inhospitable, gradually became a reference for visitors, both locals and pilgrims.

⁶ «Un'isoletta linda e fiorita di fronte, già scoglio che fu nido di serpi, e poi aspra roccaforte, poi castello di vescovi e residenza di tranquilli canonici, ed oggi, ingentilita, luogo di ville e giardini, ripete al paese quasi la sua stessa immagine».

⁷ The author visited the abbey on August 28, 2025 and was granted an interview with the abbess. All text marked with the indication (interview) are quotes translated into English from the original recorded Italian interview.

This impression is supported by informal conversations conducted during fieldwork in villages around the lake. Although these exchanges were not designed as structured interviews, they consistently pointed to the abbey's significance within the local imagination. Residents living in places from which the island is clearly visible, as well as in a village (Omegna) where its view is obscured by the surrounding topography, described the abbey as a familiar and meaningful presence in the area. Such observations suggest that the island is experienced locally through a symbolic geography that exceeds simple physical proximity or visibility. Its gradual emergence as a "landing place" for visitors may therefore be understood in relation to a broader sense of attachment, through which the abbey forms part of the cultural identity of the lakeside communities.

This point appeared to be particularly significant in the case of coastal villages from which the island is not visible. The symbolic value attributed to the abbey therefore appears to exceed the immediate experience of sight, a factor that is often central in the construction of *topophilia* (Tuan, 1974, p. 4). Its presence seems to circulate within a wider local imaginary of the lake, shaped by forms of memory and association that are not reducible to physical proximity. For this reason, the abbey's position within the cultural identity of the surrounding communities would merit a separate and more systematic investigation, in order to understand more fully how the island is situated within local perceptions of place.

The nuns engage in a range of crafts and activities that contribute to the preservation of cultural and religious legacies and artisanal traditions. Their restoration laboratory – described by the abbess as «one of the largest in Italy for liturgical textile conservation» (interview) – receives numerous precious fabrics from across the country. They also carry out the restoration of ancient manuscripts, host hand-weaving and iconography workshops in the "Gloria Dei" house and maintain a small printing laboratory.

Year 2023 marked the 50th anniversary of the monastery's foundation. Over these decades, it has become a significant landmark in the region. The nuns actively contribute to the enhancement of the island and its surroundings, promoting the local cultural and historical heritage and ensuring its preservation, while presenting the area's historical memory to the public. Although the establishment of the Mater Ecclesiae gradually encouraged the purchase and restoration of many of the island's old houses – now largely used as holiday homes by Italian and foreign visitors – the Benedictine community remains the only year-round resident presence, de facto the «*castellane* of the island» (interview).

What emerges from the island's long history is the continuity of a religious presence. San Giulio has constantly retained its symbolic function as a spiritual place, in spite of experiencing phases of decline and short interruptions of ecclesiastical activities, between the Late Antiquity and the Contemporary Era. Even today, the island continues to be an important pilgrimage site, linked to the memory of the eponymous saint. This is especially evident on January 31, the feast day of Saint Julius, when people from the lakeside towns gather for a

celebration. To mark the event, the nuns distribute small, sweet buns, known as “pane di San Giulio”, a tradition they revived since seventeenth-century testimonies of bread offerings, now a symbol of the festival (fig. 2).



Figure 2. The entrance to the Mater Ecclesiae with a sign displaying that the abbey is not open to general tourism and that the “pane di San Giulio” is distributed only during the related feast. Photo by Roberta Rodelli

This symbolic continuity – rooted in the landscape, the architecture, and the narratives surrounding the island – has made San Giulio a uniquely layered site of meanings. The island’s spiritual identity was not constructed in a single moment, but gradually sedimented through centuries of liturgical and territorial practices. As the next section will show, this inherited significance forms the foundation upon which the place is perceivable as a renewed and living heterotopia.

Reading the Island of San Giulio through Foucault’s principles

In his 1967 lecture *Des espaces autres*, Michel Foucault outlined six principles that define heterotopias. These principles can offer a framework through which interpret San Giulio as a functioning heterotopia in the present landscape. The following analysis tries to apply each of these principles to the island and its contemporary monastic community, to recognize in which terms the very space of San Giulio continues to produce “difference” – through rhythms, relations and symbols – within the fabric of the present.

According to Foucault, all cultures produce heterotopias, though their forms and functions may vary. He identifies two main types: *heterotopias of crisis*, typical of so-called “primitive” societies, where specific places are designated for

individuals undergoing transitional or exceptional conditions – such as adolescence, pregnancy, or illness – and *heterotopias of deviation*, more common in modern contexts, which accommodate those whose behaviour departs from societal norms. Throughout history, islands (especially small ones) have frequently been selected as preferred sites for these heterotopias. Their natural separation by water creates a spatial threshold, which has made them particularly suited for practices of isolation, seclusion, sanctification, or transformation. This spatial distinctiveness has made islands recurring settings for spaces imbued with symbolic or regulatory functions, as literature and cultural history abundantly demonstrate. Beyond their symbolic value, islands are explored in political geography as material sites and political concepts that reveal «spatial ontologies of power» (Mountz, 2014, p. 3, 5). Their boundedness and distance have often made them places where different forms of power become spatially visible: gathered at the edge and kept apart from the outside. The Island of San Giulio offers a compelling case. Over the centuries, across different social contexts and through evolving historical spatial configurations, it has embodied successive heterotopic functions: from a centre of early Christian mission to an episcopal stronghold, then a canonical hub and presently a cloistered monastery. While each transformation altered its institutional and symbolic role, the island has consistently functioned as a space of separation and meaning. As the abbess observes, beyond every historical change the island has always been inhabited by religious presence: from the legend of Saint Julius driving away the snakes, to the steady succession of communities that kept a flame of devotion alive, passing from one generation to the next. The current Benedictine community has built upon this legacy, reshaping it and establishing a living form of heterotopia that engages with the present surroundings, within the broader framework of a millennial Christian cultural presence that emerged in the aftermath of the collapse of imperial institutions.

In fact, Foucault's second principle highlights the mutable nature of heterotopias: within a given historical context, societies can redefine and even reabsorb these spaces according to shifting cultural logics and purposes. Each heterotopia operates according to a specific mode that reflects the values, structures, and symbolic frameworks of the society that produces it. As cultures evolve, so too can the meanings and functions attributed to heterotopic places. Islands, in general, illustrate this dynamic capability for transformation. A single island may serve, at different times, as a sanctuary, a military base, a prison, or a holiday retreat, with its function reconfigured by the needs and imaginaries of its era.

The Island of San Giulio exemplifies this heterotopic adaptability. Once a fortified episcopal citadel commanding religious and political authority, it hosts today the Benedictine monastery that sustains a space of quiet enclosure and spiritual labour. While the nuns continue a historical path of religious/sacred presence, they also shape a renewed spatial narrative, that is not confined within the island "walls", but irradiates outward through gestures, presence, silent hospitality, offering the broader community a glimpse of an alternative way of

inhabiting/living space and time. For instance, they practice hospitality not for tourism but for spiritual reception: guests participate in liturgies and prayers, share meals in silence, help with light works... activities are meant to propose a counter-experience of existence, distinct from the surrounding lakeside life and fast-paced realities. An already existing heterotopia has therefore evolved into a new today-situated function: a space of spiritual refuge that offers a way of living alternative to the values of the surrounding modern society, both inheriting and transforming the island's past.

As a third principle, heterotopia holds the ability to juxtapose, within a tangible space, different *places* that might even inherently contradict one another, such as the sacred and the secular, the confined and the open, the fantastical and the real. In the case of islands, the concepts of mystery and knowability could be attributed to this contradictory coexistence. The physical configuration of an island, defined by its natural boundary, becomes especially striking when dealing with smaller islands. Logically, such tiny territories should lend themselves to easy exploration and understanding. Yet, they frequently stir feelings of unfamiliarity and unease. Throughout history, they have often become settings for mysteries in different cultures⁸.

San Giulio condenses elements of sacredness, spirituality and common everyday life, seclusion and openness, religious timelessness and human seasonal rhythms.

Objectively located in the centre of a lake, the small island appears to be held within the natural embrace of the surrounding shores, a place enclosed, encircled, visible and maybe even “protected” by the mainland, so logically part of the cultural and social fabric of the surrounding villages and cities. Nevertheless, the symbolic charge that has been recovered, reconfigured and amplified by the monastic presence makes it somewhat escape this “embrace” (fig. 3). San Giulio, when experienced, is perceived as not fully integrated in the “ordinary” landscape, as a space apart, distant, almost symbolically “out of reach”. The nuns themselves describe their feeling both surrounded and set

⁸ Examples supporting these claims can be found in the works of Deriu (2020) and Cavallo (2019). Deriu analyses how several Homeric islands, such as Ogygia, Eea, Faro and Thrinakia, are portrayed as static, enclosed, and often unsettling spaces, inhabited by divine beings and associated with temporal suspension and existential tension. These characteristics contribute to a sense of disorientation and unease, especially in the case of Thrinakia, which is sacred to the Sun and shadowed by the threat of divine punishment (Deriu, 2020, p. 76). As for the second point, both Deriu and Cavallo emphasise the cultural role of islands as natural settings for mystery and the extraordinary. Deriu highlights the ambivalence of Scheria, described as a fabulously rich and utopian space with supernatural features and the nostalgic idealisation of Syria, an imaginary island evoked through deceptive or dreamlike narratives (Ivi, pp. 75-77). Cavallo reinforces this reading by observing how, in literature, islands often serve as distinct topological settings for apparitions, transformations, and revelations, spaces where narratives unfold between the marvellous and the unsettling (Cavallo, 2019).

apart, able to see the horizon in every direction, as if placed at the centre of a universal dimension.

What's more, the heterotopic layer of San Giulio is "experiential": the same space is lived in radically different ways. For the external visitors, who easily reach the island by boat, it offers an experience of free walking among quiet clustered houses through an inner circular walkway⁹ immersed in a contemplative mood that is accessible but not imposed. For the cloistered Benedictine nuns, by contrast, the island is a space of enclosure and permanence: they can not leave it, while others may temporarily enter. This coexistence of meanings confirms San Giulio as a site where multiple apparently non-commensurable spatial logics and functions act simultaneously.

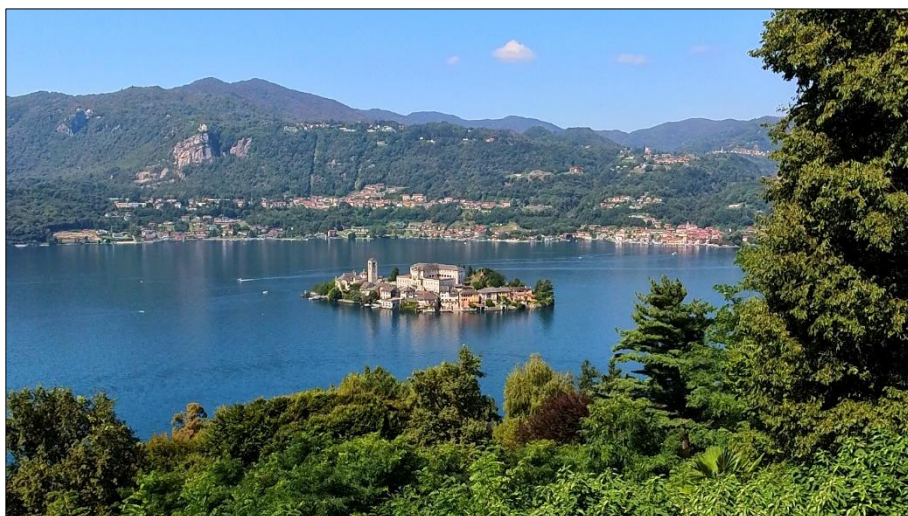


Figure 3. The Island of San Giulio seen from Sacro Monte d'Orta. Photo by Roberta Rodelli

In his fourth principle, Foucault brings the notion of "heterochrony" as an attribute of heterotopia. This refers to the fact that heterotopias are frequently linked to the division of time. A heterotopia operates when individuals experience a break from conventional time. He provides the examples of cemeteries, symbolizing eternity beyond life or holiday resorts that offer festive time detached from the "regular time" of everyday life. Marginality of small islands inherently results into distinct temporal dynamics. The geographical separation between island and mainland is reflected in temporal distance, influenced by travel durations needed for the transfer, that can vary based on factors such as water conditions and the frequency of ferry services that may

⁹ The circular route of the street is believed to have originated in the early medieval period and to have continued, over the centuries, to act as the organizing principle behind the settlement pattern (Caldano, 2014, p. 130).

change according to seasons. Even today the rhythm of life on small islands is often punctuated by the arrivals and departures of ships, often serving as the sole connection to the mainland (Rocca, 2012, p. 43). In the case of San Giulio the temporal separation is especially visible outside the peak of summer touristic season: from autumn to spring, the only restaurant is closed and transport is limited since the last ferry departs at 4 p.m., and no further connections are available until 9 a.m. the following morning.

Monastic life as well is structured by specific temporal subdivisions, by repetition and by cycles of prayer, silence, and manual labour. This repetition creates a sense of eternity and of suspended time (Melville, 2020, pp. 339-340).

Also, in the case of San Giulio, the geographical separation from the mainland – however small – imposes a logistical and symbolic time lag: life on the island is influenced by logistical/external factors and by organizational/internal ones: the rhythm of arrivals and departures, of transport constraints, of liturgical seasons.

In this case too, though, the contribution of the nuns in materially shaping the island's landscape suggests an even deeper detachment from the outside world at a temporal level, reinforcing the sense of heterochrony. Evidence of this different perception of time can be recognized also in the aforementioned inner circular walkway prepared for the visitors by the monastic community. The so called *Via del Silenzio* winds around the island, offering gentle hints for reflection through short, highly meaningful phrases displayed on signs affixed to the abbey walls. The path begins and ends at the same physical point, yet it invites to an inner transformation: the time spent "walking in silence" is meant to foster spiritual/meditative self-awareness. In the words of the abbess Cànopi «All those who are thirsty for beauty and infinity will find, in the *Via del Silenzio*, the home of their hearts» (<https://benedettineisolasangiolio.org/lisola-di-san-giulio/la-via-del-silenzio/>), the offer of infinity suggests the reachability of a threshold into timelessness or eternal present. What's more, the physical loop shape of the path evokes a non-linear experience of time, a symbolic circular repetition, as it is in monastic life, where days are structured by recurring cycles of prayer and work. The *via* created by the nuns seems to encourage the one who walks to escape linear worldly temporality to reach a rhythm closer to eternity.

The fifth principle states that heterotopias always assume a system of entrance-and-exit, of opening-and-closing that simultaneously isolates and allows access to them. For instance, gaining entry often necessitates a special authorization, or it may be required to complete a number of actions or to go through specific rituals. This opening and closing of the island is inevitably conditioned by the water that surrounds it. Whether it is the sea or a lake, water acts as both a divider and as a means of connection. It is indeed possible to approach the island exclusively from certain specific points where the coastline is accessible and where a harbour or a dock is available. In 1980 Angelo Turco indeed observed that, regardless of destinations and origins, the flows of people moving in and out of an island have obligatory points of passage (Turco, 1980,

p. 17). These points are relatively few in number, especially in small islands (Rocca, 2012, pp. 42-43). The harbour, the pier, or also the airport in the contexts where it is present, all serve as transitional points, specifically designed to manage arrivals and departures. Thus, they form a structure of openings and closures that fit in the island's natural boundaries, characterizing the island as a heterotopia.

In the case of San Giulio, this spatial filter is reinforced by the rules of monastic enclosure. The Benedictine nuns do not leave the island, and the monastery is not open to casual visitors. Guests who wish to stay must request hospitality in advance and agree to live according to the rhythm of the community: in silence, simplicity and participation. Even for daily visitors, access to the cloistered areas is restricted, and the island as a whole carries a tone of separation and reverence. The very journey of leaving the shore and approaching the island carries its own symbolic resonance, mirroring that "spiritual transition" that monastic life represents. Physical boundaries (the lake), architectural thresholds (the gate to the monastery), and behavioural expectations (silence, contemplation) all converge to define the modes of access and its limitations. Symbolic and physical restrictions work together to reinforce the island's heterotopic identity.

As a final principle, Foucault indicates that a heterotopia is functional to the surrounding space. Heterotopias unfold between two extremes: «either they serve to create a space of illusion that exposes all real space, all the sites in which human life is relegated, as even more illusory (...) or else, on the contrary, they create another space, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as much as ours is disordered, badly laid out, and confused» (Foucault, 1967, p. 7; my translation).

Frequently, the island assumes the role of a separated, peripheral context that operates independently from the mainland, yet plays a functional role relative to it. Islands have frequently been used as a place of exile to accommodate individuals showing unconventional behaviours. Alternatively, they have been adapted to function as organized sites for specific purposes, following their own temporal rhythms, as seen in the concept of resort-islands. Moreover, they can be transformed into places of mystical or sacred importance, serving, for instance, as dwellings for religious hermits or coenobitic communities.

San Giulio, rather than serving as a space of marginalization or illusion, has been shaped into a coherent space of spiritual precision. The Benedictine monastery, with its strict rules of silence, enclosure, and ritualized daily life, establishes a carefully ordered microcosm. This island-space does not reflect the fragmented and noisy reality of the mainland; instead, it offers a counter-space of calm, contemplation, and constancy. It is functionally autonomous, yet it carries symbolic and cultural meaning for the surrounding area.

As suggested by Ragazzoni's evocative verse, the island «mirrors the village (Orta San Giulio) almost like its own reflection», preserving the historical memory and traditions, standing as a symbol of Christian continuity in the region. It also intends, however, to counterweight excessively secular time, hyper-

productivity, and fragmentation through proposing a different model of life, one rooted in stillness, ritual, and permanence. In doing so, it does not withdraw from society but offers a counter-space that remains present and active within it. A clear expression of this vocation may be found in *Via del silenzio*, the only path that runs through the island accompanied by signs bearing phrases that invite to pause, listen and dwell in the experience of interiority.

Conclusions

In light of Foucault's six principles, it becomes evident that San Giulio is not merely a historical space whose heterotopic qualities faded in time. Rather, it is a heterotopia living to this day, that maintains, renews and amplifies its "otherness" through the presence and practices of the Mater Ecclesiae's community. The evidence demonstrates that the island is today a strong historical and spiritual site which is dynamically experienced as "other space" in-between its surroundings. Its separation is not marginalization, but orientation; its isolation is not sterile detachment, but intentional distinction.

Several dimensions have emerged as central. The insular condition itself is able to reinforce the perception of the abbey as "other", in line with Foucault's theorization. The historical continuity of religious presence, as emphasised by the abbess, anchors the island's identity in a sedimented symbolic and spiritual framework.

The Benedictine community of Mater Ecclesiae has played an active role in revitalizing the island: they restored abandoned buildings, restructured daily life and effectively reopened the island to visitors. Their presence stimulated new flows of tourism – today, ferries depart almost every fifteen minutes in the summer season, a service that did not exist before the nuns' arrival.

The monastery's relationship with the surrounding territory is significant. The community has become a point of reference, or even a "landing place" for the lake area. This is evident in both symbolic and practical ways. The aforementioned practice of baking the "pane di San Giulio", during the saint feast day, established by the nuns rediscovering an earlier tradition, has been embraced by nearby communities as a cultural and spiritual marker.

From their vantage point, in the highest part of the island, the nuns experience both separation and centrality: set apart from the visitors below, yet literally at the centre of the lake, with a 360-degree outlook over the surrounding territory.

Perhaps a very peculiar feature of San Giulio's heterotopic quality lies in the monastery's carefully framed hospitality. Mater Ecclesiae abbey is certainly closed and detached from the outside world, the nuns maintain a separation from the flow of tourists on the lower part of the island, and contact is established only on their terms. Guests are, nevertheless, welcomed, if they wish to participate in the monastic rhythm, adapting themselves to the community's conditions. In this sense, hospitality becomes an extension of the monastic

heterotopia itself: entry requires crossing first a physical boundary – the waters of the lake and the gate of the abbey – and a second symbolic threshold of a different place and of a different temporality, one that is ordered by prayer, work and silence. The abbeys captured this dynamic by describing the monastery as «a beacon illuminating many shadows, a landing place for those arriving with questions, doubts or solitude» (interview). The experience offered is not that of a conventional openness, but of encounter within a ruled distinct spatial and temporal order.

The Island of San Giulio today can be understood, for all of the above, as a heightened heterotopia with a doubled nature. The two dimensions of *island* and of *monastery* reinforce one another: the insular physical and symbolical separation amplifies the monastery's spiritual distinctiveness, while the monastic life gives the island renewed significance and visibility in the cultural and territorial network. It offers a significant model of resistance against the erasure of memory, a phenomenon increasingly common in insular contexts subject to tourism rebranding (Nocente, dell'Agnese, 2025). In contrast, the monastic presence on San Giulio ensures that its historical and symbolic layers are not silenced by a naturalistic/aestheticizing gaze. While tourism often seeks to “freeze” islands into ahistorical idylls, San Giulio's doubled heterotopia keeps history alive and in motion, proving that “other spaces” can be vital anchors of collective memory. It exemplifies how heterotopias can persist and evolve in a sort of “multilayered complexity”: rooted in history, sustained by insularity, embodied in religious life and carefully dialoguing through practice of hospitality and traditions with the community that surrounds it. The case study may therefore be defined as a compelling case of a contemporary reinforced – in some ways doubled – heterotopia, intended as a vibrant spatial condition in motion and as a shaper of cultural and territorial relationships in the milieu to which it belongs.

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THE ISLAND OF SAN GIULIO: A “HEIGHTENED” HETEROTOPIA – The article interprets the Island of San Giulio (Lake Orta, Piedmont) as a contemporary “heightened” heterotopia, produced by the interplay between insularity and Benedictine enclosure. After framing the discussion within recent Island Studies and Foucault’s theory of heterotopia, the research combines theoretical exploration, historical-documentary reconstruction, and direct observation. Applying Foucault’s six principles, the island displays: continuity and metamorphosis of “other” functions; heterochronies linked to monastic rhythms and lacustrine connections; regimes of access and regulated

hospitality; the coexistence of eternity/temporality and territorial separation/centrality. Since 1973, the Benedictine community has reactivated material and symbolic heritage, redefining the island as an ordered microcosm that, in various ways, becomes an attractor within the local context. The case shows that heterotopias are not necessarily marginal spaces but may also be relational devices capable of shaping contemporary landscapes and practices.

Keywords: heterotopia; lacustrine islands; Benedictine monasticism; Island of San Giulio.

L'ISOLA DI SAN GIULIO: UN'ETEROTOPIA "RAFFORZATA" – L'articolo interpreta l'Isola di San Giulio (Lago d'Orta, Piemonte) come eterotopia contemporanea "rafforzata" dall'intreccio tra condizione insulare e clausura benedettina. Dopo un inquadramento nei recenti Island Studies e nella teoria foucaultiana dell'eterotopia, la ricerca combina esplorazione teorica, ricostruzione storico-documentaria e osservazione diretta. Applicando i sei principi di Foucault, l'isola mostra: continuità e metamorfosi di funzioni "altre"; eterocronie legate a ritmi monastici e connessioni lacustri; regimi di accesso e ospitalità regolata; compresenza di eternità/temporalità e separazione/centralità territoriale. La comunità benedettina, insediata dal 1973, ha riattivato patrimoni materiali e simbolici, ridefinendo l'isola come microcosmo ordinato che diviene in vari modi attrattore nel contesto lacustre. Il caso evidenzia come le eterotopie non siano necessariamente spazi marginali, ma dispositivi relazionali capaci di modellare paesaggi e pratiche contemporanee.

Parole chiave: eterotopia; isole lacustri; monachesimo benedettino; Isola di San Giulio.