

Sea Level Changes Affect Jersey's Inhabitants

Old World Archaeologist - May 1984

by Heinz D. Schwinge

On April 20, 1982, the Channel Island of Jersey issued four stamps (Scott Nos. 285-288) which show the changes in sea level from 16,000 to 4,000 B.C. The set was issued as Jersey's contribution to the Europa theme "Historic Events". Designed by Alan Copp, the stamps were printed by lithography by the House of Questa in sheets of twenty. The bottom tabs of each sheet carry a brief description of the scene shown on the stamp. (See Notes below for the text.)

The first stamp (11 p, horizontal format) depicts Jersey 16,000 years ago. It is shown not as an island, since the sea level was about 100 meters (about 328 feet) lower than it is today, but as an Outcropping of rock overlooking a broad valley in which the Seine made its way to the Atlantic, which can be seen in the distance.

The second stamp (11 p, vertical format) zooms in on Jersey so that the cliffs making up the future England and France can be seen at the top and bottom of the stamp respectively. The sea level has risen to forty meters (131 feet) below the current level.

The third stamp in the set (19 1/2 p, vertical format) shows a view of coastal France, 9,000 years ago. The water level is only twenty-five meters (82 feet) below today's level. While Sark, Guernsey, and Alderney have become islands, Jersey remains part of the continent.

The fourth and last stamp (19 1/2 p, horizontal format) focuses on a Jersey which has finally become an island, although at low tide it is still linked to the continent by a rocky causeway. The sea level is now about 12 meters (40 feet) below the current level. The then-existing island is about twice the size of the island today. (Throughout the set, the island's current size is indicated by a white line.)

Changes in apparent sea level are caused by a number of factors such as uplift or subsidence of an area, but in the case shown on these stamps, a world-wide phenomenon is responsible. The last of a series of ice ages which irrevocably altered the world's flora and fauna, including humans, was beginning to come to an end.

Thus this series of stamps portrays one portion of one of a number of glacial epochs. Prior to the time depicted on the set, during Mousterian or Neanderthal times, only Jersey of the Channel Islands is known to have been inhabited but as the previous ice age came to an end, the rising sea inundated a source of flint lying on the channel bottom between Jersey and France. Stone tools had to be made from coarser and less suitable materials. From 125,000 to 75,000 years ago, the island was apparently uninhabited as one of the major prehistoric sites on Jersey, La Cotte de St. Brelade, was partly removed by rising sea waters which also sealed the remainder with a sterile layer. Only to be abandoned

Sea Level Changes Affect Jersey's Inhabitants

permanently when the layers of accumulated debris made the shelter too small for humans.

While Cro-Magnon hunters apparently occupied the island, they left no art work similar to that in near-by France which has captured our admiration since its recent discovery.

Later, Neolithic peoples left pottery as well as evidence of shelters, agriculture, and hunting of seals. Tools indicate that inhabitants received goods via trade routes from as far away as the Alps. Jersey also has its share of dolmens and passage graves, the most spectacular being La Hougue Bie. This is covered with a thirteen-meter (43 feet) mound and is made of sixty-nine large stones weighing up to thirty tons. Skeletal remains of eight persons (three females) as well as pottery were found. (see following checklist)

While an island during Neolithic times, Jersey could be reached from France either by boats (which were then available) or by simply walking during low tide. To this day Jersey remains near France in some ways; yet – also separated – by more than water.

The stamps which at first seem little related to an archaeological theme, upon closer inspection reveal an intimate relation to the prehistory of Jersey's people.

Notes:

“16,000 BC at the time of greatest glaciation in Europe, Jersey and the whole of Britain were part of the continental land mass. Now, slowly, the ice commences its retreat and as it melts, so the sea levels begin to rise.”

“10,000 BC As the ice edges north wards, the mosses and lichens of the tundra are replaced by a greater abundance of plant life. Sea levels rise further, the western ocean advances into the lowlands still joining Britain and the Continent.”

“7,000 BC the sea surrounds Britain, and only Jersey remains part of the Continent. The landscape is transformed with pines followed by the growth of deciduous trees and other vegetation. Tribes of hunter-gatherers live along the shorelines of the region. “

“4,000 BC The sea level rises further and Jersey, too is separated from the Continent, although at low tide linked by a rocky causeway. Neolithic man looks over from the neighboring mainland to the Island's thickly wooded valleys, gorse and bramble uplands and will soon begin to cross.”

Reprinted through the kind permission of the Old World Archaeological Study Unit.