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'The concept of 'Finland as an Island': a critical reappraisal within a comparative European context'.

For a considerable time, the concept of Finland as a peripheral 'island' in northern Europe dependent to a large extent on maritime trade and commerce has tended to dominate its historiography. A very high proportion of its foreign trade was seaborne; over one-third of its external borders were coastal; urbanization was driven primarily by the growth of ports and maritime communities; and a wide range of occupations and activities were directly related to the sea. Moreover, long-term changes in the maritime economy had a direct effect on the structure of Finnish society and on family life.

The primary objective of the keynote presentation is to re-examine the established concept of 'Finland as an Island', specifically in the nineteenth century, when the Grand Duchy of Finland was an autonomous part of the Russian Empire. It will explore, in turn, a number of related themes as a means of reassessing the apparently unique status of Finland during this period. These will include the following: the role of ports and coastal communities in urban population growth; the extent and significance of merchant trading networks; the familial and social framework of a seafaring culture; and the contribution of emigration to economic development. In each case, the experience of Finland will be analysed in a comparative context, focusing not only on other Scandinavian states, but on Europe as a whole.

Too often in the past, Finland has been portrayed as a special case, as 'one of the world's most northern and geographically remote countries' with an island mentality moulded by trade and maritime culture. Because of its isolation, its long-run development, at least until the first half of the twentieth century, has often been seen as atypical. According to some sources, the traditional concept is 'still very true', but it is clearly the case that a critical reappraisal is overdue, particularly if maritime historians are to place their research more effectively within a comparative European framework.