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FRAGMENTS OF AN ARCHIPELAGO: AEGEAN ISLETS AS HUMAN LANDSCAPES

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INTRODUCTION

The Aegean Archipelago consists of numerous insular groups formed by main islands and clusters of outlying uninhabited or not permanently settled islets. This seemingly “fragmented” and dispersed geography has been emblematically projected and familiarized through the Greek national and tourist landscape imagery, from postcards and advertising to TV news and weather reports. Within such a visually articulated setting, the peripheral and remote islets of the Aegean are perceived in an ambiguous marginality. Described as deserted rocks (in Greek, *vrachonisdhes*, or *erimonisdhes*) and imagined as inhospitable, wind-swept landscapes in winter, they became during the summer months remote shelters providing “unspoiled” shores and underwater scenery ideal for scuba diving and yachting. Reference and representation of the islet seascapes usually comes with strong connotations of inaccessibility, abandonment and exile, or of an “exoticized”, idyllic monasticism. This stereotypical duality of winter abandonment and summer attraction has been aptly summarized as a main imaginary constituent of the Aegean “myth”: “The Aegean landscape is imagined as an essentially uninhabited landscape during the best part of the year, while, during holidays, and especially summer, it becomes vacationland, the playground of both Greek and international tourism” (Terkenli, 2001: 204).

Within considerable distance from the urban mainland centers as well from popular island destinations and sea routes, the outlying islets are perceived as “purely” natural landscapes, timeless fossils of the Aegean’s wild beauty as manifested in its tectonic geomorphology and rich biodiversity (also see Terkenli, 2001: 203). Many islets and sea rocks are proclaimed wildlife reserves or ornithological shelters and have been inscribed in environmental preservation lists. The symbolic taxonomy of ascribing these sites to the domain of nature and wilderness also implies an assumed absence, or minor presence, of historic evidence and contemporary human activities.

Among the few exceptions of claiming a cultural context and historical background for these landscapes are the restoration and heritage management plans for the sites of Yaros and Makronisos, two islets which have been places of political exile and

imprisonment for long periods of Modern Greek history (1948-1974) and recently acknowledged as historic sites of national, collective memory.

The Greek-Turkish 1996 crisis over the Imia/Kardak rocky islets triggered a debate on border, national territory and sovereignty, and raised interest on the islets' definition, land use and exploitation. Human presence on these small places arose as a crucial issue since, as it is defined in the UN Law of the Sea Convention, "rocks which cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of their own shall have no exclusive economic zone or continental shelf" (United Nations, 1982). Possible habitation and activities (even ephemeral) were seen as spatial markers of the national counter-geographies, symbolic, argumentative "anchors" in the turbulent field of diplomacy and political contestation. The interest and concern of the polemic was not invested on the islets as actual places but rather as metaphors solidifying the national borderline. When describing the Imia incident, in his autobiography, former U.S. president Bill Clinton is quite eloquent: "They were about to go to war over two tiny islets called Imia by the Greeks and Kardak by the Turks...There were no people living there, though Turks often sailed to the larger islet for picnics. The crisis was triggered when some Turkish journalists had torn down a Greek flag and put up a Turkish one. It was unthinkable that two great countries with a real dispute over Cyprus would actually go to war over ten acres of rock islets inhabited by only a couple of dozen sheep (...) I couldn't help laughing to myself at the thought that whether or not I succeeded in making peace in the Middle East, Bosnia, or Northern Ireland, at least I had saved some Aegean sheep" (2004: 697)

Throughout all these imagined views or contestations, there is an absence of the actuality and materiality of the islets as lived, inhabited spaces. Whether used as visual metaphors (hidden tourist shelters, landmarks of the Aegean iconography, border markers) or charged with negative associations (places of exile, prison or quarantine) these sites are not seen as ordinary places that people sail to, live and work on, build their houses or cultivate the land. They are perceived not as parts of daily life geographies but rather as belonging to another marginal, symbolic territory. This "state of exception" has also almost excluded these places from any deeper anthropocentric spatial analysis, integrated landscape research and interpretations.

INVESTIGATING THE DODECANESE ISLETS

This paper's discussion originated from fieldwork observations and data gathered on certain islets of the Dodecanese insular complex during the summer periods of 2000-2002 and the analysis, interpretation and discussion that followed (2002-2004).¹ Pre-fieldwork research included a detailed study of maps and aerial photography, documentation of ethnographic and historic resources, and selective interviews with the

¹ *Ethno-archaeological* and *Archaeo-ecological survey of the Dodecanese islets* conducted during two research periods between 2000 and 2002 in Southwest Aegean by the Department of Cultural Technology and Communication at the University of the Aegean supported by the Greek Ministry of the Aegean.

local islander communities.² These preparatory stages proved to be very useful in narrowing down the region of inquiry and conducting a targeted field research. Field walking and surveying in the whole territory or in extended areas of certain islets followed. Diaries of ethno-archaeological and ecological observations were kept in an attempt to integrate and comparatively interpret a diversity of field notes and raw data:

- archaeological field notes and records (building ruins and constructions, artifacts, surface potsherds);
- ethnological field observations (vernacular dwellings and architecture, place names, kinship lineage and structure, story telling);
- ecological (observations on the human ecology / human use of natural resources, e.g., land use, animal husbandry or water reservoirs);
- maps and geographic data;
- on-site photography.

The insular complex of the Dodecanese consists of 14 permanently settled and 11 seasonally inhabited, uninhabited or semi-abandoned islets (Fig.1 and Fig. 2). Islanders usually hire these islets from local municipalities of the main islands as grazing lands for their livestock, which they carry across the water on their fishing boats, sometimes combining alternative activities as cultivating forage crops, herb collecting or hunting game. The legal ownership of the islets is confirmed for some cases by land property titles, tax catalogues or other documents dating back to the Ottoman period, down to 1912.³ Land use and grazing rights though, are legitimized mainly through hereditary rights following a lineage of ancestry and kinship and through a continuity of living (even if maintaining a seasonal residence) and working (cultivating, building terraces, water saving, stock breeding) on the place. Therefore, continuity of presence (whether permanent or ephemeral), namely leaving a mark on the land, is essential for it turns an unclaimed, vague space into a contested landscape, a “flagged” territory with a firmly shaped identity of owning and belonging. During our research, we investigated “satellite islets” which lie within the periphery and belong, as public properties, to the administrative units of the main islands of Nisyros (Pergousa, Yali, Kandilousa, September 2000) and Astypalaea (Syrna, June 2002). Our aim has been to survey, document and interpret historic and contemporary elements of the regional ecology, built environment and cultural history. Physical as well as man-made features of the landscape (e.g., elevation and landmarks, coastline, dwellings and other constructions, agricultural terraces and enclosures) were identified and compared with intangible, social and symbolic landscape dimensions based on oral history and ethnography (e.g., place names, story telling and sacred places).

² Pre-fieldwork data was gathered and cross-examined by all authors. Dimitris Papageorgiou conducted interviews. On-site and overall research was planned and coordinated by Professors Nicholas Vernicos and Sophia Dascalopoulos.

³ It is on the basis of such legal documents that the municipalities of the islands of Nisyros have confirmed the lawful possession of the islets of Yali, Pergousa, and Pacheia and are profiting from the exploitation of the Yali *pozzuola* mining.

This paper is an attempt to summarize some main “features” of the humanly shaped landscapes on the islets that have been surveyed.

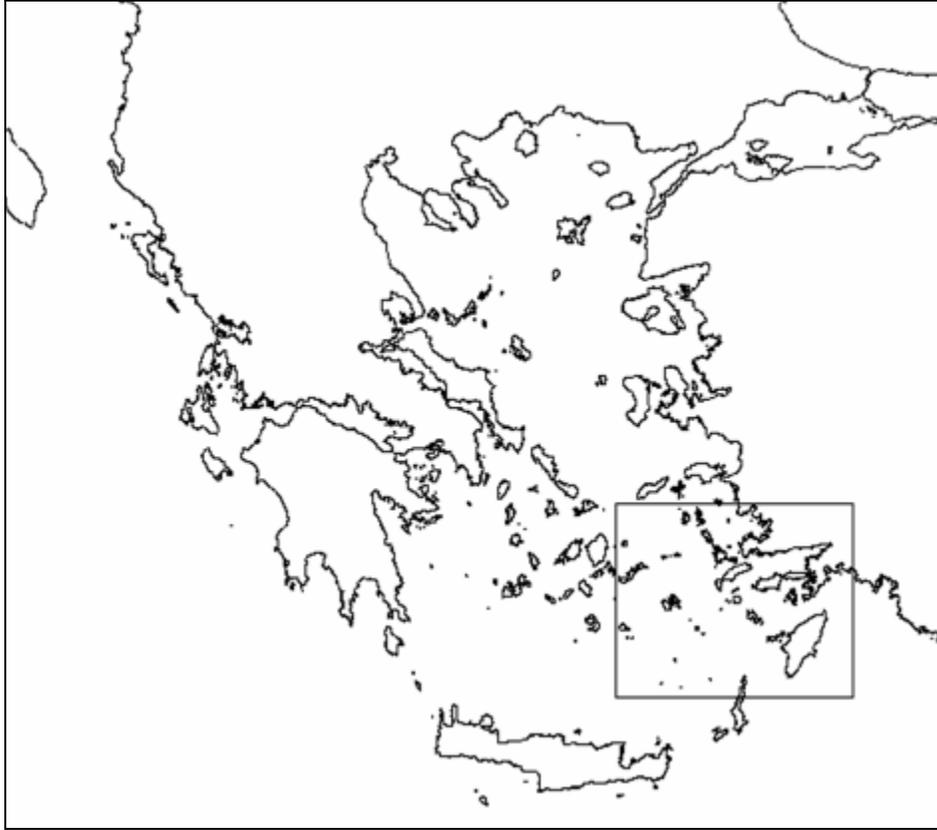


Figure 1: The Aegean region discussed.

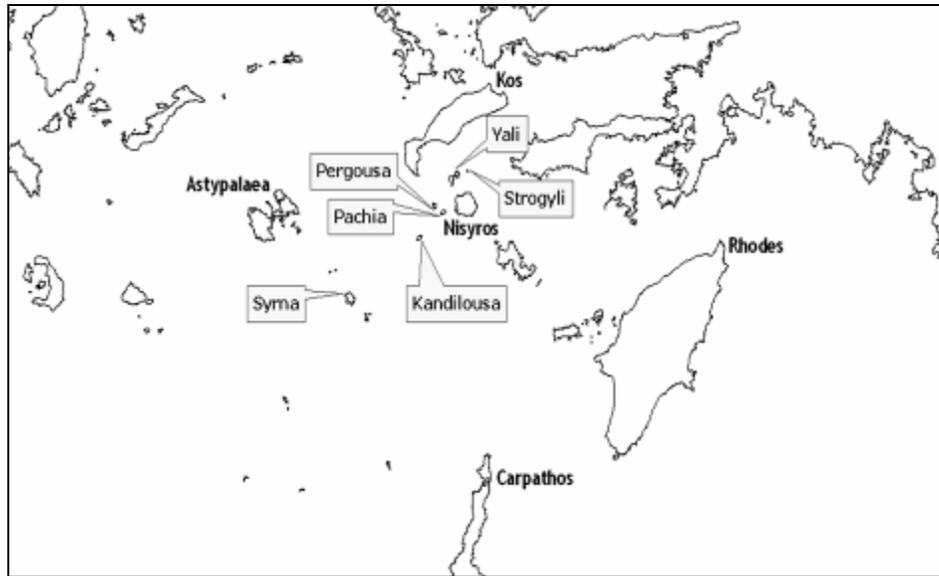


Figure 2: Dodecanese Islets.

SHAPING LANDSCAPES AND SEASCAPES.

Being a scarce resource in these semi-arid landscapes, water is highly valued. In almost every Aegean islet, people had to “crop” rainwater. We have located freshwater storage systems of cisterns in houses and fields, water ponds and reservoirs which, in some cases, are quite sophisticated, extensive and of a duration spanning across decades or centuries (though its continuous use makes it difficult to back-date them precisely).

Along with the limited fresh water, rough terrain and seasonal grazing (or over-grazing, occasionally) drastically restrict the land which is available for agriculture and only favor the growth of low vegetation: thyme, phrygana, juniperus (the local term is *fidhes*), sage and several other herbs and plants.⁴ Nearby islanders had to terrace the islets and create two or three zones, in order to take full advantage of it in harsh conditions. Terraces, enclosures, niches, built with dry stonewalling, have shaped the diminutive landscape and in many case the whole islet (as in the case of Pergousa). The scarcity of resources raised a need for the utmost exploitation, control and maintenance, in the long term, of these exiguous and dry landscapes.

Seasonal dwellings, storage rooms and fenced areas for animals, harboring points and shelters along with other constructions of a vernacular architecture based largely on oral tradition and experiential skill, have structured the surroundings. Limestone, sandstone and various volcanic stones as well as cedar (*juniperus*), wood and phryganum, are the most common resources for building on the islets. Dry stone, in all its versions of masonry, is the dominant resource of altering the landscape into a regulated, hospitable,

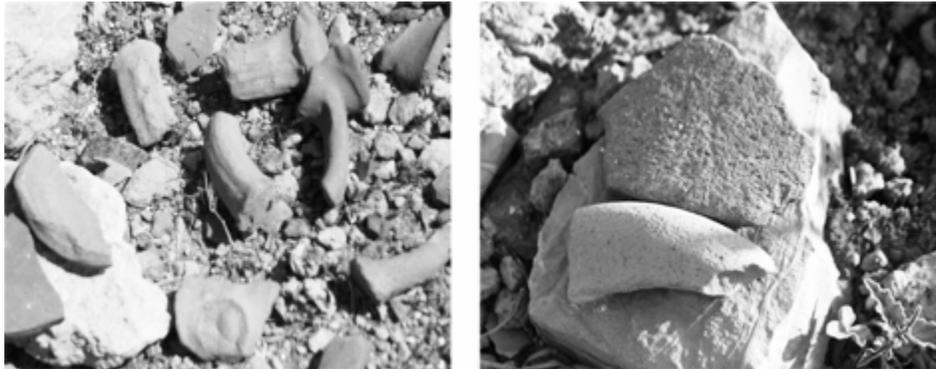
⁴ We have been unable to observe the Fall and Spring vegetation during the rainfall seasons.

viable and cultivable place. In some cases building is subtle and assimilated by geomorphology without leaving much traceable evidence exposed as in the case of the cave churches of Pergousa (Figs. 3 and 4).

Uninterrupted by much historic turbulence, though cultivated and ploughed, these landscapes have preserved and in many cases embodied archaeological building remains and moveable objects. Archaeological materials were often found reused and integrated in vernacular constructions and long-term structures as terraces, enclosures or other buildings. There is also a series of quite well preserved fortifications that should be part of a network of defensive, observatory, and orientating/communicative key-points across the regional seascapes (in Pergousa and Yali islets, see Figs. 5 and 6). We haven't been able to identify any traces of permanent archaeological settlements from mere surface observations but we have documented, during field-walking, considerable evidence of ephemeral/seasonal presence of various chronologies and cultural context. There is a notable surface density, topographic dispersion and time-spanning range of material evidence, from Neolithic obsidian flakes to Roman and Medieval potsherds (Figs. 7 and 8). Despite the fact that the limestone or volcanic ground of the islets does not provide orderly and chronologically layered remains but rather dispersed artefacts and eroded potsherds, further systematic, archaeological research could uncover and historically associate valuable finds and data.

The archaeological diversity and its topographic distribution favour a sense of contact, movement and exchange instead of static remoteness and historic isolation. The islets themselves, marked by human intervention (as manifested in observatories, fortifications or lighthouses) have been diachronic reference loci, in terms of contact and communication within a set of interrelated sites and regions. As points of orientation and intermediate stops during coast-to-coast navigation, occasionally providing refuge in bad weather or shelter for short stays and residence, as destinations of seasonal workers, livestock and supplies, experienced in a familiar visibility for frequent sailors like fishermen, they constitute a networked setting. They are integral parts of an inward seascape surrounded by emerged landmarks, which in some cases provides the illusion of a confined and inclusive topography resembling a lake.



Figures 3 & 4: Cave church, Pergousa Islet.**Figures 5 & 6:** Fortification, Pergousa Islet.**Figures 7 & 8:** Potsherds, Syrna Islet.

A SENSE OF PLACE: THE CASE OF THE SYRNA ISLET.

At this point, we will focus on the distinctive case of the Syrna islet, which concentrated many of the common Dodecanese features while, at the same time, provided the conditions for an integrated landscape research.⁵ Lying 16 miles southeast of the main island of Astypalaea and being the biggest islet of its insular complex, Syrna (also known as Sirna and Sirina meaning “Siren”) raises on an elevation of more than 300 metres with rough cliffs dropping into the sea and rocky slopes descending deeply into the coastline. Two inlets, penetrating the islet’s solid relief from the northwest and its southward coast, form natural harbours (described as *vala* or *vales* by the locals, a common term in island place names). The northwest inlet leads through impressive, dropping cliffs, to the settlement (Figs. 9 and 11). The low vegetation growing on the islet’s stony ground includes mainly various types of phrygana (*poterum spinosum* known as *astivies*, and *aspalathi*) juniper (*juniperus*, referred as *phida*, or *thida*) and random occurrences of sage (*Salvia Triloba*) and fig (*Ficus Carica*) or prickly pear. In

⁵ Syrna fieldwork team: Nicholas Vernicos, Sophia Dascalopoulos, Dimitris Papadopoulos.

the middle of the open and exposed Karpathian sea, along with the islets Trianisia (three islands) and Zafora (which are visible from the top of Syrna), Syrna has been a seascape-marker of navigational routes, which are often harsh due to the strong northern winds (the summer etesian winds are known in the Aegean as *meltemia*). A Greek portolan written before 1543 (published by Delatte in 1947) describes a route from Tilos and Nisyros and via the islets of Pachia, Kandileousa and Syrna, to Astypalea and Amorgos. There is also reference in the Ottoman Records of the Archipelago (1886-1887).

Syrna has always been assigned, usually through public auctions, to local householders and their families for exploitation (mostly livestock breeding). By (re)claiming and maintaining land use rights, descendants have ensured lineage continuity. According to historic records, an islander from Nisyros who lived on Syrna (1810-1830) herding his goats was officially granted the last name “Syrmiotis”.⁶ Since the end of 19th century, the islet has been the home of an extended family, living together, building, crafting and cultivating through collective and continuous labour that has shaped much of the islet’s surface. During the lifecycle of at least four generations (according to identified genealogy) the tenants of Syrna have built the settlement house (Figs. 12 and 13), a stone fenced stockyard and a furnace for baking their own bread, they terraced the fields (Fig. 18), constructed and maintained the dry stone enclosures, using the local resources of limestone, sandstone and schist, juniper wood and phrygana brush. As narrated by Eleni Metaxotou, one of the islet’s last occupants (1939-1959), all relatives were living together and were involved in the cultivation of barley, seasonal vegetables and fruit. Children were helping the adults in terrace cultivation. For herding, they had hired more than ten shepherds. Located on the south slopes and exploiting the rich resources of brush and wood, a limekiln was maintained and operating for many years. According to oral history, the kiln had been attracting workers from the island of Astypalea.⁷ This lively scenery of daily activities and mobility was affirmed by social contacts with outsiders and distant travellers. As mentioned by Nikitas Kontaratos (of the Syrna’s tenant family), the people of Syrna had music feasts with Cretans coming on the island and bringing wine with them. This social micro-geography also included two “sacred” landmarks: a vaulted little church, standing on the top of the terraced slope (Figs. 16 and 18) and the monastery of St. John after which Syrna was alternatively named in early map depictions.

The laboured and persistent habitation of Syrna led, in the long term, to the modification and regulation of a stabilised human landscape. Not surprisingly, the landscape shaped by the contemporary inhabitants - namely the locations of the harbour, the settlement (the “Vala” region) and the fields - coincides with a region that is quiet high in density of scattered potsherds (dating from various historic periods, mostly back to the Hellenistic and Roman times). Within the settlement periphery, as well as in the

⁶ Signifying descent, origin, ‘coming from Syrna’.

⁷ The kiln is also mentioned in the 18th century monumental chart set up by the Greek revolutionary Rigas Feraios.

fields, there is a diffusion of potsherds mingled with contemporary artefacts and utensils indicating that the islet must have been an occasional refuge and ephemeral residence within a continuum of centuries.

Another significant landmark of the local topography is the south plateau of Padiarolia where a dry stone round enclosure and a building within its periphery almost drops into a deep cliff facing southward, towards the Sophrana islets which are visible in clear weather. According to a story told by the elders, a hermit monk living in a cave once stepped down the cliff and vanished into the sea sitting on his clothing. The cape was named after this incident (*kalogeropount*) (Figure 14).

Some of the often-recalled events in Syrna's recent social biography took place during the Second World War. During the War, Greek and British resistance groups had found refuge on the islet. As narrated by the locals, the people of Syrna had once healed the burns of a British pilot using a traditional remedy. In December 1946, a military ship transferring Jews from Yugoslavia to Palestine sunk close to Syrna. As a British witness describes: "We returned to the patrol early in December (1946) and were diverted to the tiny Dodecanese Island of Sirina where an immigrant ship had grounded and sunk. The eight islanders were completely overwhelmed and unable to provide food or shelter, so the supplies and blankets dropped by RAF planes from Palestine were received with tears of relief as they had been surviving on soup made of local snails" (Newsletter of the American Veterans of Israel, 1999).

Throughout the years, the people of Syrna shaped a sense of belonging, a home identity, forged through family intimacy and kinship, daily labour, collective recall, and their experiential engagement with the landscape. Eleni Metaxotou who left the islet in 1944, reveals the forcefulness of emotional attachment to place in describing the loss of her young sister: "On Liberation (1944-1945) my mother gave birth to my sister and the English came and baptised her giving her the name Eleftheria (meaning Freedom in Greek). The poor girl died because she got sick. We couldn't carry her away and she died on Syrna. We couldn't get her elsewhere because we were afraid. Germans you see were still around. We buried her there behind the chapel. Since then we stayed again on the island but we fell apart and our worked spoiled and we lost our people."⁸

⁸ Interview with Dimitris Papageorgiou.

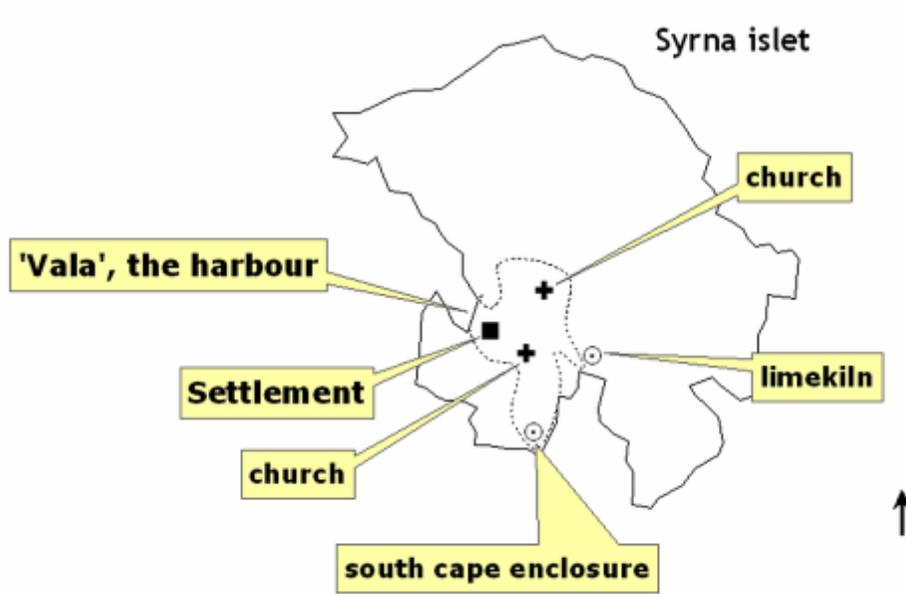


Figure 9: Sketch of the fieldwork area on Syrna Islet.



Figures 10 & 11: Syrna. Views of the harbour (vala) from southwest.



Figures 12 & 13: The settlement of Syrna.



Figures 14 & 15: Drystone enclosure and construction in Syrna's south cape.



Figures 16 & 17: Vaulted church in Syrna.



Figure 18: Syrna's terraced fields.

ABOUT SMALL ISLANDS AND PLACES: LANDSCAPE RESEARCH FROM MACRO TO MICRO-SCALE

Shaped by and experienced through human agency and engagement, Dodecanese and Aegean islets bear their own cultural biographies and could be researched and analysed in their historic “thickness” and complexity and through various interpretative schemes:

- as seascape landmarks within a networked visibility and interconnectivity of navigation, mobility, transportation and contacts, or refuge and seasonal dwelling;
- as locales of human experience, significance and spatial identity a “set of relational places, linked by paths, movements and narratives” (Tilley, 1994: 34). Small islands and islets have been the daily and familiar landscapes of human use and invested labour, passed from one generation to the next through hereditary property, ancestry and kinship continuity. The individuals or small-scale communities living on the islets hold strong ties with their land and the surrounding seascape, they recall stories about people and places, they get homesick and occasionally they even get a name after their home place;
- as a microcosm of human ecology, a cognitive territory perceived through an intimate knowledge of vegetation, soil qualities and environmental resources or “imprinted” in a detailed density of place names;
- as integral parts of the Dodecanese vernacular landscape and cultural heritage in its tangible or intangible manifestations (e.g., the local stonework architecture, craftsmanship or experiential skills and knowledge).

The interpretation of the Aegean outlying islets as cultural landscapes sets some interesting challenges for landscape theory, research and methodology. Insularity, as a particular spatial quality, offers much ground for exploration and potential for an integrated, holistic investigation. It has been acknowledged that, “as small islands offer the possibility to study the entire spectrum of man-environment relationships, a number of theoretical issues with a wide range of applications in insular situations have emerged” (Vernicos, 1990: 162).

Shaped by a subtle, continuous human adaptation and often ephemeral intervention with no solid signs of permanence, perceived through intangible (e.g., cognitive, emotional) associations, these landscapes may have vague limits in the so called “natural/cultural divide”. The same vagueness may also occur in an attempt to define a division between the past and contemporary landscape. Archaeological evidence, often dispersed or integrated into contemporary structures and uses, is not always fittingly layered and chronologically ordered. An archaeology of place and landscape on the islets, should share resources and methodologies with ethnology or human/cultural ecology in order to gain validity and inclusiveness.

Descriptive, analytical accounts on a phenomenological level and biographical micro-scale (see Tilley, 1994) can also set the ground for insightful inquiries on the

experiential qualities of place. Focusing on small-scale does not necessarily coincide with a fixed, static view of “rooted” landscapes, if leaving room for notions of movement, change and relocation (Bender, 2001). Detached from the binding dichotomy of the “centre/periphery” scheme, research could concentrate on the locality of these sites, in order to place them within the dynamic continuity of the broader, regional interrelation and interconnectivity.

Comparative approaches, including various insular settings and case studies, in which “socio-cultural environments are taken into consideration and small islands are viewed as places where humans live and work” (Vernicos, 1990: 162) have still much to reveal and contribute to the cultural history and geography of the Aegean.

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