MEANING AND IDENTITY IN A GREEK LANDSCAPE

In this interdisciplinary study, Hamish Forbes explores how Greek villagers have understood and reacted to their landscapes over the centuries, from the late medieval period to the present. Analysing how they have seen themselves belonging to their local communities and within both local and wider landscapes, Forbes examines how these aspects of belonging have informed each other. Forbes also illuminates cross-disciplinary interests in memory and the importance of monuments. Based on data gathered over twenty-five years, Forbes’ study combines the rich detail of ethnographic fieldwork with historical and archaeological time-depth, showing how landscapes have important meaning beyond the religious sphere in terms of kinship and ideas about the past and in their role as productive assets.

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MEANING AND IDENTITY IN A GREEK LANDSCAPE

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ETHNOGRAPHY

HAMISH FORBES

University of Nottingham
To the women in my life: Anne, Helen, Janet and Lin

And to the memory of Michael H. Jameson,

whose ideas on the Greek
countryside led to the research described

here
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This book is an ethnography aimed primarily at archaeologists, but I hope it will also be of interest to cultural geographers and social and cultural anthropologists. Indeed, my original research on the peninsula of Methana in Greece, the focus of this study, was an ethnography, written up as my Ph.D. in cultural anthropology. Yet I never intended to be an anthropologist. I embarked on a British undergraduate degree in Archaeology and Anthropology having already had some experience of archaeology, in both the classroom and the field. My experiences as an undergraduate only confirmed my belief that archaeology was much to be preferred over social anthropology, which seemed to me at the time a way of turning the lives of real people into artificial conceptual categories, as often as not via arid exercises in kinship algebra.

My graduate studies in the United States in a Department of Anthropology in which archaeology was a sub-field, along with cultural and physical anthropology, initially left me with much the same views about anthropology and its practitioners. Here the situation was exacerbated by occasional disquisitions on why North American cultural anthropology was so much better than European social anthropology: the differences between the two versions seemed minor in comparison with the similarities. However, my views about anthropology changed when I met one of America’s foremost cultural ecologists, Robert Netting. He showed me that some kinds of anthropology could remain firmly rooted on – indeed, in – the ground, in a pragmatic way that made sense. His empathy with dwellers in rural communities, as well as his mastery of the well-placed pun, have remained an inspiration for much of my own work.
Thus, although I considered myself at heart an archaeologist, I eventually found myself conducting ethnographic research for two years in a village on a small peninsula in Greece – Methana (pronounced with the stress on the first syllable). The understanding derived from that initial fieldwork on Methana forms the basis of much of this book. However, it was also significantly informed by a campaign of archaeological survey in the 1980s and by research into nineteenth-century documentary sources in the late 1990s. Over the period represented by these dates, I have seen many changes in the people, their livelihoods, and their landscape on Methana, which I have incorporated into this account.

The original germ of a book on Methana landscapes came from a discussion with a colleague who had also worked in Greece. After I had described aspects of Methana and its landscapes, she was very insistent that I should write what I knew. At the further urging of Lin Foxhall, my wife and closest colleague, I eventually applied for, and was awarded, a Leverhulme Research Fellowship for 1997–8. It was this award which allowed me to initiate this book and conduct research into documentary sources, the existence of some of which I had known about for almost a quarter of a century but had never had a suitable opportunity to study.

The other element in the germination of this book was the flurry of publications on prehistoric landscapes, starting in the 1990s, in which phenomenological approaches were frequently employed. As will rapidly become apparent, I felt dissatisfied with the ways in which landscapes, ancient and modern, were conceptualised and with the apparent desire to employ ethnographic parallels which seemed simultaneously maximally different from (aka ‘most anthropological’), and also least relevant to, those of Europe. Many scholars discussing the meanings of ancient landscapes were mining the literature on modern societies and their landscapes within the narrow confines of university libraries. From my direct experience, I felt that some of their efforts were leaving the subject as little rooted in the realities of real people wresting a living from unforgiving and unpredictable environments as the kinship algebra which had turned me off anthropology as a student. Ultimately, the stance of the phenomenologist, dispassionately standing on the outside looking in, whilst purporting to empathise
with the experiential world of their objects of study, lacks the genuine empathy with dwellers in rural landscapes which is so necessary for understanding the reality and complexity of meanings that their landscapes have for them.

In this book, therefore, I present an alternative view of a set of rural landscapes, seen not from the outside, but from within. Of course, not being a Methanitis, I cannot give a direct personal description of the meanings of the peninsula’s landscapes as one who has grown up there. However, much of this book represents the ethnographer’s viewpoint gained as participant observer – as ‘marginal native’, or ‘outsider within’. It also represents the understanding of someone accustomed to participating in rural communities and their landscapes in Britain, before I ever visited Greece, and since.

This presentation is also ‘alternative’ in being holistic in two senses. First, it represents a complex mix of sources of information. Traditional ethnographies have depended very largely on ethnographic data gathered via observation of life in the community or communities studied and via interviews which draw out information on a wide variety of topics. While this study depends greatly on such information, it also draws heavily on the material cultural record, much of it derived from archaeological survey. In addition, information from a unique set of nineteenth-century documents has been incorporated into the discussion and analysis to give a greater time-depth than is possible for most ethnographic studies.

Second, unlike many recent archaeological examples, this book goes beyond discussion of religious monuments in landscapes. Although these have had a pivotal role in Methanites’ landscapes, so, too, have issues of production, reproduction and questions of remembering and forgetting in the secular sphere. Ultimately, the key which unlocks the greatest number of doors to understanding these landscapes is that most ‘anthropological’ aspect of so many small communities: kinship and the family.

Equally ‘alternative’ is the European-ness of the study community, in contradistinction with the exoticism of many of the ethnographic studies used in discussions of prehistoric European landscapes. The issue of ‘valid’–’invalid’ or ‘more valid’–’less valid’ ethnographic studies to assist in understanding specific archaeological problems has a long
and unresolved history to which I do not wish to contribute directly. However, many will have nagging doubts about the extent to which arctic reindeer herders or foragers from the Great Australian Desert can really shed light on the meanings of places and spaces for European agriculturalists and herders in prehistory. More important, I argue that using highly exotic ethnographic examples risks dehumanising the people thus involved. Ultimately, interpretation in archaeology is about trying to understand the lives and knowledge of real people in the past.

In a period of research now extending over more than thirty years, focusing on data collected over a span of twenty-five years, a large number of people and organisations have had inputs in one way or another. This book would never have been written had it not been for periods of study leave in which I was able to concentrate fully on research and writing. I gratefully acknowledge the award of a Leverhulme Research Fellowship noted earlier, generous study leave provision from the University of Nottingham, and a semester of study leave funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board. I also owe an unrepayable debt of gratitude to all those Methanites who have accepted me into their villages, their churches and their homes, teaching me the true meaning of philoxenia (hospitality) and, equally important, giving me a glimpse of what a privilege it is to be a Methanitis. Particular thanks go to the president of the Demos of Methana, Panayiotis Lambrou, for permission to study and copy the archival sources held in the town hall and to the secretary and assistant secretary who made such study possible; also to Tobias Schorr, another non-Methanitis who has a special affection for Methana. Particular thanks, too, go to Athena Masst and her sister Penny, who have provided encouragement and important information on Methana from afar.

Many friends and colleagues have also contributed to this book in multifarious ways. Studying the cultural ecology of rural Greek communities was the inspired idea of the late Michael Jameson, who maintained an interest in my research on Methana throughout. The debt that I owe to the late Robert Netting is equally great – not least for showing me that it is possible to be both an archaeologist and a cultural anthropologist and to enjoy both. I would also particularly like to thank Karen Stears for her suggestion that I put what I have
learned about Methana landscapes into a book; Mari Clarke, with whom I shared my first period of fieldwork and on whose subsequent publications many aspects of the present work rely; Harold and Joan Koster, who introduced me to the benefits of working in the fields as part of fieldwork, and much more besides; Chris Mee, with whom I shared several summers during the Methana Survey and who has helped with a number of illustrations; Theo Koukoulis, who shared his knowledge and love of Greek churches with me; Bill Cavanagh for guidance on matters statistical; Lena Cavanagh for help on some abstruse aspects of Greek language and culture; Mercouris Georgiadis for correcting the Greek in the text; Jack Davis and Michael Given for pointing me towards some crucial references; David Taylor for most of the line drawings and diagrams; Keith Streb for his ingenuity in scanning a number of illustrations onto CD; Simon Whitmore and latterly Beatrice Rehl and Barbara Walthall for their advice on publication matters and for forbearance over missed deadlines; and two anonymous referees who provided supportive comments and insightful suggestions. Above all, Lin Foxhall has provided inspiration, support, advice and guidance while I have been involved in writing this book: she knows better than anyone what it is like to juggle teaching, administration, and research while also looking after an energetic family.

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Mari Clarke: figs. 3.2, 3.9a, 3.9b, 4.1, 4.2, 7.4, 9.4 and 9.5
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Stefanie Moehrle: fig. 9.9
Tobias Schorr: figs. 1.2, 2.1, 3.6 and the cover photo
There is no fully satisfactory system for transliterating modern Greek into Latin characters: the system used for ancient Greek is not entirely suitable. I have assumed that for those who do not know Greek, a simple transliteration into Latin letters will generally be of little value, so on occasions I simply give a word or phrase in Greek characters with its translation in English. However, where words or phrases in Greek are repeated, I give the Greek and a transliteration when they first appear and subsequently use a transliteration.

Many Greek characters have close equivalents in Latin letters, but a number do not. Where they do not, I generally transliterate them approximately phonetically.

- \( \alpha = a \)
- \( \alpha = e \)
- \( \alpha = av \) or \( \alpha = af \), depending on whether the following letter is voiced or unvoiced
- \( \beta = v \)
- \( \gamma = gh \) (\( \gamma \) before \( \epsilon, \upsilon, \varepsilon_1 \), and \( \omicron_1 \) has a sound close to an English initial \( y \), whereas before other vowels and diphthongs, it is closer to an aspirated \( g \). Nevertheless, I use \( gh \) throughout in order to distinguish \( \gamma \) from \( \gamma k \))
- \( \gamma k = g \)
- \( \delta = dh \) (a sound similar to the th in ‘then’)
- \( \epsilon = e \)
- \( \epsilon_1 = i \)
- \( \epsilon u = ev \) or \( \epsilon f \), depending on whether the following letter is voiced or unvoiced
TRANSLITERATION CONVENTIONS

\[ \begin{align*}
\zeta & = z \\
\eta & = i \\
\theta & = \text{th (a sound similar to the th in ‘thin’)} \\
\iota & = i \\
\kappa & = k \\
\lambda & = l \\
\mu & = m \\
\mu \tau & = b \text{ if used in initial position, otherwise generally mb} \\
\nu & = n \\
\nu \tau & = d \text{ if used in initial position, otherwise nd} \\
\xi & = x \\
\omicron & = o \\
\omicron \iota & = i \\
\omicron \nu & = ou \text{ (a sound similar to the oo in ‘boot’)} \\
\pi & = p \\
\rho & = r \\
\sigma, \varsigma & = s \\
\tau & = t \\
\upsilon & = i \\
\phi & = \phi' \\
\chi & = \text{kh (a sound similar to the ch in “loch”)} \\
\psi & = ps \\
\omega & = o
\end{align*} \]

The acute accent indicates where the stress falls.

Exceptions: Certain place names (e.g., Piraeus) and surnames (e.g., Triandaphyllou) do not conform strictly to these rules, if they are conventionally written in the form used for transliterating ancient Greek.

In addition, I use the following characters in Albanian place names:

\[ \begin{align*}
\breve{e} & \text{ represents the ‘er’ sound as in the standard British English pronunciation of the word ‘water’ – that is, without the post-vocalic r.} \\
\breve{j} & \text{ represents a sound like initial English y.}
\end{align*} \]