The Rural Landscapes of Archaic Cyprus

The ninth to the fifth centuries BCE saw a series of significant historical transformations across Cyprus, especially in the growth of towns and in developments in the countryside. In this book, Catherine Kearns argues that novel patterns of urban and rural sedentism drove social changes as diverse communities cultivated new landscape practices. Climatic changes fostered uneven relationships between people, resources like land, copper, and wood, and increasingly important places like rural sanctuaries and cemeteries. Bringing together a range of archaeological, textual, and scientific evidence, the book examines landscapes, environmental history, and rural practices to argue for their collective instrumentality in the processes driving Iron Age political formations. It suggests how rural households managed the countryside, interacted with the remains of earlier generations, and created gathering spaces alongside the development of urban authorities. Offering new insights into landscape archaeologies, Dr. Kearns contributes to current debates about society’s relationships with changing environments.

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The Rural Landscapes of Archaic Cyprus

An Archaeology of Environmental and Social Change

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For Alex
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Preface

Two sketches: in one, someone doctors a poster board map of the southeastern United States with a permanent marker to extend a projected impact area of Hurricane Dorian around southeastern Alabama. The correction followed the personal tweet of the then-President of the United States in early September 2019, which claimed that Alabama, along with Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Georgia, would “likely be hit (much) harder than anticipated. Looking like one of the largest hurricanes ever.”

Intervening between the bombastic tweet and the visual prop of the hurricane’s altered “zone of uncertainty” were various contradictory official statements from the local Birmingham division of the National Weather Association (NWA) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA), caught in the optics of a struggle over weather prediction involving the White House, meteorologists, the media, and various publics, especially those vulnerable to storm damage and dislocation. Embattled NOAA head Neil Jacobs, at an annual NWA meeting, called for his colleagues to remember that “weather should not be a partisan issue.” In the second sketch, photographs of icicles hanging from ceiling fans and videos of pipes bursting through the floors of homes in Texas circulate on social media during the days following a vortex of dangerously low temperatures in February 2021. This icy rupture of household things caused numerous deaths and wide-scale property damage, chiefly because vast sections of the region were subjected to rolling power blackouts from the lack of energy supply in the state’s privatized electrical grid. After people spent days without running water, or resorted to burning furniture for warmth, and with public and state tensions erupting, we could read in news headlines that “even the weather is polarized now.”

This book argues that weather has always had the potential to be political, because of how we humans experience it and perceive it as climate, unevenly, in material and ideational ways. The infrastructural conflict or failure in these sketches emerges not only through our unequal preoccupations and motivations, or through our fumbling to respond to unfamiliar weather events, but also through the volatile propensities of water, ice, or natural gas, and our expectations of their activity and force. Behind these
vignettes are mounting pressures to address global climate change and the increasingly great effects that greenhouse gases and carbon emissions are having on the frequency of hurricanes or the severity of Texan winters. The sketches prompt us to ask questions of who the “we” is or ought to be in the stories we tell about climate change: politicians, capitalists, scientific authorities, regulatory bodies, or diverse and unequally precarious communities. The weathering of our everyday experiences and material environs catalyzes new political relationships and opens up places for unruliness, made legible in a Sharpie-covered poster board or iPhone photos of bottom-up, community efforts to provide clean water, clothes, and food amid storm wreckage and state negligence. While the media presentations behind such sketches would suggest that deleterious climate change and heightened scrutiny of disasters are politicizing weather in novel, modern, and even neoliberal ways, this book seeks to acknowledge the deeper histories of the political and social dimensions of weathered surroundings and to examine these relationships in one series of ancient landscapes across south-central Cyprus. Rural landscapes, the “sedimentations” of history and sociology that Henri Lefebvre (2016 [1956]: 68) urged us to analyze, invite inquiry into the ways that materials and climatic changes spur on new political relationships. In this book I put forward several arguments about studying the places and environmental engagements of smaller settlements together with the growth of what we would call urban sites, but key to all of them is the claim that landscapes like these were, and are, weathered and made political through the actions of humans, their norms and institutions, and the other-than-human soils, waters, airs, and things around them.

Writing a book on ancient rural landscapes is a challenge – not just to sustain a long-form argument using a notoriously patchy dataset, but to accept and admit that the established scope may falter as more data are explored, synthesized, and interpreted in new ways and with different frameworks in the future. In committing these arguments to the genre of the monograph, I stitch together several close and interrelated examinations of ancient town and countryside formations in south-central Cyprus, but I do not aim to produce definitive conclusions or to finish conversation. I offer this book, in the spirit of what Rosi Braidotti (2006: 115) has called epistemological humility, as a provocation for more research on environments and ambient things through a close study of small Iron Age sites. Satisfying answers are few and far between; I focus more on posing questions and presenting plausible patterns and hypotheses from conjectural, and even speculative, footings. It goes without saying that I dearly hope that more evidence, more posthuman approaches, and new archaeological
insights appear in the coming years on non-urban sites and environmental change that unsettle and greatly expand on some of the evidentiary claims made in these pages.

I finished writing this book with the generous support of a Loeb Classical Library Fellowship as well as a fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies on a year of teaching leave. Its origins, however, grew a bit more haphazardly from years of fieldwork in the Vasilikos and Maroni valleys on Cyprus, conversations over Keo with mentors, colleagues, and friends, and presentations for critical audiences in which I tried to make scholarly gains for all the other avenues of interpretation that seemed to dead end. I am deeply grateful to Sturt Manning for encouraging a project on Iron Age settlements and for pushing me to undertake it, even if it meant spending those hot afternoons walking through maquis with me that he could likely have used more productively. Bernard Knapp has been a tremendous help and I am very grateful for his taking the time all those years ago to listen to my ideas about landscape and to support and edit my writing. Sturt and Bernard pushed me early on to contact Maria Iacovou, of the University of Cyprus, who graciously let me tag along with her field project at Palaipaphos/Kouklia Laona and whose commitment to understanding the Iron Age of Cyprus has been a guiding force for my own efforts.

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