

ON DISQUIETING GROUND

Erosion and Narration on Samothraki Island, Greece

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Abstract

This article focuses on attempts by inhabitants of the island of Samothraki, in North-Eastern Greece, to make sense of rapid soil erosion and degradation. Through the use of ethnographic vignettes, collected during my first fieldwork on the island in August of 2022, and broader ethnographic material, I show the imbrication of landscape perception with questions of collective ethics as well as the specific forms of social uncertainty which emerge from soil instability. The article highlights specific and local discursive attempts to make sense of broader processes, including weather events, as prompts used by Samothracians to think about their ways of inhabiting their own island.

Keywords: *soil erosion, climate, landscape, crisis, Greece, weather events*

Introduction

I visited the island of Samothraki for the first time in the summer of 2022 while on an exploratory fieldwork session. My aim at the time was to find an island in Greece where I could study the imbrications and effects of a hurtling acceleration of both anthropogenic climate change and radicalizing economic liberalism on winemaking and local perceptions of time and place.

While I did not know whether people made wine on Samothraki, I had been advised by friends that I should “go visit the goat island.” There, I was told, huge numbers of goats roamed free.

The number of people working in the primary sector on Samothraki (agriculture, fisheries, and animal husbandry) is 45 percent of the active population (in contrast to the Greek average of around 12.5 percent¹), an overwhelming majority of which involves the ownership of goats destined to dairy and meat production, exported throughout Greece through a recently created cooperative.

Parsing through the meagre literature (Petridis and Fischer-Kowalski 2016) concerning the island provided a little more detail. A Viennese team from the Institute of Socio-Ecology conducting sustainability research on Samothraki since 2007 (Fischer-Kowalski et al. 2020) estimates the number of goats on the 178 square kilometre island at around 50 000 (for

¹ National Statistical Service of Greece 2012 report, quoted in Fetzel et al. (2018).

a human population of 2 596²). According to these researchers, the overwhelming presence of goats on Samothraki poses a number of problems which accelerate and radicalize the habitually deep temporal process of erosion. As the goats roam free in search for feed, their argument goes, they indiscriminately uproot the network of plants which ties together and maintains the soil, weakening its coherence and rendering it vulnerable to the action of the elements. While goat grazing has been linked to reduced risk and intensity of forest fires (Mancilla-Leytón, Mejías, and Vicente 2013; Mancilla-Leytón et al. 2021), a problem to which Samothraki is also confronted (TA NEA Team 2023), the Viennese team emphasizes the role of overgrazing (alongside with illegal logging and firewood collection) as a driver of increased rates of soil erosion.

In the natural sciences (Allaby 2013), erosion encompasses a number of phenomena, distinguished by their effects – a change in the chemical composition of rocks for example – and causes – whether by wind, water, ice, or the growth of organic materials. Erosion implies the movement of materials in a process opposite to that of deposition, which accumulates materials. All soil is the ensuing product of the weathering, intermingling, and movement, over millions of years, of minerals and a host of organic materials like fungi, bacteria, and animal remains.

On Samothraki, erosion expresses itself as the incapacity of the soil to retain or to resist the waters from rivers and rainfall, disintegrating into labile fragments. The speed with which erosion happens on Samothraki, rather than the slow and deep temporal process of shaping and resettling materials, prevents any consistency in deposits, washed away before they had time to sediment. The rivers steadily overflow from their beds, while the spontaneous rivers that appear with every rainfall create new, impermanent beds in the waters' indiscriminate race downwards towards the shore, dragging along trees, goats, rocks, and roads, and in the case of the 2017 deluge, houses and cars (ENA Channel Greece 2017) .

In late September 2017, a state of emergency was declared after heavy rainfall on the night of the 25th had caused severe flooding and important infrastructural damage to many settlements on the island, most importantly Chora, the traditional village perched at the centre of Samothraki. Whether caused by goat grazing or not, the floods and ensuing landslides have been directly tied by local, regional, and environmental authorities to the advanced state of erosion on the island's shrublands, but also extending into the Northern shore's forest (Fig. 1).

As a consequence, researchers in the fields of sustainability and socio-ecology (Petridis and Fischer-Kowalski 2016) have warned of a state of “collapse” to describe Samothraki as a physical island. This collapse is visible everywhere through the decay of infrastructures. On the North shore of the island, one of two of the island's asphalt roads seems at a constant risk of careening away into the sea, the ground literally slipping away from under it (Fig. 2).

My original research questions concerning winemaking were of course considerably impacted by the omnipresence and importance of erosion on Samothraki. Even if the themes of economic crisis and global anthropogenic climate change were present, they were mediated by a sense of immediate and pre-existing urgency. The unstable metaphorical “ground”

² <https://www.statistics.gr/el/2021-census-res-pop-results>, accessed December 4, 2023.



Figure 1: Collapsed soil slipping onto a cement road, Samothraki, August 2022.



Figure 2: Asphalt road undergoing heavy erosion, Samothraki, August 2022.

I had expected to find had taken on a very concrete, if all the more unstable, existence. After this short overview of the state of erosion and its attributed immediate causes on Samothraki, I now wish to move away from the “scapegoating” of goats and interrogate a few of the ways in which erosion is linked to shifts in the ordinary epistemologies of Samothracian farmers and their ways of inhabiting the landscape. What happens to one’s sense of place and capacity for inhabiting when the landscape can become unrecognizable overnight? What qualities does time take on when the soil beneath your feet is eroding?

The Symbolic and Physical Linkages of Landscape

In his 1905 description of the island for the Royal Belgian Geographic Society, Henry Hauttecoeur mentions “the artificial regularity of the soil, laid out in terraces, and the multitude of sheep steads forming enclosures, by which one recognizes the Samothracians of past centuries as skilful and brave cultivators” (Hauttecoeur 1905, 187, my translation).

His geographic survey, which focused on the productive capacities of the island, is particularly striking insofar as it evokes a now non-extant structure on Samothraki, which Hauttecoeur describes as being “remarkable in the Cyclades” (Hauttecoeur 1905, 187, my translation), namely the terracing of arable land for feed production.

What Hauttecoeur’s description makes visible is the dissolution of communal landscape formation and upkeep on Samothraki over time. Terraces indeed constitute an important barrier to erosion on sloped grounds, by retaining and distributing water evenly across the different ridges while decreasing the water flow which provokes landslides (García-Ruiz et al. 2013). Furthermore, they are, in the absence of generalized mechanization, fundamentally a collective creation, requiring coordination and general assent regarding the roles devolved to each farmer in the upkeep of their walls so as to not jeopardize the whole ensemble (Bevan et al. 2013; Sluis, Kizos, and Pedroli 2014).

After I had told him I was interested in learning about farming on the island, Pavlos invited me to meet him in the evening and see how he worked with his animals and how he tended to his land. He was one of the very few farmers to not own goats or sheep, and instead owned donkeys and pigs. The days of August had become so warm that he could only work during the few hours of daybreak and sunset. We took advantage of the last rays of sunshine and the cooling air to walk around the farm he had mostly built himself. He took special pride in the quality of his fencing and in the motorbike he had purchased and modified in order to be able to cross over the two unstable riverbeds which cut through the dirt path leading to his farm.

As he was showing me a small, terraced wall he had built himself and, in a sigh, admitted to not keeping up as he would like to, he confirmed to me the past prevalence on Samothraki of the practice noted by Hauttecoeur in 1905. He bemoaned the way in which:

Today, people do not get together to make anything of the land. In the past, everyone knew how to make terraces. Today, people are not capable of coming together to build them, and every farmer works for himself. Because of that, after each rain, you can’t recognize your own island. (Pavlos, August 17, 2022)

In his account, it's the disappearance of the social ties, which made this kind of work possible in former times, that led to the abandonment of terracing and the subsequent increase in erosion that destabilized the landscape. As humans collectively no longer participate in the accretive quality of the landscape on Samothraki, what is left is the constant reconfiguration of the soil. Stephanos, a friend of Pavlos, who worked as a builder on the ongoing project of an artificial lake in the centre of the island, warned me not to go out when it rained. I asked him why, and he responded that: “*One morning, you go out expecting the road to be still there, and all of a sudden it's gone.*” (Stephanos, August 14, 2022)

Julie Cruikshank, a Canadian anthropologist working on the history of climate change in the Saint Elias mountain range, shows how places are tied to stories concerning the tribulations and deeds of specific mythical characters in her description of Tlingit relations to glaciers. She speaks of “symbolic linkages between physical and social landscapes” (Cruikshank 2005, 132), those linkages allowing for a specific time depth exercised through narrative time reckoning means in which both the deposit and the erosion are accounted for and narrated as historical events.

While Cruikshank delineates the involvement with landscapes as socio-temporal markers (Cruikshank 2005), the speed with which on Samothraki land is modified and shifted with every rainfall makes the recognition of these markers impossible, situating the present in an ever-unfolding crisis.

In that sense, the speed and uncertainty that erosion imprints on the landscape provokes the kinds of temporal distortions that anthropological research into crises (Barrios 2017; Eriksen 2016; Knight 2016; 2021; Stensrud and Eriksen 2019) has revealed. Crises carry along repercussions on local perceptions of time, presence, and identity provoking temporal collapses and telescoping. Huw Halstead (2020) further highlights the effects of these temporal restructurings founded on speed and “adjustment” as a source of alteration in Greek farmers’ “ways of moving around the landscape, its sensory prompts, and how the body is used to work the landscape in conjunction with others’ bodies”, a consequence he terms “*in situ* displacement” (Halstead 2020, 664). Barbara Adam (Adam 1998), similarly, speaks of the “disembedding” effect of the relation between the timescape of crises and the temporal horizons of environmental events, creating a series of increasing divergences between the respective speeds and rhythms of economic accumulation and environmental sustainability.

Narrating the Rain

I first experienced this sense of unsettling on Samothraki while at a restaurant, in the small village of Xiropotamos, literally the “dry river.” I had spent the evening with friends of my host who run the restaurant and we were now listening to musicians playing *rebetika*³ folk songs as the evening started to dwindle. Over the plaintive voice, we started hearing thunder in the distance, and occasional flashes crept through the shaking trees. My new acquaint-

³ Urban folk music, sometimes referred to as “Greek blues”, focused on themes of poverty, exclusion, drugs, and violence.

tances began counting the seconds between the cracking and the flash, looking increasingly worried. Most customers had left by then, the outdoor chairs and tables had been put away, and the tension did not stem from the potential impact of rainfall on their business. As the time elapsed between the sound and the light shortened, the worry became more pressing, and they implored me not to take the road and return to my place.

It rained quite heavily that night. As I left my home the next morning, the roads had been transfigured. Covered in gravel, mud, and slabs of soil, the cement paths had become nearly impractical. The small river crossing that brought me home looked like it had been gutted. On the slopes of hills, large and angular sinews had been carved out by the rain, and near the shores new riverbeds had emerged overnight, already dried out and crumbling away.

Considering the specific temporalities of climate change, Richard Irvine (2014) invites us to shift our attention to the slow life of geological deep time as an actor of historical processes. However, on Samothraki the eroding nature of the landscape itself takes on the qualities of an acceleration and an instability. The depth of the process of change and shift isn't conceptualized or perceived through temporal depth, but through hurtling acceleration and uncertainty. Irvine's emphasis that erosion constitutes a historical actor in the possibilities and forms of continued human settlement does not take into account the possibility that erosion and the landscape themselves might constitute specific forms of unsettling.

If, as Irvine claims in reference to the process of erosion, "to inhabit the landscape is to be part of these long-term processes" (Irvine 2014, 165), how might then the act of inhabiting be conceptualized when the process is chaotic, accelerating, immediate, and unpredictable? How might one think of the landscape when it becomes increasingly difficult to locate it both physically, through a sense of *grounding* in the endurance of a sense of place as well as symbolically, when, to quote pioneering geologist James Hutton's concluding words to his 1788 *Theory of the Earth* "we find no vestige of a beginning – no prospect of an end" (Hutton 1795 [1788], 200) to the unsettling change of the ground?

Hutton's words were dedicated to the dizzying temporal depth of continuous change in the earth's structure but retain equal strength when applied to the similarly dizzying speed with which Samothraki's soil is reconfigured. In an appendix to his *Theory of Earth* called *The Theory of Rain*, he concludes the first part of his examination of the different forces of heat, cold, condensation, and evaporation which provoke rain with an ode to the "most provident attention" of the "actual system" (Hutton 1788, 12), where "both the extremes of drought and of wetness are so wisely avoided" while a "variety of different degrees" of "temperate drought and moisture, rain and sunshine, so beneficial to the economy of this world" allow for the development of a "multitude of different beings [...] to be provided with the necessary conditions for their life" (Hutton 1788, 12).

On Samothraki, the relation to rain does not belong to the mechanistic, providential view advocated by Hutton, and in fact where he commends the system of rainfall for its wisdom in avoiding extremes and promoting the stability necessary for a multitude of beings to thrive, the island is perceived by many of its inhabitants as a jealous, punishing organism at the centre of competing, inscrutable forces. And indeed, while Hutton conceptualizes rain as a series of harmoniously beneficial relations of heat and cold, humidity and dryness, the

unsettling we referred to earlier turns a potentially coherent ensemble of phenomena into an illegible conglomerate of forces. Regarding the 2017 deluge, a recurrent point of concern for Samothracians was the fact that “not even the fishermen could predict the rainfall.” In his text, Hutton also refers to fishermen and lauds their capacity to understand the relations of winds and clouds to rainfall and thus produce accurate predictions. The fishermen’s incapacity to accurately predict rain, on the other hand, reveals a profound shift in the qualities of weather. No longer legible and subject to knowledgeable interpretation, the clouds and the winds become autonomous forces while humans become progressively powerless. An elderly Samothracian woman, Maria, whom I had asked if she enjoyed living on the island, described to me the toughness of character required to live there, and continued:

Samothraki has a difficult personality. It can reject you if it doesn't want you. You'll be walking and then rocks will start to fall out of nowhere and you'll break a leg. I know many people who have left because the island didn't want them. (Maria, August 14, 2022)

The unpredictable nature of events, provoked as if by an incomprehensibly capricious island, is the sign of a shift in scales of inhabiting. When “in the past,” as Pavlos explained to me, people were able to relate, shape, and inhabit the island, today inhabitants cannot insert themselves within the geological and climatic processes which fully escape their control and might reject their participation.

A story I heard regularly, when I asked inhabitants about changes in the landscape and farming practices, spoke, in its bare-bones structure, of an anonymous old man who owned a lot of land, in a location that varied depending on the storyteller. The old man planted many trees on his land. He cuts wood from the old trees and allows the young to grow, because he had the appropriate knowledge. His son didn’t have knowledge, and he cut the wood from the easiest and most accessible places, close to the road. One day, heavy rain fell and under the trees which had been cut the soil collapsed and destroyed the road.

This short myth speaks to a desire to reassemble a coherence between the weather and farming practices, through moral teachings and calls to engage with knowledge of the same kind as those of the Western Apache in Basso’s ethnography *Wisdom Sits in Places* (Basso 2002). For the Western Apache, the narrations with which they apprehend a landscape makes clear the connection between a sense of place and the permeation of values. As such, a place and the means through which one apprehends it are always also a fragment of a social norm to be rediscovered and heeded. I argue that, through this story and others of this kind, my informants reinstate a sense of permanence and coherence in which the moral qualities of the island as castigating the “bad farmer” are inserted in an indeterminate, expansive, and at the same time immediate narration. This enables them to anchor their experiences of change and uncertainty within a set of norms which in turn allow them to inhabit the island *with* the soil and the weather through active mutual interpretation. Reinstating narration in that way can be a way to not let oneself be carried away in the overwhelming rhythm of decay and emergence.

Pathways of Dirt

Going into the field, Tim Ingold's 1993 article *The Temporality of the Landscape* (Ingold 1993) was very present in my mind. Walking through the dirt paths of Samothraki, I could sense myself looking for the kind of internal coherence his vivid description of Brueghel the Elder's painting of the *Harvesters* offered on landscape. I had spent most of August in Samothraki, the very same month that Brueghel's painting depicts allegorically. Ingold's slow and steady "dwelling perspective" meanders through the hills and the paths, uncovers permanence in change, sits in the eurythmic resonance of the field workers and the resting farmers. In his description, trees, valleys, church, and human all grow in synchronous harmony, disturbed only by the selfish snore of the lone sleeper. But what affordances are made for the anxious expectation of the unexpected? Which space, in the Ingoldian landscape, allows for confrontation and unsettling?

As the Samothracian goats graze, it becomes increasingly difficult for bees to find food and pollinate. Beekeepers as a consequence multiply the number of their hives in the hopes that at least some will be able to produce honey. Attempts at protecting the flora and fauna of the island have resulted in protected zones (the quasi entirety of the island falls under the Natura 2000 status) including most of the island's traditional fishing grounds, forcing the already struggling fishermen to further push away from the coast in the hopes of finding subsisting stocks. The paths which in the dwelling perspective hold the memory of all the journeys they participated in creating and which in turn created them are washed away with every rainfall. These forms of struggle in inhabiting the island have their roots in the succession of specific historical social relations. The abandonment of Samothracian agricultural terraces may well resonate today, not as part of a pre-lapsarian *coherence* but as a call to historicize and politicize our modes of inhabiting.

If the landscape is, as Ingold claims, a network of meaningful relations (Ingold 1993), then these relations must also include confrontation and disquiet. In this sense it might be useful to attend to the "provocation" of the English Skiddaw mountain in Doreen Massey's contemplation (Massey 2006). Her reflections on the tectonic and geological movement of the mountain lead her to conceptualize it within the constantly unfinished business of simultaneously ongoing narrations which place humans within a series of diverging and converging "events" or "happenings." Rather than surfaces to be deciphered, the changes in the landscapes provoke reconfigurations in the grounding of one's presence in place. The constant movement of rocks and soil does not coalesce into a surface which might be passively deciphered, but requires the active interference of actors into the ever-ongoing narrative of territory.

Ernesto de Martino might help us think of this disquiet in more productive terms. In his unfinished series of manuscripts dedicated to the idea of cultural apocalypses, he reminds us that "the world, as a cultural world produced by human action, can end and any answer as to what 'tomorrow's' world can and should be implies the prior question of knowing whether 'tomorrow' there will in fact be a world" (De Martino 2016, 61, my translation). As I have tried to show in this short article, on Samothraki, the unsettling of the ground provokes us, and demands that we interrogate the ways in which, under continuous tension and flow,

a world can still be made, and through which stories we might be able to make sense of the disquiet itself.

As the spatial-temporal markers of landscape disappear and re-emerge, refactored according to the change in scale and speed of erosion, Samothracian farmers diversely attempt to reinstate an epistemological, ecological, or moral coherence to their inhabiting of the island. The rapid change allows us to perceive the ever-precarious nature of both our sense of place and of the meaning we attribute to our knowledge of it. Centring the idea of 'unsettling' thus allows for a dynamic examination of the interplay of making and unmaking underway in our continuous attempts to find some kind of metaphorical or all-too real stable ground.

To quote Pavlos, who took a long pause after I asked him how he thought of the future of the island: "If Samothraki can be saved, then the world will be saved." (Pavlos, August 16, 2022)

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CURRENT RESEARCH

TA NEA Team. 2023. “Πυρκαγιές: Υψηλός κίνδυνος για Έβρο, Σαμοθράκη και Θάσο – Απαγόρευση κυκλοφορίας πεζών και οχημάτων.” TA NEA. September 25, 2023. Accessed December 4, 2023. <https://www.tanea.gr/2023/09/25/greece/pyrkagies-ypsilos-kindynos-gia-evro-samothraki-kai-thaso-apagoreysi-kykloforias-pezon-kai-oximatou/>.

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Robin Jaslet has a background in philosophy and history and then entered the field of anthropology and ethnology. His main interest are the processes that bring together human and non-human actors (objects, living beings, spaces, temporalities, etc.). His Masters in Anthropology at the University of St Andrews (UK) focussed on the study of heritage, memory, and temporality in relation to religious ruins of the Scottish Highlands.

As part of his dissertation project at the University of Neuchâtel, Robin Jaslet is looking at soil erosion on the Greek island of Samothraki and the changes that it is causing in local shepherding practices and in the shepherds' imaginations of their ethics, environment, and landscape.

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