Flowing Rock, Dancing around Trees
Conviviality and the Landscape of Cyprus

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Kourion Acropolis, looking southeast, 2019. Photograph by Michael Given.

Rocks and trees are not just omnipresent in the landscape around Kourion: They constitute that landscape, far more dramatically and fundamentally than buildings or roads or fields. Light gray or yellowish limestone pushes through thin soil in jumbled outcrops or rough cliffs and underlies the long, rolling ridges of the ancient city's hinterland. To its west, Episkopi Forest impresses not with its height or uniformity, but with its lively and aromatic tangle of Cyprus pines and cypresses, terebinth and myrtle, and many more (fig. 1). In the middle of this scrubby woodland is Kourion's main sanctuary, dedicated to Apollo Hylates: Apollo of the Woodland. At its ritual heart lies not a statue or a temple, but what seems to be a circular arena for dancing around trees.

Rocks and trees are part of the fabric of the landscape, and so of communities and societies, both human and ecological. They make distinct places by working with the soil, the weather, and all manner of animals from soil biota to the deer that gained protection in Apollo Hylates's sacred grove. Humans often work with these partners to assemble food, materials, home, and meaning. In such a landscape, there is no culture and nature, no human and environment, no functional and symbolic, no self and other.

A useful framework for understanding this nonseparation, for humans being *in* the world not *over* it, is conviviality. After explaining this term, I will use it to explore the interdependencies of rocks, trees, and humans across the historical periods of Cyprus's long trajectory, looking particularly at Kourion on the southwest coast and the northern foothills of the Troodos Mountains (fig. 2).

Conviviality

So what does it mean to say that a relationship between trees and people is convivial? The term was coined by radical social critic, Catholic priest, and polymath Ivan Illich in his book *Tools for Conviviality* (1975). Illich is careful to distinguish the term from the popular meaning of "tipsy jolliness," using it to challenge capitalist principles of individualism, speed, and productiveness. Conviviality, he explains, is "individual freedom realized in personal interdependence and, as such, an intrinsic ethical value" (24). That "*inter*dependence" is crucial.

Illich's work has been revitalized in the twenty-first century in a strikingly diverse but productive way (Given 2018; Costa 2019). Etymologically, conviviality has the principle of living together at its heart (*con-vivere*): We enjoy life and vitality through interdependence and a rich and diverse set of social and ecological relationships. All the different players in these networks, of course, keep on changing; there is nothing inevitable or built-in about conviviality. At one level, competition and conflict are part of the mixture: We feed and are fed; we eat and are eaten. But on a larger scale and a longer time frame, a socioecological community can thrive on these dynamics and tensions and use them to adapt and morph into new convivialities.

This very sensitivity to changing contexts means that convivial relationships are always under threat from anything that might reduce that richness of social and ecological relationships (Costa 2019: 17). This particularly includes ideological and physical totalitarianisms: plantations using enslaved labor, capitalist consumerism, oppressive political regimes, dehumanizing technologies, and the green deserts of industrial monocultures. So, conviviality needs to be worked at and maintained. Often it

Figure 1. Looking from the Basilica of At Meydan, across the Stadium and the Episkopi Forest to the sanctuary of Apollo Hylates, west of Kourion. The partially reconstructed temple can be seen on the far right. Photograph by Michael Given.

Figure 2. Map of Cyprus. Background: ESRI. Map by Michael Given.

requires social and political intervention, whether in a capitalist society or a small-scale indigenous community (Illich 1975; Overing and Passes 2000: 24).

Part of that intervention is a human recognition of the power and value of conviviality, and an attentiveness to the particularities and needs of social and ecological convivial partners. That fruitful relation needs to be continually celebrated in routine movements, ritual practice, art, and stories. The same sort of engagement is required on the part of the scholar as well: Like any community, we do not sit over our world but in it. We should be striving for what Anna Tsing calls a "new, passionate immersion in the lives of the nonhuman subjects being studied" (Tsing 2010: 201).

Flowing Rock

At first sight, rock brings its essential qualities of hardness and stability to the construction of places. But this perhaps just shows up the limitations of our vision (Ingold 2013: 30–31; Smith 2015). Molten lava solidifies on the deep ocean floor, and that floor is uplifted into a mountain range. The rivers draining the mountain range carve out sediment and tumble it down to the coast. Storms and currents toss around the sediment and animal shells, leaving swirls and big inclusions when they finally solidify into conglomerate, limestone, and shale (fig. 3). Outcrops crack, fall, and wear. Rock and humans shape each other in quarries, building sites, houses, and cemeteries.

Kourion, whose geological history I have just summarized, has a special relationship with rock. This can be read in the limestone-cut tombs, the faceted cliffs, the quarries, and the doorways leading into the rock. One of the aims of the Excavations at Kourion's Amathous Gate Cemetery, conducted by the late Danielle Parks between 1995 and 2000, was to read changing community relationships in their complex, intricate, and overlapping traces in the limestone of the acropolis cliffs.[1]

Storm conditions and varying energies in the rivers bringing down the sediment have created two distinct layers: a hard, gray limestone; and a soft and friable yellow chalky marl, dramatically eroded along the upper parts of the cliff (fig. 4). However monumental and permanent they might seem, these cliffs have changed dramatically over their lives, thanks to their ongoing interaction with wind, rain, and humanity.

In the Iron Age, the southern and eastern slopes of the acropolis were steep and rough, but not the dramatic cliffs we can see today. Quarry workers in the Classical and Hellenistic periods cut vertically through the soft marl to reach the harder gray limestone underneath, showing sensitivity and attentiveness to

Figure 3. Doorways of chamber tombs cut into the limestone in Kourion's Amathous Gate Cemetery, Area B, April 2018. At the top is a hard capping of conglomerate deposited in high-energy storm conditions. The left-hand doorway is ca. 1.5 m high. Photograph by Michael Given.

Figure 4. The remains of rock-cut chamber tombs in Kourion's Amathous Gate Cemetery, cut by later faceting of the cliffs, June 2019. Photograph by Michael Given.

Figure 5. Recording a Roman- and Ottoman-period structure at Trimitheri, upper Asinou Valley, July 2003. The forest consists of Cyprus pines; a dark green, bushy golden oak; and cistus on the forest floor. Photograph by Sarah Janes.

the north–south seams in the rock and the different textures and properties. These same properties were transferred to the structures built out of them on the acropolis. This rock grew homes and communities, not just buildings.

This rock also grew tombs. The Hellenistic and early Roman chamber tombs follow the same seams in the rock and the same local grid as the quarries, and used the vertical quarry faces as walls in which to insert doorways and chambers. At one point, the quarry workers had followed the gray limestone right down, forming a canyon between the new cliff and a limestone ridge beyond it. This became a funerary street with chamber tomb doorways on each side. The limestone helped to grow family identities and community neighborhoods by matching the streets of the living and the dead.

The massive earthquake of the 370s CE shattered these families and neighborhoods, as demonstrated in a very literal sense by the mother, father, and baby buried under the huge blocks of a market building in the "Earthquake House" on the Acropolis (Soren and James 1988; Soren, Leonard, and Molinari 1988).

The city-wide clean-up project of the later fourth and early fifth centuries included extensive new quarrying in the chamber tomb cemetery. New vertical faces were cut along the acropolis cliffs and the outlying limestone ridge. In each case they were carefully placed to cut through the old chamber tombs, leaving just the rear arcosolium to carry the memory of the tombs. These deeply shaded arches covering the central sarcophagus at the back of the family tomb were dramatically revealed in lines along the base of the cliffs, standing out against the carefully cut and textured cliffs (fig. 4). New generations were buried in individual cist tombs cut into the horizontal platforms carefully prepared on the gray limestone quarry floors.

This rock history shows a real richness of connection between community and rock, a close and intimate relationship. The skilled and sensitive rock cutters follow the flow, not just of the storms and depositions of the distant geological past but the ongoing flow of the acropolis rock into cliff, block, street, tomb, and home. Always fluid and dynamic, as demonstrated in the great rock-quake of the 370s CE, the rock carried the memories of ancestors and past families and communities, lined up in shaded arcosolia at the base of the newly cut and textured cliff.

Tree Assemblages

There is no such thing as a tree. Trees are assemblages, not just of the woody material, sap, leaves, and fruit, but the water and mineral exchanges carried out at the root tips, the flows of nutrients, and informational exchanges with other trees and even other species via the elaborate networks of fungal mycorrhizae. Like people, trees flourish through rich connections, biodiversity, and interdependence.

The forests of Cyprus pine (*Pinus brutia*) that cover much of the Troodos Mountains up to about 1500 m above

sea level are distinctive not so much because of the pines themselves but because of their characteristic relationships with other species. Common partners include the golden oak, wild olive, terebinth, and lentiscus in the understory; the animals and plants of the shrub layer and forest floor; and, of course, a long association with people (fig. 5; Fall 2012: 87).

A striking example of these relationships is the Asinou Valley on the northern flanks of the Troodos Mountains (fig. 6). At first sight it seems a steep-sided valley like any other on the north face of the Troodos. At its upper end it certainly is, but lower down a Pleistocene landslide has opened out the valley, creating thicker soils, more level surfaces, and an unusually intensive human-landscape history over the last two millennia. Some of that is expressed in the long history of the famous Byzantine church of the Panayia Phorviotissa (Weyl Carr and Nicolaides 2012), and in the lively village of Asinou that lasted until the 1940s.

Even up in the higher part of the valley, the Troodos Archaeological and Environmental Survey Project charted large-scale charcoal production for the Roman copper mines of Skouriotissa, medieval settlements on high mountain ridges, and widespread evidence of goat grazing, resin tapping, traveling, and hunting in the Ottoman (1571–1878) and British colonial (1878–1960) periods. One of the small settlements in the upper valley, Mandres tous Jerenides, consisted of four houses, a single domesticated olive tree, and a wood-fired oven in a clearing in an open forest of pines, wild olives, and terebinth. Local people recalled its seasonal use by goat herders who sold their cheese in a range of nearby villages, though five resin scars in nearby pine trees and small agricultural terraces suggest a wider range of economic activities at different periods (Given et al. 2013: 226–28).

Ethnographic, archaeological, and botanical data show an impressively wide range of human activities that took place in the pine forests in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: hunting quails and hares, gathering firewood and selling it in treeless villages in the plains, charcoal making, light diffuse grazing and cheese production, hunting mushrooms such as the highly prized saffron milk cap, gathering berries, nuts, and a wide range of edible plants, and resin tapping and pitch production.

There is an important distinction here. These human activities certainly affected the forest, but when they were diverse and diffuse, and carried out with careful attentiveness to the needs of ecological partners such as pines, hares, and mushrooms, they allowed gradual changes and adjustments, growing new symbioses and dynamic relationships among species, soils, and water. This interaction built intricately interconnected places, which in local human terms were often highly significant and filled with meaning and story.

What does not work is when the human community is under unbearable pressure because of overtaxation, bureaucratic restrictions, and war, and so is pushed into overexploiting one specific element of their ecological community.

Figure 6. Lower Asinou Valley, July 2003. The area of the Pleistocene landslide is lower left and center, with Asinou village on its highest ridgeline. Beyond, Cyprus pine covers the steeper slopes of the valley. Photograph by Michael Given.

Figure 7. "Taphos tis Panouklas," the Tomb of the Plague, Spilia village, March 2002. Photograph by Michael Given.

Rock Stories

Some meaningful places are subtle and discreet, only expressed in repeated practices and developing relationships. Others are prominent: They stand out from what is round them, and are instantly identifiable by the human actors in these relationships. Rocks and outcrops are particularly conspicuous and generate a wealth of human stories and ritualized practices.

Just below the village of Spilia in the northern Troodos Mountains, a weathered boulder of plagiogranite sits perched on its pedestal. The neat seam between them makes it incredible that it has not just slid off (fig. 7). This is so striking that the rock has become part

Figure 8. Cypro-Archaic II terra-cotta shrine model, Cesnola Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art. The rock is garlanded by flowers or possibly stars. 9.9 cm high. MMA Open Access; Accession number 74.51.1753.

Figure 9. Clothing and pieces of cloth hung on a eucalyptus tree outside the church of Panayia Kousouliotissa, Karkotis Valley, March 2006. Photograph by Michael Given.

of the local village community. Long ago, runs the story, the villagers of Spilia were dying because of a terrible plague. So, they prayed at a well-known church below the village dedicated to the Virgin Mary. In response to their prayers, the Virgin Mary pursued the plague up the hillside to hunt it down. It climbed onto a flat rock to try to escape, but she heaved up an enormous boulder, and used it to grind out the plague like a village woman grinding grain in a rotary quern. The remains of the plague still lie between the stones, and so the rock is known as "Taphos tis Panouklas," the Tomb of the Plague (Panoukla 2019).

Striking rocks with stories attached to them abound in Cyprus. Most famous of all is perhaps the "Rock of Aphrodite" on the southwest coast of Cyprus, a large block of reef limestone created by the collision of the African continental plate with the Cyprus microplate. The story of Aphrodite being born offshore from this rock dates back to no more than the middle of the twentieth century, and seems mainly to be an artifact of the Cypriot tourist industry (Merrillees 2015; Papantoniou and Morris 2019). Such is the power of this rock and the visitors' need for a story, however, that it is developing its own mythology and ritual practice (Stylianou-Lambert 2014). Even in western, largely materialist societies, humans retain a shadowy recognition of the importance that rocks play in our lives.

Rocks gathered stories and significance in antiquity as well, judging from the central roles they played in cult. Most famous is the aniconic rock at the center of the cult of the Cypriot Goddess, later identified with Aphrodite, at Palaepaphos. This smooth, wedge-shaped boulder of diabase is 122 cm high, and has clearly been washed down the river bed from the ophiolite complex of the Troodos—in spite of the modern determination that it should be a meteorite (Mozel and Morden 2006). It was found out of context upside down in a pit in the south Roman stoa cut in the post-Roman period (Mozel and Morden 2006: 150), but has been securely identified with the cult stone by its frequent representation on Roman coins and by descriptions in the ancient sources (Crooks 2012).

The stories and meanings attached to these cult stones were made even more powerful by their frequent reproduction as models for dedication, to hand on their stories and replicate their power. The original excavator of Palaepaphos found fragments of limestone and marble conical stones (James 1888: 180). Stone and terra-cotta model "baetyls" from the Cypro-Archaic to the Roman periods have been found across Cyprus, including one in the sanctuary of Apollo Hylates (Flourentzos 2011: 180–82). The architectural settings of such stones are highlighted by the Roman-period coins showing the Palaepaphos example in the center of a tripartite temple façade, and by the numerous Cypro-Archaic terra-cotta shrine models from across the island (fig. 8; Karageorghis 1996: 57–67; Flourentzos 2011: 177–80).

Rock has long been an essential part of the Cypriot world view. Conviviality is not just a matter of mechanical relationships, however beneficial to all concerned. It requires from the human partners a recognition of the inherent value of all players, whether rock, soil, weather, or, of course, trees.

Tree Stories

Trees, like rocks, can stand out from their surroundings, and show close relationships with a nearby spring, ruin, or an older tree. Across the Eastern Mediterranean, such trees have grown up through long stories, memories, and elaborate human practices (Rich 2017). As Itamar Taxel (2021) demonstrates, trees should be considered as archaeological features in themselves. In particular, trees are often considered sacred in Orthodox

Christianity and Islam, though this is never so simple as their being directly "worshiped" (Kyriacou 2021).

A useful entry point into understanding the role of trees in Cypriot popular religion is Panaretos's collection of accounts about thirty-five such trees. These stories are taken from a range of attentive local authorities such as village schoolteachers, elders, and a traveling agricultural official with an eye for a tree and an ear for a story (Panaretos 1979). There is no sense that any particular species is considered "sacred," and all but one are more or less wild; there are no olive trees, for example. Other than that, they show an impressive inclusiveness: agency and sacredness reside in the exotic liquidambar as well as the indigenous cypress and hawthorn, and examples range from the majestic pine to the humble bramble.

Nine of these thirty-five trees can heal the sick. Ayia Varvara (Saint Barbara) in the village of Pano Pyrgos cures eyes through the medium of two sacred pine trees; Ayios Nikolaos (Saint Nicholas) in the same village cures hearing problems via a lentiscus. In both cases the cure involves taking a stone from the ruined church, lighting a candle on it, and hanging it from a branch of the tree, along with strips of clothing (Panaretos 1979: 35). Ruins, stones, and trees work together to enact the saint's healing power in the world. Hanging up items of clothing of the sick person is important in all of these healing trees: It mediates the physical contact between the sick person and the tree and remains as prominent evidence for the cure.

The church of Panayia Kousouliotissa in the Karkotis Valley has the particular role of curing sick children. Today the children's clothes hang on a eucalyptus tree adjacent to the church (fig. 9), though formerly they were spread on brambles and Christ's-thorn; if anyone touched them after they had been dedicated, they would in turn fall ill (Paraskevopoulou 1982: 27–28).

Respect for these trees is shown by the taboo about cutting them—often reinforced by the stories of dire punishments on those who do. A woodcutter who cut down one of Ayia Varvara's sacred pine trees became paralyzed. He was only cured after he lit a candle on a stone from the ruins and hung it from the branches of the remaining pine tree, along with strips of his clothing (Panaretos 1979: 35, 41). The value of these trees and their convivial relationship with human health is recognized, celebrated, and reinforced.

Dancing around Trees

A similar recognition of the power and value of tree relationships is clearly identifiable in Archaic Cyprus, at a time of significant climatic and industrial pressure on the forests. Climate proxies indicate a much drier period in Anatolia and the Levant beginning in ca. 900 BCE (Finné et al. 2019: 854, 858). Pollen cores suggest a major drop in the extent of pine-oak woodland at the same period in Cyprus, with a corresponding increase in scrubland (Kaniewski et al. 2020: 2). The analysis of charcoal from copper slag heaps shows a surprising use of scrub species

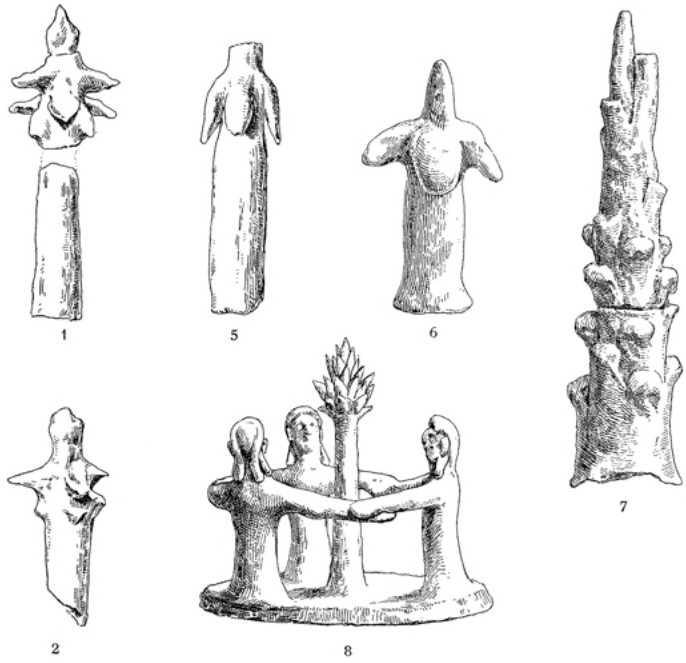

Figure 10. Sacred trees and ring-dancer group. 1–2: Akhna. 5: Idalion. 6–8: Khytroi. Ohnefalsch-Richter 1893: pl. 76.

Figure 11. Circular monument at the sanctuary of Apollo Hylates, Kourion, July 2005. Visible tree pits are indicated by arrows. Photograph by Michael Given.

as opposed to the usual Cyprus pine in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE, indicating significant deforestation (Socratous, Kassianidou, and Di Pasquale 2015: 381).

It is exactly in this period that we see a striking increase in dedications at rural and urban sanctuaries across the island. From the later seventh century, terra-cotta figurines were dedicated at rural sanctuaries in huge numbers, varying from 10 cm high to well over life-size. They depict human figures engaged in everyday activities, warfare, and ritual, and many show a ring of human figures dancing round a musician or a tree. Max Ohnefalsch-Richter (1893: 129–31, 413, 439, pls. 76, 127:4) found ring dancers and over eighty "tree idols" at the sanctuary of Akhna, and many others across the island (fig. 10). Other examples come from rural sanctuaries in copper mining areas, some of them within sight of the ancient mines (Given et al. 2013: 107–9; Papantoniou and Kyriakou 2018: 563, 566).

Most striking of all these sanctuaries is that of Apollo Hylates at Kourion. The huge deposit of terra-cotta figurines, mainly from the fill of the Archaic precinct, includes twelve ring-dancer figurines, twenty-three fragments, and three sacred trees, two of them with attached red-painted disks to indicate leaves (Young and Young 1955: 39–41).

Even more striking is the architectural evidence for such rituals. Immediately across the Sacred Way from the Archaic Altar and the deposit of figurines is a circular structure about 18 m in diameter, forming a ring-shaped walkway with a surface of pebbles set in mortar. In the center is bedrock containing a circle of six pits. Five of these pits are round, the other being square, and they are a little less than 1 m in both depth and diameter (fig. 11; Buitron and Soren 1981: 102–3). They could hold soil and water for a circle of six trees, perhaps a microcosm of Apollo's sacred grove and a focus for the dancers on the circular walkway around them.

First-century CE pottery in the terrace fill and a ramp on the northwest is presumably associated with Roman-period renovation, though the structure's position and its striking resemblance to the ring-dancer groups suggests an Archaic predecessor (Soren 1981: 63–64).

The sanctuary of Apollo Hylates clearly focuses the attention of pilgrims and worshipers on the power of the woodland god and therefore of the trees. Like the trees beside churches, that power can extend out of the sacred grove and into the forests, bringing a recognition of interdependence and a celebration of conviviality among trees, people, and landscape.

Conviviality of Trees, Rocks, and People

Rock is fluid and dynamic; a tree is much more than a tree. Rocks, trees, and all our other ecological partners interact in elaborately intertwined ways with each other and with humans. When these relationships are healthy and positive, they build together deeply interconnected places, which demonstrate the diversity and interdependence of the relationships.

These rocks and trees gather and grow human stories. This is very clear from the ethnographic sources of more recent times, but was also a very important part of community life in antiquity, and can be traced in documentary and archaeological sources. Stories, ritual dances, and dedications allow people to recognize, celebrate, and reinforce the interdependencies that are so important for healthy socioecological communities.

Conviviality is a framework for engaging more closely with past places and lives and so a useful tool for investigating the past. But there is another, urgent reason for exploring such interdependencies. As we watch the floods, fires, rising sea levels, and inequalities of the Anthropocene threatening our own socioecological communities, we see the consequences of separating out an "environment" that is around us rather than an integral part of us.

Note

1. The final publication of the Excavations at Kourion's Amathous Gate Cemetery has been submitted to the American Schools of Overseas Research.

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