

Anna Václavíková, Jakub  
Černý:

# In the footsteps of the Greek underground II: Longing for deep time

Translation: Tomáš Pivoda

*"To contemporary humanoids from big cities, thousands of deserted Aegean islands offer the opportunity to break out of the primitivism of the big cave, to overcome their fear of being alone in nature and to be fascinated by it again. And while they roam around, admiring the landscape, a plethora of thoughts and desires are born in the mind, and unfulfilled dreams call for realization..." (Teos Romvos, "Follow Them")*

While in Athens people and cultural artifacts were at the forefront of our attention, Syros brings a change of perspective. The human element recedes into the background. Syros, at least the autumnal one, is the antidote to the hurried capital reeling in the aftermath of the economic crisis, revolutionary enthusiasm and the tourist onslaught on ancient monuments. In Athens, we encountered the ruination of urban communities and their renewing by the post-autonomous underground; in Syros, everything is less condensed, but also less defined by the human element, its urban ecology and perception of time. Natural elements in the form of sea, wind, land and non-human living nature come to the fore, but also different layers of history in which the ways these elements have interacted or layered upon each other over time are revealed.

We are able to see glimpses of the different relationships formed in this rich ecosystem. Some of them also become the subject of interviews with Teos Romvos and Chara Pelekana, activists, anarchists, and above all world citizens with big hearts, who were at the origin of the first anarchist publishing house in post-revolutionary Greece, called Octopus Press, and later decided to spend the rest of their lives on the island.

The encounter with Teos and Chara, who become our guides, and their insight into the island, gradually confronts us with a different perception of time than we are used to from the “big cave,” whether in the form of Athens or Ostrava. Together with Joanna Macy, deep ecologist and philosopher, we define it as “deep time,” an alternative to the more common “accelerated time.”

Accelerated time, typically oriented towards shorter time cycles, creates a conceivable horizon for our world. The preference for accelerated time inevitably leads to crises, because the negative consequences of our actions, beyond the horizon of short time cycles, are not taken into account, creating unexpected pitfalls for the future. The most typical example is the climate crisis, the consequences of which still extend beyond the short time cycles in which we have become accustomed to operating in modern history. On a personal level, accelerated time manifests itself in burnout, which is the result of long-term functioning in debt to oneself. Macy says that if the cause of contemporary crises is a distortion in our temporal perspective, then a different perception of time can lead to recovery. As an alternative, she offers deep time, which can be imagined, for example, as decision-making based on the perspective of the seven generations that preceded us and will succeed us. How might people living in the mid-twenty-second century perceive our desire for quick profit, devastating native ecosystems? Will they still mourn what is getting lost today? What would our world look like if we got used to taking their future voice into account?

But is seven generations enough? Some cycles go beyond seven generations. The excess greenhouse gases in the atmosphere will certainly not disappear after seven generations, nor will most of the non-biological waste we produce today probably decompose. Imagining the horizon of some of these processes runs up against the limits of our imagination. Yet, according to Timothy Morton, for example, in order to overcome today’s crises, it is important to take into account the existence of “hyperobjects” (climate change, the planet, the total amount of microplastics on the planet, etc) that enter our everyday life from another temporal dimension, the perception of which escapes the untrained mind. Learning to perceive hyperobjects, their proportions and rhythm, helps to orient oneself in the present. It helps us to orient ourselves in what we should strive for and how to act. Perceiving deep time is a guide to activism, the long-term goal of which we can sometimes lose sight of. The island system is one such hyperobject that is complex, but at the same time, in a way, isolated from the rest of the world, and therefore provides an opportunity to rise above the froth of the days. It offers a chance to break out

of civilization's fast pace and reconnect with a deeper sense of time, to find a place in the larger story of evolution.

Join us for a moment to tune into this island system and its tensions, and meet Teos and Chara, who have been absorbed by the island life outside the great cave and who made us long for a stronger sense of deep time.

### Notes from the cruise

The day of the cruise begins dramatically. During the metro ride to the port of Piraeus we realize that we will miss the check-in for the ferry. It's 6:30 in the morning, and the thought of being stuck in a chaotic port district for the day waiting for the next boat is not comforting at all. Miraculously, however, we manage to pick up our ticket and catch the ferry just as the last passengers are boarding and a shipping company employee is about to give the order to retract the boarding platform connecting the vessel to the shore. A feeling of relief sets in. We set sail just as the sun is rising.

The transition from the morning run through the city to the static position of observers on the ship's deck brings a sudden change of perspective. The stress of the city's hectic pace drains away from us as the nautical miles accumulate on the Blue Star ship regularly connecting Athens with the Cyclades islands. Perhaps it is the vastness of the seas and the shrinking image of Athens in the distance, which is reminiscent of a picturesque model of the city in a museum. It also has something to do with our being ensconced on an open deck, buffeted by wind and water, from which people are gradually disappearing; the water salinates every fold of clothing and body, and everything is sticky wet. Along with a brave (i.e. smoking) few, we stay on deck and try to withstand all weather hazards, soak up the vastness that comes with the feeling of freedom, and pay attention to where we are going. As the scale changes, so does the degree of absorption in urban themes.

We pass the uninhabited island of Agios Georgios, which currently serves primarily as a giant wind farm. While in our country wind farms are a symbol of the green revolution, in the Cyclades they have become a symbol of wanton plundering against which a growing wave of resistance is rising. Teos is also involved in Pan-Cyclades groups, and regularly publishes articles in *Eyploia* magazine in support of these initiatives (especially the Aegean Network of Environmental Organizations). Together, they are trying to limit or

completely prevent this type of development, which, in their view, has no beginning or end and only serves to enrich investors.

Already in Athens, environmental activists have drawn our attention to the fact that, under the guise of green energy production, an ecological disaster is taking place here that is destroying the islands' ecosystems. The wild expansion of wind farms is having an impact on fragile habitats, bird sanctuaries, and the overall landscape of the islands. Dilapidated power stations are rusting away in pristine nature as a memento of the reckless drive to cash in on the green energy subsidy boom. Looking at the ruins of dysfunctional wind turbines that have not been repaired or cleaned up creates a mysterious sense of existential distress: we are witnessing a kind of accelerated history that could very well be our own, although we do not recognize our own ideas about the future of this renewable resource in it.



Wind farms in the Cyclades. Source: BR/Stelios Efsthopoulos

Navigating in the Aegean Sea also reveals bits and pieces of the recent history of the fascist dictatorship. One of them is the island of Gyros, with the ruins of a military fortress, later a camp for political prisoners. It was set up by the military junta to indoctrinate the dissent of the time into the nationalist project through ancient symbolism. As we read in Simon Murray's book *Performing Ruins*, the so-called re-education was based on the forced exposure of prisoners

to stories but also to physical images of ancient monuments. Prisoners had to write and recite Greek poetry or perform plays adoring the spirit of Hellenism. Patriotic music was played in the camp, and overall the system tried to get dissidents to sign a declaration of loyalty, denying their political beliefs and denigrating their friends.

The following islands do not arouse as much curiosity in us, and so we again become absorbed in the texts of Teos and Chara's magazine *Trypa*. We're a little nervous that we don't know enough about them, that we don't really know what we want them to do. We are already beginning to learn to deal with this feeling and not be ashamed of it.

After three and a half hours, battered by the salty wind and a little tired, we arrive in Ermoupoli, the capital of both Syros and the Cyclades archipelago and, for a time, the main commercial centre of the whole of Greece. A pretty, would-be nineteenth-century colonial town with an industrial past surprises us with its post-seasonal provincialism.

### **(Non)-place for the realization of utopia**

*In a way, everything points to the fact that the paradise in which Adam and Eve lived was one such desert island. Because here the non-place, the utopia, is revealed...* (Teos Romvos, Follow Them)

We meet Teos and Chara later that evening. The meeting takes place in the restaurant of the harbour hotel Hermes, where we probably couldn't afford to stay. It's after the tourist season, and the tables, set with clean white tablecloths, are empty. Our hosts greet us warmly and immediately persuade us to join them for chocolate and rum—a drink that Teos himself is said to have popularized in local restaurants on Syros.

We have left bustling Athens with the impression that we would meet Teos and Chara for a few fleeting meetings in cafés, during which we would briefly get to know each other and discuss the Greek underground. We are surprised when they come up with a schedule of the places they plan to take us in the next few days to show us a “different” island. The axis of the places is made up of the island's treasures, the remains of engravings left by the original inhabitants of the Cyclades, ancient burial sites, hidden beaches, geological rarities or

inhabited caves, and the ambitious project of Yannis, an American who has created a green oasis on an arid part of the island.

Teos and Chara, whom we meet on the island, are different from the people we associate with the post-revolutionary urban backdrops of Exarchia, in which they created the magazine *Trypa* and which were referred to in the exhibition of the same name, *The Hole*. They are people of the islands, not people of the city, although their current situation is hard to understand without the path they have travelled in their lives:

*I was born and raised in a big city. I have spent the better part of my life leading an alienated, disjointed existence in various European cities. When I moved to Syros, it was a decision driven by a desire to “live permanently on an island.” I was mad with the desire to live on a piece of land separated from the other mainland by a huge sea chasm, especially in winter when the coast is buffeted by a fierce north wind.* (Teos Romvos, [blog](#))

When we say that these are island people, we mean a kind of vastness and continuity, but also perhaps a determination with which they strive to realize something much larger than themselves. It is difficult to say exactly what this is, but we associate it with the idea of a pan-island utopia <sup>1</sup>, evoking the very reality of living on scattered pieces of land separated by a sea chasm.

A freedom, a union with nature that has an almost psychedelic effect, but also a link to the adventures and lively interaction of cultures in the days before nation-states, when the Aegean islands were places of freedom, self-reliance, but also cultural exchange.

*These uninhabited islands (the Cyclades) belong to all wandering creatures who want to sunbathe, explore and discover, but above all to understand how life begins, because everything points to the fact that these uninhabited islands belong to plants, migratory birds and free creatures without nationality who want to live there for a while or forever...* (Teos Romvos, [blog](#))

Meeting Teos and Chara also allowed us to get to know their circle of friends. On the very first night we meet Sotiris, a local bohemian who runs the bar La Bohème and drinks a bit. He maintains his student-bohemian style, even though he is in his late forties. He is already enrolled in a third school. So far he has studied physical education in Belgrade (where everyone drank a lot) and literature in South America. When he learns that Jakub works with drug users, he teases him that he would like to get to rehab.

## **I smile, but I cry inside**

The next morning Teos and Chara pick us up at the corner of the main square of Ermoupoli. Teos hits the accelerator briskly and takes us through the steep and narrow one-way streets, so that we can go back down to the shipyards, where the boats are only being repaired. We pass an industrial museum and an old infirmary on the hill behind the town, but the real destination is the seemingly ordinary coastline of the southern tip of the island. A place Teos and Chara have come to love.

There's a nice pebble beach here, but it's also where the almost daily feeding of the feline friends who are eagerly awaiting Teos and Chara takes place. We sit for a while at a small abandoned house—except that it is on the terrace of the house that the regular feeding ritual takes place, so we have no shortage of company after all. We look around and listen to the wind leaning against a few small trees, reeds and bushes, and hear the rough sea in the background. We walk onto a rocky shoreline full of pointed cliffs with waves crashing violently against them. We follow a path between low thorny bushes. The ground is dry. Teos tells stories of the landscape and its changes. He points to the rooftops of newly built residences peeking out from behind the hills and smiles as he talks about the uncontrolled development on the islands that tends to swallow up the remnants of the original landscape. “I smile, but I cry inside,” he laments. Later we run across the unmanaged and wilful construction and encroachment on the island's open landscape several more times.



Syros. Authors' archive.

Chara gradually makes us smell all the herbs and tells us about their use in the island's economy. Sage, thyme, fennel, St. John's wort, and other various scents are carried on by the island breeze, which on the higher cliffs is replaced by a strong north wind that is salty and dizzying. We pass a well, but there isn't much water in it; someone has painted a frowning face on it. Spring water is scarce on Syros, so most of our drinking water supply is covered by desalination plants, and a slight saltiness is ever-present, even when brushing your teeth.





Syros. Authors' archive.

We walk back to the car and pass a cute snake on the dirt road. By some chance, our conversation gets around to how shoes fall apart on hikes in the midday heat. Then the following revelation becomes very impressive: the Greek word for shoe is *papuč* in Czech (το παπούτσι, which means “slipper” in English). Be warned, we Czechs share the word slipper with the Greeks!

### The island's social network

*I chose Syros because I felt that its landscape reveals the essential elements of the islands here; it is stark, almost ascetic. On one side, there is a vibrant town with a rich community, but on the other—the northern part of the island—there is a nature reserve; a harmonious natural unity with the native island flora. It is places like this that gave rise to the Aegean civilization, which archaeologists consider to be the dawn of European civilization. (Teos Romvos, [blog](#))*

We keep going and climb to the higher, much wilder parts of the island. Along the way, Teos tells us about the mysterious carvings, thousands of years old, that appear in various places on the island, on stones and rocks. We park on a small hilltop plain. There aren't enough comparatives and superlatives to describe the force of the wind that's just blowing. We descend the dry rocky terrain and head towards a huge rounded piece of rock that dominates the landscape before us with its size. Syros is characterized by its geodiversity. It is largely made up of metamorphic schist rocks. In the mid-nineteenth century, glaucophane, a dark bluish mineral, was discovered and described here, and we see plenty of it. Looking closely, it's clear that other creatures have been coming to the rock for many centuries before us, perhaps millennia, and groping as we do now when we observe the ancient carvings, remarkably clear considering their age, and search for their possible meanings.

According to Teos, the engravings may be messages, important information for visitors to the islands, a kind of social network of the indigenous inhabitants of the Cyclades. The islands were not distant worlds. From time immemorial, they were a living network in which dynamic communication and exchange, influenced by the element of the sea, took place. The mass of water, while limiting travel, also encouraged people to explore and overcome challenges, motivating them to leave messages to themselves and their gods on the islands.

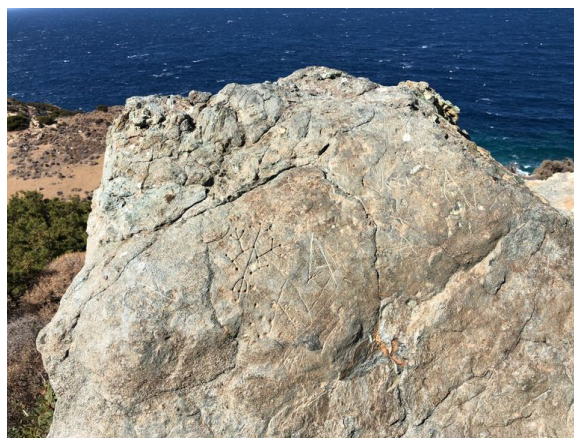


Engravings, Syros. Authors' archive.

The drawings record shapes reminiscent of stars, snails, rhombi, but also ancient measurement systems, human figures, or the shapes of ships of the time. They were the first groping form of preserving or recording and transmitting a piece of meaning, and they foreshadow later writing. In his examination of these engravings, which he published under the title *Traces*, Teos witnessed a record of thousands of years of Greek culture, language and architectural development, something that no one at Syros before him had been particularly concerned with. It is scarcely credible that in Europe you can find the remains of an ancient history hitherto undescribed and uninterpreted.



Engravings, Syros. Authors' archive.



Engravings, Syros. Authors' archive.

On the way back, we pass through an area built up with typical family houses that we know from Ermoupoli, as well as much larger and more spectacular settlements than what we have seen on the island so far. Today, if sumptuousness were still indicative of the sacredness of the place, we as foreigners would have little chance of identifying the spiritual sanctuaries; we might as well mistake a church for a rich man's villa. This is one aspect of the beginningless development described by Teos, which knows no boundaries other than those imposed by the lucrateness of the investment opportunity and the despotism of (private) capital. In the end, we are the only guests having a beer in a restaurant by Azolimnos beach, which dwells in the autumn emptiness of a Mediterranean resort. The openness and warmth of Teos and Chara draw us into the island's comfort, the day seems slower than previous ones, there is more space to think between words. The horizon of the sea allows us to put aside thoughts for a while, to let them sway on the waves and sink deeper into the spiral of the moment.

In the early evening of the same day, we head to the town of Ano Syros, where our two friends live in a traditional house of island folk architecture painted bright pink. The dwelling and the way it is inhabited induce an impression of modesty in us, but also of liberty linked to creative freedom and independence. Various plants weave through the house, and cats can walk in and out without restriction. We take our seats in a cosy living room, which serves as a meeting place as well as a place of creative process, as evidenced by the piles of various files stacked on top of each other. The scent of the homemade pizza that will be served for dinner wafts from the stone oven. In the meantime we sip rosé and browse the library, where we occasionally stumble across Teos's books and originals of the legendary *Trypa* magazine, linked to Teos and Chara's life before they settled on the island. The pizza comes with a delicious sauce made with herbs that Chara collects on her trips around the island. After dinner we chat until we slowly start to fall asleep; then we walk to Ermoupoli. The slower island concept of time has finally released the tension of the fast-paced city and untangled the knots in our minds that we've been unable to untie for the past few days. The evening languor after good food and wine accompanies satisfied bodies through the narrow quiet streets to the port town.

## **Ermoupoli**

Unlike other island towns, Ermoupoli is not just a tourist resort. Founded at the time of the Greek Revolution in the first half of the nineteenth century by people fleeing the war from other Greek islands, the town was at one time an industrial centre and for a long time also Greece's largest port (today it is Piraeus in Athens). A technical college still operates here today. Ermoupoli is also the administrative centre for the Cyclades islands. It is a cultural centre and has a stable community of people. Especially in the off-season, it has a civilian feel to it and, apart from the seaside promenade and a few shopping streets, looks quite ordinary, creating a sense of a stable base to which we like to return from our travels to remote parts of the island. The town's industrial history hides a few curiosities, which we encounter in the museum. Among the most bizarre is the Enfield 8000 electric car, which was produced here in the early 1970s and, according to a local witness, was one of the first mass-produced electric cars in the world. The battery weighed around 140 kg and took six hours to charge. Unfortunately, we didn't see any of them in use in Syros.



The first mass-produced electric car in Greece—and possibly in the world. Authors' archive.

The second, slightly more tragic curiosity was a paddlewheel boat designed for sea travel. Its uniqueness lay in the fact that it was a steam paddlewheel boat, used exclusively for river navigation. Unfortunately, it was only a matter of time before it would succumb to the harsh weather conditions in the Aegean Sea. A ship called the Patris, which provided regular large-scale transport of people and goods between Syros and Athens, sank off the coast of the island of Kea in February 1868. Thanks to the efforts of people and the memories of a few divers, it was found and partially recovered. It is a flagship story of the local industrial history that the local people pride themselves on. It is interesting to see which history is being restored and which remains rather in the background. A ship emerging from oblivion has been put back into the story of the island's history and its place in modern industrial history.<sup>2</sup>



Museum of Technology and paddlewheel of the wrecked Patris. (Authors' archive)

## Apano Meria

*Come closer, friends, and experience the wild nature of the island, enjoy Apano Meria, the last landscape Homer dreamed of when he was homeless and*

*wandering among the islands of this archipelago. Come and walk in the sand dunes, discover the beauty, the virgin nature with terraces and walls, paths and trails, small settlements and farms that have become part of the landscape.*  
(Teos, *Pages of Apano Meria*)

On the second day of our joint excursion, Teos and Chara guide us through the northern part of the island, called Apano Meria. They have a warm affection for this area, and its look is a frequent subject of Teos's texts. Apano Meria embodies the story of the Cyclades as the cradle of European civilization. In purely descriptive terms, it is the part of Syros separated by an imaginary line stretching from the northern edge of Ermoupoli across the island, covering roughly the area that falls under the protection of the Natura 2000 network of nature reserves. It is here, in the northern part, where you can find rare metamorphic stones formed by high pressure and relatively low temperatures deep in the earth. Among them are the so-called eclogites, strikingly dark and peculiarly protruding from the ground, which can be noticed even by a cursory glance at the landscape. The largest of the metamorphic monolithic stones on Syros, which came from a depth of 80 kilometres, is known locally as *aerolithos* (the stone that fell from the sky).

The northern area is characterized by much thinner settlement and is also drier. The steep rocky slopes are covered with thyme, gentian and sage bushes. Access to the sea from the rocky coast is often difficult, but there are sandy beaches hidden among the cliffs that you wouldn't find elsewhere on Syros. We also noticed many ruins of abandoned farms and shepherds' dwellings, blending into the dry landscape. Seen through the lens of a tourist, this is a declining part of the island.

Lacking commercial tourist infrastructure, the area has been spared (at least until now) from the onslaught of tourism affecting other Greek islands. The captivating nature of the place is therefore to be found in the mystery of the natural phenomena and in the unmarked archaeological sites, which are often unknown even to the locals. It is no coincidence that Teos depicts Syros in his latest publication, *Follow Them*, as a treasure island, evoking the captivation of pirate adventures.



Treasure Island, map by Nicholas Liber. Source: Eyploia magazine

Teos and Chara's attitude towards Apano Meria is based on a thorough exploration and slow acculturation to the island, which we sense from the mundanity and ordinariness of their dedicated efforts. It took them three years to walk the island and study it in detail. Part of the process involved learning about the various elements of this ecosystem: people, animals, plants, rocks and engravings, climate, the morphology of the island and its processes:

*I wandered the dry mountain slopes among the bushes and sparse trees. The buzzing of bees following nectar routes, chicory plants swaying under gusts of wind from the sea, small springs with aquatic plants, steep rocky shores, limestone and volcanic geological layers, cliffs, sea caves that are home to seals and sea turtles, gravel slopes, small ravines, sand dunes. While searching for ancient stones, I discovered a number of prehistoric engravings. (Teos Romvos, "Inscriptions," [blog](#))*



Also because of the language barrier that sometimes prevents us from communicating about more complex topics, it is more about a way of being, a connection to the island, that is the main message for us. In proximity to Teos and Chara we feel that we are also growing into it, that we are connecting to the layers of the island, and we feel that it is a unity that is very fragile, but also robust and full of diverse human worlds and relationships that transcend civilizational history. Teos and Chara point to something very important with their lives—and they don't even need many words to do it.

*Soon, tendrils sprouted from my body and my fingers intertwined with shoots that began to bear fruit, while stem cells turned into neurons and I began to feel part of an entire ecosystem, an organism that coexists in the coexisting. I forgot to speak, I forgot that I was a rational being, I was there, without memory, without purpose and without a past, lying on the green grass, listening to the quiet voices and whispers coming from the ground, aware of the songs of the grass, the whispers of the plants growing before my eyes, the conversations of the mosses and lichens all around reaching my ears. Slowly, slowly, I recalled the forgotten language of plants, precious words were emerging from the depths of my mind, forgotten words, names of places, poetic names that people have used for centuries, which vary from country to country, from region to region, sometimes even from valley to valley or village to village. My consciousness was changing, I was no longer feeling unique. I perceived that I was no longer an individual, I had become a multiplicity, a subsidiary breath, a root, a branch, a capillary process. I ceased to feel that life began with my birth and would end with my death. I have become “the other,” I have finally understood that I am “the other.” There is no real time, no objective time, all these were mere subjective projections of the human intellect. I am entering the cosmic time, infinite and circular time, in folds and discontinuities, in timelessness. I was born and raised here on Earth. (Teos Romvos, [blog](#))*



Chalandriani and Kastri. The north wind is blowing. Teos curls up in a ball by a tomb at the site of the discovery of a prehistoric settlement and burial site. The dead were placed in graves in foetal positions here. Authors' archive.

Apano Meria thus takes on two levels in our investigation: the experiential and the political. The place confronts us with its rawness and its strange beauty, which we can touch, which we can walk in. But it is also the terrain of a political struggle with the processes of ruination that arise from the desire to commodify everything that can be commodified on the islands: the land, the wind, the sea and the culture. These two levels are intertwined. Without a relationship with the island ecosystem, there would be no effort to save it—and without the politicization of that relationship, the islanders would soon have little left.

Thus, a broader community of island “lovers” has formed around Apano Meria, seeking to prevent overdevelopment without beginning or end, and supporting activities with little impact on the local ecosystem. The group started as an open symposium of island citizens and formalized itself in 2017. Its activities include promoting geo-tourism (as an alternative to tourism without sensitivity to the site and local ecosystem) and preserving and enhancing the protected status of the natural site. They try to promote site restoration (cleaning, trail clearing) and organize educational workshops or walks promoting awareness of alternative geo-tourism options that contribute to the conservation of (native) ecosystems.

In our encounters with Teos and Chara, as well as with Syros, we also become the kind of tourists who gradually adopt a different approach to exploring the island. It can be described as a gradually built relationship with the landscape, shaped not by preconceived interpretations but by feelings, fragments, impressions. These are more personal, and so create a mosaic that can be viewed a little differently each time, that can get under the skin as a kind of embodied experience.

With Chara, Teos and their friends, we also see a specific form of activism that is rooted in the local community and coalesces with its place of impact. It does not enclose itself in subcultural retreats, because it cannot, and it also makes use of various formal formations or practices (for example the establishment of a geo-park). It aims for a long-term vision of coexistence on islands, celebrating life in its diversity and the seemingly invisible connections and relationships within island ecosystems that have enormous value and history. In contrast to urban activism, we note that the collaboration also involves representatives of the “establishment” and local citizens without clear ideological or political lines. In this way, everyone can connect and define themselves together as residents who care about a sustainable way of life on the islands. The perceived threat that unites them comes more from the outside. It is the developers coming in with large investments, to which the corruptible central government often gives in.

Our island excursion among the Apano Meria protectors was too brief to reflect critically on this form of activism in more depth, let alone think of it as a kind of underground. We were particularly impressed by Teos and Chara’s strong relationship with the island and their sincere efforts to make it a free place again, free of all kinds of exploitation. The inclination to use various formal institutions to protect the islands reminded us of a remark by our Athenian guide Nadja. She was pointing out that activists today need to be clever and strategic in their use of different forms of struggle which previously might have looked like blending too much into the system. However, it is impossible not to notice the risks that this tendency can bring. In the case of Syros, this concerns, for example, efforts to include the island’s geological heritage on the UNESCO list of sites, which, in the eyes of the inhabitants, will prevent the island from being exploited. On the other hand, UNESCO, which officially promotes “sustainable tourism,” does not only mean protection, but also brings with itself a new type of ruination linked to the increase in sightseeing tourism. Treasure Island, whose charm lies precisely in its slight decrepitude and thus its harder readability, could lose its charm for good.

## Trip to Cape Grammata

On our third day on Syros, we rent motorbikes on the recommendation of Teos and Chara and head north to one of the few green spots on the island. At Cape Grammata we want to explore the messages carved in stone.

For the last few kilometres we ride along empty dirt roads in the upper parts of the island. Then we have to put the machines away and follow a sporadically marked trail. It leads through arid hillsides, over goat and sheep pastures, and geological formations, past the American's preserve and sandy beaches, to the small bays at the northernmost tip of the island, Cape Grammata. We pass a marble quarry and stumble into a valley, expecting the shade of pine trees planted there in the past by a man the locals called none other than "Yannis, the American."

Yannis may have grown up elsewhere and in a different linguistic culture, but he received a classical education. When he visited the Cyclades for the first time in the 1960s, he was enchanted but struck by the difference between the landscape he knew from reading Plato and Homer and the real one he encountered, desolate and desertified (an ancient ruin of that landscape, one might say). He bought a plot of land in Apano Meria, some 200 acres of arid land, dug wells to access water, fenced the land to keep the wild goats out, and set about restoring the land. He learned from the local people how to cultivate the land without irrigation, planted trees in places protected from strong winds—especially the Halep pine, which is hardy and undemanding—and dug holes at the roots to allow moisture and precious rainwater to reach them. The once-arid rocky landscape is now a grove of pine trees that reaches down to the sandy beach. The ecosystem that has been created or started is now capable of renewing itself and no longer needs the supportive human intervention it once did.

The story of this American is interesting to us because it is almost paradigmatic of the island situation (we draw here mainly from the conversations with Nadja, from her perspective on the arrival of the virus that will save us). The foreigner, the antithesis of the autochthon, a man bred by classical reading and the study of the great ancient past, who lives in an alienated society, arrives in the Cyclades, where an indeterminate encounter occurs. The American is captivated, enchanted and saddened by the place, falls in love and, according

to the image in his mind, gives himself over, supported by the force of love, to the idea of revitalizing a landscape which, in his perspective, is actually a *ruin*.

The place called “At the American’s” is a popular destination for residents and visitors to the island. We move on and meet young people camping on the beach and enjoying the summer romance. We bathe in the bay and continue along arid rocks, scented with thyme and sage, and sharp cliffs with stray goats, to the northernmost part of the island, Cape Grammata. The place where we are told that there are signs of the ancient cultures that Teos and Chara told us about on our wanderings around the island. The lack of marked paths adds to the mystery. We pass a small beach covered with drifting garbage and plastic bottles from boats, and reach the edge of the island, which is a huge pyramid-shaped cliff. From here you can see the vastness of the Aegean Sea, with only the outline of Gyaros rising out of it. It is only on the way back and thanks to a more careful examination of the coastal rocks that we gradually begin to notice the different types of messages carved into the flat stone terraces. We also come across a flaking sign with the inscription GRAMMATA, ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE, which will probably soon be blown away by the wind.

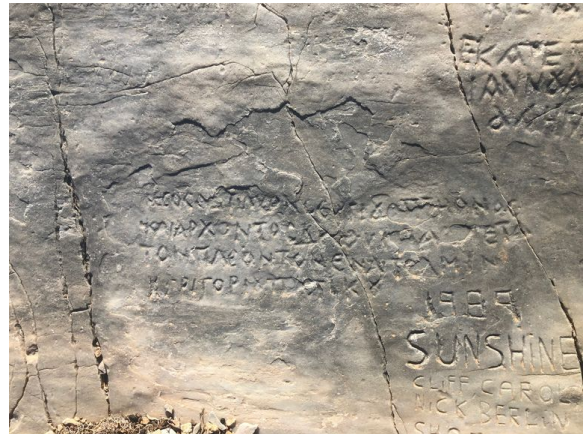
It is certain that if we had spent more time here, examining the various inscriptions carefully, we would have come across some truly ancient messages; however, our untrained eyes were offered rather more distinctive inscriptions of a younger date, roughly from the last two centuries. Here and there we could see almost obliterated inscriptions that were probably much older, but their dating and meaning remained a mystery to us. We had expected to find carefully marked evidence of ancient cultures that inhabited the islands before the advent of modern civilization. Instead, we encountered a still-living stone chronicle that never ceased to serve the human desire to leave a mark, to communicate, to express oneself. The old mixes with the modern, and the absence of clear markings telling the visitor where to look and what is truly valuable gives the impression of a kind of layered continuity. A continuity that can be seen in remote places that have not yet succumbed to the attempt to preserve themselves by removing or preventing the emergence of anything new. How would UNESCO approach this still-living chronicle? Would it not consider the message engraved by our contemporaries as vandalism?

In Teos’s later texts we find a deeper insight into the changing shape of this place, and a certain amount of adventure that is linked to history and rarely experienced by the modern traveller:

*Those who had been beaten by the sea voyage headed for the quiet refuge of the bay. Once over the headland, they entered the safety of calmer waters. People who had gone through good and bad on their voyage etched their thanks into the rocks to the Gods who had guided them to safety. They came so close to drowning, to death, but they managed to survive. They had witnessed the wrath of the seas and now celebrated the impermanence of their existence.... By carving the name of their ship in stone, pilgrims sailing the seas of ancient antiquity, Roman times and Byzantium gained divine protection from the fierce north winds of the Aegean for centuries.*



Grammata. Authors' archive.



Grammata. Authors' archive.

Today's pilgrims get here on foot or on much safer and better-equipped vessels and yachts, so their messages are directed elsewhere than to the Gods and serve more as a guest book in a mountain hut. But ancient mariners paid homage here to the Gods (Asclepius, the Dioscuri, Helios, and later Christian saints such as St. Phocas and others), asking them to protect the travellers and ensure good weather and protection from storms. The inscriptions on Cape Grammata thus testify, among other things, to the importance of the Mediterranean, where merchant ships, pirate ships and warships from many parts of the then-known world—Thrace, Asia Minor, Egypt and elsewhere—met. What a contrast with today's world, where for many Syrian men and women, sailing from Turkey to the nearby Greek islands is a life-threatening venture (also due to the “pushbacks” by the Greek navy), with an endless stay in a detention camp awaiting them at their destination.

## Longing for deep time

In the big city, a cave of individualism, alienated labour and ostentatious consumption with a good dose of anomie, we get lost a little in the overlapping voices of pluralism. Sometimes it seems impossible to decide which way to go. After the chaos of the big city, Syros, Teos and Chara welcomed us like old friends. They embraced us with love, hospitality, and the opportunity to observe and listen intently to the island's living and non-living nature.

Syros, Teos and Chara have grown so close to our hearts that we are thinking of returning here as soon as possible (at least for the holidays). Not because it is an exceptionally beautiful island. The landscape here is quite dry and inhospitable, and the few beaches are difficult to get to. Ermoupoli's industrial glory days are now history, as is evident after just one walk through the centre: the once opulent houses are now often abandoned and dilapidated. It's more about the nature of the experience that Teos and Chara have prepared for us, the long story of the island and our short one that have intersected here.

The work of Teos, Chara and their friends is going on daily and is almost anti-like. It does not bear fruit immediately. It requires patience and humility, and is characterized by the originality of its motives and the veracity of its stories, without any war narratives or heroic pathos. It is a model of how to live and how to do activism; it is a fusion with the place, a specific connection between life values and the way to achieve them. It is a model of activism—and let it be a model for activism.

What we take away from their kindly guided tour of the island is the joy of exploring and listening to nature, as well as the experience of awakening a longing for a different perception and experience of time than that defined by the great cave. It is a time that flows differently, based on different scales than the hustle of the city. It is closer to geological processes. A deep time that transcends us.



Teos, Chara and us. Authors' archive.

- 
1. However, both the expansion of the power plants on Agios Georgios and the island of Gyaros are proof that islands can serve not only to realize utopias, which Teos often writes about, but also perfect dystopias. Moreover, in the dystopia of Gyaros, the ancient ruins play an important role in creating and supporting a specific cultural narrative that serves to support a nationalist regime and ignore or neglect contexts that might lead to other meanings. The Gyaros island encampment thus reveals the multifaceted role of ancient ruins used by various rulers, not only in Greece, to culturally frame their political project, which we have already pointed out in relation to the Acropolis. ←
  2. As a ruin pointing to the past, the wreck of the *Patris* is an artefact that makes history, but it is still part of the underwater ecosystem today and thus participates in the continuation of history. Based on this and other examples of decay and decomposition, it could be said that ruins in a new arrangement are often constitutive elements of a new ecosystem, conditions for something new. Like a ship that sinks forever and becomes a reef teeming with life. ←

---

**Jakub Černý (\*1984) studied psychology, social work, and psychotherapy. In his research he focuses on resistance in the field of urban and housing rights, burnout in activism, political aspects of mental health, and related support for people with**



lived experience. He is a member of Narativ, an association dedicated to spreading collaborative and dialogical practices in the Czech Republic.

Anna Václavíková (\*1997) studied social anthropology and sociology and is currently studying sustainable systems engineering in Freiburg. Her research focuses on (post )industrial cities, possibilities for using abandoned industrial structures, and strategies for sustainable urban development.

