

# The River as an Economic Asset: Settlement and Society in the Xeros Valley in Cyprus

Giorgos Papantoniou – Athanasios K. Vionis

Settled and Sacred Landscapes of Cyprus (or SeSaLaC) is a systematic archaeological survey project of the University of Cyprus in the Xeros River Valley in the Larnaca district (fig. 1). The project aims to identify, map, and interpret traces of pre-modern human activity in the valley in order to examine the interaction of secular and religious space with the natural environment. In many respects, the microenvironment of the survey area, defined by a continuous series of hills, crossed by the River Xeros, and located within the ‘landward buffer’ of the south coast of Cyprus, provides an ideal laboratory for examining phenomena of centrality, settlement hierarchy, and political economy in the *longue durée*.

Our project manifests how surface survey and landscape archaeology can provide a fresh perspective and a powerful investigative tool to address research questions related

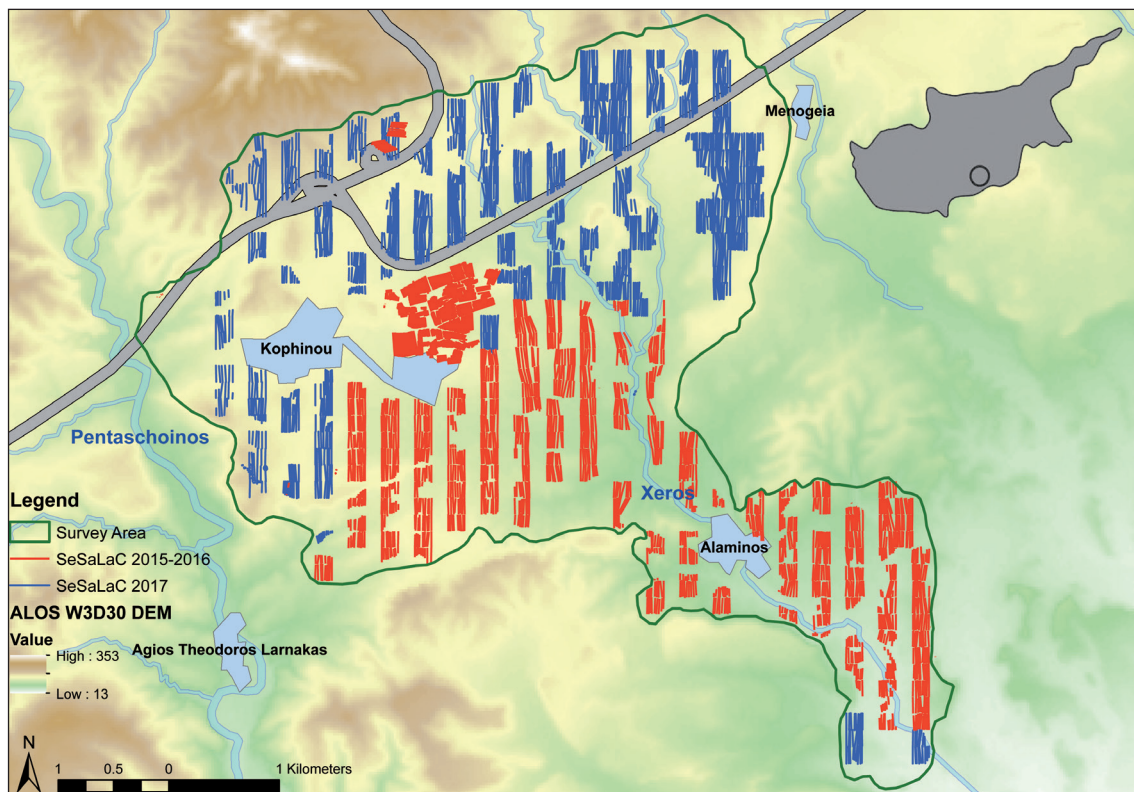


Fig. 1: SeSaLaC surface survey area with transects (zones of squares: 150 × 150 m) investigated in 2015–2016 and 2017. ALOS DEM are in meters. Digital data courtesy of the Geological Survey Department, Republic of Cyprus.

to the conscious and the unconscious shaping of the land, as well as to the processes of organizing space, which involves the interaction between the physical environment and human presence. The centrality of a place can be seen as the result of inter-reliant socio-political processes relating to the natural environment on different spatial scales, ranging from the local to the supra-regional. The consideration of political geography and political economies play a significant role in any discussion concerning the development of settlement patterns.

Waterways had a prominent role in shaping the settlement landscape of southeastern Cyprus diachronically. Examining the Xeros Valley from the perspective of political economy and natural resources, we show how an 'un-central landscape' may have functioned as a place of economic and ideological centrality. The Xeros River clearly acted as an economic asset in making this 'un-central' landscape central. Water procurement and management seem to have determined the clear tendency for settlement along the main Xeros River and the small valleys formed by its streams from prehistory to Late Antiquity. Yet, these settlements always kept a safe distance from the water to avoid the risk of flooding.

The river creates a fertile valley along its way, where people in the past, and until recently, likely used a canalization system to water their orchards. Preliminary Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping of agricultural soils and settlement activity has shown that the main antique settlement in Kofinou lay in the middle of less fertile soils. This should probably be seen as a very wise choice on behalf of the valley's inhabitants, making use of less productive areas for their settlement's built space, as well as for less demanding cultivations, such as vegetable gardens and olive groves or as pasture land.

Our team aims to investigate how climate change adaptation and tectonic activity may have altered the course and flow of the river, and how these may have affected settlement choice and hierarchy diachronically. Future research should also integrate survey data with geological investigation, considering that some rivers along the southeast coast may relate with a system of identified anchorages that were used in conjunction with overland portages for transporting timber, copper and other goods downstream to the coast for processing and cabotage. The integration of zooarchaeology, archaeobotany and ethnoarchaeology in Cyprus has recently shown not only the adaptation of sheep and goat management to differences in local vegetation and landscape, but also that other elements in the landscape, such as wells, springs, rivers, pools of fresh water, and safe access points to the sea were integral parts of herd management.

Water and rivers are understood to have specific powers and agencies related both to life and destruction. Management of riverine water, such as in the cases of Ottoman watermills both in the Xeros and the nearby Pentaschoinos valleys for example, should be scaled at the level of its associated communities and environments. Rivers, incorporated into social and ecological developments, were particularly vibrant elements in periods of economic crisis, stability and growth.

## Image Credits

Fig. 1: Map by Charalambos Paraskeva.

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