Landscape Heritage and the Commons Potential. The Case of the Aegean Sea

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Abstract This paper explores the application of commons theory to landscape heritage, with a focus on the rural cultural landscapes of the Aegean Sea region. The study examines how commons—defined as resources and processes managed collectively by communities—can provide a new framework for understanding and managing cultural landscapes and their heritage remains. By investigating the historical and social dynamics that shape these landscapes, the research highlights the importance of community involvement in the production and reproduction of heritage. The study argues that viewing landscape heritage as a commons not only enhances its preservation but also promotes resilience against contemporary challenges.

Keywords Cultural landscapes, commons, heritage, Aegean Sea.

Landscapes and their communities

While overcoming the traditional concept of pictorial and aesthetic products of western appreciation, contemporary scholarship has been attributing new meanings and various characteristics to cultural landscapes reflecting the needs and challenges of our era (Panagiotopoulos et al. 2023).

Landscapes are now considered as cultural constructs with natural and cultural connotations (Olwig and Ingold 2019), shaped by the interplay of natural, cultural and social elements (Menatti 2017). The integrity of these landscapes is jeopardized when any of their constituent elements are threatened (Fairclough 2020).

Landscapes are influenced by local contexts as well as national and global phenomena, making them subject to constant change (Turner et al. 2020). This dynamic nature renders the term "living landscapes" somewhat redundant, yet it underscores the need for a historical approach to examining landscapes, taking into account temporal, spatial, and cultural factors, as well as acknowledging the observer's perspective (Taylor and Lennon 2012).

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While these perspectives offer diverse avenues for research, they converge on a central theme: the significance of locality and the presence of the communities that inhabit and shape landscapes.

This public emphasis is exemplified in the European Landscape Convention (ELC), which defines landscapes as "an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors" (Council of Europe 2000, Article 1). UNESCO further elaborates on this by describing cultural landscapes as "combined works of nature and humankind," reflecting "a long and intimate relationship between peoples and their natural environment" (UNESCO 2024).

These discussions prioritize the public's role in the historical understanding, interpretation, and management of cultural landscapes. While this approach is not entirely novel, it aligns with a broader trend in cultural heritage management. The 1990s marked what is often referred to as the "social turn" in heritage management, where attention increasingly shifted from experts to include non-specialists, including peripheral communities and taxpayers (Lekakis 2020b: 20–21).

In addition to the ELC, the Faro Convention emphasizes the importance of placing people and human values at the center of an expanded and interdisciplinary concept of cultural heritage, recognizing it as "a resource for sustainable development and quality of life in a constantly evolving society" (Council of Europe 2005, Preamble). This approach has since become well-established in various landscape policy texts (Fairclough et al. 2020), including the recommendations on Historic Urban Landscapes (UNESCO 2011), which also provide practical methods for public participation.

A common thread in the normative documents mentioned above is the description of heritage as a "common good," a concept likely inspired by the UNESCO 1972 Convention. This Convention, renowned for the World Heritage list, which includes assets of "Outstanding Universal Value," aims to protect the "common heritage of mankind," asserting a somewhat ambiguous "common ownership" of heritage on behalf of humanity (Council of the European Union 2014). In these texts, heritage as a common good is frequently discussed alongside other compelling language, emphasizing the priority of involving the public more fully in heritage decision-making.

But what, precisely, are the commons?

Commons & (landscape) heritage commons

Although the concept of the commons—referring to a public right to a resource—may initially appear broad and difficult to define, it is, in fact, a precise and well-established governance practice. Commons encompass the management of vital everyday resources, such as pastureland, water, and the atmosphere.

The clarity of this concept can be largely attributed to the work of Elinor Ostrom, a seminal figure in contemporary commons studies. Ostrom's lifelong contributions, as showcased at the Ostrom Workshop at Indiana University (Indiana University 2024)

and in her influential book *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action,* focus on the collective management of Common Pool Resources (CPRs). These are natural or man-made resource systems that are subtractable and pose challenges in excluding potential beneficiaries from accessing their benefits (Ostrom 1990, 30). Moreover, her work addresses the complexities of such systems in the context of current challenges.

Ostrom's contribution attracted a great deal of attention to the field and opened up new horizons in the study of the commons, particularly in relation to the abundant and diverse cultural systems and social interactions of traditional communities that formulate sustainable strategies for land use, crop collection, cultivation differentiation, and natural resources management (Ostrom 1990, 88–101). Although Ostrom's approach has been critiqued for its (institutional) economic perspective, it is widely acknowledged that her work revitalized the field, providing a foundation for a diverse group of scholars who have either followed her lead or advanced more radical approaches (Lekakis 2020a).

By synthesizing the extensive literature available today, we can define commons as goods and processes used and produced collectively, administered in egalitarian and participatory ways by the communities that manage them. The involvement of these communities in the process of commons production and reproduction is referred to as "communing" in the literature, which also serves as an analytical tool for determining whether an activity qualifies as a commons; i. e.

(i) if it involves tangible or intangible resources, public or common,
(ii) if it is managed by one or more communities of 'commoners' and
(iii) if it is protected by a framework or rules organized and actively defended by the commoners, in the participatory act of 'commoning'.

This tripartite framework has both a political dimension and a transformative potential, and it can be applied to other 'public' resources. Over the past decade, the focus has increasingly shifted to heritage (and cultural landscapes as a broader category) to assess whether the complex interplay of cultural, social, and economic factors fits within this tripartite schema. Although the literature on heritage commons is considered fragmented (Avdikos et al. 2023), we can identify key elements when discussing heritage:

(iv) the tangible and intangible material (for example, a cultural landscape or a historic building and the social/traditional knowledge or local practices and visions surrounding them),
(v) the communities and their values (local and distant stakeholders surrounding the resources, the public in a plural and diverse form, e. g., archaeologists, administrative bodies, locals, tourists, etc.) and
(vi) commoning (namely, the present and aspired governance arrangements along with the products in the process, either in the form of (scientific) knowledge and information or as relevant tourism and education activities).

To structure our discussion, we will examine case studies from my research area, where the application of commons theory to landscape heritage has provided valuable theoretical and practical insights.

Rural landscape heritage in the Aegean

In recent years, I have engaged in various research projects on both sides of the Aegean Sea (Greece and Turkey) that focus on rural cultural landscapes and particularly rural heritage (e.g. Dragouni and Lekakis 2023; Lekakis and Dragouni 2020; Turner et al. 2020).

Rural heritage can be understood as the tangible and intangible outcomes of a network of edifices, natural resources, and socioeconomic activities that have co-created the broader natural, social, and cultural landscape. The structures associated with land cultivation and animal husbandry practices, such as terraces, trails, threshing floors, windmills, water mills, wells, fountains, and cisterns, as well as temporary accommodation and storage facilities, are prominent features in the landscape, framing the rural space of the recent past in the present.

Research at the local level has revealed that these structures are highly variable and responsive to environmental conditions and landscape-management strategies, particularly crop diversification in response to broader socioeconomic contexts. Many of these structures have ancient origins (e.g., terraces from the later medieval period, ca. 1000–1600 C.E.) and are the result of successive investments in the landscape over time (Turner et al. 2020). These examples of anonymous architecture were passed down through generations until the 1950s and 1960s, when the advent of electricity and mechanized production and transportation methods transformed rural spaces, leading to the disruption of local communities and their integration into modernity. Today, they are mostly partially used or abandoned.

Despite their significance, the attributes and values of these structures remain largely underexplored. In most cases, they are interpreted through folk studies as a continuum from antiquity, serving the national narrative by linking the nation's history to its geographic context. In the field of heritage management, rural heritage is often aestheticized for (alternative) tourists seeking to explore the hinterland, regarded as a natural and picturesque setting for walkers, devoid of social or political agency, or simply neglected (Lekakis 2023).

Applying (heritage) commons theory has provided a fresh perspective, shifting the focus to community understandings and practices regarding these landscapes and their features. In one study on Naxos Island, Greece (Lekakis and Dragouni 2020), we were able to map the significance of (cultural) memory in shaping the place for the community and fostering a bottom-up appreciation of monuments—a form of social monumentality understood outside the national framework for heritage. This process was termed "mnemeiosis," derived from the Greek word "mneme" (memory), to contrast with the typical "monumentalization" imposed by the state—the top-down

Figure 1 Rural landscape from central Naxos Island, Greece. Collapsing stone walls, and an abandoned threshing floor can be observed in the middle of the photo, among the uncultivated fields. Author 2018.

process of defining and delineating a heritage site. Mnemeiosis represents a paradigmatic commoning process, where communities attribute values and produce heritage that is constantly evolving and in flux (Lekakis and Dragouni 2020, 87–91).

On Naxos Island, these self-referential narratives, intertwined with personal and family histories, converge with romantic notions about the significance of rural heritage, underscoring the need to preserve it for the sake of collective memory in a rapidly changing world. This contrasts sharply with the precarious status of rural heritage in terms of management, as it is not yet part of the official heritage framework of protected sites and monuments, and therefore lacks proper protection.

Commons theory in this context allowed for a relative freedom in appreciating the diverse values of this type of heritage and involving numerous stakeholders in the discussion. It also offered the potential for developing new forms of community-based management to enhance resilience to various pressures, such as urbanization, rural depopulation, mechanization of the rural economy, renewable energy infrastructure, the tourist gaze, and the degradation of the historic rural landscape (Dragouni and Lekakis 2023).

Ways forward to heritage commons

When discussing the Aegean rural landscapes, the application of commons theory has been instrumental in identifying both historical insights and future management directions. It appears that landscape heritage, like all heritage, is relational, with its past and future embedded in the communities that engage with it, constantly shaping and reshaping it.

In this specific context, the absence of formal state policy creates opportunities for flexibility in negotiating assessments and management strategies for the future of rural heritage. This opens the door for the involvement of non-state, non-expert communities, and participatory processes that align with the latest developments in the field, closer to the framework of heritage described by normative documents from the 1990s onward.

However, conceptualizing (landscape) heritage as a commons also invites a broader discussion. There is a need for a culture-centric approach to heritage management, revisiting essential, often overlooked elements of the internal social dynamics that underpin heritage. We must return to treating heritage—and all cultural products—as products of history and society. This can be achieved locally, in context, by promoting localities and understanding the attachment to place before connecting with global processes that extend beyond identity and memory politics. This approach cannot be effectively utilized unless there is a strong motivation to transform these resources into rights, acknowledging their social importance for communities and avoiding overly revolutionary or ambitious narratives.

This transformation can be accomplished through collective action focused on prefiguring change in managing the public texture of culture and heritage. As a result of this approach, commons can emerge as a viable and realistic strategy for culture and heritage, establishing connections with other resources and giving rise to commons ecologies. These ecologies would contribute to a multi-modal, commons-centric transition, where participants actively engage in a polity that tends toward a new world, already beginning to take shape beneath our feet.

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