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Chapter 7
General concluding remarks

This study has attempted to review the history and archaeology of the Cycladic islands between the 4th and early 9th centuries in the broader context of the diverse and highly interactive Eastern Mediterranean world. Studying the settlement pattern of insular communities can trace possible shifts in the social and economic sphere, not only for specific islands but also for the broader worlds that are related to them. Through the case-studies of Paros and Naxos, a new framework was set for the discussion of the settled landscape and the material culture of the Cyclades dated to Late Antiquity and the Byzantine Early Middle Ages.

The neighbouring islands of Paros and Naxos diachronically constitute two of the most dynamic spaces in the Cyclades, forming interactive microcosms at the heart of the complex Aegean maritime communication network. Due to their setting in this geographical space both islands have experienced the same general historical circumstances and have been integrated into the same political regimes which dominated the East Mediterranean world between the 4th and early 9th centuries. A thorough and comparative study of the settlement pattern and material culture from both islands from Late Antiquity to the Byzantine Early Middle Ages suggests that Paros and Naxos sometimes followed common and sometimes separate paths. In this respect, both case-studies are enough to demonstrate that each island can tell a unique story during different periods of its history. The essential distinction between the two islands lies in the diametrically opposed localised environmental advantages of their landscape character.

From this point of view, it was a great challenge for this study to investigate whether the local diversities of the Parian and Naxian landscapes have determined the settlement pattern’s historical evolution as well as the ways in which these two adjacent insular spaces were integrated and interacted with broader worlds in specific conditions and periods of time. Over time, the insular communities of the Cyclades show different variations, forming, changing and reshaping their settled landscapes due to the intensive human-environmental interactions and cultural diversities. Some of them, like Naxos, have presented a more consistent historical trajectory engaging with the broader world in a sufficient way during almost all periods, benefitting by their topography’s peculiar advantages. Some of them, like Paros, were more fragile places which at times have integrated successfully into broader networks whilst at others been placed on the margins of history, once again as a result of the characteristics of their landscape. In any case however, they all form interesting archaeological palimpsests, providing pictures of long-term successive episodes of settled landscape changes within the broader context of the highly interactive Mediterranean world.

The period between the 4th and middle 7th centuries was a time of relevant prosperity and stability for most of the Aegean islands. Paros and Naxos, like many other regions in the Aegean world, show evidence of commercial success as they developed a complex network of various types of settlements, functioning as producing, processing and exporting centres. A comparison of the material evidence from both islands suggests that Paros held a more important position in the communication networks of Late Antiquity. During the centuries that followed this economic vitality, when the Aegean world appeared to enter a transitional period of multiple changes, the island of Naxos shows tangible signs of a stable and vibrant insular microcosm characterised by integration, connectivity and interaction with broader worlds. Even in the case of Paros with the archaeologically low visible sites, there are some parts of the coastal landscape that have been occupied in every period and the island continued to interact with the external word in a different way and on a lesser scale. Archaeological material testifies that it was the island of Naxos
which held a unique position in the communication networks of the Byzantine Early Middle Ages.

In any case, it seems that after the flourishing period of Late Antiquity the so-called “Byzantine Dark Centuries” may have not been as “dark” as we think, especially for the insular Aegean world compared to Mainland Greece and Asia Minor. It appears the Aegean Archipelago continued to be a highly interactive world between the 7th and early 9th centuries in a different way compared to the previous period despite external threats, natural disasters and wider socioeconomic changes. The Cycladic islands should be considered as places of interaction with the external world rather than as places of isolation that suffered from Arab raids, since all types of landscapes, coastal and mountainous, continued to be settled, cultivated and in other ways modified by humans between the 7th and early 9th centuries. The increasing archaeological records from the Cyclades need re-evaluation and any kind of trace of either decline, or stability, and revival, should be seen as evidence reflecting a progressive and smooth transition to a rather different world and a new lifestyle. It is quite evident that the material culture from both case-studies reflects a process of transition from antique to medieval way of life and mentalities.