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Deciphering Mechanisms and Narration Systems in the Natural Landscape: The Case of Keros

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Deciphering Mechanisms and Narration Systems in the Natural Landscape: The Case of Keros

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Abstract

This research project explores the design methodology of a site-specific experience in Keros, an uninhabited island in the Cyclades, where access has been forbidden since 1992. Keros carries traces of dense historical layering: from early Cycladic ritual activity (c. 2750 BCE) to a classical acropolis, Byzantine ruins, and more recent structures. The island could be described as an *abaton*, a site known primarily through excavation reports, oral histories, and distant observation. The central research questions are: "How can a place be perceived, archived, and interpreted remotely? How can we design a site-specific experience for a place we cannot access?" To address these, we developed a four-layer documentation system that captures the island's physical, narrative, and mythological dimensions. Layers include: the island's geomorphology and human traces (Layer 0); buried stories through ruins and excavations (Layer -A); intangible oral histories and myths (Layer +A); and an attempt to reintegrate this liminal space into a collective geography (Layer +∞).

Following this remote archiving process, a single 8-hour visit allowed us to document a 3.5 km route using GPS, continuous video, photographs, and our embodied experience. We identified 42 spatial transitions, classified into six qualities: path, plateau, staircase, balcony, tiers, and forest, treating each as a scenographic element- structuring a sequence of moments in which the visitor becomes performer, and the site becomes stage. The resulting intervention acted as a guiding mechanism, framing the visual field and choreographing spatial, immersive experiences for the *flâneur*.

The central element of this project is the system itself: a methodology for remotely, documenting, and reimagining different landscapes. This system functions as a mirror between site and project, generating tools tied in the landscape's unique characteristics. While the methodology is universal, its content and expression are always site-specific - as the mechanism is fed by the unique traits of each landscape.

Keywords: Landscape, site-specific, documentation, narrative, route.

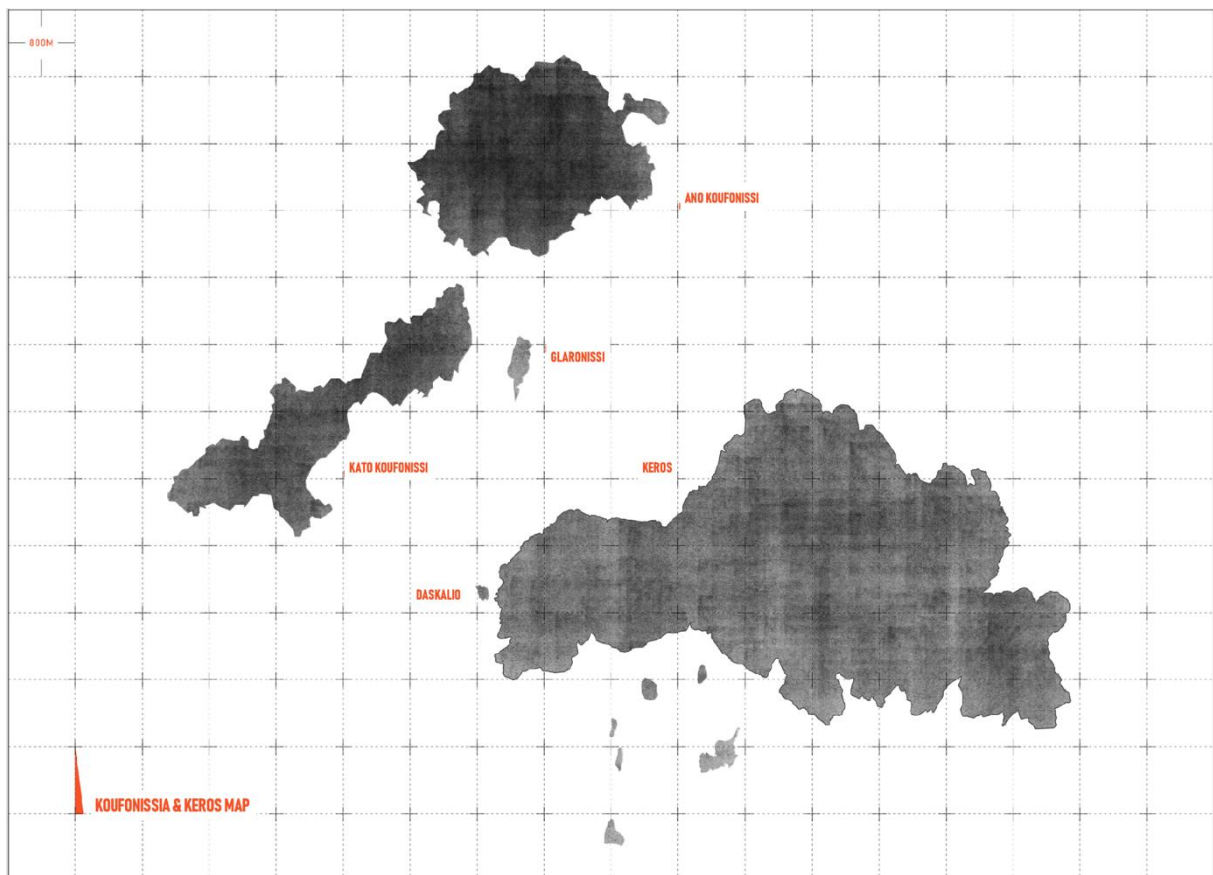
Deciphering Mechanisms and Narration Systems in the Natural Landscape

This project is a diploma thesis completed in 2021 for the Department of Architecture at the National Technical University of Athens. It explores the development of a methodology for documenting and designing natural landscapes using the uninhabited Cycladic Island of Keros, which has been restricted since 1992 when it was declared an archaeological site, as a case study.

The research focuses on two central questions: How can a place be perceived, archived and interpreted from a distance? How can a specific experience be designed for a place with limited access? Initially, these questions were addressed through remote research, combining narrative collection, cartographic analysis, and archival study. A visit to the site, carried out with special permission, enabled the physical characteristics of the island to be documented. The second phase of the study then focused on practical research into design tools. The study's central focus is the development of a four-layer conceptual framework that functions as an analytical and generative design mechanism. This framework was tested through the proposal of a scenographic tour of the island.

Figure 1

Koufonissia and Keros map. (personal archive)

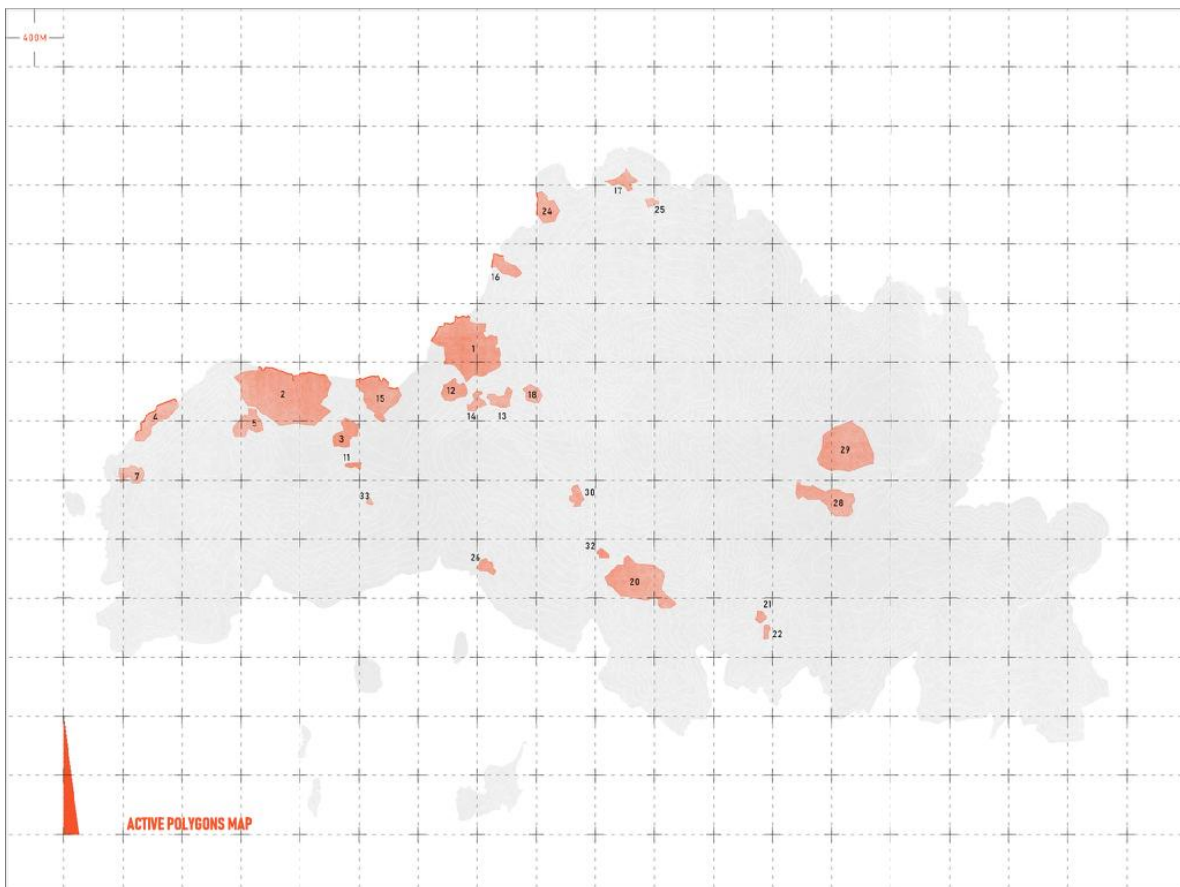


Keros and Daskalio

Keros is located in the southern Cyclades and forms part of the Koufonissia island group. The currently uninhabited island covers an area of 15 km² and has a 27 km coastline, with an altitude of up to 400 metres. It has been inhabited since ancient times, but people have gradually abandoned it since the 1960s. The first archaeological finds were discovered in Kavos Daskaliou in the 1960s, when the first signs of illegal excavations were detected (Renfrew et al., 2013). This marked the beginning of a series of systematic excavations, the final phase of which took place between 2015 and 2018 under the direction of Renfrew and Boyd. These excavations focused on the western part of Keros and a rocky islet called Daskalio. The initial findings included fragments of Cycladic figurines and ceramic vessels. Only a few figurines were found intact, and most of the fragments could not be reassembled. Through archaeological field research, the first theories emerged that attempted to explain the activity that took place on Keros in the third millennium BC.

Figure 2

Active polygons map. (University of Cambridge, Michael Boyd's archive).

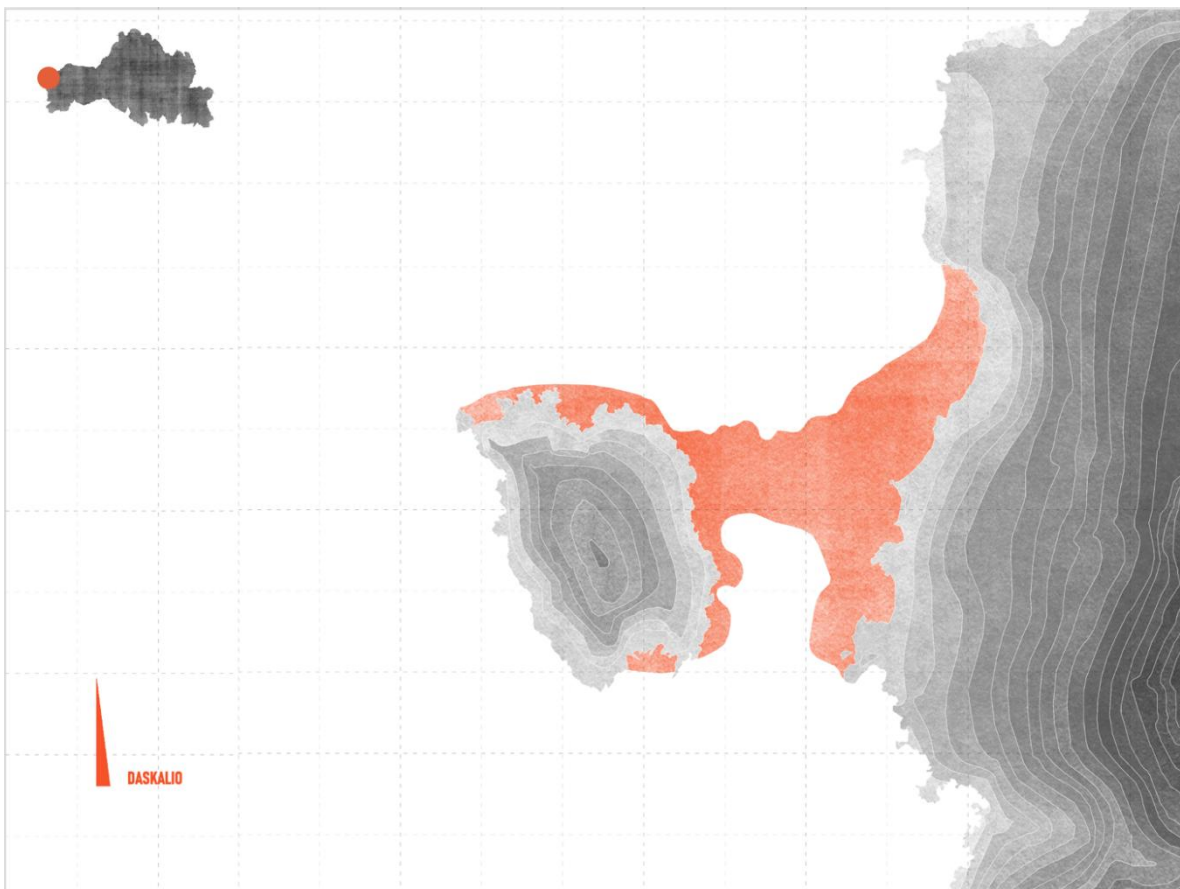


It has been proven that the pottery and the figurines found in Keros were broken before they were placed on the island, and that this was done in a purposeful and systematic way.

It has been proven that the pottery and figurines found on Keros were broken before they were placed there, in a purposeful and systematic way. This process was not vandalism, but a ritual practice that continued in the following centuries. The prevailing theory today is that Keros was a centre for religious ceremonies honouring the dead (Renfrew et al., 2013). During these ceremonies, people from the surrounding islands would bring broken figurines and vases to Keros. The Keros sanctuary is the first in the Aegean Sea to be known to have had inter-local power and influence extending to a radius of hundreds of kilometres (Sotirakopoulou, 2016).

Figure 3

Daskalio islet map. (University of Cambridge, Michael Boyd's archive).



The small island of Daskalio lies 90 metres offshore from the western end of Keros. Although it is now a rocky islet, cut off from Keros, in the Early Cycladic period it was connected to the main island by a strip of land which sank as the sea level rose. The islet was home to a religious centre and an advanced settlement, probably due to its natural, two-sided harbour (Sotirakopoulou, 2016). Most of Daskalio's population only lived there periodically to attend rituals (Renfrew et al., 2013). Important findings from the 19th century include the Head of a Female Figurine, housed in the Louvre Museum in Paris, and the Figurine of the Harpist and Figurine of the Piper, housed in the National Archaeological Museum of Athens.

Konakia, the last settlement on the island to be abandoned, is located on the northern side of the island (Renfrew et al., 2013). Traces of two three-aisled Byzantine churches can be found there, and some of Konakia's buildings were constructed based on these. Therefore, it seems that the island continued to be inhabited in phases even after the Daskalio era ended.

Figure 4

Konakia. (Personal archive)



Narratives

Keros could be described as an “abaton,” a place that is mainly known through excavation reports, oral histories, and observations from a distance. The first step in the research was to compile local accounts and our personal experiences at the site:

The passage: Even if you're not a sailor or a fisherman, there's still a way to read the water when you're out at sea. The tones of blue. The darker the blue, the deeper the sea. But when the blue thins out and turns pale and crystal-clear, it means the bottom is near. Shallow. Now, we're crossing the passage between Keros and Daskalio. I lift my head from the edge of the boat and peer down. The water here is almost translucent. It's clear. Shallow. Like a reef.

“Daskalio used to be joined to the island,” the fisherman says, as if he has read my mind. “That's why it's so shallow here.”

I follow the line where light blue vanishes into deep navy, where the sea suddenly swells into mystery. To the left, Keros rises. A great, sleeping mass of stone. Huge slabs of rock are stacked to shape the southern face of the island. They watch us pass.

For tourists like us, heading to Kato Koufonissi, the trip always unfolds in the same way.

The ferry from Piraeus arrives. We pick up a few essentials from the island's grocery store and then wait at the café by the port, passing the time before the little boat takes us to Kato Koufonissi. While we wait, we look out across the sea. Keros is there, framed by the wooden beams and stone walls of the terrace. It resembles a woman lying on her back, floating on the water. The locals are quick to point that out. It's one of the first things they'll proudly tell you about Keros.

Myths and Fantastical Stories

Who is Keros? Could it be a mythological figure?

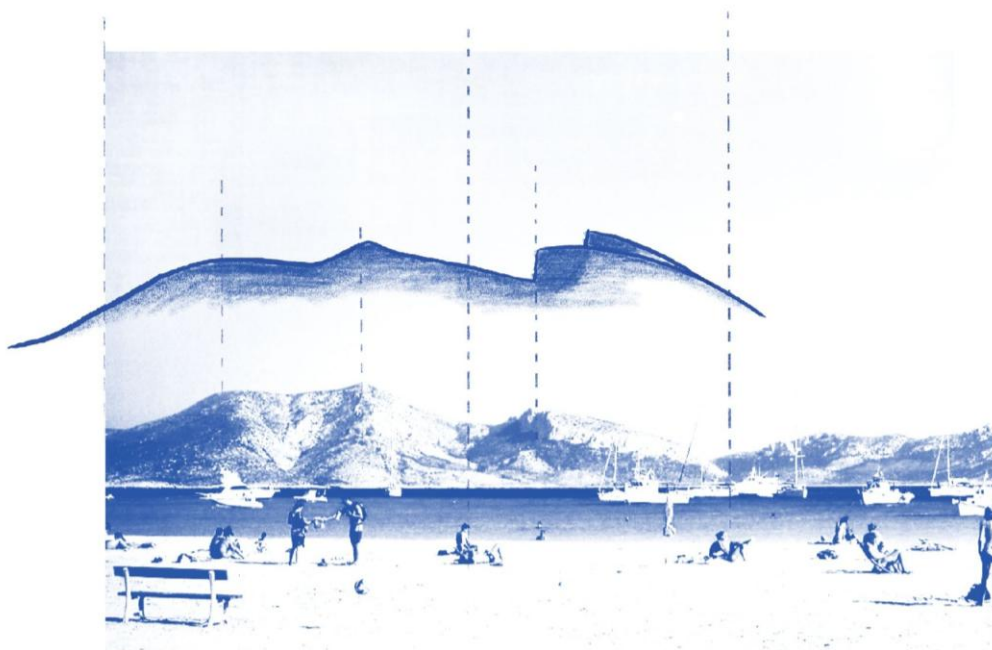
When we asked the inhabitants of Koufonisia, they told us that she is one of Zeus's daughters, whom he banished to the island to hide from Hera. We were also told that Keros is one of the gates to Hades in the Mediterranean Sea. One woman told us: "I remember playing with the figurines when we were children."

Other possible origins of the name "Keros:"

- *Κειράς, η, & κουράς - κουρά, η*, (shaved hair and beard)
- *Κερεία, η, ποιητ. Τύπος του Κειρία, η*, (1. Rope 2. Shroud, cloth with which the dead are wrapped)
- *Κείρω, κέρρω & κερέω* (the cutting or shaving of hair because of mourning, to mourn.
- *Εκείρατο η πόλις* (the city mourned)

Figure 5

Keros as a woman figure - collage. (Personal archive).



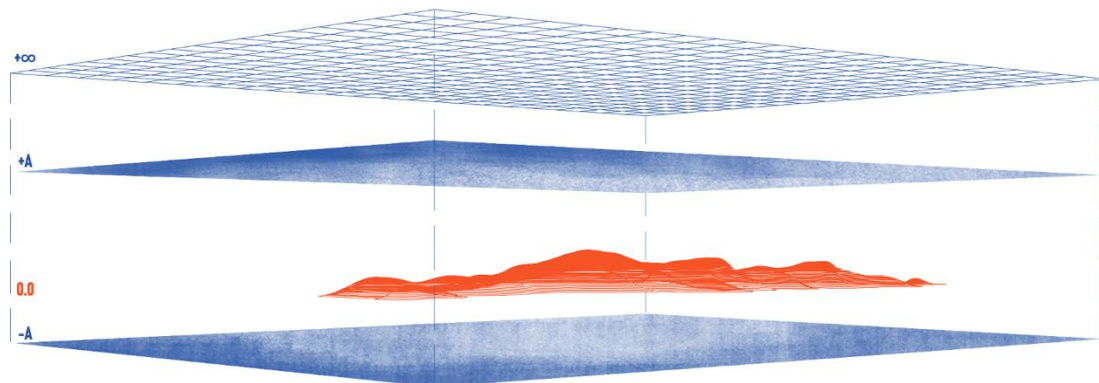
Archiving

Before visiting Keros, we interpreted and analysed the island's character on many different levels. The island's history of habitation, its enduring presence despite limited access, and local stories guided our remote research. To analyse and document this, we created a four-layer system that captures its physical, narrative and mythological aspects.

- Layer 0.0
The site of reference, which contains all of its traits, natural and man-made traits. The mapping of the island and its topography.
- The narrative layers +A, -A.
Layer +A contains the human perception of the island, the intangible oral histories and myths.
Layer -A concerns buried stories through ruins and excavations and the work of archaeologists in revealing them.
- The layer + ∞
This layer addresses the relationship between the site and its surroundings, as well as the attempt to reintegrate this liminal space into a collective geography. Excavation grids, naval systems, access points, viewpoints and orientation systems, such as the coastline and relations with surrounding islands, are used during research.

Figure 6

The four-layer mechanism. (Personal archive).



Site Visit

Following our remote research, a special permit granted by the Ephorate of Antiquities of the Cyclades enabled us to conduct a 3.5 km GPS-based survey of the landscape, capturing continuous video footage and making notes based on our embodied experience. This completed our initial Layer 0.0 research. During the visit, we observed the landscape's

natural and human-made features, such as the terrain, vegetation, traces of excavations, dry stone walls and structures such as the Acropolis and Konakia. We recorded the different typologies encountered along the route, focusing on how the environment relates to the body, which led to the identification of 42 spatial transitions. Each of these transitions functions as a scenographic scene, transforming the visitor into a performer and the site into a stage. These qualities were grouped into six types:

- Path: Area of strict and limited movement.
- Staircase: Natural connections of height differences.
- Tiers: Freer movement comparing to the trails. Due to the steep slopes, rocks become natural furniture.
- Plateau: Free movement in low-slope areas.
- Balcony: Natural ground ledges with open views. Resting spaces.
- Forest: Dense vegetation obstructs the view of the coastline and surrounding islands, intensifying the sense of disorientation experienced by walkers.

The spatial qualities and section typologies encountered along the route, are interpreted into a plan view and compose the diagram of the route's layout. Therefore, the final intervention zone on which the design will take place is re-delimited and combined with the four conceptual layers mentioned above.

Figure 7

Keros - vegetation map. (Personal archive).



Figure 8
Keros – man-made landscape map. (Personal archive)

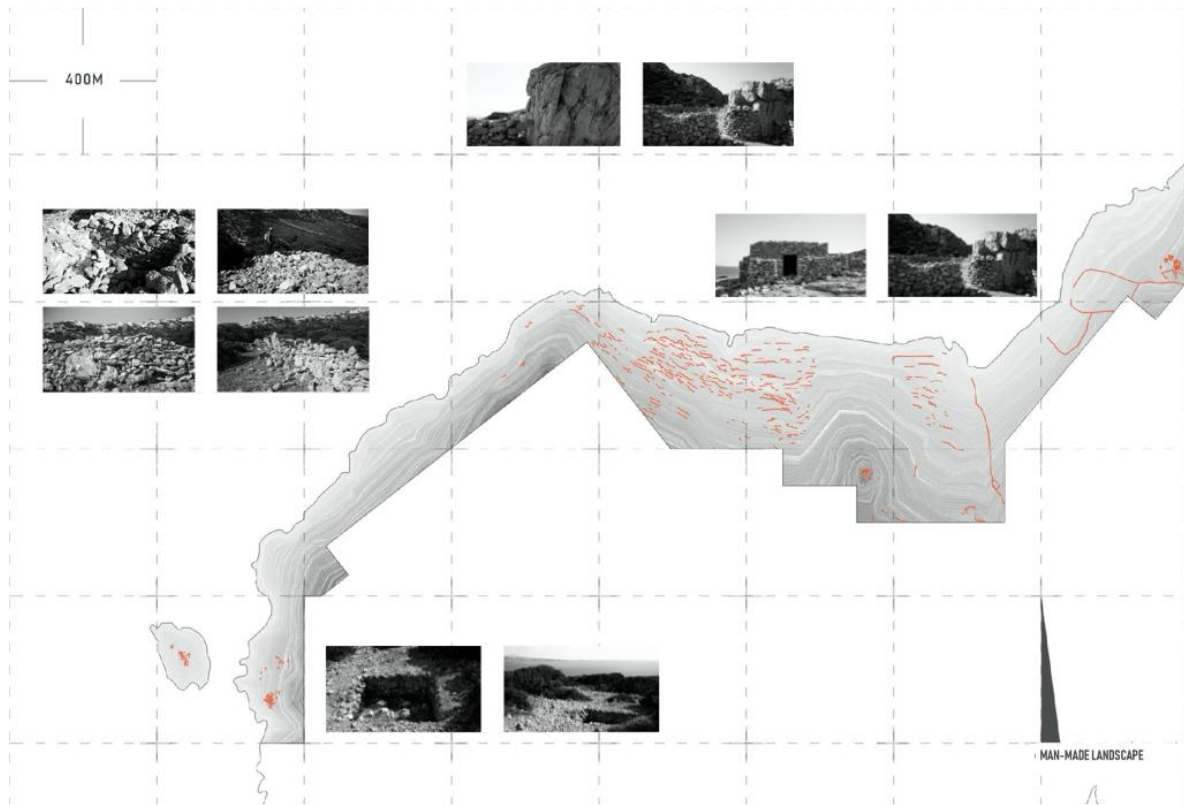
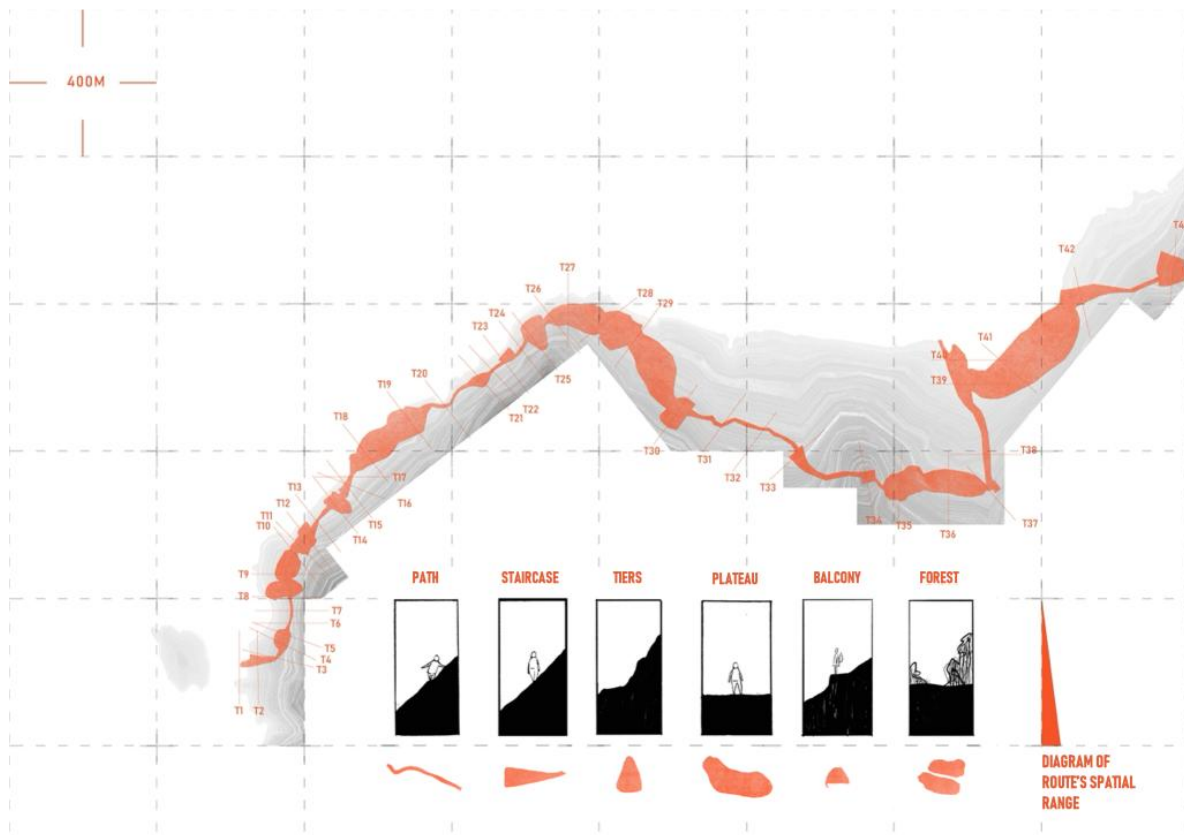


Figure 9
Diagram of route's spatial range. (Personal archive).

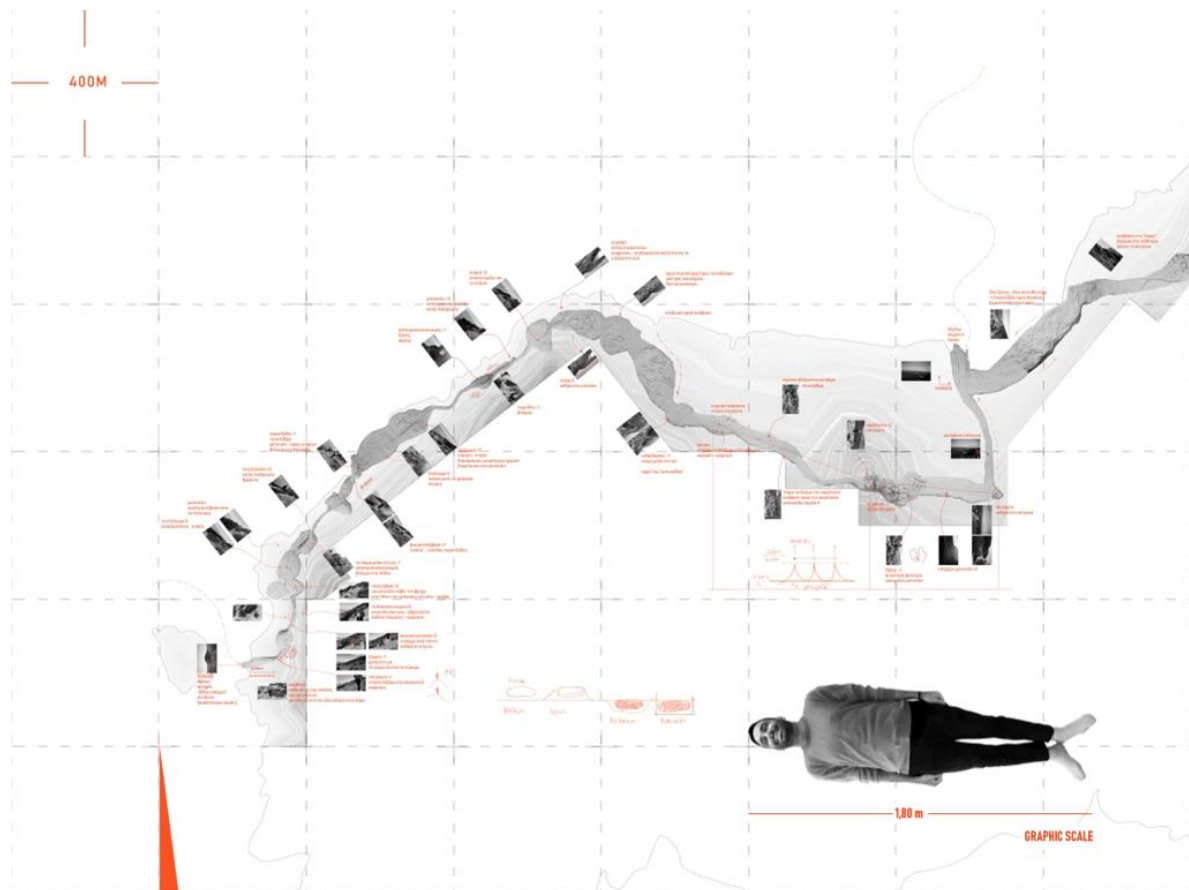


Remotely Visiting the Site

Due to our limited time on the island, we constructed a 7-metre-long collage model to revisit the route throughout the design process. This model incorporated the physical form of the landscape, as well as photographic frames, sketches and notes documenting our intentions. Each element was inscribed into the final model to create a map of our journey.

Figure 10

Model collage of Keros. (Personal archive).



The Four Layer Mechanism and its Design Tools

The synthetic tools are drawn from the data of our four conceptual layers and are integrated with the information recorded during analysis of Layer 0.0.

- Layer 0.0
The points that we choose to maintain and do not require any intervention.
- Narrative layers +A, -A
These are the points at which we create a spatial narrative to help form a relationship between the scale of the landscape and the human body.
Regarding layer +A, we design sections that expose the body, creating a sense of suspension.

Regarding layer -A, we create cavities in the landscape to intensify feelings of disorientation and the physical experience of walking.

- Layer + ∞

Initially, this functions as a tool for organising the plan view of the entire route. In the individual interventions on this layer, excavation grids are used to create visual escapes towards the surrounding islands and to establish relationships within the landscape.

Thus, the four conceptual layers coexist along the path. Each of the 42 points of interest (cinematic frames) is assigned a layer, from which specific design tools are derived that aim to guide the walker's movement. The design proposal comprises these 42 individual sections, each of which functions as a distinct system that guides both the gaze and the body. The existing landscape, in dialogue with the new interventions, shapes the reimagined narrative.

Figure 11

The four-layer mechanism and its design tools. (Personal archive).

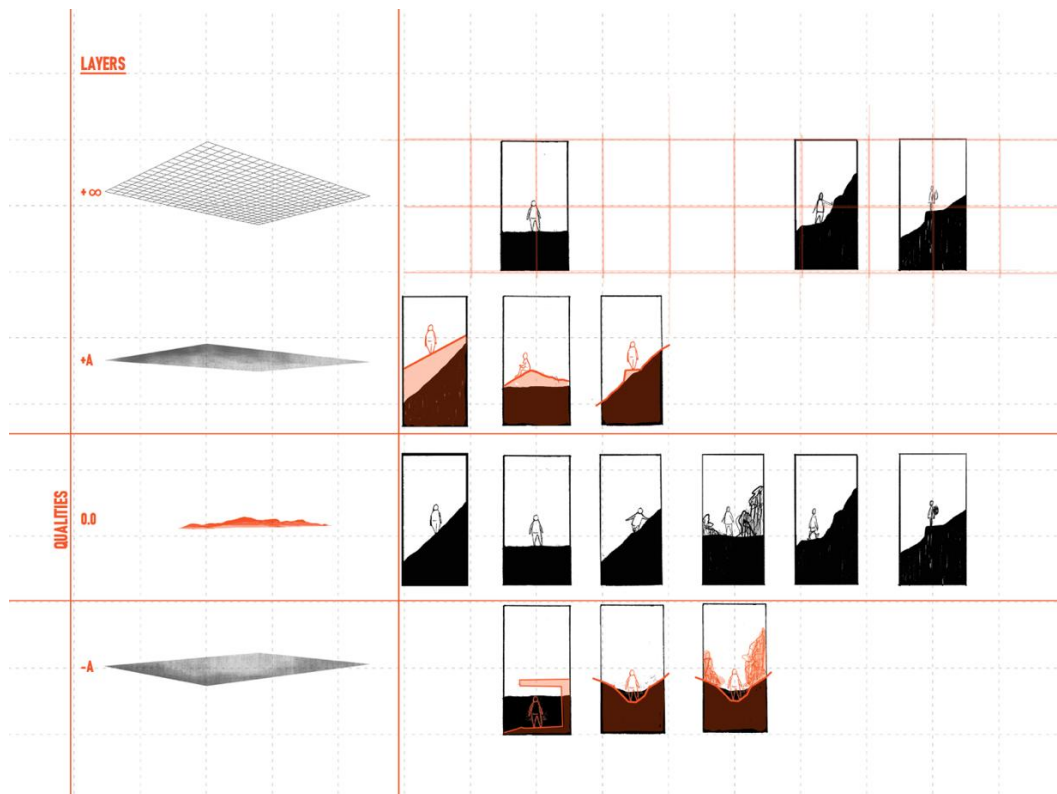
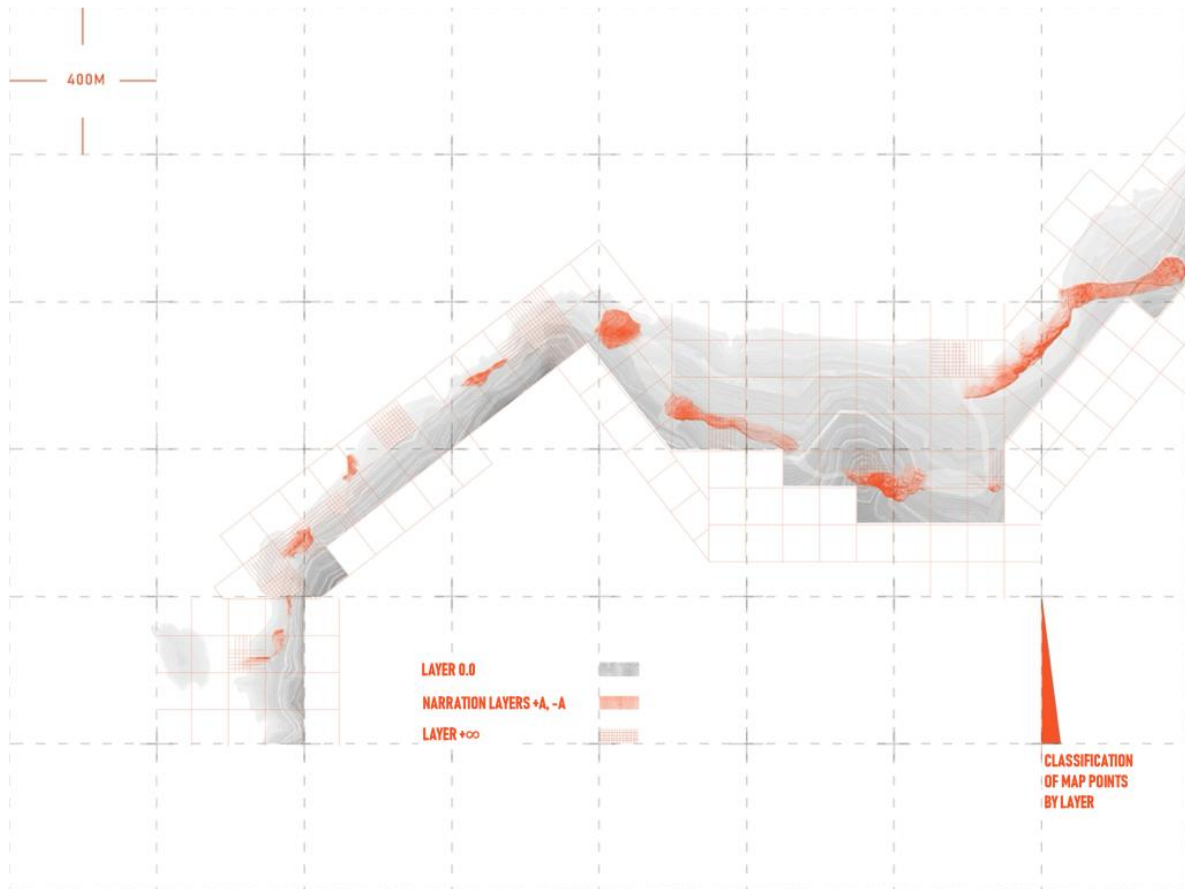


Figure 12

Classification of map points by layer. (Personal archive).



Conclusion

The study aimed to design a trail on Keros that reflects the island's history and memory. Due to the restricted access to the site, it soon became clear that the island's identity is shaped not only by its physical characteristics, but also by intangible elements such as narratives, mythology and everyday practices. This is a condition that could apply to any landscape.

The four-layer system addresses this issue by ensuring that all landscape features, both physical and intangible, are considered equally in the design process.

Returning to the initial research questions: How can a place be perceived, archived and interpreted remotely? How can a site-specific experience be designed for a place with restricted access? The answer lies in the system itself.

The proposed framework is a methodology for remotely interpreting, documenting and reimagining landscapes. It functions as a mirror between the site and the design process, generating tools that are tied to the landscape's unique qualities. Although the methodology is universal, its content and expression are always site-specific, as the mechanism is informed by the landscape's physical, historical and narrative characteristics.

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