

YERONISOS

twenty years on Cleopatra's Isle



by JOAN BRETON CONNELLY

An isle beyond an isle she lay, the pale ship anchored in the bay.

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So wrote English poet James Elroy Flecker in *A Ship, An Isle, A Sickle Moon*. Flecker may just have well been describing the islet of Yeronisos, off the headlands of Cape Drepanum in Cyprus,



which, when lit by the pale light of the waning moon, looks much like a ship in harbor. We have no record that Flecker ever traveled to western Cyprus, though it is not impossible. He served as British vice-consul in Beirut for two years before his death in 1915 at the age of thirty.



Yeronisos enjoys the rarefied status of being an island beyond an island. Its name, which means “holy island,” is an ancient one, first attested in Pliny (*Natural Histories* 5.129–131) in the first century A.D. and later by the historian Strabo (*Geography* 14.6.4) in the second. Both authors place the island called Hiero (“holy”) on the west coast of Cyprus, between the city of Paphos and the Akamas Peninsula.

Steep cliffs, strong currents, and lack of a water source have kept Yeronisos free from inhabitation since Byzantine times. These same obstacles also have kept away looters, leaving Yeronisos a pristine, un plundered time capsule, one of the last truly virgin sites of Cyprus. Luigi Palma di Cesnola, the swashbuckling American consul general and controversial first director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, removed some 30,000 antiquities from Cyprus during the 1860s and 1870s. Thankfully, he never made it over to Yeronisos.

The island remained the wild haunt of fishermen and swimmers until 1981, when a developer from Paphos set his sights on transforming Yeronisos into the setting for a Casino Resort Hotel. His proposed “Ulysses Palace” was to be connected by a causeway to the mainland, forever destroying the island’s rugged natural beauty, its fish-filled

waters, and its nesting sites for birds.

The Department of Antiquities of Cyprus stepped in and, under the direction of Sophocles Hadjisavvas, undertook five weeks of excavation to determine whether the site held ancient remains. The archaeological team unearthed extensive architectural foundations, building blocks and cornice moldings, roof tiles, stone and glass bowls, and an extraordinary sequence of late Hellenistic pottery. In 1982, Yeronisos was expropriated by the Republic of Cyprus as a national heritage site of tremendous cultural significance. The casino building was stopped.

In 1989, I had the opportunity to look at the material that was recovered in these first excavations on Yeronisos. It literally knocked the socks off of me. Here was an assemblage of finds concentrated within an astonishingly narrow time frame in the first century B.C. The fact that there was no Roman material to speak of led me to believe that we had here a rare opportunity to explore intact, undisturbed, pure Hellenistic levels. A coin of Cleopatra VII of Egypt and her son by Julius Caesar, Ptolemy XV (known as Caesarion or “Little Caesar”), pointed to the third quarter of the first century, a period about which we know very little in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Furthermore, I was holding in my hands the

only Ptolemaic Egyptian ostraka (inscribed pot sherds) found to date in all of Cyprus. This meant that something very specific—and very special—was taking place on the island. The impressive assemblage of fineware pottery imported from across the Mediterranean suggested contacts with far-flung centers.

I eagerly applied for a license to explore Yeronisos and its surrounding waters and in 1990 was granted permission to direct an expedition on behalf of New York University. In 1993, our team was honored to carry the Explorers Club Flag across the waters and up the cliffs, to fly high above the ancient site. This year we celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the start of our work on Yeronisos.

Over the past two decades we have undertaken two archaeological and geomagnetic survey seasons, two ecological survey seasons, one underwater survey season, ten excavation seasons, and seven study seasons.

From the day we first set foot on Yeronisos, it was the island itself that told us how to dig it. We were not alone, but were mere visitors to a vibrant community of avian inhabitants: yellow-footed gulls, rock doves, jackdaws, cormorants, and swifts. Before we started excavation, we brought out naturalist and island conservancy steward Peter P. Blanchard III of New York City and Mt. Desert Island, Maine. In 1990 and 1992, Peter undertook surveys of Yeronisos flora and fauna, taking bird counts and identifying plant samples. He flew our pressed plant specimens to the Herbarium of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in England. He was joined in the work of identifying the samples by Desmond Meikle, a world authority and author of the first comprehensive study of the some 1,750 plant taxa from Cyprus (*Flora of Cyprus*, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, 1977, 1985).

Peter also set up guidelines for our work to help us minimize the invasive effects of excavation upon the natural habitat. We would construct only temporary landings and shelters, use only natural “camouflage” materials, wear earth tones, and adopt a slow and sequential calendar of excavation seasons, punctuated by study seasons in which the vegetation could grow back. We carefully scheduled our weeks of work to fall after the nesting season. Most important, we would save all the earth we dug from our trenches, backfilling





them at the end of each season, thus allowing the plant life to regenerate and nesting to continue as before.

As we pioneered the integration of ecological and archaeological fieldwork to preserve both the natural and cultural resources of Yeronisos, we also developed fruitful collaborations with the Department of Fisheries. Yeronisos lies just opposite the long, broad beaches on which the loggerhead and green turtles lay their eggs each June. In 1978, Andreas Demetropoulos, former director of the Department of Fisheries, founded the Turtle Conservation Project, the first organization in the Mediterranean to protect sea turtles. Today, his son Simon Demetropoulos is a member of the Yeronisos Island Expedition staff, taking our NYU students on nighttime beach patrols to watch turtles laying their eggs and to assist in collection and transfer of turtle nests to the hatchery on nearby Lara Beach.

What have we learned over twenty years of excavation? The “golden age” of Yeronisos occurred at very end of the Hellenistic period, following the death of Alexander the Great when the Ptolemies of Egypt ruled Cyprus. During the first century B.C., someone or group of individuals committed very substantial resources to initiate a vast building program. Construction was intense over a very short number of years focused on 50–30 B.C., coinciding with the reign of Cleopatra VII of Egypt.

No expense was spared in transforming Yeronisos from a desolate, uninhabited island to an elegant sanctuary of Apollo. A quarry was dug to the west for the retrieval of building materials. A great cistern was sunk to the east for the collection of drinking water. Its fan-shaped water trap, made of more than 100 stone blocks, covered with a layer of waterproof cement, directed rain-water down into the carafe-shaped tank beneath.

On the western precipice a templelike structure was built. Most of it has collapsed into the sea, along with the whole west end of Yeronisos, probably during the great earthquakes of the fourth century A.D. In 1994, we scrambled down

the cliff face and recovered a treasure trove of architectural fragments: cornice blocks, egg and dart moldings, Ionic columns, and a lion’s head waterspout with a highly expressive face—open mouth and threatening teeth—all carved from limestone and plastered to resemble marble. These extraordinary finds attest to the opulent nature of the little Ionic temple that once stood on the westernmost point of Yeronisos, looking out over the sea toward Alexandria and Egypt.

The Yeronisos lion’s head is currently on view at the Museum of Natural History of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., “Cyprus: Crossroads of Civilizations,” the largest exhibition of Cypriot art ever to travel to the United States, is on show until May 1, 2011, and presents a rare opportunity to see fascinating objects unearthed by the NYU Yeronisos Island Excavation team.

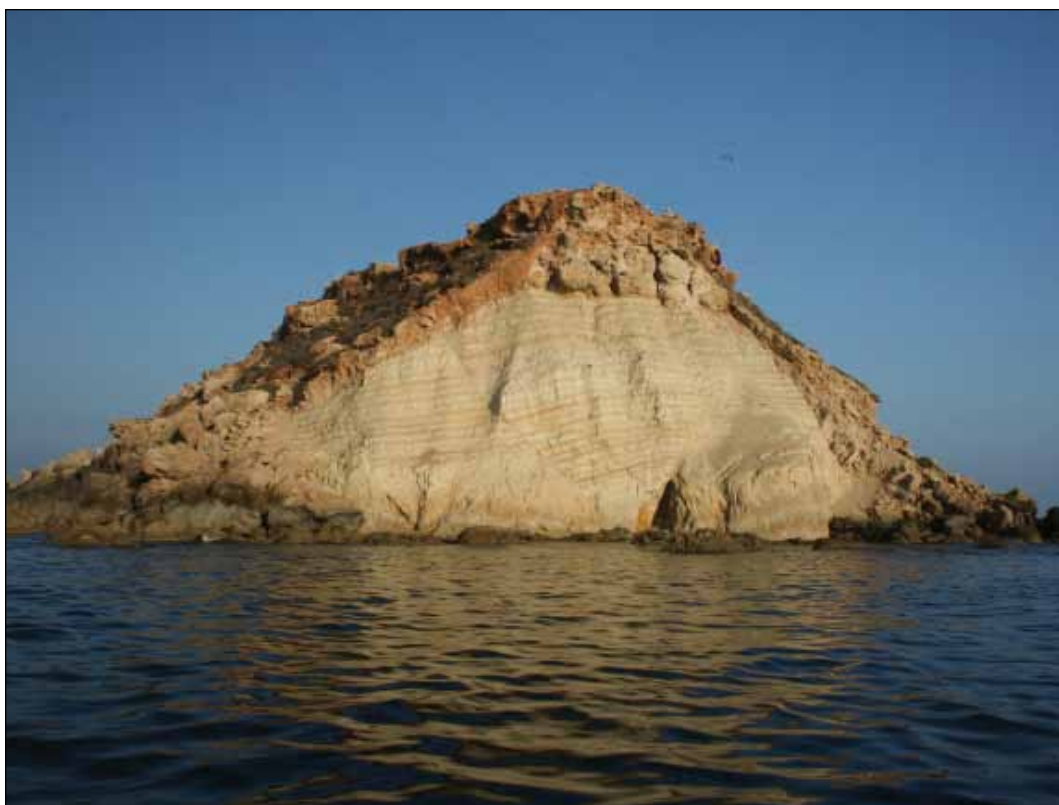
Along the southern side of Yeronisos lies a series of small dining and sleeping rooms to accommodate pilgrims visiting the island. The square rooms with low benches were filled with drinking cups, jugs, casseroles, bronze needles, dice for playing and passing the time, as well as coins of Cleopatra and Caesarion, dated 47–30 B.C.

In 1994, we recovered an amphora sherd with an inscription to the god Apollo. By far the most popular male divinity on Cyprus, Apollo looked after boys during their time of transition into manhood. Other inscribed sherds point to the presence of young boys on the island. One bears lists of male names. Some others preserve the writing exercises of children, exciting evidence that the teaching of young boys may have taken place within the island sanctuary. Small stone votive trays for offerings to the god, miniature vessels, and votive plaques all point to the sacred character of activity on this “holy island.”

The most compelling evidence for rituals involving boys on Yeronisos lies in the amulets that would have been worn as talismans or good luck charms. These include an Egyptian scarab showing the Sekhmet, goddess of motherhood, medicine, and war; a deep orange carnelian frog, a well-known







fertility charm; and 17 limestone pendants marked with magical signs and age-old motifs. Some of these designs derive directly from Alexandria: the Ptolemaic Eagle, the Sun Disc, a portrait of a fat diademed ruler, the image of a skinny male wearing the double crown of the Egyptian pharaoh. Each of these motifs can be matched in clay seal impressions found at the temple of Horus in distant Edfu in Egypt. This very ancient Egyptian sanctuary was adorned by Cleopatra in the first century B.C. on the occasion of the birth of her son, Caesarion. In associating his birth with the birth and rebirth of the god Horus, an offspring of Isis and Osiris, Cleopatra presented herself as the “new Isis,” with Julius Caesar as the deceased ruler, Osiris, and her son, Ptolemy XV Caesar, as the pharaoh reborn, Horus.


Cleopatra was so thrilled with the birth of her son that she built *mammisi*, or “birth shrines,” for him throughout Egypt. I believe the building of the sanctuary on Yeronisos may have been inspired by this same event. We cannot know whether Cleopatra herself founded the Yeronisos shrine, but the extravagance of its architecture, the amulets that evoke fertility and motherhood, the images of the Ptolemaic kings, including one that may show Caesarion himself, all suggest that this might be so.

The nearby city of Paphos held special importance for the father of the boy, Julius Caesar. This was the birthplace of his own famous ancestor, the goddess Venus. The association of the birthplace of Venus with the birth of the prince Caesarion would go a long way in solidifying Little Caesar’s claim as legitimate heir, not just to Egypt, but to Rome. By playing up the connection with Paphos, the administration of Cleopatra would have made brilliant use of myth, allegory, and political propaganda in promoting the cause of Caesarion. But this was not to be. With Octavian’s defeat of Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium, and the subsequent death/murder of Cleopatra and Caesarion in 30 B.C., interest in the Yeronisos sanctuary and the resources needed to keep it going dried up. An earthquake toppled its structures in 15 B.C., sealing the pure Hellenistic levels beneath deep strata of fallen blocks and decomposed mud brick.

Unlocking the secrets of the time capsule that lies beneath this destruction level has been a thrilling enterprise, one that we have shared not

only with our students, but also with members of the private sector. In 1992, we started a program called “Exec-U-Dig” through which individuals, for a robust tax-deductible contribution to the project, can travel to Cyprus to join us for a week in the trenches. A distinguished alumni group, including bankers, authors, businessmen and women, journalists, and soccer moms has grown from this program and has greatly enriched our experience on Yeronisos. Actor Bill Murray, Citicorp’s Bill Rhodes, gallery owner Martha Sutherland, and writer Barnaby Conrad are among the many happy campers who have taken pick and trowel to the trenches of our holy island.

In his most enduring work, *The Golden Journey to Samarkand* (1913), James Elroy Flecker pays lasting tribute to the spirit of exploration and the fearlessness that drives it:

*We are the Pilgrims, master; we shall go
Always a little further: it may be
Beyond the last blue mountain barred with snow,
Across that angry or that glimmering sea...* 

INFORMATION

We do so hope that some of you will travel beyond the “glimmering sea” to Yeronisos and experience with us, first hand, the wonders of Cleopatra’s Cyprus. The 2011 excavation season will run from May 21 to June 18. For information on joining the project, contact: joan.connelly@nyu.edu.

BIOGRAPHY

A Fellow of The Explorers Club since 1990, archaeologist Joan Breton Connelly is Professor of Classics and Art History at New York University; Member of the School of Historical Studies, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton; and Director of the NYU Yeronisos Island Excavations, Cyprus. A MacArthur Award winner, she is the author of *Portrait of a Priestess: Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece*, *Votive Sculpture of Hellenistic Cyprus*, and dozens of scholarly articles on Greek art, archaeology, religion, and history.