

**Marilena Mela**

*Assembling the Archipelago: Heritage in Energy Transitions and Climate Action*

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In *Assembling the Archipelago* Marilena Mela offers an interesting counterpoint to the dominance of global policy frameworks and technocratic solutions in climate discourse. Drawing on five years of fieldwork across four European archipelagos, Mela constructs a compelling argument for ‘thinking small’ – examining how locally situated heritage can inform energy transitions in ways that centralised planning often fails to achieve.

The book is organised into six chapters, with a theoretical introduction followed by four empirical case studies and a synthesising conclusion. Chapters 2–5 form the empirical core, each dedicated to a specific island landscape: Ameland in the Dutch Wadden Sea, Tinos in the Greek Cyclades, Shetland in Scotland, and the Aeolian Islands in Italy. Mela takes a Braudelian perspective, explaining each landscape as the history of its geological formation, followed by centuries of the human-environment dynamic, and culminating in modern conflicts over renewable energy infrastructure. This methodological approach has been effective, in that the reader can understand the extent to which historical processes influence modern responses to climate mitigation strategies.

Mela’s central thesis is that heritage is not a passive object of preservation but an active factor of landscape transformation. On Ameland, she captures how the ‘solar park’ on the island, inaugurated for a royal visit in 2019, has become mixed with local histories of autonomy and identity rooted in centuries of self-governance (p. 53). The decision to cover the panels with an artificial dike, making them part of the dune landscape, indicates that sustainability ambitions should be mediated with internally determined aesthetic values and historical land-use patterns. Likewise, on Tinos, when the island began to resist wind turbine projects, this led to a grassroots movement that inculcated the notion of ‘heritagisation’ of the rural landscape, thus defining new frameworks for local appreciation of place and stewardship (p. 88).

Chapter 4 provides an advanced analysis of the historical commons’ effects on modern energy politics. Mela focuses on the influence of the Shetland archipelago’s experience with North Sea oil extraction on further discussions of the Viking Wind Farm, as well as on community-owned tidal energy projects on Yell. The author’s examination of the manner in which ‘the oil boom of the end of the twentieth century signalled prosperity and the development of an island-centric governance system’ clarifies the complex legacies involved in renewable energy initiatives (p. 171). The case of the Aeolian Islands conveys a very different message of inaction, whereby strict heritage planning frameworks and fragmented administration have blocked local climate response whilst preserving scenery against industrial-scale growth.

## REVIEWS

One of the major strengths of the book is its methodological approach. Mela combines techniques from archival work, policy research and broad fieldwork, and includes interviews with island residents, activists and government representatives. Her position as a Greek researcher in the Netherlands, where she works on a project in four languages, provides the project with significant geographic and cultural scope. The comparative framework is useful, because it helps identify both central tendencies, such as the historical peripheralisation of island communities over time, and areas requiring special focus, such as how each archipelago has resolved the issue of the relationship between local autonomy and the guiding national or European policy frameworks.

Among the limitations of this volume, some readers may consider the complete theoretical treatment provided in Chapter 1 to hamper the prompt delivery of the empirical content. Moreover, despite Mela's care not to generalise from four cases, the writing could be strengthened by a clearer presentation of how the archipelagic methodology could be applied to situations beyond islands. The author hints at this but does not fully explain it. Lastly, her study of power relations is inclined to favour local agency, overlooking the constraints imposed by national energy policies and international flows of capital.

To scholars interested in the field of environmental history, Mela's work is a significant contribution to modern discussions of how historical consciousness can bear on environmental political praxis. Her claim that 'the rethinking of such global relationships cannot occur at a global scale' urges environmental historians to be more rigorous in incorporating geographically specific processes through which historical narratives are mobilised in current sustainability struggles (p. 3). The concept of 'latent landscape heritage', that is, the practices and worldviews historically entrenched but potentially re-emerging as informants to the present praxis, is a valuable tool that enables researchers to question how communities manage environmental change (pp. 178–179).

To sum up, *Assembling the Archipelago* has shown that heritage cannot be adduced solely to impede climate action, or to market tourism products and services, but is instead a dynamic resource by which communities develop meaningful ways to move toward sustainability. The archipelagic approach of Mela, in following out interrelations across diversity while maintaining the specificity of place, provides a paradigm of inquiry into environmental history, combining empirical rigour with theoretical appeal. The book will be of interest to researchers and learners in the fields of environmental history, heritage, geography and environmental humanities, as well as to anyone seeking to situate sustainability transitions and issues within the context of local knowledge and practice.

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