

DEPARTURES

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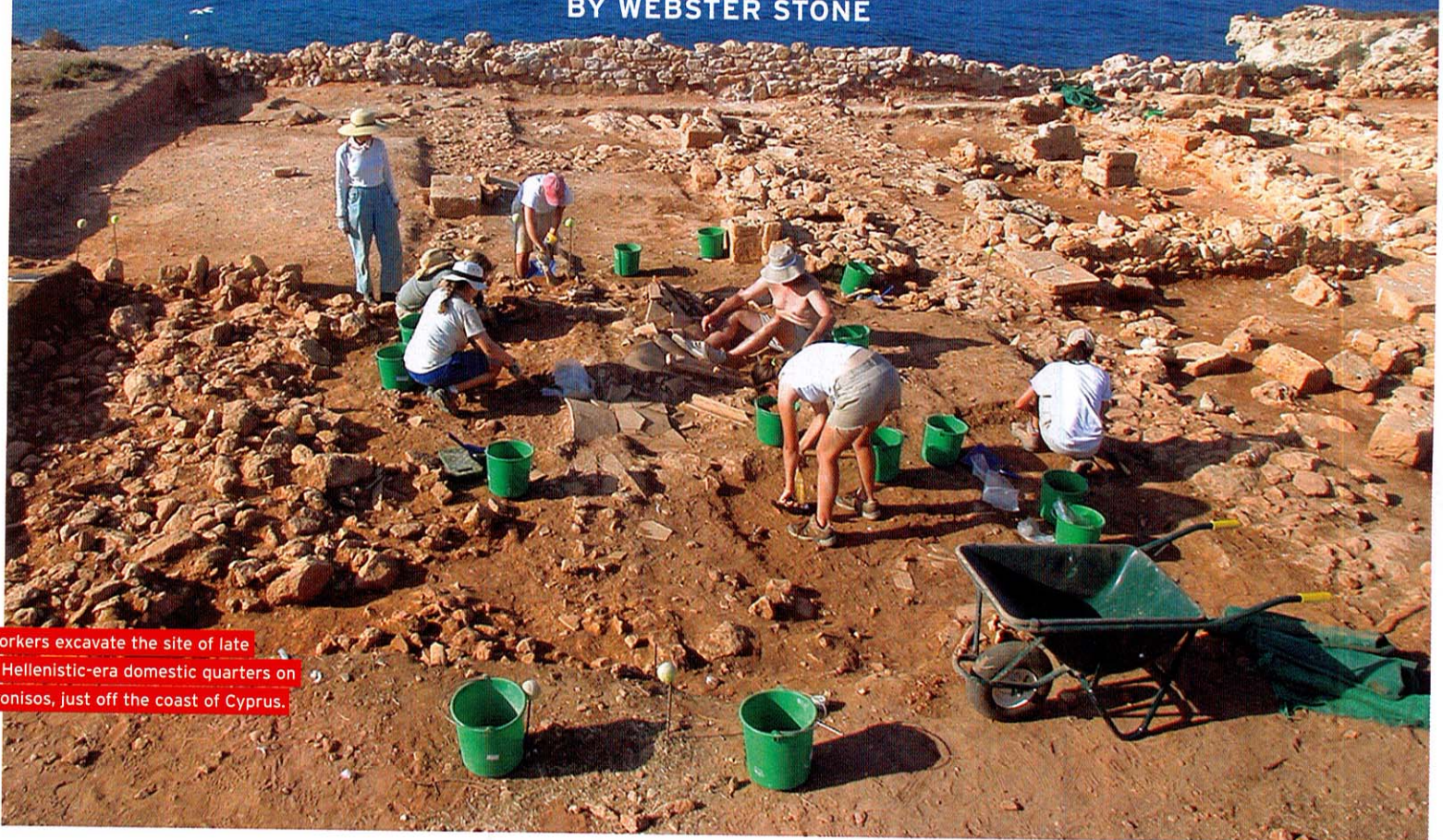
CULTUREWATCH

THE STATE OF THE ARTS AROUND THE WORLD | Edited by Stephen Wallis

Cleopatra's Secret

On a tiny Mediterranean island, archaeologist Joan Breton Connelly is digging for clues that could rewrite ancient history.

BY WEBSTER STONE



Workers excavate the site of late Hellenistic-era domestic quarters on Yeronisos, just off the coast of Cyprus.

I'm standing atop a slippery half-submerged boulder at the bottom of a 70-foot cliff. Nearby, a dozen women balance on makeshift wooden planks or wait back on the beach. We are trying to get off the damn island.

The Mediterranean, so calm at dawn, thrashes at us now. Andreas, a fisherman, has rigged a line to pull his dinghy to the shoreline and back out to his boat 50 yards away. The operation, usually no more than a rowboat ride, has taken on the cast of a Navy SEAL rescue. I doubt any of us will end up with our heads bashed on these razor rocks, but the thought crosses my mind.

All for a few ancient fixtures, roof tiles, and pottery shards. Christ! Let me rephrase that: Pre-Christ!

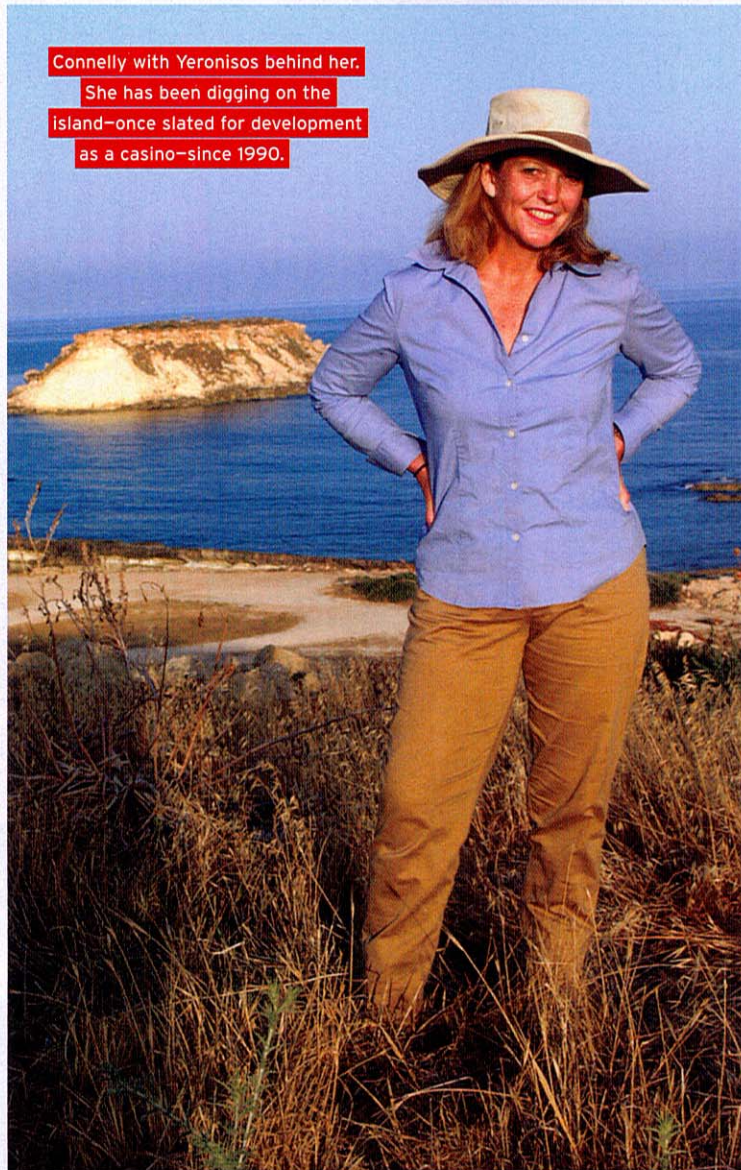
The young women around me are not even 22. Practiced in this routine, they have no fear. Inside the valley of a swell, Andreas maneuvers in close, signals, and deftly grabs the first arm. The women pounce, one by one, in and down. A wave is fast approaching. Three more—in and down, in and down, in and down.

Andreas looks out at the dark water, calculating distance and time. He motions "Come!" and I jump in. He pulls hard at the rope, but already the water rises steeply underneath us, picking

up the dinghy and slamming its bow against the dock-boulder. Nothing splinters. Andreas shrugs and pulls us out into the choppy water. I feign a yawn.

Another day in the field. Our group is part of a team that has come to excavate the archaeological sites of Yeronisos, a small island—a rock, really—300 yards long by about 75 yards wide, just off the coast of Cyprus. For nearly two decades New York University professor Joan Breton Connelly has been bringing students and other visitors, like me, here to help with the digs. She believes this might be the spot where Cleopatra built a sacred temple to Apollo to thank the god and to celebrate the birth of Caesarion, her child with Julius Caesar. Connelly is searching for clues to support that theory.

I had first met Professor Connelly a few years ago, when I made my way to an NYU lecture hall. From a seat in the back, I watched as she clicked her slides and told stories of the Acropolis, Ptolemaic Egypt, and the illicit



Connelly with Yeronisos behind her. She has been digging on the island—once slated for development as a casino—since 1990.

scholars silent or dismissive,” said Cambridge fellow William St. Clair at the time. “They cannot bring themselves to accept it.”

But the MacArthur Foundation was convinced and in 1996 awarded her a coveted \$250,000 “genius” grant. Last year Connelly published a book about the power of women in Greece, *Portrait of a Priestess* (Princeton University Press). *The New York Times* called it eye-opening and named it a Notable Book of 2007. When Connelly is not lecturing, writing, or serving on a panel that advises the State Department on cultural heritage issues, she can usually be found digging on Yeronisos.

As we head up Cyprus’s rugged coastline, my driver abruptly pulls over. He points down to a cove of turbulent sea and announces, “The birthplace of Venus.” A sign corroborates his claim. In the Battle of the Titans, Cronus is said to have cut off the testicles of his father, Uranus, and thrown them into the sea—apparently here. And from that foam rose Venus.

“We’re not finding treasure,” Connelly tells me, “but we are finding history. Lamps, fishhooks, needles—these are the DNA of archaeology.”

antiquities trade. Though a popular teacher and entertaining speaker, Connelly often invites colleagues to address her class: a marine colonel tasked by General Tommy Franks to investigate the looting of the Iraq Museum, an FBI special agent who directs the nation’s Art Crime Team, and an art historian who participated in a sting operation to recapture a stolen work by Peter Paul Rubens. No wonder a student once asked, “Professor Connelly, are all your friends superheroes?”

Actually Connelly is something of a superhero herself. Experienced, deeply

knowledgeable, lively, and attractive, she is—in keeping with the comic book theme—the real world’s answer to tomb raider Lara Croft. Educated at Bryn Mawr and Princeton (followed by a fellowship at Oxford), Connelly first made headlines in the mid-nineties when she reinterpreted a Parthenon frieze using 120 lines of a newly discovered Euripides play found with an Egyptian mummy. Connelly’s work rendered centuries of scholarship obsolete, earning her the enmity of stodgy classicists. “The boldness of Joan Connelly’s suggestion has left other

If this is where it happened, Botticelli definitely did not do his homework.

We continue on, finally arriving in the small town of Agios Georgios tis Pegeias and making our way to the West End Hotel’s shaded porch. This is base camp for Professor Connelly’s Yeronisos Island expedition. When we show up the entire crew is well into lunch.

I sit at one end of the table with Connelly and two of her friends, a husband-and-wife archaeologist team from the University of Warsaw. The rest of the table looks like the dining room of a women’s

college—bright, healthy girls chowing down. These are Connelly's worker bees, students in the field school. (Women account for a high proportion of fine arts, archaeology, and classics majors—the most common applicants for the program.)

A grilled fish lands on the plate in front of me. "Stavros fishes every evening," says Connelly. "Then his wife, Athena, cooks

to ruin, so did Yeronisos. The island abruptly ceased operations in 31 B.C. when Octavian (later Augustus) defeated the forces of Mark Antony and Cleopatra at sea in the Battle of Actium. After an earthquake hit the island 17 years later, Yeronisos became an archaeological time capsule.

Now I am eager to dig into this time capsule, and I have come prepared—shorts,

swifts hover and caw. Ecologically minded, Connelly works hard to protect the natural habitat. "Archaeologists can turn into strip miners," she says, "but there's a way to excavate and preserve the ecosystem." Digging only occurs between nesting seasons (May and June), camouflage is used to cover equipment, and excavations are carefully filled in.

Connelly's Exec-U-Dig program allows real-world people—from soccer moms to bankers—to spend a week on-site exploring their inner Indiana Jones.

them for us—octopus, sea bream. I think that's red mullet."

I order another Keo, Cyprus's tasty home-grown beer. Feels like vacation already.

I'm sweating pretty hard now. After a Greek breakfast and taking a '62 Land Rover to the dock, a trawler out to sea, a dinghy to shore, and a zigzag march up the precipitous earthwork stairs (loading, unloading, and carrying equipment at every turn), I'm finally standing on the plateau of Yeronisos. Blue sky, bright water, and hard sun. It is not yet 6 A.M. This is no vacation.

Professor Connelly walks me around the island's circumference. She points out a quarry from the first century B.C., a cistern and accommodations for ancient pilgrims, an Ionic column from the temple, and her proudest discovery, an expansive dance floor where she believes young boys were trained to perform. "We're not finding treasure," she tells me, "but we are finding history. Lamps, fishhooks, needles—these are the DNA of archaeology."

Connelly started her excavation work here in 1990. (Yeronisos had been slated to be developed as a casino.) Digging up foundations, walls, coins, amulets, wine jugs, and much more, she deduced the island had been a temple to Apollo. Almost all the items found at the site can be traced to Cleopatra's capital, Alexandria. "Someone threw a ton of money at this place," says Connelly. "Cleopatra was the only one with the resources to build on an island surrounded by seventy-foot cliffs."

But why would the Queen of Egypt build a shrine 300 nautical miles north of her palace? The answer may lie in her relationship with Julius Caesar, and their son, Caesarion. Whatever the reason, when Cleopatra went

shirt, sneakers, hat, sunglasses, sunscreen, iPod. As I report for duty, a 19-year-old requests that I help shovel and wheelbarrow a gigantic mound of dirt.

Two hours later Connelly rescues me. "We're going to East Building," she announces. "It's where I send my keenest student diggers." Along the cliffside route herring gulls, rock doves, jackdaws, and

At the island's northeastern edge, we step down from an ancient wall onto a dirt floor. "Byzantine monks probably came out here," Connelly says. "I think this was a little sixth-century monastery."

Two enthusiastic young women greet us. Connelly introduces me to the tools of her trade: pickax, trowel, pail, and brush. But before I can get to work, she delivers an absorbing mini lecture about calcareous rock, red earth versus black earth, bone identification, and the island's unusual erosion patterns. Then she doffs her canvas hat and climbs out. The girls beam.

"She always do that?" I ask.

"Yeah. Last time she told us about aerial cartography. She's great."

I settle into my task. Pick, dig, brush, look. Repeat. For hours. In 100-degree heat. "What am I searching for?" I ask.

"A solid gold statue that says 'I, Cleopatra, was here!'" They laugh. "We're just looking for glass, pieces of pottery, tiles, plaster. You can tell when something is just a rock or bone and when it's made by humans."

"So," says the other girl, "We have an initiation rite at East Building. Everyone who digs here has to do it."

Uh-oh.

"You must tell us what happened at your high school prom."

"Junior or senior year?"

Hours later, at 11 A.M., a horn blows and everyone converges under a tent for second breakfast, a Greek tradition. We eat some fruit, bread, hard-boiled eggs, and cured meats. We drink a lot of water. After a good half hour of chat and chew, it's right back to the trenches.

We knock off at two in the afternoon. This has been the longest day I can remember. We head down to where Andreas picks us up. And that's the drill. Every day. What

Pick, Dig, Brush...

If you've ever dreamed of being an archaeologist, NYU professor Joan Breton Connelly offers the Exec-U-Dig program, which lets amateurs spend a week in the field—beside specialists and students—scouring for ancient artifacts on her Yeronisos Island expedition. The program runs mid-May to mid-June. Participants (from stay-at-home moms to high-powered lawyers) have included actor Bill Murray, Citibank chairman and CEO Bill Rhodes, and writer Barnaby Conrad.

The Highlights

- Beautiful Mediterranean setting with clear, clean water, great swimming, hiking in a nature preserve
- Rich history that includes Cleopatra, Julius Caesar, Caesarion
- Village life and the friendly Cypriot people—shepherds, fishermen, monks

Consider Before Signing On

- Waking up at five in the morning
- Occasionally brutal heat
- Physical labor, including hauling equipment and moving earth
- No e-mail access and poor cell phone reception

The program costs \$10,000 per week a person (part of which is tax-deductible). For information visit nyu.edu/projects/yeronisos or contact Connelly at 212-998-8194 or joan.connelly@nyu.edu.

with rising at 5 A.M., carrying stones, shoveling dirt, and pickaxing rocks, I'm not an amateur archaeologist—I'm on a prison chain gang.

But this chain gang has some illustrious ex-cons. There are the academics from numerous countries who come for weeks at a time. And then there are Professor Connelly's friends—a year before, Bill Murray spent a week digging and entertaining the troops. "He was a great worker," Connelly gushes. Another friend, filmmaker George Lucas, has yet to visit, though he contributed to the project early on.

Connelly also organizes an Exec-U-Dig program, in which real-world people spend a week on-site exploring their inner Indiana Jones. "We've had bankers, media executives, soccer moms, and writers," she explains. It's adventure travel while eating well, getting a warm shower, logging some beach time, and learning something.

One evening Connelly announces there will be no work the following day. Instead, she has arranged for the team to take



The author readies for work, armed with tools of the archaeologist's trade: a pickax, a shovel, a brush, and some pails.

alfresco party space. Each day after lunch and a siesta or swim, the professor and her charges work here. On a terrace covered by grapevines, they sit at "monk's" tables cleaning, studying, and cataloguing artifacts. Inside the *apotheke* (store-room), shelves hold finds from years present and past.

But tonight the place and people have been transformed. Lights show off the fig trees, spice garden, and jasmine. The girls wear dresses, pass hors d'oeuvres, and mingle with distinguished guests.

After cocktails we gather for a sit-down dinner under the stars. It's a night of toasts, animated talk, and even dancing—quite civilized and colorful for this little town.

Holding court, Connelly returns to her favorite subject. "Caesar gave Cyprus to Cleopatra in 48 B.C.," she tells an ambassador who is the UN's special envoy to Cyprus. "He gave it to her just before their trip up the Nile. Cyprus was the Island of Love, since Venus, who Caesar claimed to be descended from, was born here."

Life in this part of Cyprus is utterly isolated and unchanged. Some shepherds here actually speak a form of Homeric Greek, from 2,700 years ago.

a trip through the remote Akamas region along the northwest coast of Cyprus.

In the morning an ecologist takes us to the restricted nesting area of endangered green and loggerhead turtles. Then we clamber through coastal caverns and above blowholes (with names like the Fountain of Love). We swim in clear turquoise waters on empty pebbled beaches before making our way inland to the mountains. Sheep and goats rule the roads.

Life in this part of Cyprus is utterly isolated and unchanged. Some shepherds here actually speak a form of Homeric Greek,

from 2,700 years ago. The inhabitants, though friendly, seem wary of outsiders and more wary of one another. According to a story told by villagers, there is a local man who ran off with the mother of his wife. Rumor has it that when she grew old and sick, he put her out among the sheep where she eventually died. Years later, when he came to one of Connelly's parties, some of her guests refused to sit at his table.

That evening I make the ten-minute walk from our hotel to Megaw House, a stone bungalow that serves as Connelly's classroom, drafting studio, warehouse, and

There is a hush. We are all listening.

"Caesar gave Cleopatra the Island of Love while in love with her," she continues. "Perhaps Cleopatra deliberately played up the Paphos connection, associating the birth of Caesarion with the birthplace of his ancestor, Venus herself! Celebrating the young prince's birth on Yeronisos would have reinforced the boy's connection to Caesar, as his son, as his heir—as the next ruler of Egypt and Rome!"

In the distance I can see Yeronisos, floating in the bay. I want to stay. I want to keep digging. ■