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*From cartographic objectivism to situated geographies:  
revisiting the Cyprus/UK border at the British base of Akrotiri*

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‘In certi momenti mi sembrava che il mondo stesse diventando tutto di pietra: una lenta pietrificazione più o meno avanzata a seconda delle persone e dei luoghi, ma che non risparmiava nessun aspetto della vita. Era come se nessuno potesse sfuggire allo sguardo della Medusa’.

Italo Calvino, *Lezioni Americane*





## **Introduction**

In the aftermath of World War II the representatives of the winning countries traced lines on maps to dismember the territory of the German Reich, to give birth to the State of Israel and to establish the borders of many postcolonial nation-states. In 1960 the island of Cyprus was declared a sovereign state, independent from the British Empire. But actually not the whole island: 3% of its surface formally remained UK's territory and it still is. Although probably unnoticeable at first glance, the two coastal territories of Akrotiri and Dhekelia are unanimously recognised as UK's land, delimited by clear and undisputed boundaries. Today almost 10,000 Cypriot citizens reside there, along with roughly 7,000 members of British armed forces, civilian personnel and their families. These two Overseas Territories, defined 'Sovereign Base Areas', are exploited for military purposes: they host the largest Royal Air Force base outside the United Kingdom.

Geographic knowledge produced by UK institutions about the Sovereign Base Areas speaks the language of western geopolitics, the geopolitics of the Allies, of NATO, of King Charles III; a tautological kind of geopolitics imbued with militarism and not used to describe particularly complex human dynamics, wittingly erased from the territorial framework. The intricate textures of state of exception and spatial differentiation which entangle the local Cypriot population can hardly be envisioned through geopolitical discourses grounded on quasi-colonial norms and cartographic representations, both tools that tend to 'petrify' the world for making it ordered, quickly readable and controllable. Alternative geographical imaginations are thus needed for approaching the case of the British sovereign territories in Cyprus in a critical way.

The first theoretical step of the thesis consists in understanding the function of cartography as a normative tool. More broadly, the work tackles the dominance of

cartographic representations as objective means for imagining the world of ‘western modernity’. Giuseppe Dematteis and Franco Farinelli are the two main inspiring authors, accompanied by Gregory, Mitchell, Haraway, Mignolo and many others. Subsequently, critical approaches to the production of geographic knowledge are reviewed, eventually highlighting the potential of situated geographies, namely those descriptions of the world whereby the subject is not abstracted from the framework but rather embodied and located. The stance of the knowing subject indeed always influences knowledge production.

Moving from such premises, the thesis focuses on a case study, in order to operationalise the concept of situated geographic research through actual methodological tools. The case under scrutiny is the Sovereign Base Area (SBA) of Akrotiri (*Ακρωτήριο*), one of the territories of the island of Cyprus which has remained under British military jurisdiction since the independence of Cyprus from the British Empire, occurred in 1960. The area of Akrotiri is kept separated from the territory of the Republic of Cyprus by a clear and undisputed border, drawn by the *Treaty concerning the Establishment of the Republic of Cyprus* and impressed on the land through the cartographic representations attached to the Treaty itself. Such a border, which is the southernmost border of the European Union, is however a soft one, not materialised on the ground by any wall or fence, rather imperceptible. Being freely crossed by thousands of Cypriot citizens who live and work inside the British retained territory, it is in fact very flexible and continuously subject to negotiation. In other words, even though it is a real georeferenced boundary which nominally separates British and Cypriot sovereignties, it works in shifting ways according to certain conditions.

How is such a border perceived, experienced and negotiated at a local level? The stiffness of cartography cannot offer any exhaustive answer to a similar research question. Cartographic representations are indeed only able to tell us how the reality is supposed to be, as they are projects of territorialisation of the world. But the project of making the SBA of Akrotiri a homogeneous British territory has never been fulfilled, nor seriously attempted, by the military authorities of the UK, who have not accomplished a total transfer of the Cypriot population outwards the military base and thus have not made the

territory of the SBA identical to its cartographic image. Due to the latter point, alternative ways for conceiving the Cypriot/British border are more than ever necessary, requiring appropriate geographic research methodologies as well.

A fluid and shifting border(scape) is experienced, lived, reinforced, established, crossed, traversed and inhabited in Akrotiri through various practices, addressed by my research through mixed qualitative methodologies, which include participant observation, interviewing, archive and newspaper review, analog photography and film-making. Stimulating qualitative studies about borderscapes have been carried out not only in the fields of political geography, international relations, anthropology, architecture and visual arts. I decided to undertake fieldwork in Akrotiri, which consisted of eighteen days in total, and, when possible, to opt for visual methodologies, mixed with other qualitative tools. The outcomes of the research appear in a narrative form. The use of cartographic representations is relinquished, in order to give more 'space' to alternative geographical imaginations, capable of conveying the sense of situatedness. Akrotiri is not presented as a location on a flat map looked at from a fictional zenithal position. It is instead meant as *chora* of human action, as inhabited place and as complex reality. Excerpts of my fieldnotes and of press articles, both having clear dates and authors, start to tell the story of past and present borderscapes practices in Akrotiri; photographs and video recordings add details and depth to the narration.

The thesis consists of four chapters. The first one retraces the legitimization of British sovereignty over Cyprus since 1960, focusing on the *Treaty concerning the Establishment of the Republic of Cyprus*, which formalised the independence of Cyprus, but allowed the permanence of British sovereignty over Akrotiri, where its huge Royal Air Force base is still located, side by side with thousands of Cypriot residents. The chapter goes on displaying the original map attached to the Treaty and also more recent cartographic representations of Akrotiri produced by various institutions, which convey an objective sense of territorial immutability typical of western geopolitics, apparently not used to describe particularly complex human dynamics. Lastly, the chapter focuses on the village of Akrotiri, the core of my fieldwork, which gives the name to the whole Sovereign Base Area and accommodates a sizeable portion of the British military facilities.

Chapter 2 explores the concept of normal geography, namely the hegemonic world-view put forth by the ruling subjects, and analyses the normative effects of cartographic representations. Cartography, which throughout modernity has basically become synonym for geography, is acknowledged as a tool of colonial and military power. The principles of situatedness, embodiment and complexity are then introduced as stimuli for the conception of alternative geographical knowledges, which have been undervalued or neglected by western epistemologies. Ideas of objectivity, universality and rationality are critically scrutinised, unveiling the shortcomings of euclidean geometry as an effective means for the description of the Earth. Then, following precious contributions from the field of Critical Border Studies, the concept of linear border is confronted with more nuanced notions, such as that of the borderscape.

Chapter 3 is meant as a methodological one, since it clarifies why and how I chose mixed qualitative research methods. It tells about, for instance, my encounters with other students, scholars and professors who helped me to build my research during the last few months. Therefore, the chapter eventually tells more about myself than about the methodological framework. This may appear paradoxical, but it is actually a way to start declaring my positionality since the very inception of the research. Details about access to Akrotiri and contact with its inhabitants are then provided, together with the constraints that have emerged from time to time, requiring me to change or remodulate my plans. Last but not least, the idea of shooting a short film in Akrotiri, involving a professional documentary maker, is highlighted as a key phase of the research process.

Lastly, Chapter 4 tries to answer the research questions, reflecting on how the Cypriot/British border(scape) is negotiated, established and experienced locally by those who inhabit Akrotiri or who just visit the place, including myself and my colleague documentary maker. This is the part of the thesis in which actual situated geographies are proposed and experimented in a creative way, shaping nevertheless clear and straightforward research outcomes, which illustrate through texts and/or photos cases of blurring sovereignties, dynamics of spatial differentiation and contested territorial issues, which inevitably mould the borderscape as something fluid and indeterminate. A short

research documentary is then introduced, underlining how it has contributed to the development of the thesis.



## Chapter 1

### **The boundaries of British sovereignty in Cyprus after WWII**

The transition from the British Colony of Cyprus to the independent Republic of Cyprus was a deeply complex diplomatic issue, finalised in 1960. During the 1950s the military strategies of the British Empire required to maintain a solid presence in the Middle East, given the loss of a key military base in Suez. In 1956 the colonial Governor of Cyprus, John Harding, even stated that ‘NATO defence – thus not only British defence – in Middle East begins in Cyprus’ (Cyprus Mail, 1956:1). At the same time, a sentiment of independence from British colonial rule had gained political strength among Cypriots. The role played at that stage by Archbishop Makarios and by movements such as EOKA (*Εθνική Οργάνωσις Κυπρίων Αγωνιστών* - National Organisation of Cypriot Fighters) surely influenced the process of decolonisation of the island, driving a sizeable part of Greek Cypriots towards the idea of unification with Greece (the so called ‘*Ένωσις*’ - ‘Enosis’). By contrast, many Turkish Cypriots imagined the possibility of ‘*Taksim*’ (literally ‘partition’), the creation of two different states on the same island, one for Turkish Cypriots and one for Greek Cypriots. However, both solutions seemed not viable for the British government, which was meanwhile investing in the construction of gigantic military facilities on the island, including an airfield in Akrotiri, near the city of Limassol. ‘No scuttle from Cyprus’ is the title of a biting article written by Harold Walton about the matter in those years: ‘In this lovely fertile island millions of pounds are being spent on building the base which is to take the place of the Canal Zone, and Britain is not spending this money for nothing’, said the Foreign Editor; ‘no stone-throwing by schoolboys, no speeches by Makarios and certainly no bombing or shooting by the terrorist thugs of Eoka will make us change our minds about this’ (Times of Cyprus, 1955:2).

The final decision was taken through the London and Zurich Agreements in 1959, between the governments of Greece, Turkey and UK and the leaders of both Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots. The definitive idea consisted in the creation of a brand new sovereign state, namely the Republic of Cyprus, independent from Greece, Turkey and UK. The only condition demanded by the British Government before ending its colonial rule was to keep control over those areas devoted to its military operations. Apparently everybody agreed on such a request, but an out-and-out bargaining was triggered for defining the exact size and boundaries of such military areas: the British Government insisted for roughly 140 square miles, which included the two coastal territories of Akrotiri and Dhekelia plus a number of additional military sites across the island; Archbishop Makarios, new President-elect of Cyprus since December 1959, proposed about 40 square miles. The compromise proposed by Fazıl Küçük, Vice-President-elect, of 99 square miles was eventually accepted by the British Government (Constantinou, 2005). The decision was ratified on August 16th, 1960, when the *Treaty concerning the Establishment of the Republic of Cyprus* (ToE) came into force, signed by H. Foot (United Kingdom), G. Christopoulos (Kingdom of Greece), V. Türel (Republic of Turkey) and both Archbishop Makarios and F. Küçük for the Republic of Cyprus. Article 1 of the Treaty says:

‘The territory of the Republic of Cyprus shall comprise the Island of Cyprus, together with the islands lying off its coast, with the exception of the two areas defined in Annex A to this Treaty, which shall remain under the sovereignty of the United Kingdom. These areas are in this Treaty and its Annexes referred to as the Akrotiri Sovereign Base Area and the Dhekelia Sovereign Base Area’ (UN, 1960:10).

It is important to highlight the unequivocal use of the word ‘sovereignty’ referred to the areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia. Sovereignty is something absolute. It entitles to pure power. For Charles Maier (2019) sovereignty implies at least two aspects: supreme authority within state borders and prohibition of interference by any external authority. Wendy Brown (2013) lists a number of essential features of sovereignty: supremacy, perpetuity, discretion of decision, completeness, non transferability and clarity of



jurisdiction. There is no room for doubts: Akrotiri and Dhekelia are UK territories. Article 1 actually specifies that they ‘remain’ under the sovereignty of the United Kingdom, revealing some continuity with the situation prior to 1960, that is colonial rule. However, the final declaration by Her Majesty’s Government attached to the last pages of the Treaty states the intention ‘[...] not to set up and administer ‘colonies’” (UN, 1960:162). The two bases are indeed considered British Overseas Territories (BOT), although they are administered by a representative of the Ministry of Defence (currently Air Vice-Marshal Peter J. M. Squires), rather than by a governor answering to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The two Sovereign Base Areas (SBAs) include gigantic military facilities of the Royal Air Force (RAF) and therefore they are ‘home’ for thousands of British soldiers and their families, plus a number of civilians who work there, either permanently or temporarily. At the same time the 99 square miles of the SBAs encompass various Cypriot villages, predominantly inhabited by local communities, namely descendants of the Cypriot people subjected during the colonial period. It is important to note that such Cypriots were not granted British citizenship once their lands had become British Sovereign Base Areas in 1960. They became instead citizens of the newborn Republic of Cyprus, even though they were dwellers of UK soil. According to *His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary Services*, they remain ‘citizens of the Republic of Cyprus but are governed by the Administration of the SBA’ (HMICS, 2024). The Treaty, together with the British National Act promulgated subsequently in 1981, created a neat distinction between the settlers and the local population, defining objective criteria for differentiating British inhabitants from Cypriot ones of the SBAs, the latter referred to as ‘Cypriot population’ or ‘Cypriots’ in the Treaty.

**‘With the exception of the two areas defined in Annex A to this Treaty’**

Due to their exceptionality and ambiguity, the territories of Akrotiri and Dhekelia have been defined a ‘metacolonial realm’ (Kentas, 2018) and a case of ‘colonialism redivivus’ (Clogg, 2015), although their colonial *continuum* seems to be tempered by *ad*

*hoc* geopolitical expressions such as ‘Sovereign Base Areas’ and ‘Overseas Territories’. The status of the Sovereign Base Areas surely constitutes a unique case of (de)colonisation, grounded upon a scrupulously legitimated state of exception (Dodds *et al.*, 2015; Constantinou, 2008). Even the text of the Treaty makes explicit use of the word ‘exception’ when referring to the two areas (UN, 1960:10). For sure they constitute an exception to the unfettered exercise of sovereignty and to the withdrawal of colonial armies (Constantinou, 2008). Such British sovereign territories were designed to legalise the persistence of UK military presence, which is expressly given priority over any other activity within their boundaries. The *Declaration of Her Majesty’s Government Regarding the Sovereign Base Areas* attached to the Treaty is eloquent about the Crown’s objectives: the SBAs should be used as military bases; they should not be developed for other purposes; expropriation of private property is only allowed for military ends (UN, 1960). The wellbeing of the Cypriot population of the SBAs is treated as a secondary issue and is mostly delegated to the Republic of Cyprus.

On the one hand, the UK enjoys undisputed sovereignty on the two territories, controls the SBA Police Service and defines land use, implying that the Cypriots living in the villages of the SBAs are still bound to British jurisdiction. On the other hand, the latter Cypriots belong to the Republic’s jurisdictions for matters such as welfare policies, education, fiscal regimes and EU citizenship. Moreover, the Treaty states that the laws applicable to the Cypriot population of the SBAs ‘will be as far as possible the same as the laws of the Republic’ (UN, 1960:162). But the two Courts of the Sovereign Base Areas, which serve all the civilian and military populations living and working in the SBAs, have British judges appointed by the Ministry of Justice of the United Kingdom. The Western court is located in Episkopi Cantonment, the official headquarters of the Royal Air Force in Cyprus and capital of the SBAs, while the Eastern court is in Dhekelia. Established in 1960, they deal with a wide range of offences committed within the Sovereign Base Areas, except offences against military discipline, which are heard by the Courts Martial. It is however specified that where both the defendant and the complainant are not UK personnel, the defendant may ask to have his or her trial heard in the courts of the Republic of Cyprus (SBAA, 2024a).

It seems that the SBAs are set apart from Cypriot territory, while not being fully incorporated in the UK's in certain circumstances. Costas Constantinou (2005:66) observes that a sort of simulation operates on two fronts: 'on the Cyprus front, the faking of sovereign independence; on the UK front, the faking of Britannia's rule and global relevance'. Since their inception, the issue of the bases has been a sort of taboo subject for the British and the Cypriot governments and they have not generally manifested serious intentions to rediscuss such a sensitive issue (Clogg, 2015). The Treaty itself prevents any sovereignty claim or annexation attempt by the Republic, as testified by the *Exchange of Notes between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Cyprus Concerning the Future of the Sovereign Base Areas*, attached to the ToE. The following text is the note signed by Baron Hugh Foot, the last Governor of Cyprus, addressed to the new President and Vice-President of Cyprus:

'Your Excellencies,

I have the honour to refer to the Sovereign Base Areas mentioned in Article I of the Treaty concerning the Establishment of the Republic of Cyprus and in this connexion to state that the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland do not intend to relinquish their sovereignty or effective control over the Sovereign Base Areas and that therefore the question of their cession does not arise.

I have the honour to be,

Your Excellencies' most obedient, humble Servant,

Hugh FOOT'  
(ToE, 1960:172)

Follows the joint answer by the Greek Cypriot President-elect Makarios and the Turkish Cypriot Vice-President-elect Küçük:

'You Excellency,

[...] We wish, on behalf of the Government of the Republic of Cyprus, to assure you that the Republic of Cyprus will not demand that the United Kingdom should relinquish their sovereignty or effective control over the Sovereign Base Areas. In the event, however, that the Government of the United Kingdom, in view of changes in their military requirements, should at any time decide to divest

themselves of the aforesaid sovereignty or effective control over the Sovereign Base Areas, or any part thereof, it is understood that such sovereignty or control shall be transferred to the Republic of Cyprus.

We have the honour to present our best respects,

Ο ΚΥΠΡΙΟΥ ΜΑΚΑΡΙΟΣ F. KÜÇÜK'

(ToE, 1960:174)

Today's state of exception seems to be the preferred option for the Cypriot government, which has gradually normalised it and rendered it somehow invisible for Cypriot citizens (Constantinou, 2008). What is instead well visible is the fact that the SBAs are administered by a British Air Vice-Marshal, who is not elected, but appointed by the UK Ministry of Defence. This is also an exception that has been the rule in Akrotiri and Dhekelia for over 60 years now. But, as Constantinou (2008:145) eloquently writes, 'certain states of exception are more comfortable than others'. They may therefore be preferred to any available alternatives.

Following the accession of the Republic of Cyprus to the European Union, the situation of the SBAs and its inhabitants has received growing attention, as their exceptional status has become even more evident. In 2004, when Cyprus entered the Union, the territories of Akrotiri and Dhekelia were kept as separate entities, excluded from EU space. At that time the UK was still a EU member state, but the SBAs had always been considered an exception due to their special military character. Nevertheless, when the Republic of Cyprus adopted Euro in 2008, the European currency also became the official currency in the two British territories, constituting a unique case among the lands of the Crown. On May 7th, 2008 the European Parliament gathered to discuss the issues of human rights and the relevant EU policies. In that occasion Marios Matsakis, Cypriot member of the EU Parliament, took the floor to raise the case of the SBAs:

[...] The United Kingdom perpetuates, in violation of international conventions, the colonisation of a foreign country: in Cyprus Akrotiri and Dhekelia are inhabited by roughly 10,000 Cypriot civilians, who are European citizens although their houses are located on a territory which the UK has excluded from the European Union for obvious reasons. These people do not have the fundamental

right of electing their executive authorities, they are governed by a General who is nominated by the Queen of England. Therefore they cannot have an elected parliament. The laws of such colonies are fully under the jurisdiction of the Governor. As a matter of fact, these EU civilians live under a British military dictatorship [...]’ (European Parliament, 2008).

Matsakis’s tone was surely full of resentment, but his words can hardly be judged as false. At the end of his speech he asked the Parliament not to ignore such an issue and to admit responsibility for lack of concrete intervention. The Cypriot residents of the SBAs, paradoxically, are EU citizens who inhabit a place which is disconnected from the EU zone. The soil of certain municipalities of the SBAs is even split between EU and non-EU territory. Such a phenomenon is possible because some villages are crossed by the borders established by the Treaty in 1960, dividing the territory of the Republic of Cyprus from the Sovereign Base Areas. Such borders are in fact EU external borders.

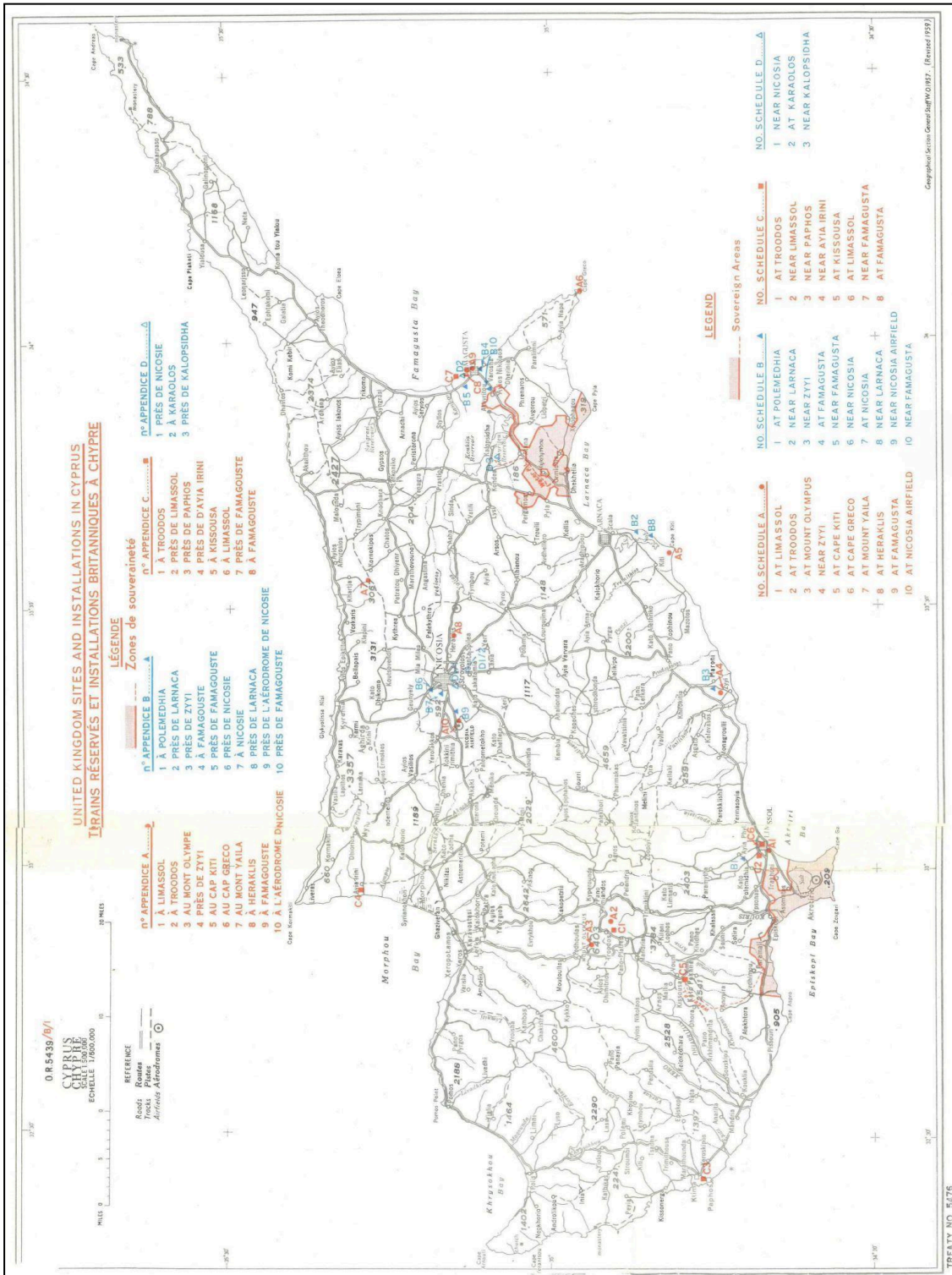
The exceptional condition of the inhabitants of the SBAs was investigated by the Council of Europe in 2007 through the Report on the *Situation of the inhabitants of the Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia*. The three major issues identified, mainly through interviews, were the restrictions for land use, the noise produced by military aircrafts and the serious health hazards caused by high-powered military antennas (CoE, 2007). Such antennas, located in the municipality of Akrotiri, are also mentioned by previous studies about the Sovereign Base Areas and are considered a major cause of cancer by many inhabitants of the village (Constantinou, 2005; 2008). In 2005 a Health Survey had been conducted jointly by the University of Bristol and the Cypriot Ministry of Health: its results eventually remained vague and uncertain, concluding that the absence of clear evidence ‘does not imply that there is no association’ between an excess of brain tumours and leukemias in Akrotiri and the presence of gigantic military antennas (University of Bristol, 2005:73). Interestingly, the complaints about the health risks caused by the antennas came mainly from Cypriot residents, but not from the British personnel and their families, who also live in proximity with the antennas. Perhaps, supposes Constantinou (2005), the perception of the UK residents is different, due to the military orientation of their personal lives. In

some ways the British and the Cypriot inhabitants of Akrotiri, despite living on the same soil, seem to be separated by an invisible cultural boundary, which makes them perceive the reality through slightly different modes, maybe related to the respective purposes of their presence in the area.

### **Official cartographies of the SBAs and their borders**

Attached to the twelve articles of the Treaty are annexes and maps, which shall be considered as integral parts of the ToE itself. The long and detailed annexes, consisting of about 70 pages, constitute the actual *corpus* of norms that regulate many aspects of the SBAs, including the treatment of Cypriots. In addition, the maps delineate the exact extension of the territories in which the Treaty's provisions are enforced, thereby imprinting British sovereignty onto the land. They actually consist of 23 maps in the strict sense, plus 273 air photographs and their associated verbal descriptions, as well as 153 sheets of detailed plans attached to Annex B. The maps, as explained in a footnote of the Treaty, 'are not published in the United Nations Treaty Series owing to difficulties in reproduction'. But it is then specified that the omission from publication of the Treaty's maps does not affect their validity.

All the representatives who signed the Treaty were aware of the necessity of a neat and unmistakable cartographic representation for the subdivision of sovereignty and power on the island. As John Brian Harley reminds us (1989:12), 'a mapless society [...] would now be politically unimaginable', because maps are crucial for the maintenance of state power, as they become a 'juridical territory' which facilitates surveillance and control. Therefore, the maps of the Treaty, which may seem to have just an ancillary function, are actually the 'genetic information' for the reproduction of territorial order (Dematteis, 1985:106).



Map 1. Sovereign Base Areas and retained sites and installations [source: United Nations]

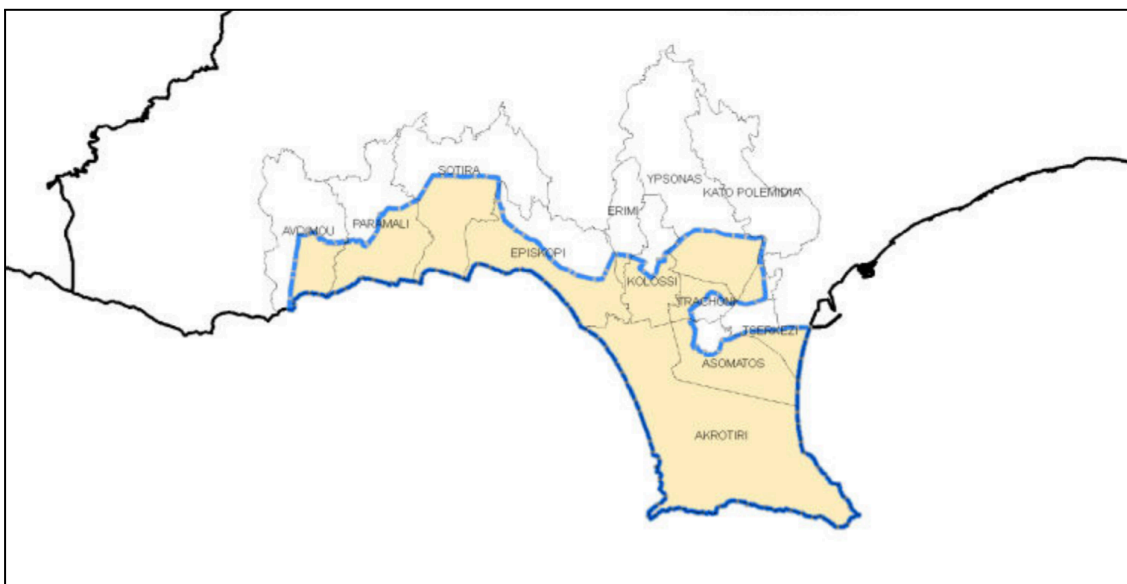
The original map above (Map 1) illustrates the borders of the two SBAs (sharp red lines), their areas (coloured in red) and also a number of additional sites and installations retained by the UK for military purposes (red dots). The Western SBA is Akrotiri, clearly recognisable as a peninsula within the district of Limassol. The Eastern SBA is Dhekelia, which since the 1970s shares its border with three different territorial entities: the Republic of Cyprus, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and the United Nations Buffer Zone, also known as the 'Green Line', that nowadays divides the island and passes through the city of Nicosia.

The map of the Treaty, for obvious chronological reasons, does not represent the situation which followed the occupation of the northern part of the island by the Turkish army in 1974. Nor has the map been updated according to such a disruptive event, because the United Nations and all the actors involved have never officially recognised the presence of the Turkish state on the island and they tend not to represent it geographically. Nevertheless, the factual fracture between the Republic of Cyprus and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus has affected the two SBAs, despite the immutability of their territorial borders. The SBA of Dhekelia, for instance, has become a sort of buffer zone between the two Republics, implicitly conferring to the UK a role of peacekeeping force. Both SBAs became temporary safe zones for Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots who left their homes when the conflict occurred in 1974 (Evangelou, 2023). The two communities were gradually allocated into new settlements, following the partition of the island. Some villages of the Akrotiri SBA, such as Paramali and Sotira, were at that time inhabited mainly by Turkish Cypriots, who fled their villages and moved to the northern side of the island (Oberling, 1982). Such population has never been replaced by anybody, so their villages still remain empty 'ghost' towns, nowadays used by the British forces for their military training. In parallel, some other villages abandoned by the Turkish Cypriots, for example Avdimou, have been re-populated by Greek Cypriots coming from the northern part of the island. A man I interviewed during my fieldwork in Akrotiri mentioned the events of 1974, because his own wife had been personally involved: she was born in northern Nicosia



and she escaped with her family when she was 3 years old, eventually settling in Kolossi, one of the twelve municipalities of the Akrotiri SBA.

The map below (Map 2) shows the border of the Akrotiri Sovereign Base Area, which is also the southernmost EU external border. Map 2 is actually a detail of a wider map, accessible through the website of the SBA Administration, showing the trajectories of the borders of the SBAs and how they intersect Cypriot municipalities (SBAA, 2024b). The border of Akrotiri SBA is in reality a porous one, barely perceivable on the ground, since the Treaty itself prescribes ‘not to create customs posts or other frontier barriers between the Sovereign Base Areas and the Republic’ (UN, 1960:162). Interestingly, such a border cuts through several villages, split between Cyprus and the United Kingdom. The only municipality fully incorporated in British territory is the village of Akrotiri, which gives the name to the whole Western SBA and accommodates a sizeable portion of its military facilities. Its name, ‘Akrotiri’, comes from the Greek word ‘*ακρωτήριο*’ meaning ‘cape’ or ‘promontory’. The other 11 villages of the SBA (Asomatos, Avdimou, Episkopi, Erimi, Kato Polemidia, Kolossi, Paramali, Sotira, Trachoni, Tserkezoi, Ypsonas) are ‘cut’ by the UK/Cyprus border, determining incredible situations in which certain private properties are virtually split between two different states (Constantinou, 2005, 2008).



Map 2. *Cypriot municipalities included in the Akrotiri SBA* [source: SBA Administration]

Generally, the core of each of the 11 villages cut by the border is located within the territory of the Republic, as in the case of Community Councils, schools and important churches. In the town of Kolossi its renowned mediaeval castle physically defines the position of the border with the SBA. While other villages, such as Kato Polemidia, Ypsonas and Erimi are barely touched by the SBA. The most immediate way to sense where the border is located is by noticing the movements of the Police: the Cypriot side of each village is under the jurisdiction of the Cypriot Police, while the lands of the SBA are indeed patrolled by the Sovereign Base Areas Police Service, a unique police force specifically created for Akrotiri and Dhekelia, born exactly at midnight on the 15th of August 1960. Nowadays it counts 241 officers, all locally employed Greek and Turkish Cypriots (in Akrotiri only Greek Cypriots), with the exception of the Chief Constable, the Deputy Chief Constable, and the two Divisional Commanders, who are UK nationals. The SBA police is the only police force covering the 99 square miles of the UK territory, not accessible by the Cypriot Police. The SBA Police somehow contributes to materialise the border of the UK territory, especially when no other tangible barriers are established. As regards the village of Akrotiri, the extent of British sovereignty on the ground is unmistakable, since the municipality is wholly encapsulated inside the border of the Sovereign Base Area. Most probably this is the reason why the UK authorities tried during the 1960s to move its inhabitants outwards, paying them an economic compensation, though without eventually succeeding.

Map 3 comes from the Central Intelligence Agency's 'World Factbook', a detailed geopolitical portal which illustrates the characteristics of states through maps and data produced by the United States. The map of the CIA represents the quintessence of geopolitical objectivism: the border appears thick and grey as a reinforced concrete wall; the only villages displayed are Episkopi Cantonment, namely the British administrative settlement and formal capital city of the SBAs, and Akrotiri, the one giving the name to the whole area and hosting the RAF facilities, airfield included; the Greek Cypriot population is depicted as an external entity, which controls the areas outside the frontier, even though it is the predominant community inside the SBA. Of course the CIA is aware of the actual situation of the SBAs, as it writes that the total

population is ‘approximately 18,195 on the Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia including 11,000 Cypriots and 7,195 Service and UK-based contract personnel and dependents’ (CIA, 2024). The technical geographic description provided by the CIA cannot convey the actual complex condition of Akrotiri, which is thus simplified, according to current power trajectories, i.e. UK’s rule. According to such a logic, it is absolutely normal that the country flag of Akrotiri and Dhekelia reported by the CIA’s World Factbook is the British Union Jack, even though thousands of their Cypriot inhabitants would not necessarily recognise it as their own flag.



Map 3. *Akrotiri and Dhekelia country map* [source: Central Intelligence Agency]

### **Akrotiri: British base or Cypriot village?**

As shown by Map 3, the Sovereign Base Area of Akrotiri has two cores: the administrative one is located at Episkopi Cantonment, a UK Air Force cluster situated between the municipalities of Sotira and Episkopi and functioning as capital of the SBAs; the military core is instead situated at RAF Akrotiri, namely a larger fenced area which hosts the actual operations of the Royal Air Force troops, incorporated into the municipality of Akrotiri. Both places are inhabited, either permanently or temporarily, by the families of the British military and civilian personnel. These families, defined by

the ToE ‘dependencies’ of the British personnel, live within the fenced areas of Episkopi Cantonment and RAF Akrotiri, which offer them all the daily services they need. Newspaper articles dating back to 1955 illustrate the creation of such residential settlements during the last years of colonial rule:

‘Akrotiri [RAF] will in fact be a little self-contained town for something like 2,000 people with their own church, schools, cinema and other necessities of life. [...] Akrotiri may be rather isolated, but it should eventually be quite a pleasant spot to live in. [...] Beautifully equipped there will probably be some 250 to 300 married quarters at Akrotiri. Although they are «prefabs», that word would probably give most people a wrong impression of their appearance. In fact they look nice and are beautifully equipped inside’ (Cyprus Mail, 1955:3).

‘At nearby Episkopi, on what was once a scrub of pines and olive trees, a vast new city is arising. This is the new joint command headquarters of the northern Middle-East. There are administrative blocks and hutments for Army and R.A.F. men, including 900 modern homes for officers’ families’ (Times of Cyprus, 1955:2).

They were designed as gated communities for British citizens from their very inception. Some 70 years after their installation, their outline has not changed much: RAF Akrotiri is still a town-inside-the-town, with its schools, its shops, its families and kids who grow up there as full British citizens on UK soil.

The surrounding village of Akrotiri counts about 800 Cypriot residents, has its own Community Council (*Κοινοτικό Συμβούλιο*), an elementary school, the Orthodox Church of the Holy Cross (*Τιμίου Σταυρού*), the Environmental Education Center, the Stadium of the local football club, a few restaurants, cafes and pubs, one tattoo studio, one butcher and two convenience stores. Slightly outside the core of the village, but still within the municipality of Akrotiri, are the Monastery of Saint Nicholas of the Cats (*Άγιος Νικόλαος των Γατών*), the beach of Lady’s Mile and, as already explained, the Royal Air Force base, which is inaccessible without a specific authorisation, only granted to the Cypriots who are employed there. The boundaries separating RAF areas from civilian ones are the most distinct in Akrotiri: unlike the external borders of the

SBA, that are in general very soft and barely perceivable, the military sites are marked by barbed wire, walls and guards (Dodds *et al.*, 2015).

The decisional power on land use held by the British authorities during colonial rule proved determinant for imposing the installation of the RAF Base in Akrotiri. As testified by several press articles published between 1952 and 1954, the seminal military project of building a huge airport in Akrotiri was not welcomed positively by the villagers and by the Cypriot left wing parties: the land to be destined for military activities was partly property of the Bishopic and partly owned by the inhabitants of Akrotiri, who had repeatedly demanded to distribute such land among landless peasants and breeders, fostering collective exploitation (Cyprus Mail, 1953a, 1953b, 1953c). In spite of the local resistance, the UK Government confirmed its decision in December 1953, triggering further unheard protests, which apparently came to an end in 1954, when the construction actually started (Cyprus Mail, 1954a, 1954b). There was no chance for the local communities to contrast the will of the colonial authorities, who gave priority to their military needs over any alternative claim for land use. In the years which preceded the independence of Cyprus, it had become clear that the UK would not simply build a runway for military aircrafts, but something far bigger. The real projects were disclosed gradually, but their implementation was relatively rapid. By the end of the decade, RAF Akrotiri had become not only a massive military base, where numerous squadrons were transferred from other locations in the Middle East, but also a modest town, ready to host thousands of British nationals.

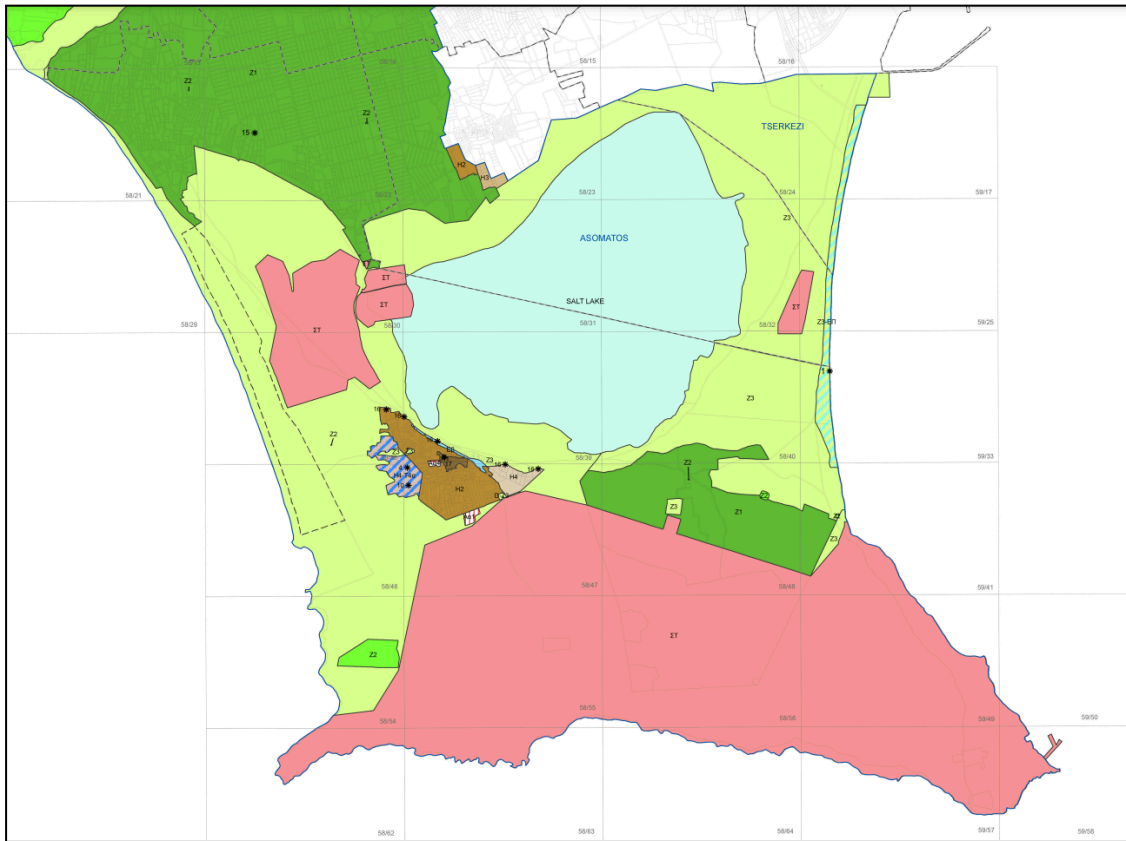
Nowadays the reality of Akrotiri is characterised by an intense interaction between the two communities, which somehow depend on each other. Excluding those working in the nearby city of Limassol, many Akrotirians are employed in local businesses or inside the military base. The latter offers numerous job opportunities to Cypriot citizens. Vacancies recently published on the SBA Administration portal include posts for librarians, caregivers, receptionists, doctors and diverse other jobs (SBAA, 2024c). Who is employed in the base obviously holds a pass for entering the fenced area and works side by side with British army members and civilians. At the same time, those working outside the military site meet the numerous UK nationals who spend their free time in

taverns, pubs and cafes. The situation in Akrotiri thus appears somehow balanced: in the perception of Cypriot inhabitants, Akrotiri is a village within the district of Limassol, belonging to the Republic of Cyprus, hosting the British Air Force; in parallel, British inhabitants can legitimately consider the area as UK territory, enjoying the related rights and dealing with the local population. In a way, both groups are right, although the hegemonic geopolitical discourse of the UK and the UN and their cartographic representations can hardly take into account such a complex reality and can only give emphasis to the British point of view. Of course the dominance of the UK Government is not limited to the geographic descriptions, becoming truly palpable when it comes to actual regulations of spatial differentiation.

The website of the British Army describes the SBAs as ‘real estate that would remain as British sovereign territory and therefore remain under British jurisdiction’ (British Army, 2024). In general terms, such real estate should not be developed other than for military purposes. However, the Administration of the Sovereign Base Areas has gradually implemented a specific program for Non-Military Development, referred to ‘any development in the Sovereign Base Areas not undertaken by or for the SBA Administration or British Forces Cyprus’ (SBAA, 2024d). After a revision of the land use regime that occurred in 2014, the Administration offers increased opportunities to landowners and other residents of the SBAs. The legislative source is the *Policy Statement for the Promotion, Regulation and Control of Development and the Protection of the Environment*, which is made operational through 10 maps specifying the detail of Planning Zones. The map below (Map 4) shows the Planning Zones of Akrotiri municipality. The red areas indicated as ‘ΣΤ’ (from the Greek word ‘στρατιωτικός’, namely ‘military’) designate Military-Controlled Sites, i.e. the zones only accessible for UK nationals and authorised people, or even more restricted military areas rarely accessible. The brown area corresponds to the core of Akrotiri village. The small white/red spots refer to Public Uses Zones, namely the Stadium of Akrotiri and the building of the elementary school. The different shades of green identify environmental preservation zones and determine various degrees of restrictions. Each Planning Zone has its own parameters as regards building coefficients and

environmental protection regulations. The *Policy Statement* is also accompanied by an additional document, the *Arrangement Relating to the Regulation of Development in the Sovereign Base Areas*. Such a short document (only 5 pages) lists a number of principles agreed between the Governments of the United Kingdom and Cyprus. Section 1 states that ‘where new land is acquired or leased by the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in the SBAs, it will be designed as a military site and will be excluded from the relevant provisions of this Arrangement’ (SBAA, 2014:2).

The land use policies of the SBA Administration determine a regime of sharp spatial differentiation. Firstly, they preserve the British gated community at RAF Akrotiri and allow a careful selection of those Cypriots who are authorised to cross its gates after being identified. At the same time, the policies regulate the life of Cypriot villagers outside the base as well, giving or denying them the permission to build an additional floor, to start a new business or to hunt in a specific area. A quick look at the schedules of the Court of Episkopi shows that in the Western SBA there are on average 4 cases per month of ‘erection of buildings without a permit’ (SBAA, 2024e). Until 2022 the inhabitants of Akrotiri were not allowed to sell their properties to anybody external to the SBAs, as the ToE dictates ‘not to allow new settlement of people within the Sovereign Base Areas other than for temporary purposes’ (ToE, 1960:162). Such a restriction has clearly determined a significant devaluation of properties over the years and has also shaped Akrotiri as a rather closed community. But since 2022 Cypriot citizens are authorised by the UK to develop their properties inside the SBAs and to sell them to external actors (Maghribi, 2022; Smith, 2022). Former president of the Republic of Cyprus Nicos Anastasiades said that such a concession would ‘correct distortions and imbalances in the lives of residents living in villages incorporated in the facilities’ (Smith, 2022). Andreas Theophanous, head of the University of Nicosia’s Politics Department, defined non-military development on the bases ‘a positive step’, but ‘not enough’ (France 24, 2022).

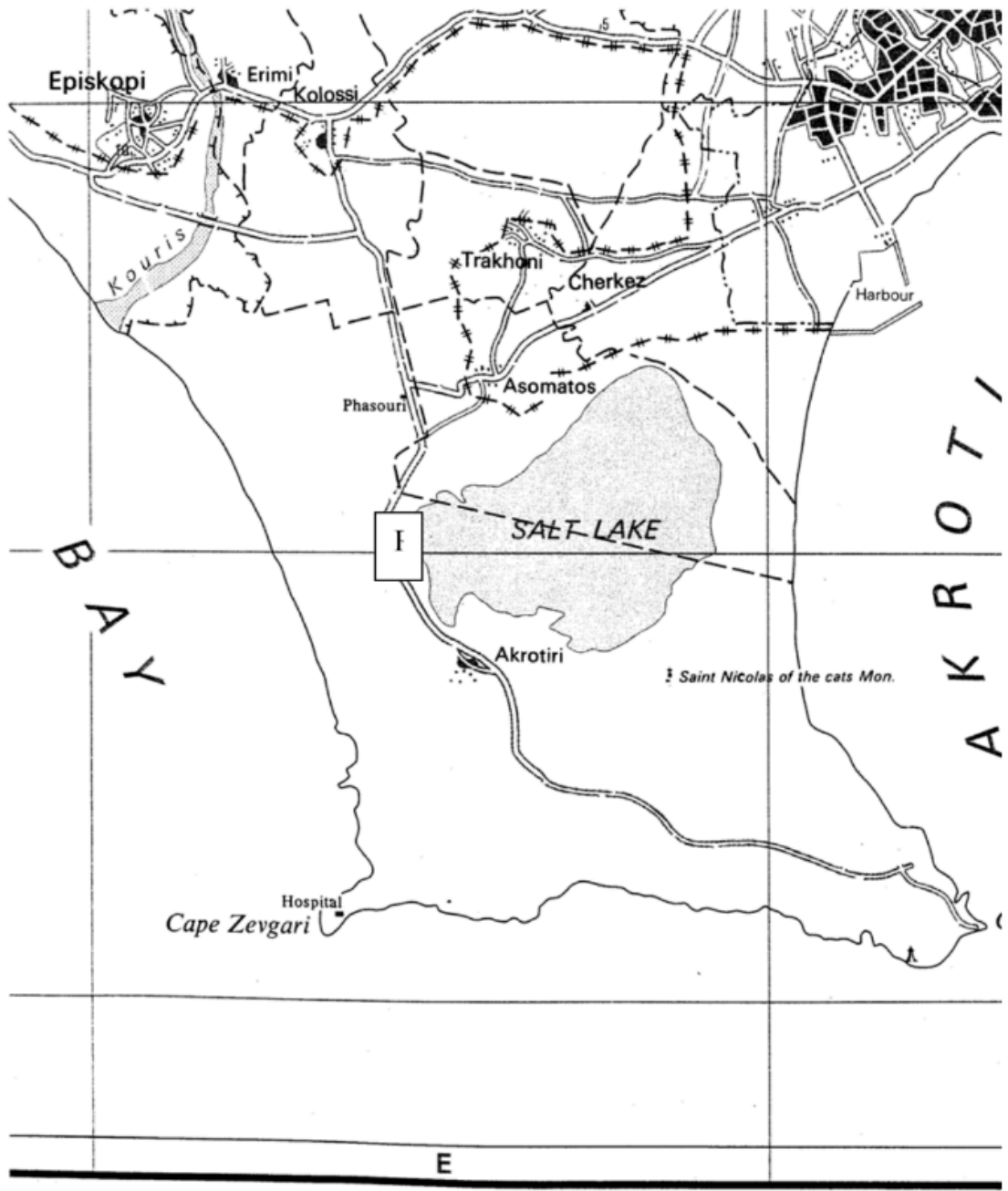


Map 4. *Planning Zones of the Municipality of Akrotiri* [source: SBA Administration]

One of the most recent controversies about the use of soil in Akrotiri was related to the erection of gigantic military antennas just on the western shore of the Salt Lake (see Map 5: the antennas are located in the red ‘ΣΤ’ area west to the Salt Lake). As usual, once the UK authorities had taken their decision, there was no space for the disapproval of the local Cypriot community, simply forced to accept the installation of the antennas and take the risk of possible health harms. On that occasion Marios Matsakis, the EU parliament member mentioned previously, guided a harsh protest against the UK military activities: the night of May 2nd, 2001 was defined ‘a night of unprecedented violence against the sovereign British bases’ (Wilson, 2001), as roughly 1,000 people from the whole island marched towards the military areas of Akrotiri, damaging cars and other goods and eventually clashing with the SBA Police and with the British



Army. About 50 people were injured and Matsakis was arrested (Cyprus Mail, 2001; Wilson, 2001).



Map 5. Map of the Akrotiri Peninsula to show the relative positions of the antenna and communities [source: University of Bristol]

It seems that, as regards some aspects of life at a local level, the situation has not really changed in Akrotiri 64 years after the formal end of imperial rule. As just observed, the actual bargaining power on the strategies of land use held by the Cypriot inhabitants is pretty limited. Moreover, as the Treaty of Establishment itself prescribes, the military activities of the UK have absolute priority over any other issue, especially in times of emergency. The point is that such ‘times of emergency’ are uniquely determined at the UK’s discretion. During the last decades, worldwide dynamics of power and sovereignty have determined frequent situations of emergency in which the UK, always in collaboration with the US, has decided to intervene, exploiting the base of Akrotiri for harsh military operations, without consultation with the Cypriot politicians or the local population. The Cold War, The Gulf Wars and the conflict against the Islamic State are just the most famous cases. The most recent one was the attack launched by the United States against the Houthis in the Red Sea in January 2024, exactly when I was carrying out my first period of research in Akrotiri. Of course the United Kingdom is perfectly legitimised in using the base according to its military strategies, which also include a tight collaboration with the US and the NATO. But the situation of Akrotiri at a local level might prove more complex than it appears on a map which dates back to 1960. The Cypriot population of Akrotiri is inextricably intertwined with its soil and cannot be just cut off from the territorial framework, as if it simply lived on the other side of the border, namely on the territory of the Republic of Cyprus.

## Chapter 2

### **The geometries of cartography and the ‘test’ of situated geographies**

Grand attempts to establish and impose novel territorial orders have largely been underpinned by treaties coupled with cartographies: the *Treaty of Tordesillas* traced a sharp line dividing Spanish and Portuguese colonies; the *Congress of Vienna* reorganised the map of Europe after the defeat of Commander Bonaparte; the *Paris Conference* drew the outline of a peaceful and prosperous planet. The *Treaty Concerning the Establishment of the Republic of Cyprus* is no exception: it consists of a normative corpus which is then imprinted upon the ground by means of cartographic representations, which illustrate the extent of British sovereignty on the island (see Map 1 in Chapter 1). Such representations are apparently indispensable for the exercise of power and for the making of territory, namely the geographic scope of political and military dominion.

The primary aim of this chapter is to understand the functioning of cartography as a normative tool and, more generally, to delve into geographical imaginations which have dominated and shaped ‘western modernity’. The geographies of Akrotiri produced by the United Nations and by the Sovereign Base Areas Administration can be in this way located in the wider scenario that determined and legitimised them. Subsequently, critical approaches to the production of geographic knowledge are reviewed, highlighting the concept of situated geographic knowledge, eventually associated with qualitative research methods, essential tools of my research.

### **Normal geography or geography as norm**

Franco Farinelli (1992) argues that every map (*carta*) is first of all a transformative project about the world, a project to make it identical to its cartographic image and thus to the vision of the ruling subjects. Since the modern concept of territory has come into existence, its cartographic representations have necessarily preceded it, electing geometric spatiality to an essential trait of territorial models. In other words, geographic representations become promises of realisable territorialities. Functioning as ‘genetic information’ for the reproduction of the territorial order, they always hold a normative power, writes Giuseppe Dematteis (1985). ‘Imperial systems throughout history exercised their power through their ability to impose order and meaning upon space’, suggests Gerard Toal (1996:4). When geography and cartography coincide, they equate to an active writing of the Earth that complies exclusively with the cultural visions and the material interests of the ruling subjects (Toal, 1996). And the task of cartography is exactly to transform places into legible territories to be administered. The case of the Sovereign Base Areas is truly relevant, as the borders traced in 1960 were in fact a transformative project, aimed at establishing a novel regime of sharp spatial differentiation between Cyprus and the UK Royal Air Force. But linear borders are only ideal trajectories of spatial differentiations, which in reality might be still fluid, negotiable and not necessarily aligned with the supposed geopolitical order. For example, dense communities of Cypriots still inhabit the territories of the SBAs since 1960, because the UK authorities have never achieved, nor sometimes even attempted, a total transfer of people outwards the bases. This means they have not made the territories of the SBAs identical to their cartographic image yet.

Those geographic representations which reproduce territories uniquely in compliance with the dominant power trajectories are labelled by Dematteis (1985) as ‘normal geography’. The descriptions of the world provided by normal geography emanate from the authorities which hold the power to occupy and organise space. Every geography, for Dematteis, is somehow the description of an appropriation, whereby cartography, due to its geometric properties, is a useful means for implementing a reticular control on the ‘body’ of the territory. Of course normal geography, as its name suggests, has to do

with normativity. But that is not all. It also claims a scientific status. The concept of territory is indeed based on the construct of geographic space, derived from the euclidean metric space, conceived as a homogeneous reality which allows the subdivision of the Earth into ordered geometric blocks (Dematteis, 1985). Thanks to the adoption of linear perspective, cartography makes territorial representations univocal: perspective establishes a rigid criterion of general equivalence, capable of erasing qualitative differences while transforming every value into quantity, or, to use Farinelli's words, into 'fraction of an abstract quantity' (2007:94), namely the Earth as geometric object. The world can then be looked at from above, from a single point of view which is located outside the map. This mechanism gives the illusion of objectivity and universality of geographic knowledge conveyed by cartographic representations.

Perspective does not only 'colonise' territories, but also people's imagination, becoming a solid model for the construction, the perception and the representation of the world (Farinelli, 2007). This is why cartography tends to appear rational, unmistakable, objective and non political. Alternative descriptions, interpretations and imaginations of the world are thus easily hindered and devalued (Fall *et al.*, 2012). In Farinelli's words (2007:130):

'Una carta è dotata di una faccia soltanto, riduce il mondo a qualcosa che non solo è statico, immobile, fisso, rigido come un cadavere, ma anche a qualcosa di assolutamente normativo, perché non ammette alternative'.

And for this reason cartography can become literally a normative tool when particular laws and juridical acts are translated into geo-cartographic forms in order to be implemented on the ground, exactly as in the case of the maps attached to the Treaty of Establishment of Cyprus. In the latter case the georeferenced borders of the Akrotiri SBA are only visible on the map as a line, while on Akrotiri's ground they are not materialised, if not by human actions and interactions, determined by the virtual position of the line. It seems that, although the map is commonly considered a copy of the Earth, the latter has acquired in western culture the shape and the nature of a map. Far from remaining just a mimetic product of reality, cartography even subtracts the ontological primacy from the world itself, since its geometric representation eventually

precedes it (Farinelli, 2007, 1992). As Farinelli confidently argues, the seminal act of western consciousness consisted exactly in the reduction of the world to a cartographic representation. The age in which such reduction has taken place is referred to as ‘modernity’.

‘That way of thinking in terms of space-divided-up is a product of modernity’s own project’, wrote Doreen Massey (2005:66), somewhat echoing Farinelli’s point. Then what is such a project of modernity? It is very hard to give a finite answer. But for a preliminary understanding of the relation geography/modernity it may suffice to take a closer look at the word ‘project’ itself. As a noun, it basically indicates a planned work or activity. But at the same time, as a verb, it means ‘to make an image’, i.e. ‘to cause it appear on a screen or other surface’ (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). And this is what geography during modernity has been about, seeking increasingly accurate methods to project the whole planet on a flat surface. Modernity has indeed been defined the age of the world as image, picture, exhibition (Gregory, 1994; Farinelli 1992; Mitchell, 1989). Timothy Mitchell (1989) relevantly argues that modernity relies on a mechanism that he defines an ‘enframing’ process, whereby the world is made intelligible through its representation, it becomes a picture to be looked at, an exhibition disposable for the gaze of the knowing subject. The world finally becomes an object, not least thanks to the epistemological framework set out by René Descartes, who inaugurated a way of thinking about the world peculiar to European modernity at large, separating the self from the outside world (Gregory, 1994; Farinelli, 2007; Bonfiglioli, 2020a; Morin, 1990; Haraway, 1988). Abstraction and detachment are exactly those principles permitting the creation of cartographic representations by a number of ruling subjects, who put themselves in a ‘convenient position’ to represent territories while escaping their own representation, affirming their privilege of seeing without being seen and leaving the contingent character of their world-view outside the frame. ‘Man’, adds Derek Gregory (1994:36), ‘contends for the position in which he can be that particular being who gives the measure and draws up the guidelines for everything that is’.

If modernity conceives the world as cartographic representation, then the history of western culture becomes the history of a gradual colonisation of the geographic

discourse by the cartographic image (Farinelli, 1992). European ruling subjects have gradually turned overseas lands into objects simply looking at their maps, enjoying a sort of ‘God’s eye view’ on the world from an abstract zenital position. A dislocated, disembodied and disengaged subject has thus produced the western global model, relying on the rhetoric of modernity (Mignolo *et al.*, 2018). Mary Louise Pratt (cited by Gregory, 1994:26) explains such a process with extreme clarity in her book *Imperial Eyes*:

‘One by one the planet’s life forms were to be drawn out of the tangled threads of their life surroundings and rewoven into European-based patterns of global unity and order. The (lettered, male, European) eye that held the system could familiarize new sites/sights immediately upon contact, by incorporating them into the language of the system’.

This is particularly relevant in the case of the European colonial enterprises. As Gregory (1994:31) maintains, the core of colonisation consisted first of all in making the ‘others’ silent objects of ‘our scripts and scenarios’, assuming the capacity to represent them. The totalising claims and the epistemic violence of modernity have proved formidable weapons of colonialism. For Walter Mignolo (2018) modernity is a set of narratives contributing to disguise coloniality, which cannot be mentioned explicitly, because it is in fact oppression, exploitation, dispossession.

The geographic ‘discoveries’ of the Modern Age have radically transformed the perception of the world, erasing from its representations what is mysterious, infinite, or empty, until then ‘populated by monsters’ (Dematteis, 1985:15). Such enterprises have contributed to make the world a finite, delimited and divided-up surface, perfectly prone to cartographic designs. But gradually, even people have been excluded from modern cartographies, particularly when they could not fit into any clear-cut geographical category. Stefania Bonfiglioli (2020a) points out that the spatialisation of politics determined by the modern imagination of the world does not represent anymore the ‘stance’ (*lo stare al mondo*) of growing portions of the humanity, such as migrants, minorities and many more ‘monsters’ who inhabit the unknown areas of the western geographical knowledge. Human stance on Earth consists of experience, processuality,

movement. It is subject to mutation, which is by definition not conveyed by maps made of immovable lines.

Then some questions arise. Can cartography actually describe the Earth as a 'living' entity? Does it not only fit the abstract description of territories? There is no doubt that the liaison between the territory and the map is something intense, given that they nurture and reproduce each other. The abstract geographic space is the common ground of both the concept of territory and the machinery of cartography. But how does this abstraction from the Earth occur? How comes that a geometric projection substitutes the material reality it comes from? Most probably the answer lies in the gaze of the knowing subject, the protagonist of the whole story of modern epistemology. The gaze has been a major tool of knowledge collection during modernity (Gregory, 1994; Farinelli, 2007; Haraway, 1988). Sight has allowed control, classification, differentiation and thereby has awarded identification, self-awareness and self-confidence to European subjects. But they have started cultivating the dangerous ambition to penetrate the truths of the Earth by a single gaze. Such an achievement, however, can only be fulfilled through an illusion, the illusion of a flat, small and approximate version of the planet, where mutability does not exist, relations are invisible and subjectivities are not represented, the latter being instead constrained in an abstract zenithal position outside the map.

Maybe geographic research might find its own expedients not to describe the Earth exclusively in approximate and fictional terms. Beatrice Collignon (2004:379) writes that academic geography may provide reliable narratives about the places of the world and about their dynamics if it engages with 'the geographies through which those places are experienced, understood and built by their inhabitants and by those who visit them'. In other words, geography needs to find the tools to open a dialogue with the world as a mutating and complex entity (Dematteis, 1985).



## **Situating geographic knowledge**

As we have seen so far in this chapter, distancing the knowing subject from everybody and everything gives the illusion of supposedly pure, objective and universal knowledge production (Farinelli, 1992; Haraway, 1988; Dematteis, 1985; Bonfiglioli *et al.*, 2022). The knowledge produced thanks to this logic presents itself as neutral, non political and even natural. Geography is perfectly familiar with such a mechanism, that comes in handy when a given territorial order needs to be imposed in a clear-cut manner, as in the relevant case of the imposition of British sovereignty on Cyprus, which traced sharp linear borders on the map of the island. The idea of a universe made of objective facts, deprived of any subjective interference, has enabled the prodigious development of accurate descriptions of the world, which provide a reassuring and controllable framework, but at the same time cut off what cannot be represented according to their rational criteria. The exceptional status of the SBAs and the unique condition of their inhabitants might be examples of the inherent limits of cartography and, more generally, of normal geography.

Even when geographic representations appear true and innocent, yet they are necessarily products of a selection operated by who made them (Dematteis, 1985). The abstract knowing subject of modernity, normally hidden from the descriptions, inevitably has a political position and must be situated somewhere, determining the production of geographic knowledge as expression of a specific stance (Bonfiglioli, 2020a; Simandan, 2019). It is thus important to admit that every point of view is embodied and, consequently, that knowledge is always situated. Such a point is particularly relevant for researchers in geography, who should acknowledge and declare their own positionality, in order to clarify how their context and their condition influence knowledge production (Bonfiglioli *et al.*, 2022).

Donna Haraway (1988) has provided crucial contributions to the debate on situated knowledges. She starts from the critical point that the abstraction of the knowing subject from everything and everybody serves the interests of ‘unfettered power’. Sight, based on the separation between an observing subject and an observed object, has become a

perverse scientific means of signification and classification. Haraway overtly contrasts such logic, seeking the tools ‘for deconstructing the truth claims of hostile science by showing the radical historical specificity, and so contestability, of every layer of the onion of scientific and technological constructions’. These constructions have been exploited in the interests of power incarnated by colonialism, militarism, capitalism and male supremacy. She thus argues for epistemologies of location, positioning and situatedness, ‘where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims’. She goes on arguing for ‘the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity’ (1988: 589). Embodiment is again highlighted as a key aspect of knowledge production.

As regards geographic knowledge, the question of the body may have a paramount value. The body inevitably occupies a position in the world, which influences the way reality is perceived and described. The Earth can only be experienced partially, rather than as a pictured objective totality. Moreover, the materiality of the body cannot fit into the geometric framework of geographic space, unless it undergoes an approximation, which eventually affects and biases the description of the Earth. For Bonfiglioli (2020b) a contemporary imagination of the world should ‘return with the feet on the ground’, come down from metaphysic abstraction and become physics, namely the science of movement. The world may then be imagined not necessarily as an euclidean projection ‘looked at’ from above, but rather as an ‘inhabited’ arena of human action, a world that Augustin Berque (2019) would qualify as ‘*oecumene*’. The latter refers to the whole human *milieux*, to its relationship with the Earth’s surface and to the stance which determines everyone’s existence. Berque (2019) makes a key distinction between the ‘*topos*’ and the ‘*chora*’, where the first is the cartographable place and the second is the existential place. The *oecumene* possesses both dimensions at one time, but modernity, he writes, has been exclusively cartographic. The *chora* has been left aside by the modern western imagination, which has privileged an abstract absolute space. Therefore, re-situating knowledge in the places of existence might have valuable implications in the way geographic research is developed (Bonfiglioli, 2020b).

Such a shift is not simply a change of the observer's position. It is first of all an opening towards other regimes of perception, possibly capable of dealing with particular local entanglements of bodies and power which tend to escape cartographic representations. Things such as interactions, transformations, paradoxes, contested issues and grey zones are not necessarily prone to simplifying paradigms which have dominated modern science in general. Such 'things' are nothing but expressions of what Edgar Morin has defined 'complexity' (1990), that is first and foremost a fabric, a texture of heterogeneous constituents that are inextricably bound to each other, but that cannot be exhaustively described through objective and universal criteria. Certain components of the material reality, especially those linked to subjectivity, might constitute a disturbance, deformation, or error for the analysis and the description of the world according to rational categories of classification. Therefore such components are simply erased from the scientific framework, but they nonetheless maintain their role and their presence in the complex fabric of reality experienced through the body.

Of course the concept of complexity causes uneasiness and confusion, because of our incapacity to define in a simple way, to denominate clearly and to order our ideas (Morin, 1990). But it might prove useful for venturing outside the geographic framework of modernity, based uniquely on binary oppositions, hierarchical orders and sharp boundaries. The geometric spatiality of cartography is defined by Bonfiglioli (2020a) '*striata*' (striated), because it divides the world into abstract segments and organises human dynamics accordingly. She rather proposes a geographical imagination able to narrate in a more appropriate manner our stance in the world, a world meant as *chora*, namely soil of human action. Experiencing the world from the inside means to look at it from varied viewpoints, different from the abstraction of normal geography. According to Dematteis (1985) this constitutes an opportunity for the production of geographic knowledge, which could trigger a dialogue with the Earth as a transforming entity. If we assign to geographic exploration the task of 'discovering' territorial mutations and innovations, rather than new remote lands, it turns out to be a still viable and interesting activity (Dematteis, 1985). Such a geography would counterbalance the stability and predictability of normal geography.

Dematteis thus proposes the expressions ‘anti-geographies’ and ‘counter-geographies’ to designate those descriptions of the world that do not fit into the hegemonic models. Normal geographic representations, argues Dematteis (1985), are ‘true’ in so far as we accept and translate them in our mental images. If, for any reason, the collective imagination does not accept such representations anymore, new ones should arise and replace the previous ones, likely determining a change of the political order too. For a better understanding of the latter point, I suggest a precious example provided by Giuseppe Dematteis (1985:20):

‘Non deve stupire se, nel bel mezzo della Rivoluzione francese, una commissione dell’Assemblea Nazionale lavorò intensamente per vari mesi a un’indagine geografica a scala nazionale. [...] E sarà forse casuale, ma questa *terra incognita* altro non era che la forma geografica (materiale) dell’esistenza del Terzo Stato: le città come sede della borghesia e il loro territorio come campo del suo dominio. Come realtà visibile, questa esisteva già sotto l’Ancien Régime, ma non essendo la geografia di quella forma di potere, non era, allora, la geografia della Francia’.

Such an example highlights that counter-geographies have a latent character: they remain somehow invisible until they find a way to penetrate the common sense and the political scene. If such ‘subversive’ geographies do not find room within the grids of geographic space, then they risk not to be connected to any place on Earth and thus not to exist, remaining in fact ‘utopias’, i.e. ‘non existing places’. But that is exactly their potential: utopias do not have a place yet, though they imagine possible worlds, ideally made of renewed social relations and different forms of power. They are geographies of territorial possibilities, which meet latent needs and lay the foundations for new social and political orders (Dematteis, 1985). Hence they are in reality not geographies of what does not exist, but counter-geographies of what does (Dematteis, 1985; Fall *et al.*, 2012).

### **What remains of the linear border?**

Going back to the case of the Sovereign Base Area of Akrotiri, a number of issues can now be tackled. For starters, it should be noted that the jurisdiction of the United Kingdom on the island is separated from the jurisdiction of the Republic of Cyprus by a line. A cartographic line which passes through the territory of a dozen municipalities, but does not appear on the ground in the form of a fence, a wall, or a barrier. Such line, traced in 1960, is actually a virtual one, it is a sort of approximation of the relationship between the two sovereignties. In reality, the jurisdiction of the Republic of Cyprus persists inside the SBA of Akrotiri as long as there are Cypriots citizens living within the UK territory (Constantinou *et al.*, 2005). It is also true that the jurisdiction of the UK is limited to the cartographic borders of the SBA, but the Treaty itself conceives the possibility, in case of emergency, of granting additional rights to the British Crown over the whole island: potentially, Cyprus might be entirely used by Britain as a military base (Constandinos, 2009; Constantinou *et al.*, 2005).

Such observations suggest once more that the cartographic border of the SBA represents a normal, ideal, official situation, which may be hardly realisable on the ground. A complete correspondence between the theoretical model of the map and the real inhabited places is undoubtedly a dangerous aspiration, only achievable if detailed projects of spatial differentiation are translated into practices of dispossession, deportation, or annihilation against those people who do not fit into the geographic categories imposed by the ruling subjects. However, the UK authorities apparently used to cultivate the aspiration of transforming the Akrotiri SBA into a proper British territory, through the removal of as many Cypriots as possible. The plan deployed in 1964 was addressed first of all to the inhabitants of the village of Akrotiri, the one closest to the military base in the strict sense: the plan consisted in the payment of 500,000 pounds compensation to the villagers for leaving their homes and moving outside the SBA (Cyprus Mail, 1964). The offer was accepted by the Akrotirians, who nevertheless repeatedly broke the agreement, returning to their homes without authorisation. Although the SBA authorities warned the villagers not to break the agreement, the will of the Akrotirians apparently prevailed, as roughly 1,000 of them

still inhabit the town nowadays. But there are also opposite cases in which the SBA was abandoned by its Cypriot inhabitants without even requiring an effort from the UK authorities: the case of the military and political turmoil of 1974 allowed the definitive affirmation of British sovereignty on the villages of Paramali and Sotira, abandoned by its Turkish Cypriot inhabitants.

In reality, the territory of states and the extent of their sovereignties might become more and more disjunct from each other for a variety of reasons (Brown, 2013). Sovereignty begins from the affirmation of power within a delimited territory, whereby dominion and jurisdiction are established through strategies of 'enclosure', determined by the creation of borders. The latter are able to produce well-defined political imaginaries, contributing to model the political subjectivities of those included, as opposed to those excluded. Yet, the creation of borders may imply different outcomes: from the concrete erection of gigantic walls to the simple organisation of abstract administrative subdivisions. Walls surely contribute to the dramatisation of power, which generates symbolic effects which go beyond the material ones: they revive the image of a strong, protective and self-determined state, capable of effective sovereign actions (Brown, 2013).

The border of the Akrotiri SBA is a case of soft spatial differentiation, as no material barriers have been established to separate Cyprus from the UK. The shift from one jurisdiction to another is thus not clearly perceivable at a local level in the villages of the SBA. What proves helpful for the materialisation of the linear border is the presence of the SBA Police officers, since they roam exclusively within the georeferenced borders of the UK territory. Apart from that, the Cypriots who live in the SBA are likely to feel as being in the Republic of Cyprus, due to the diffusion of Greek language, the use of Euro and other aspects of everyday life. Even the act of voting for the Cypriot elections reconnects them to their 'homeland'.

By contrast, within the territory of the village of Akrotiri there is a sizeable portion of restricted land, namely the military area indicated in the previous chapter (see Map 4 in Chapter 1). The gated community of RAF Akrotiri is truly inaccessible without

permission, it is surrounded by tall walls and carefully patrolled. As previous research by Klaus Dodds *et al.* (2015) shows, the most recognisable boundaries in Akrotiri are those which surround the military bases in the strict sense. On the one hand the external borders of the SBA are soft and imperceptible, on the other hand the military sites are protected by barbed wire, walls, security guards, gates and even ‘no photography’ zones. If, as Brown (2013:94) argues, the control of the frontiers is a ‘ritualistic performance’, then the UK seems to decisively show it off at the borders of its Royal Air Force facilities.

The latter examples taken from the reality of the Akrotiri SBA give us precious hints for a better understanding of the concept of border. In terms of location, borders may not always correspond to the territorial edges of states, being instead ‘multisituated’ (Kolosov *et al.*, 2013). Such dislocated borders might hinder somebody from entering certain areas, while potentially remaining invisible for others. For instance, the patrolled gates of the RAF Akrotiri are just a routine checkpoint for UK nationals, while might be never accessible for foreigners without a proper authorisation. But despite the latter observations, the embeddedness of cartographic representations of borders into the collective imagination makes it hard to conceive borders as non-linear, non-territorial and non-visible. The naturalisation of hegemonic geopolitical narratives and the affirmation of what we have called normal geography occur indeed at multiple levels, nurturing the imaginary of linear borders even unconsciously (Casaglia, 2022; Lewis *et al.*, 1997). Brambilla and Jones (2020) hence prompt a renewed impulse in the study of borders, not only to unveil the shortcomings of the modern geopolitical perspective, but also to explore alternative possibilities, geographical imaginations and political scenarios.

The idea that state borders are not necessarily fixed demarcation lines traceable on a map is probably the core argument of the academic field of Critical Border Studies (Brambilla *et al.*, 2020; Casaglia, 2022; Mezzadra *et al.*, 2013; Mountz, 2015; Rumford, 2012), and it certainly has to do with a critique of hegemonic geopolitical discourses and modern geographic models at large (Farinelli, 2007; Gregory, 1994; Toal, 1996). The seminal contribution *Lines in the Sand?* (Parker and Vaughan-Williams *et al.*,

2009:584) asks whether it is possible to define an epistemology ‘that is founded on uncertainty and able to sidestep the charm of the fixed border’. Alternative concepts of border have thus been investigated throughout the last few decades, paying attention to the proliferation and the heterogenisation of border(ing)s, the latter more fruitfully interpreted as a verb rather than a noun. It is indeed possible to imagine ‘bordering’ in processual terms, as relationships, discourses and performances, not fixed in space and time and eventually manifested as practices of socio-spatial differentiation (van Houtum *et al.*, 2002). Well aware of such observations, Chris Rumford (2012) proposed a ‘multiperspectival’ study of borders, whereby the single viewpoint of modern geography confronts a plethora of stances, which might prove useful to reinterpret a variety of human experiences outside the scopic regime of cartographic representations. A multiperspectival approach could value the dynamic relationships between borders and bodies in a constant condition of becoming. The work by Rajaram and Grundy-Warr (2007) introduced the term ‘borderscapes’, further explored by Chiara Brambilla (2015:19) as a concept that can express the complexity of borders as ‘not static but fluid and shifting; established and at the same time continuously traversed by a number of bodies, discourses, practices, and relationships’. In Appadurai’s theorisation of multiperspectivalism, the suffix ‘-scapes’ refers to ‘perspectival constructs’, determined by the specific position of the subjects involved, just as in the case of ‘landscapes’. For Brambilla (2015:30), ‘borderscaping’ is the practice through which fluid and shifting borders are ‘imagined, materially established, experienced, lived as well as reinforced and blocked but also crossed, traversed and inhabited’. The notion of borderscape is thereby valued as a stimulus for alternative geographical imaginations.

What is then the potential of the borderscape concept for this research about the Sovereign Base Area of Akrotiri? First of all, it allows to take into account the complexity of the relationship between the competing and sometimes blurring sovereignties of the Republic of Cyprus and the United Kingdom. It is a concept that disrupts the linear geometricity of state borders and connects the latter to material aspects of reality, such as human bodies and subjective perceptions. In addition,



borderscapes are not easily prone to cartographic representations. Not having a visible location nor a specific physiognomy, borderscapes actually challenge the immobility of a modern geopolitical and territorialist imaginary. They are rather connected with creativity and may thus be generative of projects of making (Brambilla *et al.*, 2020), translating what is now excluded from the official cartographic framework into situated counter-geographic knowledge. Western geopolitics would not at all benefit from a similar shift in the interpretation of the idea of border.

### **The choice of qualitative research**

Understanding the heterogeneous ways in which the UK/Cyprus border is experienced seems to be a viable option for investigating the conditions and the mechanisms of spatial differentiation determined by the British military presence on the island. Border geographies produced and shared among the inhabitants of Akrotiri at a local level might be nurtured by a number of intersectional and subjective factors, invisible on maps. My research thus aims to interrogate such knowledge, in its indeterminacy, partiality and fluidity, through the adoption of qualitative research methods. Hitchings and Latham (2019a; 2019b) provide a useful scrutiny of qualitative research trends in human geography, examining in particular interviewing and ethnographic methodologies. ‘Outside the world of Geographic Information Science’, they write, ‘qualitative methods would seem to define human geography’s direction and purpose’ (Hitchings and Latham, 2019a:1). My work includes interviews, participant observation and informal conversations, carried out through short periods in the village of Akrotiri and its surroundings. Nevertheless, additional qualitative methodologies are adopted in order to add more dimensions to the research: first, newspaper reviews accompany the whole work, unveiling particular local dynamics since the 1950s until today; second, photo and video material is collected in Akrotiri, contributing not only to enrich the research portfolio, but also providing a rather effective bridge with the local people involved in the fieldwork.

The choice of such a mixed qualitative methodology derives from the sum of a variety of reasons. My previous research experience has mainly consisted of semi-structured interviewing and participant observation, which I still consider precious tools for gathering information not only about the present, but also about the past and the future of a specific situation. Plus, they might be effective for understanding the ‘how’ of the phenomena analysed. I have thus initially planned to exclusively adopt such research tools, but I quickly understood that some limits could emerge: language barriers, time constraints, trust building and accessibility to the field are just the main ones. Exactly at that time I was lucky enough to get in touch with two Cypriot persons, who proved essential for the development of my research methodology: Revekka Evangelou, former architecture student of the University of Cyprus who has defended her master’s thesis about Akrotiri in 2023, and Costas Constantinou, professor of international relations at the same university, who has carried out precious research about the SBAs for roughly 20 years. Revekka has analysed cases of resistance to the British power in Akrotiri, from the 1960 until today, mainly through archive research and newspaper review. She made me understand the value of such sources for my research and also provided me with fundamental tips for accessing and analysing the Cypriot online archives. Costas, instead, told me about his fieldwork experience carried out in Akrotiri around 2005, thereby starting a stimulating exchange of our knowledge related to the SBAs. But what was even more illuminating was his documentary titled *Lines*, filmed at the SBA of Dhekelia in 2019. His filming project was meant exactly as a means for geo-graphing the border(scape) of four different sovereignties which coexist within a few square kilometres, as explained in a paper published in 2020, titled *Video dispatch from the borderscape: toward a diplomatic geography* (Constantinou, 2020).

The well pondered use of a mixed qualitative methodology might offer surprising outcomes, giving the research a sort of rhizomatic shape. As explained by Diana Masny (2013:339), rhizomatic research ‘has horizontal shoots that take off in unpredictable directions. It has no beginning, no end. It spills out in the middle’. Such a way of thinking about qualitative research does not necessarily imply a linear process aimed at finding an objective truth. Of course a rhizomatic approach to geography risks being

rather fragmented, but as Collignon conveniently remarks ‘so is the world it seeks to describe and understand’ (2004:379). There are nonetheless many criticalities I should be aware of while carrying out such a research. An important issue is my positionality, particularly delicate as the project is hinged on situated geographic research. My stance and my personal characteristics need to be taken into account when planning research activities, for they may decisively influence the direction of my fieldwork. As Dematteis (1985) wisely advises, there are many different points of observation for who is necessarily located ‘inside the things’. This means that my presence in Akrotiri is just one of the many possible positions which can be adopted to study its border. Moreover, being ‘inside the things’ means to be part of the studied reality and to take part in its complexity as well. To put it differently, the idea of the abstract and invisible knowing subject of modernity should be challenged through situated research practices which acknowledge and even value the bodily presence of the geographer. And this is exactly the strategy I decided to adopt for my thesis.



## Chapter 3

### Can we ‘write’ between the lines?

‘Geography’ comes from the ancient Greek *γῆ* (*gê*) ‘earth’ + *γράφω* (*gráphō*) ‘write’. Its etymology reminds us that geo-graphing is first of all a human act, the act of writing, rather than the rightful and objective description of the world. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, the subjective and bodily dimension of geographic knowledge has been gradually hidden from the western epistemic framework throughout modernity, which has irreparably reduced the Earth to its geometric projection, made of unmistakable cartesian coordinates and neat lines. I thus intend to revisit the geographies of Akrotiri, contrasting the monopoly of ‘normal’ geography in the legitimate production of knowledge about the Earth. Valuing situated geographies, I aim to turn state borders into textures for reading complex dynamics of power, sovereignty and spatial differentiation, escaping arid simplifying thoughts.

The present chapter clarifies how I decided to opt for mixed qualitative research methodologies and why I preferred each of them during different phases of my work. It also discloses relevant information about my educational and professional path and previous research experiences, characterised by multidisciplinary. Besides geography, which has been predominant during my last few years of study at the University of Bologna, sociology and anthropology have underpinned my empirical research experiences. I was first captured by sociology and its methodologies during the Master’s Course in Tourism Studies at the University of Bergamo. I decided to write a thesis in *Sociology of Environment and Territory* with Professor Mimmo Perrotta and I still find very interesting and useful to recover that work: its title, which somehow parallels the one of this research, is *Authorised Heritage vs Dissonant Heritage: an ethnographic study at the Archaeological Park of Herculaneum*. The concept of

‘Authorised Heritage’ echoes that of cartographic objectivism, while ‘Dissonant Heritage’ has to do with the local, situated and embodied sphere. I have not abandoned the ratio that underpinned my first thesis: also the present work confronts something legitimate, institutional and supposedly objective, namely the cartographic representations of Akrotiri, with situated claims of geographic knowledge production.

### **Methodological approaches**

A fluid and shifting border(scape) is experienced, lived, reinforced, established, crossed, traversed and inhabited in Akrotiri. It is negotiated on a daily basis. My research addresses exactly the latter aspect, making use of mixed qualitative methodologies. The adoption of such methodologies in geography is particularly fruitful for studying the processes and practices through which socio-spatial structures are built, reproduced, legitimised and contested (Martini *et al.*, 2022). My work includes, to various extents, participant observation, interviewing, archive/newspaper review, analog photography and film-making. Silverman (2002) acknowledges the usefulness of combining multiple research methods, for either enriching the analysis of the context studied or to obviate the inadequacy of certain research tools. My initial plan included exclusively participant observation, semi-structured interviews and potentially focus groups, perhaps underestimating the difficulties of accessing an unknown community. After the first period of fieldwork, carried out in January 2024, I realised that setting up a research environment suitable for in-depth interviews would have been almost impossible in such a short time, given my clear ‘foreignness’, besides the language gap between me and many Akrotirians. The research was therefore gradually re-oriented towards more *ad hoc* approaches, giving more space to participant observation and also adopting creative methods such as photography and video-making. Inspiring qualitative studies about borderscapes have been carried through the latter methods, not only in the fields of political geography, international relations and anthropology (Brambilla, 2016; Constantinou, 2020), but also in other ambits such as architecture and visual arts (Grillo, 2023). In particular, the use of photography, video-making and diverse artistic

disciplines appears as an interesting trend in geographic research, both for gathering knowledge and for presenting the results (Bignante, 2011; Garrett, 2011; Pauwels *et al.*, 2020; Tedeschi, 2011).

Participant observation remained a firm component of my work, as it could be applied in many moments of the fieldwork and could encompass diverse activities, such as public gatherings, dinners at restaurants or daily events I attended. As Corbetta (2003) suggests, such a method can be useful to unveil certain dynamics ‘from the inside’, putting the researcher within a net of relations, interactions and perceptions. Participant observation, write DeWalt and DeWalt (2011:1) ‘is a method in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, ritual, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture’. The degree of participation to the activities of the studied community is however not fixed: some observers try to be more actively involved, while some others limit themselves to simply being there. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) point out that those places where conversations are particularly frequent constitute potentially rewarding locations for the ethnographer. Participant observation is indeed mostly unstructured, serendipitous and informal, but it may subsequently help to imagine future interviewing situations (Pelto, 2013). When performing participant observation, field notes taken on a daily basis constitute a paramount part of the research work. Selecting what should be remembered and adding personal reflections eventually determine the outcomes of the study, through which the presence of the researcher becomes clear and determinant at the same time. Field notes inevitably have a selective character, because it would be hard to catch every single aspect of what is observed. There is, in other words, ‘a trade-off between breadth of focus and detail’ and ‘what is recorded will depend on one’s general sense of what is relevant to the foreshadowed research problems, as well as on background expectations’ (Hammersley *et al.*, 2007:142). Writing field notes is thus an integral part of participant observation, allowing to collect the otherwise volatile information emerging from fieldwork. I made use of pen and paper for taking notes more conveniently when I was in Cyprus. In my research, observation covered the whole period of fieldwork, which amounted to eighteen days in

total, divided in four periods: four days in January 2024, four in February, five in March and five in May.

Formal semi-structured interviews and informal ones with the people inhabiting the SBA of Akrotiri were initially imagined as a major research tool. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) maintain that people's accounts may be either used as a source of information about the context and the subjects involved, or treated as social products which might be analysed in order to discern something about the processes which generated them. To put it differently, interviews can be used in two different but potentially complementary ways: they can be read for 'what they tell us about the phenomena to which they refer', or can be analysed in terms of 'the perspectives they imply, the discursive strategies they employ, and even the psychosocial dynamics they suggest' (Hammersley *et al.*, 2007:97). Interviewing in ethnographic research may consist of formally arranged meetings or of informal conversations during the course of other activities. In the latter case, the boundaries between participant observation and interviewing are more difficult to determine. In general, interviewing is likely to be a fruitful narrative source, particularly in the case of knowledge that would be difficult to collect otherwise, such as the ways in which Akrotirians imagine their place and conceive the border between the two sovereignties. The number and the shape of semi-structured interviews to carry out in my research was not predetermined. I hoped to design an interviewing strategy during my first fieldwork period, but many obstacles emerged, as will be seen in the next section. In the end, I only carried out one semi-structured interview with a Cypriot resident of the village of Akrotiri, who is also the vice-President of the local football team, APEA Akrotiri. Such an in-depth interview was pre-arranged and video recorded.

Besides participant observation and interviewing, I decided to make use of specific documentary sources about the Sovereign Base Area of Akrotiri. A document is basically informative material about a particular social phenomenon, which exists irrespective of the researcher's actions (Corbetta, 2003). It can be, for example, a letter, a press article, a diary, or a normative source. For the aims of my research, I found very



useful the exploitation of two kinds of documents: the first type consisted of all those institutional sources regarding the establishment and the reinforcement of the interstate border between the Republic and the SBA, which included the Treaty of Establishment and its maps, the regulations produced by the SBA Administration and some relevant publications of the European Union; the second category of documents included newspaper articles (mainly the *Cyprus Mail* and the *Times of Cyprus*) which narrate from an everyday perspective the local events that played a role in the negotiation of sovereignty between the Cypriot population and the UK authorities, from the 1950s until today. Both kinds of sources proved particularly useful before starting the fieldwork, allowing me to know more about the place I was going to engage with. Unfortunately, one limit became clear in the deployment of documentary research: my basic knowledge of the Greek language was not sufficient to access a wide portion of potentially important written sources. Many Greek Cypriot newspapers, often linked to political parties, could have provided my research with additional insights about the events which led to the creation of the UK base or the protests organised by the Cypriots across the years. In some cases I managed to translate important articles, but such a translation enterprise could not be steadily pursued due to time constraints.

Last but not least, this thesis has made ample use of visual research methodologies. The potential of the latter methodologies has emerged gradually after starting the fieldwork, when I was using exclusively my analog camera, becoming perhaps the most original and stimulating component of the research. For Elisa Bignante (2011), visual observations and descriptions have always been part of the geographer's 'toolbox':

‘Il geografo rivolge la propria attenzione al territorio, ai suoi caratteri, alle sue trasformazioni, ai rapporti intrattenuti con altre scale e più in generale allo spazio e a come i fenomeni in esso si dispiegano, supportando le proprie teorie con l'evidenza visiva del mondo’ (Bignante, 2011:9).

She adds that the identification of geography with cartography has been for a long time the main way for ordering the knowledge about the world, so as to gain control upon the reality and to escape uncertainty. However, geographic research is today distancing itself from the idea of scientific objectivism. As extensively understood in the previous

chapters, the material reality of the SBA is complex and undergoes continuous transformations. Sovereignty is often fluid and shifting and so is the British/Cypriot borderscape I am hereby tackling. What becomes important is therefore the conception of visual material not as objective images of the world, but rather as interpretive tools (Bignante, 2011). For Bradley Garrett (2010:521), videographic geographies are capable of ‘producing thick cultural documents that are particularly valuable to ethnographic research’. Video making, he argues, is a drastically underutilised method, which may nevertheless be leveraged for dissemination purposes, once the research has been concluded (Garrett, 2010). Most probably the use of video in academic geographic research is discouraged by the fact that it appears as a highly specialised and technically demanding enterprise, possibly requiring the involvement of a larger team of people than is commonly needed by most academic projects (Garrett, 2010; Pauwels *et al.*, 2020). My work was not extraneous to such a criticality, which was promptly overcome through the involvement of a professional video maker who joined one of my fieldwork periods.

Pauwels and Mannay (2020) interestingly point out that the scope of visual research is, maybe paradoxically, not confined to the visible world, being also intimately related to the invisible and the inconceivable. Such an argument was truly inspiring for my decision to experiment photography and video making in the study of the Akrotirian borderscape. Nicoletta Grillo’s (2023) photographic research about the Swiss/Italian borderscape has recently dealt with the invisible dimensions of spatial differentiation and liminality, crossing and capturing the ‘absent’ boundaries of Canton Ticino. Costas Constantinou (2020) explored the complex character of the unique UK/Cyprus/UN borderscape, driving through and filming the Sovereign Base Area of Dhekelia. I followed, and somehow appropriated, Constantinou’s argument about video footage as a research method, whose task...

‘...was not just telling the story of the Cypriot borderscape, but getting the viewer to think broadly, to realize the process of active bordering and de-bordering, the actual or potential confrontation of different jurisdictions, and the distribution of material effects and emotional affects on selected sites’ (Constantinou, 2020:3).

All the research methodologies listed in this section have been modulated so as to be consistent with the major concern of this thesis: the pursuance of (experimental) situated geographies. Incorporation and reflexivity are meant as ways to put aside the hegemonic western geographic frameworks and creative methods are seen as useful tools to broaden the horizons of qualitative research (Giorgi *et al.*, 2021). It seems almost redundant specifying that the outcomes of my research do not aspire to be generalisable nor definitive. They would have been different if achieved by somebody else. My presence, relationality, attitude and skills are inseparable components of the knowledge I am putting forth. For this reason, the next section tackles the matter of positionality and reveals the details of the whole research flow, aiming at reinforcing the situated character of my work.

### **Research development: access, positionality, limits**

This section tells more about myself than about the methodologies I adopted, becoming a way to state my positionality. It is about my encounters with other students, scholars and professors who helped me build my research during the last few months; about physically accessings Akrotiri and encountering its inhabitants; and also about the constraints that have emerged from time to time, requiring me to remodulate my plans.

The actual research work about the Sovereign Base Area of Akrotiri started on October 19, 2023, when I had an online meeting with Revekka Evangelou, author of the master's thesis *Anti-treaty: reclaiming Akrotiri decolonizing practices and counter narratives*. Such thesis, defended in June 2023 at the University of Cyprus (Department of Architecture), aimed at understanding how particular local practices and narratives contested the dictates of the *Treaty of Establishment of the Republic of Cyprus*. During our precious meeting, Revekka provided me with useful insights about Akrotiri, that she had analysed in depth through the review of archives and newspapers. Her work also included a few interviews with her relatives, who used to spend time in Akrotiri during the summer. She then underlined the impossibility of accessing the military site of Royal Air Force (RAF) Akrotiri. Our theses are surely different, but still I reputed very

important Revekka's knowledge, as she knew many aspects of Akrotiri, from both its past and its present, and was able to access plenty of sources in Greek language, that are pretty much inaccessible for me. Among such sources, she highlighted some relevant ones, such as a documentary produced by a Cypriot TV channel in 2014. Moreover, she instructed me about the consultation of relevant online archives of Cypriot newspapers, which proved indispensable for my research. What decisively struck me about her thesis was one particular moment of Akrotiri's history that she had delved into: the relatively long non-violent resistance of the inhabitants of Akrotiri against several attempts of the UK forces to push them outside their village, culminated with the offer of an economic compensation. It was definitely a key moment of the relationship between the British forces and the Cypriot villagers. It was, as I interpreted it, the seminal act of border negotiation.

After the online meeting with Revekka, I was even more motivated to carry out my research. But I wanted to experience directly and physically the material reality of Akrotiri and of the British military base. I intended, in other words, to carry out fieldwork. I thus drafted a plan to reach the SBA and stay there at least a few days. Many factors, connected to my own personal condition, favoured my project: first, being an Italian citizen I did not need a visa for entering Cyprus; second, I had the possibility to take advantage of direct low cost flights between the airport of Bergamo, the city where I live, and the airport of Paphos, roughly 50 km from the Sovereign Base Area of Akrotiri; third, I could afford the costs of flights, car rental and accommodation in Limassol, one of the main cities of Cyprus, located nearby the SBA. As soon as I realised the feasibility of a first short fieldwork, I set up everything for carrying it out in the second week of January 2024. Before flying to Cyprus, I tried to establish some rough objectives, such as getting to know as many inhabitants of Akrotiri as I could, inviting them to take part in interviews, starting participant observation and investigating the existence of relevant movements or associations.

I first accessed the Sovereign Base Area on January 12, 2024. I drove from Limassol, where I was staying, to Akrotiri. It was a rainy Friday night. The first place I headed to was Polis Taver, one of the few restaurants in the village. As soon as I entered, I

realised I was the only non-British customer of the tavern. The walls were covered with photos and drawings of UK military aircrafts. But the owners and the employees were Cypriots. That was the first impact I had with the SBA of Akrotiri. Very soon I started talking with the owner of the restaurant, Stavros. He welcomed me very kindly and asked me where I was from and he wondered if I was a tourist. For some reason, I did not feel comfortable enough to tell him I was there for my research about the Sovereign Base Area. So I told him I was a tourist. At that moment I started thinking about my positionality: presenting myself as either a traveller, a student, or a photographer would have surely influenced my relationship with people and, in turn, the outcomes of the research. The following morning I was still facing the same positionality dilemma, when I spent some time at Break Coffee and met some Akrotirians. That morning I decided to tell them I was a documentarist, interested in the history and culture of Akrotiri. I thus asked them to suggest some places to film or people to interview. Some of them mentioned the Mayor of the village, George Stylianou, and the priest of the local Church of Saint Cross.

The second night of fieldwork was characterised by an unbelievable coincidence, which constituted a true turning point of the research. I was sitting again in Polis Tavern, which I felt could be a fruitful environment to ‘break the ice’ with Akrotiri. Suddenly, a voice called me: that was the voice of a girl, Laura, who I had met during my flight from Italy to Cyprus. I was shocked. I knew she was going to Limassol to visit some relatives, but I did not expect to meet her at Polis Tavern. She was having dinner with her aunt, uncle, cousin and cousin’s partner, who promptly invited me to join their table. Although they lived in Limassol, they knew the tavern very well, because Laura’s uncle, called Nakis, used to live in Akrotiri when he was a kid. The first thought which came to my mind was to make an interview with Nakis, but I did not rush. During our conversation, I told them I was in Akrotiri to carry out some preliminary research for a documentary I was planning to shoot. They seemed really interested and my idea of making a documentary slowly started to become somewhat more concrete. At the end of the dinner, Nakis proposed me to take a walk through Akrotiri for showing me some insights of the village, potentially useful for my film. Being very excited for the

opportunity, I did not think twice to accept. At first, he just told me a few stories about his childhood, remembering the houses of friends and relatives. But then, he opened the topic of the British presence in the town, criticising above all the presence of the huge military antennas installed on the western shore of the Salt Lake: in his view, they were a major cause of brain cancer, widespread in the village. We went to the cemetery of Akrotiri, to pay a visit to the tombs of Nakis' parents. His mother had died when he was young, due to brain cancer. While slowly walking through the cemetery, he was telling me the story of many of those names: some people had died when still kids, some others at a later age, but very often because of brain cancer, including the brother of Stavros, the manager of Polis Tavern. I was feeling overwhelmed. I understood that the association of brain cancer with the radiations of the antennas was something taken seriously in Akrotiri, as I had read before the fieldwork. At the end of that night, I asked Nakis and his family to meet again in February and to carry out an interview. They were willing to meet me again, but about the interview Nakis said he preferred an informal way, just eating, drinking, relaxing and talking.

On the third day of fieldwork, January 14, a paramount event took place: a protest against the military base of Akrotiri, organised by the Cypriot Peace Council and supported by AKEL (the Communist Party of Workers) and United for Palestine, whose members came from all over Cyprus to Akrotiri (France 24, 2024; Smith, 2024). I joined the protest, which started from the main road of the village and proceeded towards the gate of RAF Akrotiri, demanding the closure of the British military base. Dozens of Palestinian and Cypriot flags were waved by the participants, asking for a ceasefire in Gaza and for the interruption of UK military support to Israel, while also claiming the neutrality of Cyprus. From that day I gradually started taking more and more photographs. On the following day I noticed I had been captured by the photographs of a few reporters, published in newspapers such as Al-Jazeera, France 24 and The Guardian (Image 1). I had somehow become the object of somebody else's work, without even noticing who had taken those pictures in the first place. Although I had nothing against appearing in newspapers, I started thinking about possible ethical concerns related to my research and to the risk of objectifying the people involved.



Image 1. The group 'United for Palestine Cyprus' at the protest against the British military base. I am visible on the left side. [source: The Guardian]

After the first fieldwork in Akrotiri (January 12-15) many things were more clear. First of all, I had to define a clear positionality, both for accessing the field in an unambiguous way and to produce coherent outcomes. Plus, I needed to delineate a detailed research plan, in order to best exploit the short periods of fieldwork available during the following months. In those days I finally involved Greta Mauri, documentarist and visual artist. The second fieldwork started on February 2 and lasted four days. It was characterised by a friendly and intense interaction with the members of the local football team, APEA Akrotiri, playing in the Cypriot Third Division but on a football pitch located on UK soil. The participation of Greta gave a precise trajectory to that fieldwork: filming particular moments, landscape elements and human interactions possibly relevant for both my research and for a potential documentary to realise with her. On the first night we went to APEA Kebab, which is at the same time a restaurant and the headquarters of the local football club, APEA Akrotiri (*ΑΠΕΑ - Αθλητική Ποδοσφαιρική Ένωση Ακρωτηρίου*). There we met Panikos, the manager of the

restaurant, and Andros (Andy), the Vice-President of the football club, who invited us to the stadium on the following day for a league match. At the Akrotiri Stadium many villagers were watching the match of APEA, plus some British people scattered here and there. The stadium, being located on UK soil next to the gate of RAF Akrotiri, was patrolled by a few officers of the SBA Police. After the successful match we invited Andy, the Vice-President, to carry out a video interview about both the club and the village, potentially useful for our documentary and, of course, for my thesis. He accepted immediately. The interview was a key moment, not just in terms of knowledge gained, but also as an activity for building a friendly and trustful relation with Andy, with other members of the club and with some inhabitants of Akrotiri.

The headquarters of APEA Akrotiri had been also mentioned by Costas Constantinou (2008) in one of his articles about the Sovereign Base Areas. That was the place where he had met two Akrotirians complaining about the deadly effects of the British military antennas:

‘In the Athletic club of the village, with the background noise of landing aircrafts, I listened to the complaints of men with tears in their eyes; two lost their wives to cancer and one of them had cancer. They were convinced that the high rate of cancer was the result of the antennae’ (Constantinou, 2008:154).

After the second fieldwork I thus contacted Professor Constantinou, working at the Department of International Relations of the University of Cyprus, who had studied both Akrotiri and Dhekelia. We had a very fruitful and inspiring online meeting, consisting of an active exchange of memories and experiences regarding Akrotiri, plus an opportunity to discuss ethnographic and visual research methodologies. Although he was not studying the SBAs anymore, he manifested great interest in my work and proposed to me to be in touch again at the end of my research. Before starting my third fieldwork period, I also contacted Professor Nicoletta Grillo, working at the University of Leuven, who studies borderscapes through photography and visual arts. She eventually provided me with some useful readings and even a recent publication about the Cypriot borderscape.



On March 22 I went to the SBA again, but that time Greta could not join me. I spent much time with the usual Akrotiri villagers at APEA Kebab, including Andy, Panikos and some men in their 50s and 60s. All the people I had met in Akrotiri remembered me. But in those days the linguistic barrier emerged again, as the majority of Akrotirians I met were not speaking English very well. However, we still found our ways to communicate and to connect with each other. Carrying out interviews proved not feasible, as well as making good video recordings. I thus insisted on informal conversations and participant observation, besides analog photography. During the five days of the third fieldwork I learnt some political aspects of Akrotiri: the sentiment of Greek-Cypriot nationalism was rather pervasive; the figure of Georgios Grivas, leader of the EOKA movement from the 1950s to the 1970s, seemed highly respected among the people I met, more than Archbishop Makarios III; moreover, Andy told me that APEA was linked to the right wing side of Cypriot politics. The third fieldwork was also the one during which I met some members of the Royal Air Force, with whom I had some beers and an interesting chat on March 24, thanks to Andy who knew them very well and invited me to spend the evening with them at Hamlet's Pub.

The last fieldwork was carried out at the end of May. Akrotiri appeared a bit different, as the summer had already come. I exploited those days to explore the whole Sovereign Base Area of Akrotiri, visiting Episkopi Cantonment (the military and residential site capital of the SBAs), the SBA Court, the Archeological Site of Kourion, the renowned beach of Lady's Mile and the Environmental Education Centre of Akrotiri. At the same time, I went again to APEA Kebab, Polis Tavern, Hamlet's Pub and Break Coffee, all places where I was sure to meet the Akrotirians I knew and to have interesting conversations. I spent some time with Stavros, Chris, Panikos and those villagers who knew I was carrying out a photography and video project. I even showed them some of the videos I had shot with Greta and the analog photos I had taken.

My fieldwork was not a conventional one. It was made of four short stays which eventually amounted to eighteen days. The lack of funding plus my work commitment in Italy did not allow me to opt for a different strategy. But such constraints forced me to use every single day in the best possible way. I lived my fieldwork as an experiment,

which can instruct me for the next research projects, being aware that every methodology I adopted requires a different time span and a specific relation of trust with the local people involved. However, all the limits which emerged throughout the research are hereby meant as important sources of knowledge. Similarly, all the relations instaurated with other researchers and professionals proved an essential means to sustain my work and surely influenced the way I wrote my thesis.

### **Starting a documentary in Akrotiri**

I was on the third day of my first fieldwork in Akrotiri when I called Greta Mauri, asking her to collaborate on my research in Cyprus and, if possible, to shoot a short film. During that fieldwork, in January, I had met many people and had long chats on various topics, but yet I had no clue about how I would make people comfortable enough in doing interviews about the border of Akrotiri. When Greta accepted to join me in February for a short fieldwork of four days, I saw the opportunity to add a formidable research tool to my work. I felt that the potential of documentary-making could have been twofold: on one hand, it would allow the production of geographic knowledge based on the local landscape and on our presence on the field; on the other hand, it would help me to interact with local people in a more transparent way. I knew very well Greta and her previous filming projects. She had graduated in 2023 at Brera Academy of Fine Arts in Milan (Master's Course in *Multimedia Arts of Cinema and Video Making*) with a thesis title 'Documentary of the Past: Archive, Interview and Reconstruction' (*Documentario del Passato: Archivio, Intervista e Ricostruzione*). After graduating, she produced a documentary, in collaboration with Giorgia Bertolini, about a famous mountain tragedy that occurred on the border between Italy and Switzerland in 1953. The documentary (*Storia di un bivacco*) was first presented on October 28, 2023 in the town of Formazza, located in the Italian region of Piemonte, in Formazza Valley/Pomattertal (La Stampa, 2023).

Greta quickly accepted my proposal and we both took the project seriously from the beginning. On January 17 we had a meeting in Bergamo, in which I illustrated her the

details of my research objectives and we shared our feelings and expectations about the project. We tried to find a balance between our respective interests: I needed to focus on my thesis, but I did not intend to put any limitation to what we could do; she was willing to help me, while also being motivated to imagine a wider project which could be developed also after my graduation. In other words, she was not there just as an ‘instrumental’ film maker. For this reason, the outcomes of the video research were eventually co-constructed and co-authored, although such a strategy implied the risk of slightly changing my initial research plan.

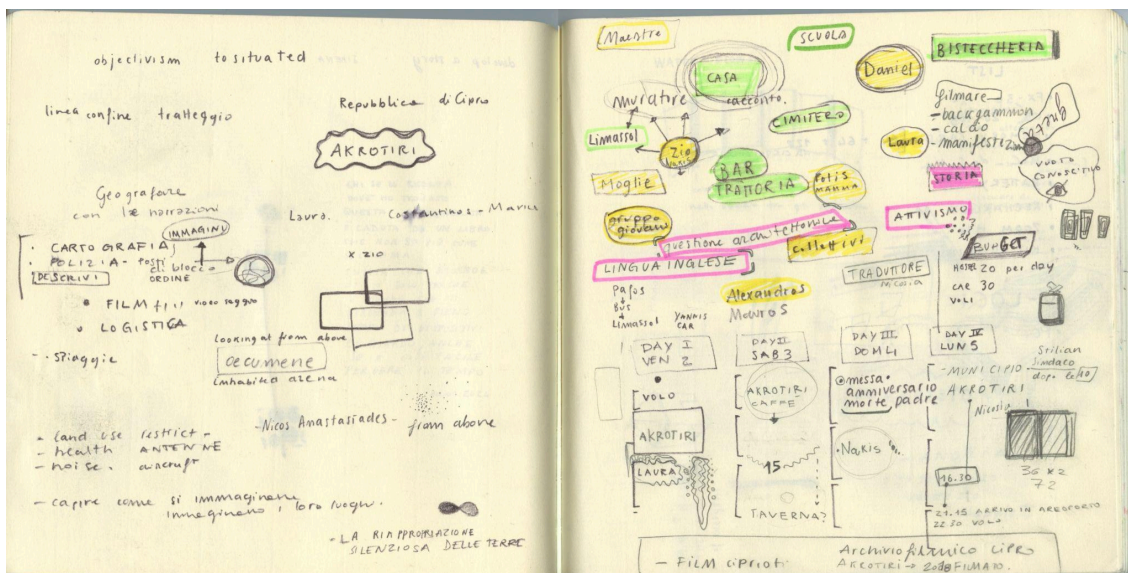


Image 2. Notes from our meeting on January 17, 2024 [source: Greta Mauri and Ernesto Martellaro]

We flew to Cyprus on February 2, 2024. At the beginning, we retraced the paths I had walked during the first fieldwork. Gradually, Greta also started to gain confidence with the village and its dynamics. Meeting Akrotirian people with her was a fundamental passage of my research. I really understood what is positionality and how the presence and the subjectivity/ies of the researcher(s) are a fundamental and inescapable component of situated knowledge production. Moreover, I gained greater credibility and trust among the villagers, who knew I was a documentarist and finally witnessed my

filmmaking efforts with my colleague. Even though local people did not know the exact and deep motivations of our work, they generally seemed to enjoy our presence. The video recordings began on road E602, the street which crosses the invisible SBA border between Asomatos and Akrotiri. They continued until reaching the gate of RAF Akrotiri, namely the physical barrier between the Cypriot village and the restricted military and residential British area. In the following days we went to all those places which recalled the idea of border negotiation, from the religious sites to the football pitch, passing through natural areas, restaurants and public spaces. At the same time, we found out new inspiring places which, according to both of us, seemed significant for my research and for the germination of our documentary project. I was surprised about the positive influence effects of our collaboration, that made me rethink many research aspects I was until then taking for granted.

Day by day, it became clear that not everything could be filmed, due to both legal reasons and ethical concerns. The first case involved in particular the military sites and installation, which were normally 'no photography zones'. We recorded and photographed some of them without particular problems or consequences, but we generally avoided to take excessive risks and thus decided to focus on other elements of Akrotiri. The second case, by contrast, was related to the personal and intimate sphere of the people we engaged with, as the presence of a camera in certain situations might have put them in an uncomfortable condition. An emblematic case was the day we spent with Nakis, the man who accompanied me through the village during my first fieldwork, and his family. On Sunday February 4, they invited us to a very important religious ceremony at the Monastery of Saint Nicholas of Cats. On that day recurred the anniversary of Nakis' father passing away, whose memory was honoured by the priest of the church. We took part in the event, but we decided not to film anything as we perceived the intensity and the intimacy of that moment. Something similar happened after the ceremony, when we were invited to Nakis' house for lunch. We initially asked him to make an interview about the village of Akrotiri, but he kindly refused, feeling uncomfortable and fearing the reaction of Akrotirians about the delicate things he might have said. In the end we enjoyed the day with them and accepted the fact that not

everything could be filmed. By contrast, we managed to engage in a different way with Andy, the Vice-President of APEA, who accepted to be interviewed and filmed. He started talking about his football team and his town, but subsequently manifested his willingness to touch other topics, such as the military base, where he was employed, and the well known dispute between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, which had forced his wife to move from Nicosia to Kolossi, in the SBA of Akrotiri.

On the last two days of fieldwork we decided to direct our interest towards those elements of Akrotiri's landscape which seemed significant to understand the border(scape) negotiation which takes place in the territory of the village and on the edge of the military base. We visited, for instance, the areas of cattle breeding and cultivation and the beach of Lady's mile, where the activities of the Cypriots blurred with the military presence of the UK forces. We noticed the potential of filming the unique Akrotirian land(scape) as an experimental method to sense the borderscape in a situated and embodied way, conveying all the reflections that underlie my thesis. Such part of the research was particularly enjoyed by Greta, who conceived documentary making as an artistic practice, before than a simple means to accumulate visual data. The apparent vagueness and ambiguity of the videos we produced on that day might actually tell more than an interview or a footage of the base. They leave space for geographic reflections and imaginations which risk to be otherwise neglected, because of their fluid and undefined character.

As we went back to Bergamo, we knew that our work was not at all finished yet: we had a lot to watch (more than three hours had been filmed), to think and to plan. We were at an important crossroads, because we had started something which could really become a film in the long run. At the same time, I needed to decide what to do with our experience in relation to the progress of my thesis. Therefore we arranged another meeting, to discuss our intentions and desires for the following months. Being aware of what it means to realise a documentary, Greta instructed me about the necessity of additional funds and technical collaborators, both in the phase of shooting and in the editing process, explaining that only within a longer time span we would likely achieve something fully satisfying. As regards my thesis, I manifested the intention to use the

video material as evidence of my research and I also expressed my desire to present a video 'draft' on the day of my graduation. We hence set a double objective: the first was to use the collected material so as to create a short but coherent video, which could be used as a sample to apply for public and private funding, but also as a trace of my fieldwork; the second objective consisted instead in planning, after my graduation, a well organised filming programme to be pursued in a professional way. We met again in March, April and May, in order to watch the videos, to find relevant narrative lines and to assemble a meaningful short-film.

## Chapter 4

### Sensing the Cypriot/British border(scape)

Akrotiri is a complex reality. It can be seen as a project of territorialisation not accomplished yet. Or perhaps accomplished, but in a very exceptional way. In fact, the lands of the Western Sovereign Base Area have not been made identical to their map. Their border has not been transformed into a line on the ground. The reason of such a fact depends on the multiple negotiations which have taken place across the decades, and still take place, between the British authorities and the Cypriot population. Not erecting any barrier between the two sovereignties was eventually a deliberate decision of the UK authorities. Most probably because a sharp separation would have implied either the full incorporation of those inhabiting the villages of the SBA, who could then claim British citizenship, or their removal from the British territory, unsuccessfully attempted across the years. Both solutions proved not implementable without triggering further problematic consequences. Therefore, as Constantinou (2005) has already noticed, a double ‘simulation’ is nowadays sustained and reproduced at a local level: the British people who live in Akrotiri are in the United Kingdom, while the Cypriots are in the Republic of Cyprus. Interestingly, the main road of Akrotiri has two names at the same time: one is ‘Queen Elizabeth Street’, the other is *Λεωφόρος Αρχιεπίσκοπος Μακάριος Γ'* (‘Archbishop Makarios III Boulevard’).

It is inevitable to make a comparison between the SBA/Cyprus border and the one which separates the Northern part of Cyprus from the Southern part, that is the ‘Green Line’ of the United Nations. The latter is a sharp, thick and fenced division, corresponding pretty much to its cartographic project. It produces and reproduces a neat separation between Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots, not only physical, but also identitarian. The linear border between the SBA and the Republic, by contrast, is a

completely different one, pertaining almost exclusively to the scope of abstract geopolitical discourses. Being virtual, not material, it must be understood as nothing more than an approximation of the true limits of the two sovereignties and it is irrelevant for describing the dynamics of Akrotiri as *chora* of human action. What to do with such a linear border then? For the purposes of this thesis, not much can be done.

### **The *chora* of border negotiation**

The linear border between the SBA of Akrotiri and the Republic of Cyprus is not noticeable on the ground without GPS technology. Driving from Limassol to the SBA, many times I have crossed it between Asomatos and Akrotiri, without knowing exactly where the Cypriot jurisdiction ends and where the British one begins. There is not a single fence or signal. One way, if not the only, to sense the border on the ground is paying attention to the presence of police forces and their movements. Indeed, the Cypriot Police (*Αστυνομία Κύπρου*) cannot access the British territory for any reason and, in turn, the SBA Police cannot act on Cypriot soil, unless exceptional conditions arise. I experienced in this way the shift between one jurisdiction to another while driving inwards and outwards the SBA. Most of the time I crossed the border through the street E602, which starts from Limassol, cuts through Asomatos and ends in Akrotiri. The international border is virtually located between the latter two villages. One night during my first fieldwork, on January 13, I was driving back from Akrotiri to Limassol when I encountered a SBA Police roadblock just before Asomatos, a few metres ahead of the border. Two police officers stopped me, asked me a few routine questions, wondering whether I knew I was in UK territory. At that point, they ‘introduced’ themselves explaining me they were officers of the Sovereign Base Area Police, which, as they specified, employs Cypriot personnel. I was very surprised by those unrequested, but still useful, clarifications. Many thoughts came to my mind while I was sitting in my car just a few metres away from the ‘comfortable’ EU territory, where I was hoping to get back soon. The police officers asked me to perform alcohol test. I was worried. While waiting for the result of the test, I really felt I was alone in



front of the huge power of the United Kingdom. It was not a rational feeling. Cyprus somehow disappeared from my mind for a minute. Then it reappeared in the Greek accent of the two officers when they gave me good news about the alcohol test. After that thrilling night, every weekend I spent in Akrotiri I saw the same roadblock on the exact same spot, thus learning what is the extent of the SBA border on the ground. However, when police cars do not roam on the streets, the position of the border is hard to detect. The border still exists, but remains invisible.

Getting closer to the village of Akrotiri, numerous fences and barbed wires gradually appear. They do not retrace the international border though, but separate military areas in the strict sense from Cypriot civilian areas, still inside the territory of the SBA. Interestingly, such barriers do not appear on official maps, with the exception of the Land Use Map published on the portal of the SBA Administration, although they are normally impenetrable for non-British citizens, such as myself. At the end of the main road of Akrotiri (Queen Elizabeth/Archbishop Makarios III) appears the main entrance gate of Royal Air Force Akrotiri (Image 3 below), usually referred to as ‘the base’ by Cypriot villagers. It is clearly recognisable through the presence of hard barriers, warning signage and armed guards. At that gate every possible negotiation comes to an end. If the international border between the Republic and the SBA is permeable, this one ‘pushes out’ unauthorised people. As I learnt from the Treaty of Establishment and from previous research (Constandinos, 2009), not only the British Air Force personnel and their families who live there are authorised to access the base, but also foreign military officers who collaborate with the UK defence, such as those of the US forces. Plus, as I discerned from fieldwork and from a report by the Council of Europe (2007), numerous Cypriots, above all Akrotirians, are employed inside the base, thus holding special entrance passes. Any other category of people can hardly penetrate RAF Akrotiri, if not due to exceptional reasons. Because of their selective character, the fences of the base function as a factual international border, more than the linear border visible on maps. The latter cartographic border is so flexible that it can be ‘stretched’ for a few kilometres, being abstractly ‘pushed inwards’ to the gate of RAF Akrotiri. I

perceived such a mechanism in the words of Chris, a man I met at APEA Kebab during my third fieldwork in March. As my field notes remind me:

‘[...] Chris was curious about my filming and photographing project in Akrotiri. He asked me why Akrotiri. I told him it is an interesting town because it is technically located on British soil. But he replied that the British base is only a circumscribed area, surrounded by the (Greek Cypriot) village Akrotiri’ (Field notes 22/03).

Chris’ words give a sense of how the territory of Akrotiri might be perceived by many of its Cypriot dwellers as an extension of the Cypriot territory. The UK border is often ‘kept aside’ from the life of villagers, who may not perceive it as a true barrier. The only perceivable barriers are the physical delimitations of RAF Akrotiri.

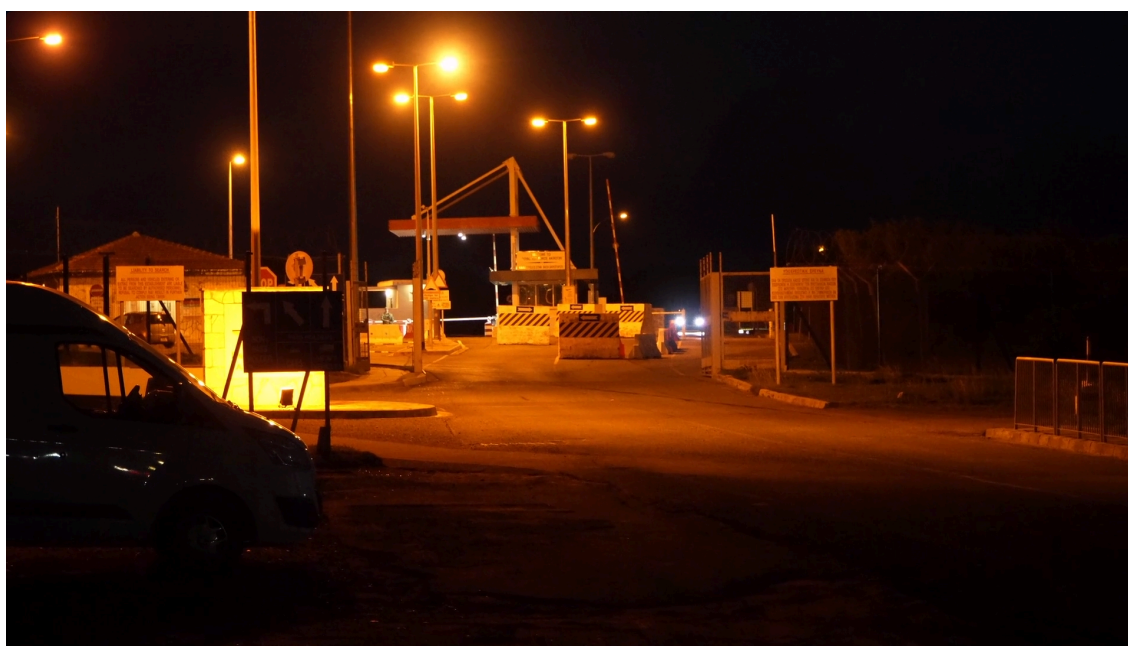


Image 3. *The gate of Royal Air Force (RAF) Akrotiri.* Screenshot from video [source: Greta Mauri and Ernesto Martellaro]

The idea of virtually reducing the UK/Cyprus border to the sole perimeter of the base seems reinforced by a number of local dynamics I noticed in the village. One picture I took during my fourth fieldwork shows three flags which stand in front of the entrance of the Saint Cross Church, located at the core of Akrotiri village (Image 4 below). They

are ‘planted’ on British soil, reaffirming both the national identity of Greek Cypriots and their religious belonging. The latter aspect is as important as nationality in differentiating the Cypriot inhabitants from the British ones, who have ‘their’ Protestant church (chaplaincy) inside the base. The presence of such flags, which is not limited to the entrance of the church, determines what Michael Billig (2018) defined as ‘banal nationalism’, namely the reinforcement of a nation through the use of its mundane symbols, such as flags, emblems or maps, on an everyday basis. Cypriot and Greek flags are widespread all over Akrotiri. Image 5 below depicts the flags waving on the roof of APEA Kebab. All these Cypriot and Greek flags, despite their apparent banality, function as powerful tools of negotiation.



Image 4. *Flags of Cyprus, Greece and of the Orthodox Church in front of Saint Cross Church, Akrotiri.*  
Analog photograph [source: Ernesto Martellaro]



Image 5. *Greek and Cypriot flags on the roof of APEA Kebab, Akrotiri.* Analog photograph [source: Ernesto Martellaro]

Not only the national identity of Greek Cypriots is manifested in Akrotiri, but also the religious belonging to the Orthodox Church. Greek Cypriotness and Christian Orthodoxy are almost inseparable. The religious buildings located in the municipality of Akrotiri are key sites of identity negotiation. Besides the Saint Cross Church, there are the famous Monastery of Saint Nicholas of Cats (Άγιος Νικόλαος των Γατών), the Chapel of Saint George and the Chapel of Saint Demetrianos. These sites, public and freely accessible, are places of prayer, relaxation and tourism, surrounded by cultivated lands as well as wild vegetation. The one I visited the most was the Monastery of Saint Nicholas of Cats (Image 6 below). Once more, a Greek flag is well visible on the top of the building, along with the cross of the church. On February 4, during my fieldwork with Greta, I was invited by Nakis to attend a religious ceremony at that monastery. The church was full of Cypriot families, including numerous of Nakis' relatives. That was the first time I ever participated in a Orthodox ceremony. Although the religious venue is located at the heart of the SBA of Akrotiri, on that day I really felt immersed in the

Cypriot universe. I did not hear anybody speaking English, nor saw any UK flag, or met any SBA Police car. I interpreted that religious ritual as a sort of de-bordering practice, which somehow detaches the whole place from its geopolitical context.



Image 6. *The Monastery of Saint Nicholas of Cats, Akrotiri.* Analog photograph [source: Ernesto Martellaro]

Something similar happened when I saw the Town Hall (*Κοινοτικό Συμβούλιο*) of Akrotiri (Image 7 below), which incarnates the political presence of the Cypriot Government on British soil. In that case not just the flags but also the building itself contribute to negotiate the porous sovereignty of the UK. And even the stadium of Akrotiri similarly stands out as a relevant place in terms of blurring jurisdictions: while the matches played on that pitch are valid for the Third Division of the Cypriot national football league, the soil the footballers run upon belongs to the Crown. Image 8 below, emblematically captures the authority of the Cypriot Football Association, incarnated by the Cypriot referee (on the left) and the authority of the UK forces, conveyed by the presence of a car of the SBA Police (on the right).



Image 7. *Akrotiri Town Hall*. Analog photograph [source: Ernesto Martellaro]



Image 8. *A football match of APEA at Akrotiri Stadium*. On the left side, the Cypriot referee; on the right side a car of the SBA Police Service. Screenshot from video [source: Greta Mauri and Ernesto Martellaro]

Another force of border negotiation I encountered during my fieldwork was not produced by the villagers of Akrotiri, but by the members of the Cyprus Peace Council (*Παγκύπριο Συμβούλιο Ειρήνης - Kıbrıs Barış Konseyi*). The anti-militarist protest I joined on January 14 came as a response to the US air strikes against the Houthis in Yemen, launched from RAF Akrotiri (Reuters, 2024). Moreover, in those days a steady air traffic between the base and Israel was detected, inducing numerous pro-Palestine committees to ask for the interruption of any collaboration between the UK forces and the Israeli State (Wilks, 2024). The protesters came from Limassol, Nicosia, Larnaca and from many other places of the island, penetrating the soft border of the territory of the Sovereign Base Area and eventually reaching the gate of RAF Akrotiri (Image 9 below). The mass of people only stopped when the SBA Police officers hindered the access to the base through their physical presence. Numerous talks, both in Greek and English, were then performed in front of the British military base, reaffirming the pacifist, non-violent and neutral position of the Cypriot people, also emphasised by numerous posts such as the one visible in Image 10 below. During the protest, everybody was asking the dismissal of the UK military facilities of Cyprus, shouting eloquent slogans, such as: «Έξω οι Βάσεις του θανάτου» («Out the deadly bases»), or «Hey hey, ho ho, British bases have to go». What I witnessed and participated in was not only an act of border negotiation, but an extreme act of territorial contestation, addressed to British sovereignty. The claims of the participants can be interpreted as a utopian view of the island of Cyprus, imagined as a place liberated from the military presence of the UK. But a project of re-territorialisation of this kind seems however far from achievable, as the key role of the base in the military strategies of the UK and NATO makes its closure quite unthinkable nowadays.

The protest of January 14 recalled those deployed across the years by the Cypriot population, including the Akrotirians, against the British military prevarication, both spatial and jurisdictional. The first case I have analysed dates back to 1953, when the colonial power decided unilaterally to build a gigantic airfield on the land cultivated by the Cypriot residents of the peninsula of Akrotiri. The latter residents involved the local Bishop and several Mayors in the negotiation, but apparently nobody had the power to

oppose the Empire (Cyprus Mail, 1953a, 1953b). The resistances then continued when the UK forces tried unsuccessfully to push Akrotiri villagers outside the perimeter of the SBA. The latter protest was probably the most successful negotiation for the Cypriot villagers, as the UK authorities eventually surrendered and in 1995 officially granted them their right to remain on their land (Cyprus Mail, 1964; CoE, 2007; Constantinou, 2008; Evangelou, 2023). Lastly, protests rocketed again when the British Ministry of Defence unilaterally decided to install the infamous antennas which still characterise the landscape of Akrotiri and cause great worries among the villagers (Cyprus Mail, 2001; Matthew *et al.*, 2001).



Image 9. *The protest reaching the gate of Royal Air Force Akrotiri.* Analog photograph [source: Ernesto Martellaro]





Image 10. *The protest against military activities in RAF Akrotiri* [source: Ernesto Martellaro]

### **Embodiment**

The most unexpected and paradoxical way in which the Akrotirian borderscape may be sensed is through the subjective experiences of the people living and working in the SBA, both British and Cypriot. One particular moment of the interview carried out with Andy highlighted the latter aspect.

Ernesto: *«Do you usually have British players in the team [APEA Akrotiri]?»*

Andy: *«No. We used to have, many years ago. [...] But now, in Third Division, we don't have nobody, because now England is not in the EU anymore for Brexit. They are not allowed to play like European players anymore.»*

E: *«Even though they live here...?»*

A: *«Doesn't matter. No. But if we are promoted to Second Division we are allowed four non-European players» (Interview Andros).*

The issue of nationality of football players gives a plastic example of border materialisation and dematerialisation depending on the subjects involved. Being at the Akrotiri Stadium during the matches of APEA equates to being in Cyprus for 90 minutes. In some ways, UK footballers become foreigners on their own land. Contextually, the Cypriot Football Association ‘drags’ the jurisdiction of Cyprus until the pitch, which partly and temporarily goes under the aegis of the Union of European Football Association (UEFA). During my third fieldwork, when I was at Hamlet’s Pub with Andy, he introduced me to the new goalkeeper of APEA, a young man called Baba. I had a chat with him about his previous experiences in the British Fifth Division and about his future perspectives. He told me he had just been hired by APEA, but he was not playing yet because of his British citizenship. He had started training with the team and attending the matches as a fan, but he was waiting for the hopeful promotion of APEA to the Second Division, in order to be legally allowed to play. In other words, his professional career was subordinated to the success of his teammates and to the invisible border between the UK and Cyprus. At the end of the season APEA failed to be promoted, remaining constrained to have no more than two non-EU players. Interestingly, such a restriction does not apply to the youth sector of the club. Following Andy’s words (Interview):

Andy: *«[...] We started just now to build academy. We have 75 kids. They started now this year. It is very successful, we go very well and I hope some of them are gonna play for our team. So it is good, is good for us. We have a lot of English young boys from the base, they are training with us now».*

The exceptionality of the SBA regime produces complex paradoxes, which eventually influence the everyday life of local people and, in some cases, their future perspectives. On my fourth fieldwork in May, I understood another similar dynamic of border embodiment, when I was having dinner at Hamlet’s Pub in Akrotiri. Hamlet’s Pub is managed by a Cypriot, has predominantly British customers and employs both British and Cypriot citizens. I had a quick conversation with a young British waitress, who told me she was happy to have that job at the pub, as she could not work anywhere else in Cyprus, but only within the boundaries of the SBA, because she did not have the

relevant work permit to carry out a job in the European Union. Although I had expected such a dynamic, it was still surprising for me to hear that the waitress could not look for a job just a few hundred metres away from Akrotiri, due to an invisible but nonetheless determinant international border.

Still at Hamlet's Pub, which proved a fruitful place for informal conversations and participant observation, I realised another interesting consequence of the subjective character of the border. On March 24 I was sitting at the table with Andy and some of his friends and colleagues, British and Cypriot. One of the latter, called Georgos (George), was slightly complaining about the fact that on the following day he was supposed to go to work, even though the 25th of March is a national holiday in Cyprus. Such a date pays tribute to the Greek Revolution of 1821, also celebrated in the Republic of Cyprus. But George was working at the British base, where that holiday did not exist. Then, we discussed that Easter was approaching (April 1) for the protestant population of the SBA, but it also meant that Andy and his orthodox colleagues at the base were not supposed to work on those days. By contrast, the orthodox Easter was coming on May 5, but it was not implying any day off for the orthodox Cypriots employed at RAF Akrotiri. I then faced a similar but reverse situation during my last fieldwork, as a British bank holiday came on May 27, called Spring Bank Holiday. That morning I was having coffee at Break Coffee, where I spent some time with Michalis (Michael) and his friend, both already met at APEA Kebab. I asked them some information about the Environmental Education Centre of Akrotiri, where I was planning to go that day. They were not sure whether the centre was open or not, because that day was technically a bank holiday in the SBA territory. I was expecting the centre to be open, given that on March 25, Cypriot holiday, it was closed. So I gave it a try and luckily I found it open. Such an intricate situation with bank holidays was something I had not envisaged. It was quite confusing, especially when I realised that the decision to enjoy or not a bank holiday could depend, to a certain extent, on the discretionality of each inhabitant of the SBA and on his or her job. In a way, even holidays might become a means to negotiate the sense of belonging to a certain community rather than another and, in turn, the extent of Cypriotness and Britishness.

Even before starting my fieldwork, I knew that the exceptional status of the SBAs determines an equally exceptional status for its Cypriot inhabitants, who have been considered ‘external bodies’ since 1960, although being rooted in their land for a long time. Reading the *Treaty of Establishment of the Republic of Cyprus* and other more recent institutional sources, it can be seen that the Cypriots are designated as a distinct category, which depends on the Cypriot state for a long list of matters, while remaining bound to British jurisdiction for more delicate issues, such as the use of land in the vicinity of military sites. But it was only through Andy’s interview that I made sense of certain norms and of their effects on people’s material life in Akrotiri.

Andy: *«In 1960, when we had our own government, they made an agreement between our government and British forces at that time: to this village nobody is allowed to come here and buy land and build. Only the Akrotirians, only the people that used to live that time here. And after, the kids and grandkids later».* (Interview)

Such words sounded striking to me. The bordering strategy implemented by the UK authorities throughout the last 64 years appeared crystal clear. The inhabitants of Akrotiri themselves had basically been transformed into a sort of border, or, to put it differently, into the maximum extent until which the ‘body’ of the Cypriot nation was allowed to penetrate the territory of the British Overseas Territory of Akrotiri after 1960. A silent bond was established between the villagers and the military authorities, who have apparently developed a relation of reciprocal dependency, hinged above all on the need of workforce, on the British side, and on good job opportunities, on the Cypriot side. But such a strategy has also determined another effect, underlined by Andy’s answer to a question asked by Greta while filming the interview:

Greta: *«What does it mean exactly to be Akrotirians? What would you define your...? Because I feel that you are talking about a family».*

Andy: *«Akrotirians, I mean...The people who live in this village...Maybe in 1950 was 200 people, now we are 1000. They are all from that 200 people. I mean generations from the old people. We don’t have people from the other places*

*to come in here. They are all from the village, like a family. Most of them we are family, we are relatives».*

The unique situation of the SBA has apparently determined a regime of spatial differentiation between the Akrotirians and the rest of Cypriot people. Of course, the villagers can freely move inwards and outwards the UK territory, as many of them go to school or to work in Limassol and its surrounding villages. But as dwellers of Akrotiri, they have been somehow crystallised in the same condition of 1960. It is hard to say how they actually experience such a status. As regards Andy, I perceived a slight sense of pride while talking about this matter. The only negative thing he said was that some people wanted to put their lands on the market but they could not. In addition, the value of properties in Akrotiri had become very low due to lack of demand. However, he personally seemed rather favourable to the status quo:

*Andy: «The people from the village, when they grow up, they want to buy house and stay here. They don't wanna move to town. So in Akrotiri village now we know they are all from the village. We don't have people from Limassol who come here and buy houses in here, or from England. We are all Akrotirians. So kids, parents, grandparents they like to stay here. It is not too far away from Limassol, so why to go to Limassol? They love to stay here».*

I found the interview extremely relevant for understanding how an apparently linear border, which is supposed to be traced on the ground, is in reality inscribed on people's bodies and 'injected' into their subjectivities. My research did not involve the whole population of Akrotiri and thus it did not allow a deep comprehension of the social and political dynamics of the village, but I still perceived a general atmosphere of normality among those who I encountered. As Constantinou (2008) has already noticed during his fieldwork in the SBA, the exception has gradually become the norm.

### **Absence and presence**

In general, the research about the Sovereign Base Area of Akrotiri made me realise something curious: I had the impression that the military presence of the United

Kingdom has been designed so as to be not easily perceivable in everyday life. The absence of material barriers at the border of the SBA is the clearest example of such a fact. The jurisdictional and military power of the Crown tends to appear and disappear according to specific conditions. The quasi colonial regime which operates in Akrotiri might be thus often overlooked by its inhabitants, but it is then reaffirmed decisively in the landscape of the village. The huge military antennas installed by the UK forces more than 20 years ago can be seen as a powerful reminder of the absolute political and military power held by the British authorities on the SBA land. Such antennas, visible from everywhere in Akrotiri, metaphorically function as huge UK flags planted on the fertile soil of the village (Image 11 and Image 12 below). They are the ultimate weapon of territorial negotiation put forth by the Kingdom, in response to the de-bordering forces of the Cypriot population, analysed in the previous sections. Sadly, these antennas might even provoke emotional feelings for many Akrotirians, such as Stavros from Polis Tavern, who have lost a relative due to brain cancer, commonly associated to the radiations of the antennas.



Image 11. *Breeding farm in the territory of Akrotiri. On the background, the antennas.* Screenshot from video [source: Greta Mauri and Ernesto Martellaro]

It is interesting to notice that the antennas are heavily present on the ground, but they are absent on the maps, with the exception of the map attached to the report of the University of Bristol about the health hazards caused by them. Such antennas are not simply present in the landscape of Akrotiri. They are actually installed in the middle of a protected natural area, that has also been a source of work for many Akrotirians, who have used the plants of that place for diverse purposes, including basket craftsmanship and cattle breeding. In other words, the huge antennas are not only a symbol of UK military power and a potential source of health hazards, but also a means to deprive Akrotirians of their own soil.

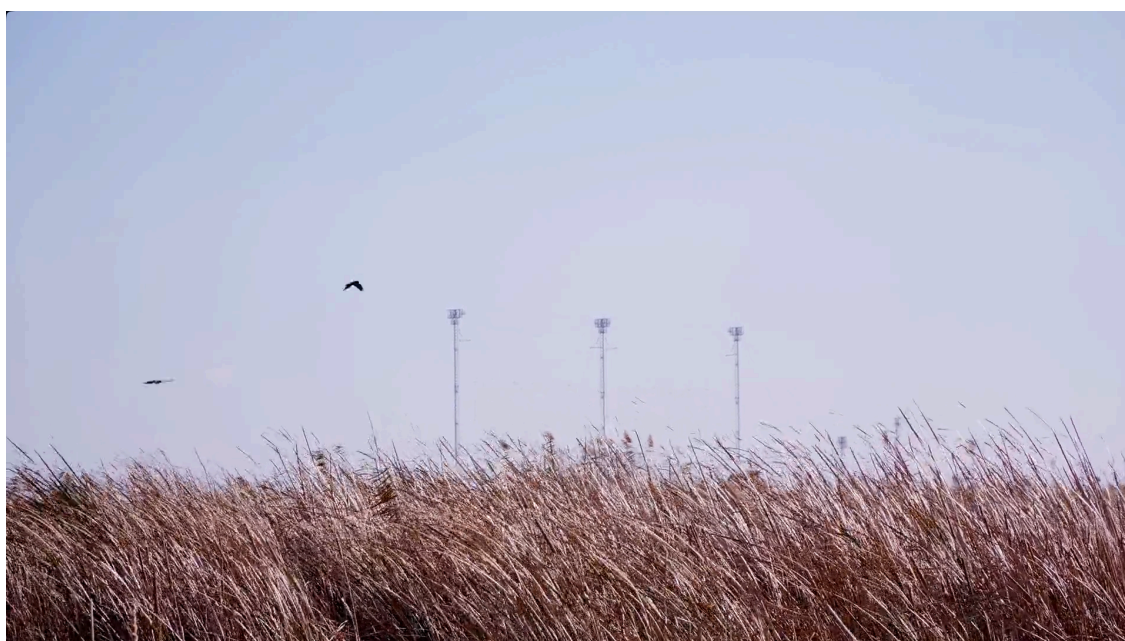


Image 12. *Waving wheat in Akrotiri. On the background, the antennas.* Screenshot from video [source: Greta Mauri and Ernesto Martellaro]

Something similar happens on the beach called Lady's Mile, on the eastern side of the Akrotirian peninsula. It is a popular place among the inhabitants of Akrotiri as well as of Limassol. Lady's Mile stands out as a meaningful leisure place, analysed by Evangelou (2023) in her previous research and mentioned by Nakis' family as a key site

of their holidays. Right behind the beach there is a fenced military area, where eight antennas are planted on the wetlands between the coast and the Salt Lake (Image 13 below). When relaxing on the beach, one feels the crippling presence of such installations.



Image 13. *Road track cutting through the beach of Lady's Mile.* Analog photograph [source: Ernesto Martellaro]

The presence of such military installations implies the deprivation of a wide portion of land from the use of local Cypriot people, which has been a constant of the UK military regime in Akrotiri. As I learnt from a book available at the Environmental Education Centre of the village, titled '*Unlocking Hidden Heritage*' (2009), there have been since the 1940s several attempts by the colonial government to drain the precious wetlands of Akrotiri. Harsh resistances have been put forth by the villagers, who eventually



achieved the protection of some areas, while losing some others to the advantage of the UK military development plans (Image 14 below).



Image 14. *Military installation on the wetlands of the Salt Lake.* Screenshot from video [source: Greta Mauri and Ernesto Martellaro]

‘When one visits the Akrotiri village, it is hard not to feel that one is entering a military zone’, eloquently wrote Constantinou (2008:154). I totally agree with him. Walking through the lands of Akrotiri, many military elements stand out, even less invasive than the antennas. Checkpoints, fences, barracks and numerous other visible and invisible elements of the landscape function as tools for reaffirming a mixture of military and colonial power held by the Crown (see for example Image 15 below).



Image 15. *Military checkpoint near the Akrotiri Stadium*. Screenshot from video [source: Greta Mauri and Ernesto Martellaro]

The most relevant example of an invisible element of the landscape working in this sense is the massive noise of the ‘Typhoons’. The latter are the ultimate war aircraft used by the Royal Air Force. During fieldwork I heard their sound many times. I even saw them twice. But the noise they produce is what impressed me the most. Before going to Akrotiri for the first time, I had read about the issue of aircraft noise, raised by the Akrotirians and published in the report of the Council of Europe (2007) about the condition of the inhabitants of the Sovereign Base Areas. But directly experiencing such a noise made me understand why the villagers complained. During my fourth fieldwork I witnessed different reactions to the take-off of Typhoons from the airfield of RAF Akrotiri. I was at Lady’s Mile beach, sitting next to some British families, when we heard the terrible noise of one of such aircrafts. We immediately stood up, trying to see it. It soon appeared, triggering excited comments among the British people standing next to me, who were likely to be themselves members of the Royal Air Force. By contrast, still on my last fieldwork, I was eating at Polis Tavern at late night, when the

restaurant was almost empty. Suddenly, the sound of a Typhoon provoked a slight trembling, ruining the quietness of the moment. I asked Stavros if such a thing was common. He said yes and confirmed that it was a Typhoon. He then showed me the numerous photographs and drawings of war aircrafts hung on the walls of the tavern. A photograph published on the Facebook page of Polis Tavern shows some of them behind Stavros' family celebrating Christmas (Image 16)



Image 16. Stavros' family and war aircraft photographs at Polis Tavern [source: Facebook]

After hearing the noise of the Typhoon, I took the opportunity to ask Stavros what he thought of the British military presence in the village. He promptly answered: «*What can I say? They are fine, we work together*», without adding anything (Field notes 24/05). I also asked something similar to Andy during the interview:

Ernesto: «*We are technically in the UK. But for you it is not, you are in Cyprus ...*»

Andy: *«We...For us is normal. We live here our life with English people. For us they are ok, they are very good. How can I say? We are...working together, we don't have problems with each other. You see, they come a lot of fans. They love our team. They all buy shirts from APEA».*

He used exactly the same expression as Stavros: 'working together'. Either at a restaurant or at the base, the professional collaboration between the two communities is something which makes the absurd situation of Akrotiri tolerable, acceptable and sometimes even desirable. Nevertheless, I noticed something in the way Andy answered my latter question. The intense way in which he used the words 'we' and 'us' gave me a sense of separation. A sense which has abundantly emerged from my analysis of the UK/Cypriot borderscape at Akrotiri and which is continuously reinforced on an everyday basis. It is, however, not necessarily reinforced through a thick line on a map or a physical barrier on the ground, but rather through complex textures of practices, relationships and negotiations taking place in the village.

## **The end**

It is hard to geo-graph the complexity of the Cypriot/British borderscape in Akrotiri. Seeking objectivity is not an achievable ambition. As we have seen, the fluid and shifting character of sovereignties in the SBA challenges the rigidity of cartography, escaping univocal geographic categorisations. The body of the inhabitants of Akrotiri has emerged as a key example in this sense, appearing as the fundamental site of border negotiation, which nevertheless does not fit into the bidimensional grid of geographic space. At the same time, my bodily presence on the field has influenced the outcomes of my research so as to hinder the achievement of an objective truth. The point of the whole work was not simply to delineate the definitive story of the UK/Cyprus border, but rather to sense certain processes, relations and paradoxes of bordering and de-bordering in the village of Akrotiri, both in past and present times. Moreover, an important aim was that of experimenting qualitative and visual methods, giving priority to situatedness, rather than accuracy and completeness.

Avoiding the use of maps for the description of the place proved a fruitful strategy to pursue alternative geo-graphic methodologies. The generative power of visual research tools has crucially driven both the fieldwork and its outcomes, paving the way to unforeseen regimes of perception and geographical imaginations. If one of the objectives was to operationalise the concept of situated geographic research through actual methodological tools, then I feel satisfied by the efforts made throughout the months of research. Indeed, participant observation, interviewing, photography and video making cannot disregard the stance and the agency of both the researcher and the people involved in the work. Such methodologies require well pondered strategies for accessing the place during fieldwork. As a matter of fact, certain tools, such as interviewing, were only used to a limited extent, due to the difficulties encountered in the relationship with the inhabitants

of Akrotiri. By contrast, other instruments, such as analog photography and digital video recording, were extensively exploited, as they became a distinctive trait of my presence in the village and facilitated the creation of a trustful interaction with the Akrotirians.

In spite of the limits faced, my research has eventually produced rich and relevant outcomes. The main research question, referred to how the Cyprus/UK border is perceived, experienced and negotiated at a local level, has been tackled in a straightforward manner. The everyday dimension of Cypriot de-bordering, for instance, has emerged quite soon from the observation of local dynamics and informal conversations during fieldwork. Similarly, more tenacious practices of negotiation have been detected, such as those related to Greek Cypriot nationalism or to the Orthodox religion, constantly reaffirmed on the UK soil in a variety of ways. But what stands out as the most controversial finding is the neat opposition between the British use of land for military purposes and the Cypriot land claims for different ends, in particular agriculture, cattle breeding and environmental preservation activities. The latter opposition might be interpreted as a metaphor of the whole period of British domination on Akrotiri. Just as it used to be during colonial rule, the Cypriots apparently do not have a say about the UK forces' decisions on land use. Since the 1950s, when the first military facilities were built in Akrotiri, local resistance has variously arisen, but without leading to fully satisfying results.

The utopian desire of Akrotirians to retain their land and use it for agriculture, cattle breeding and other related activities has accompanied the life of Akrotiri for decades, without finding an actual place to be expressed and developed. The UK authorities' planning zones (see Map 4, Chapter 1, p.32) trace the boundaries of the areas devoted to such activities, but they appear quite limited and not necessarily aligned with the desires of the Cypriot population. It is hard to say what would be exactly the ideal territorial situation for the Akrotirians, but for sure the latent utopia of non-military development could have found an actual place without the military presence of the United Kingdom. What I am trying to argue is that the claims put forth by Akrotirian villagers throughout the decades can be interpreted as a utopian view of the SBA, imagined as a place devoted to non-military activities and ideally liberated from the UK presence. But a project of

re-territorialisation of this kind seems hardly achievable, because the key role of the base in the military strategies of the UK government, along with its military allies, makes the dismissal of RAF Akrotiri unimaginable.

The latter case might be seen as an example of latent counter-geographies. The way Akrotirians imagine their own place remains somehow invisible until it finds a way to penetrate the common sense and the political scene. As Giuseppe Dematteis reminds us, if counter-geographies do not find room within the grids of geographic space, then they risk not to be connected to any place on Earth and thus not to exist, remaining utopias. But that is exactly their potential. It is true that utopias do not have a place yet and that they only imagine possible worlds, made of renewed social relations and different forms of power. But they are nonetheless geographies of territorial possibilities, which meet specific needs and potentially lay the foundations for new orders. They are, moreover, geographies which cannot be accommodated into geometric cartographic representations. At least not yet.

### **Future directions: counter-geographies and qualitative/visual research**

The institutional geographic discourse about the Sovereign Base Area of Akrotiri remains dominated by cartographic representations, which have ‘the final say’ on territorial planning and can hardly be contested. They eventually appear as the rightful description of the Akrotirian territory and, as Franco Farinelli knows very well, they even substitute the Earth itself in people’s imagination. But maps inevitably remain static approximations of the world. Nothing more. To use Dematteis’ words:

‘Il rapporto della geografia ‘normale’ col territorio è quello di un’immagine ordinatamente falsa, che tenta continuamente di imporsi su una realtà disordinatamente vera’ (Dematteis, 1985:156).

Similar reflections pushed me towards the realisation of my thesis, which has explored possible ways to understand such a ‘disordered reality’. Before starting my work, I acknowledged the necessity of a delinking from the epistemological principles I was

used to, being a European educated man. It was a stimulating challenge, which I hope to continue in my future research projects. Revisiting the epistemological foundations of western geography also means gaining critical tools for tackling a wider range of issues, related to geopolitics, international relations, diplomacy and human rights. In particular, I am fascinated by the academic field of diplomatic geography, which may benefit from the conception of fluid, multiperspectival and situated geographical imaginations. I first approached such a field through the precious work carried out by Costas Constantinou, who has studied the political criticalities of the island of Cyprus and has experimented mixed qualitative methodologies, recently focusing on the Sovereign Base Area of Dhekelia. His objective was to comprehend at a local level the material and immaterial effects of abstract geopolitical 'lines': he worked at the 'crossroads' of four different sovereignties (Greek Cypriot, Turkish Cypriot, UK and UN), exploring the 'gap' between the institutional maps of Dhekelia and the subjective experience he underwent on the ground. 'Playing' with the grey zones between institutional cartographies and situated geographic claims means, potentially, to acknowledge territorial dynamics, relationships and issues which are otherwise invisible, only because not attainable through the 'God's eye' view of western modernity, avid for bidimensional maps. Questioning the long lasting hegemony of state institutions as producers of truthful geographic knowledge should thus be a reasonable objective for critical geographers, who may work with alternative conceptions of space, territory and landscape.

In this sense, my research attempted to revisit the meaning of borders, according to the considerations just expressed. They are lines only when represented cartographically. But in the material reality they are a myriad of different things, especially in Akrotiri, where everyone's subjective status makes the difference in the transition from one sovereignty to another. Needless to say, even the most skilled cartographer of the world would fail to represent accurately the unique reality of the SBA. I thus tried to find more appropriate methodologies for the description of such a complex place, bearing in mind the centrality of the body as an inescapable element of bordering and de-bordering dynamics. I have then welcomed the concept of borderscape, in order to open up broader reflections about the multiple ways and perspectives through which the two



overlapping jurisdictions and national identities are lived at a local level, not necessarily as a line, but rather as a blended landscape of relations and negotiations. By their very nature, borderscapes cannot be defined once and for all, as their shape depends on the stance of who engages with them and who tries to understand their characteristics. Therefore, once I had identified qualitative research methodologies as viable means for approaching the complex borderscape of Akrotiri, I decided to deploy them so as to make myself always present, responsible and influential in the research process, rather than abstracted from the studied context. I shaped the work not as an aseptic pursuit of predefined results, but rather as a sensitive and flexible process, at my own risk of remaining unsatisfied. But in the end I am satisfied, as some of the research tools I have adopted eventually manifested their huge potential. Photography and video making, above all, allowed me to both gather visual material and to locate myself in the Akrotirian context in a clear and well visible position, also helping me to cope with ethical concerns in an honest way. Moreover, such visual methodologies proved essential to build a narrative thread for presenting the outcomes of my research.

Closing my thesis with the creation of a short-film is hence something I repute very important. The video making project, as I have already explained, constituted a key moment of my research for many reasons, not least the creation of a true engagement with many inhabitants of Akrotiri. After the conclusion of my fieldwork in the SBA, I have gradually cultivated the desire to use the video material not only as a source of information for completing my thesis, but also, excitingly, as the starting point for a short documentary. It has been essential in such a process the role of Greta Mauri, the documentarist and visual artist who has collaborated with me during the last few months. We have been discussing the feasibility of such an idea for the last months, eventually deciding to develop our project on a double level. The first one has to do with the presentation of my thesis: we assembled a short but coherent draft of the short film, to be used as a trace of my fieldwork and possibly projected on the day of my graduation at the University of Bologna, in July 2024. The second level, instead, refers to the planning of a well organised filming programme to be pursued in a professional way, within a longer time span and with the participation of additional collaborators,

both in the phase of filming and in the post-production process. This is a project which stimulates me to insist in my engagement with geography, with visual research and with film making. As my thesis ends, something new might begin. Hopefully.

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## Appendix

### Interview

Saturday, February 3, 2024

APEA Kebab, Akrotiri village

Participant: Andros (called Andy), resident of Akrotiri village and Vice-President of APEA Akrotiri Football Club

Interviewer: Ernesto Martellaro, supported by Greta Mauri (video maker)

The interview is video recorded.

Ernesto: *«I know APEA Akrotiri was born in 1955. How?»*

Andy: *«What I hear from old people, at that time a group of men, young boys at that time, they made this team in 1955. One of them was my father. He explained to me how they made this team, slowly slowly. And for years now this club is successful, it goes very very well for so many years. We used to play against the other villages around here. For the last ten years we are promoted to Fourth Division in Cyprus. We play football against all teams in Cyprus. For the last two years we are in Third Division and, I hope so, everything goes well, next year we are gonna play first time in Second Division».*

E: *«This year is going good...»*

A: *«Very good, yes. We have a very good team now, so I hope next year we play Second Division».*

E: *«That would be an historical moment».*

A: *«Yes, of course. But we need a lot of money to play in Second Division. But I believe we can do it, we can find sponsors to give some more money for us. So I hope we stay there for few years».*

E: *«In 1955 was the stadium already there?»*

A: *«Yes, was there but no grass, only the pitch, gravel. I used to play before the pitch was like this. There was gravel, everybody was playing like this. If you see the photos, there is gravel in front of the players. Only fifteen years now we have grass on the pitch».*

E: *«And who uses that pitch?»*

A: *«Only our team, only Akrotiri. In the village we have only one team and we play»*

E: *«You don't rent it...»*

A: *«No, no, no, no. The village...Actually the pitch belongs to the committee of the village and gives it to our team to play form free».*

E: *«The Simvoulia?»*

A: *«The Simvoulia».*

E: *«I heard about it. There is a man, I don't know the him...Stylianou?»*

A: *« Stylianou. He is like the president of the village. Yes, Stylianou is the president of the village now. He used to be a professional football player for Apollon».*

E: *«Everybody was a footballer in Akrotiri!»*

A: *«Yes, yes. He used to play there from 1975 until 1985. Ten years he was in Apollon, first team».*

E: *«And he is from Akrotiri...»*

A: *«Yes, yes. He lives just a hundred meters away from here».*

E: *«And also Panikos was playing...»*

A: *«Panikos is running now our club and the food for the last fifteen years now. He used to play football for APEA as well».*

E: *«And the football team, across the years, has had players from Akrotiri?»*

A: *«Yes, yes. All the years we used to have most of them from Akrotiri village. Unfortunately now we have only two players from Akrotiri. One of them is my son. And most of the players now are from Limassol. But also we started just now to build academy we have seventyfive kids. They started now this year. It is very*

*successful, we go very well and I hope some of them are gonna play the next five, six, ten years they are gonna play for our team. So it is good, is good for us. We have a lot of English young boys from the bases, they are training with us now».*

E: *«Do you usually have British players in the team?»*

A: *«No, we used to have many years ago. We used to have one called Ken and then another one. But now, in Third Division, we don't have nobody, because now England is not in the EU anymore for Brexit. They are not allowed to play like European players anymore».*

E: *«Even though they live here...?»*

A: *«Doesn't matter. No. But if we are promoted to Second Division we are allowed four non-European players. I think we are allowed four non-European players. Plus as many Europeans we want. But we like to work with with the Cypriot people. We don't like to to work at the moment with foreign players. All our players now they started from Apollon, AEL...And because they never made it in the First Division they play Second, Third Division. So all of them they are very good players».*

E: *«And I saw a big participation of fans: families, people, kids. How is the relationship between the town and the team?»*

A: *«Most of the fans they are from Akrotiri village. Some of them they are parents, or brothers, sisters of the players. And a lot of them are from the base, they love APEA. The English people love football. Today we didn't see so many, because of the weather. But some of the games we have three or four hundred people watching the game and two hundred or two hundred fifty are English. So they follow us everywhere».*

E: *«There is a good...»*

A: *«Yes, yes, there is a very good relationship between us».*

E: *«I see, a good relation. And then all the players of the team are they professional footballers?»*

A: *«No, no. Semi-professional. All of them they work somewhere else. We are not so rich to pay them so much money. We pay them only a little money, not too much. In Cyprus Third Division is not professional».*

E: *«And what about all the people in Akrotiri? Some people work in restaurants, somebody works in the base, then other jobs?»*

A: *«Most of them they work in the base, most of them. Some of them now they work in Limassol, different jobs. All the young kids they work in Limassol, most of them».*

E: *«Then is there a school for kids?»*

A: *«Yes, there is. Until twelve. From six to twelve years old we have school in here, it's not far away from here. And after twelve they go to Kolossi or Limassol».*

Greta: *«And you went to that school?»*

A: *«Yes, yes. All of us we started from there».*

E: *«How was it?»*

A: *«Very good, very good. You know all the guys from the village. We used to be one hundred twenty kids from six to twelve. Now, I hear, is only sixty these days. Sixty or sixtyfour kids. The good thing in Akrotiri village...The people from the village, when they grow up, they want to buy house and stay here. They don't wanna move to town. So in Akrotiri village now we know they are all from the village. We don't have people from Limassol who come here and buy houses in here, or from England. We are all Akrotirians. So kids, parents, grandparents they like to stay here. It is not too far away from Limassol, so why to go to Limassol? They love to stay here».*

G: *«What does it mean exactly to be Akrotirians? What would you define your...? Because I feel that you are talking about a family».*

A: *«Akrotirians, I mean...The people who live in this village...Maybe in 1950 was two hundred people, now we are one thousand. They are all from that two hundred people. I mean generations from the old people. We don't have people from the other places to come in here. They are all from the village, like a family. Most of them we are family, we are relatives.*  
*They made one agreement in 1960 when, I don't know if you know, the island before 1960 belonged to the English, was an English...They used to have control here, we didn't have any government. In 1960, when we had our own government, they made an agreement between our government and British forces at that time: to this village nobody is allowed to come here and buy land and build. Only the*

*Akrotirians, only the people that used to live that time here. And after, the kids and grandkids later. But now they try to change in these days, they try to let anybody wants to come here to buy now they can do it. Only they changed in the last six months I think».*

E: *«Do you think that is good or not?»*

A: *«For me has good and bad things. We don't know who is coming, if they are coming bad people. But at the end of the day it is good for some people who have land and want to sell. The prices are gonna go up. Now the prices are very low in Akrotiri village, because nobody was allowed to come and buy. So maybe the people who have lands they are gonna sell it to anyone they want in everywhere in Cyprus. Like everywhere in the world. So we see how is going. We don't know yet».*

E: *«So it's new».*

A: *«Yes, new»*

[Drinking Zivania]

E: *«Are there special places in Akrotiri we should include in our work?»*

A: *«A lot of people come to visit Akrotiri and the Salt Lake for the flamingos. It's beautiful when they are here, so a lot of people drive from everywhere to come and see them. But now they are not here yet. They are in Larnaca at the moment, some of them. Sometimes they come so close to us and they are so beautiful».*

E: *«And one more thing: what about the Church of Saint Cross? Is it a place where people from Akrotiri go?»*

A: *«Yes, everybody goes. On Sundays most of people. I don't go very often by myself, but my parents go every sunday, Christmas, Easter».*

E: *«Your parents live here?»*

A: *«Yes, yes».*

G: *«How old are they?»*

A: *«My father is eightyfive and my mum eightyone. He was at the game today, my dad. He left five minutes before».*

E: *«Ok. And...We are technically in the UK now. But for you it is not, you are in Cyprus...»*

A: «*We...For us is normal. We live here our life with English people. For us they are ok, they are very good. How can I say? We are...working together, we don't have problems with each other. You see, they come a lot of fans. They love our team. They all buy shirts from APEA*».

[Drinking Zivania]

### **Cited field notes**

Friday, March 22, 2024

I arrived to Akrotiri around 6:30 PM, when the sun was going down. I went straight to APEA Kebab. There I found Panikos, of course, but also the men we had filmed with Greta in February. They still remembered me. Michael kinda introduced me to the others. One of them, younger, called Chris, was curious about my filming and photographing project in Akrotiri. He asked me why Akrotiri. I told him it is an interesting town because it is technically located on British soil. But he replied that the British base is only a circumscribed area, surrounded by the (Greek Cypriot) village Akrotiri. He seemed kinda interested. He said he also had played for APEA. I told all of them that I was gonna go to Latsia (Nicosia) the following day to watch the away match of APEA and take pictures. By the way, they were meanwhile drinking something, such as beers and other stuff. Surely they were not occasional 'customers'. One of them told me he is father of Andy. I was so surprised and so happy to meet him. He was selling lottery tickets to his friends while sitting at the table. I spent some time with them, even though it was a bit difficult to understand them speaking Greek. They offered me something drink. I had a glass of wine. Then they started leaving. Some of them, including Michael, went to bingo in Kolossi. Some others went home. I stayed there and Panikos proposed me to have dinner. He brought me 'mix' and another glass of wine. And he said: «*It's from me*». I had no chance to refuse. I slowly ate everything. Then three men came in, also *habitués*. They stayed there, drinking something and smoking. After that, as I was tired, I left and drove to Limassol. On the way I passed through Trachoni and there I saw the SBA Police dealing with an accident.



Friday, May 24, 2024

I took the car at Paphos Airport and drove towards Limassol. On the way I stopped in Paramali, where I went to a café. The café was run by an old couple. The first thing the man told me was: «*This was Turkish village. We are refugees*». I asked: «*Since 1974, right?*» He said: «*Yes, I was living in Famagusta when this happened*». Then I asked them how many people live in Paramali. He said maybe 100 plus the British. The café is actually located in UK territory.

I moved on, driving through the SBA. I passed through Sotira, but I didn't see much, until I started seeing signals for the British Forces zone. I drove through fenced residential areas. They really looked like military restricted zones, but inside I saw houses, schools, all British. It was quite unique. A true gated community. Not many Cypriots were around. Apparently they don't go there. Then I saw the SBA Court of Episkopi. After that, I continued through Episkopi village. Eventually I reached Kourion Archaeological Site. The site is in the territory of Episkopi and inside the SBA. Nevertheless, it is managed by the Cypriot department of Antiquities. Being in Kourion was like being in Cyprus. But still it is in UK territory. Then I drove towards Kolossi and Asomatos and eventually reached the Cypriot territory again. I checked-in at the hostel in Limassol.

At night I decided to go and eat at Polis Tavern. I drove to Akrotiri. I saw the antennas, the Hamlet's Pub and reached the Tavern. It was less crowded than I expected. Stavros, the manager and son of Polis, said that the British customers come earlier. The situation was quiet. Two tables were busy (only British families and friends). I had my full kebab and red wine. At some point Chris came. Chris was a guy from APEA club. We remembered each other, we had a chat and I showed him some videos of Akrotiri. Then he gave me some updates about APEA.

At the end, I heard the heavy noise of three military aircrafts. Very heavy noise, the heaviest I've heard in Akrotiri. Stavros told me those are the Typhoons. He even had some pictures of such Typhoons on the walls of the restaurant. They are British war aircrafts. I asked him if they like the British presence. He just answered: «*What can I*

say? *They are fine, we work together*». I asked him if his British customers are military. He immediately answered: «*All of them, all of them*». Then I paid and left. I drove to Limassol, hoping not to encounter the SBA Police. I didn't.