

Rural Religion in Ancient Arcadia: A Methodological Approach

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Reality, understood as Truth, is a concept always subject to revision. Through landscape archaeology and the postprocessual trends in archaeology, we can develop the idea of 'mental landscape', which gives to perception a very important role in the creation of different realities. If we apply the concept of mental landscape to the study of religion in ancient Arcadia we will find that the temple at Bassai was a focal point for establishing an identity against the enemy. This meaning was decisive for building the landscape. Therefore, Pan's sanctuary at Mount Parthenion is the result of ideological construction by the elite. The elite knew the role of the mountain in popular imaginery and used it in support of its own interests. So, landscape is really a construction of the world.

1. Methodological approaches.

Religion has been understood as one of the most conservative human expressions, as an area opposed to change, very close to ritual practices whose origin would be – according to Mircea Eliade – *in illo tempore*. For a long time, the methodology of history of religion has not attached much importance to change.

My starting point is the opposite: religion is a construction, in the same way as any other social expression. For that reason, it must be studied using a methodology that attaches adequate importance to change.

Consequently, as a process, as dynamic expressions of social needs, religious beliefs are constructions of a specific time and space. These, space and time, are parts of an identity that men, as active individuals, build in conformity with their customs, their society and their environment.

The philosophical approaches of the 1960s have now become an object of historical study. Postmodernism – understood as an attitude and not as a closed, theoretical system – has not only denied that the concept of Truth is ontolo-

gically relevant, but it has also undermined the very concept of Reality. The issue is not any more to investigate Reality but, rather, how the realities were built and how their makers perceived them.

Archaeology has adopted many postmodernist approaches. Through landscape archaeology, the various types of postprocessual archaeology, and with contributions from radical geography, cognitive psychology and sociology and perceptual psychology, it has been able to join the study of religious beliefs and the analysis of perception. That is one of the bases of my research: mental landscapes.

So, what is a mental landscape? From my point of view, it is a construction of perception made in a specific historical time and space. The entire society, with its conflicts and interactions, builds it. It is, expressed more simply, what we perceive when we look at it. For example, in the mid-5th century B.C. several monuments were built at Mount Lykaion. It was a great physical transformation of space, a re-construction of the religious world following new political, economical, social and religious needs. However, they also rebuilt and changed the space and the image that people had of this space; not only the place but also the landscape. In Dennis Cosgrove's words: "Landscape is not only the world that we see, it is a construction, a composition of this world. It is a way of looking at the world."¹

Perception acts on the physical elements that constitute parts of the landscape in order to build realities. Thus, we cannot separate what we have decided to call 'Reality' from what people perceive as real because – at the end – reality is only a changing way of looking, only a perception. Thus, to the Phigaleians the temple at Bassai was equally real as Apollo's existence. We must not distinguish between the real landscapes and perceived or imaginary ones because both are identical: existential landscapes.

Perception becomes the builder of vital experiences, as Hodder says, because the simple act of looking at the world is something active, a way of making sense of experience.² Perception is a language with syntax, morphology and codes of communication constructed by those who need it in order to establish a relationship with the world. These codes are not simply passive recipients of constructed realities, but are themselves builders. As expressed by J.C. Barret and his "postmodernist anthropology", the word or its canonical meaning is not so important because that meaning changes every time that the word is used. What is really important, is the meaning that the word takes when someone uses it and someone else listens to it.³ The challenge is to proceed beyond the canonical

1. Cosgrove 1984, 13.

2. Hodder 1985, 2.

3. Barret 1991, 1.

code and try to understand the word in its cultural context in order to understand better the realities constructed by men and women in the past and in the present.

These theoretical questions require an eclectic methodology. I try to demonstrate that the theoretical basis of landscape archaeology and the various postprocessual disciplines allow us to analyse with historical method ancient religious beliefs through the images that they built.

2. From theory to practice

2a. *The extraurban sanctuary as a representation*

Generally speaking, an extraurban sanctuary is a meaning, a representation. It symbolizes the power of the community, defines the limits of its territory, and it is like a spot, as opposed to what is far away.

Its importance as a concept goes beyond the mere material characteristics of an altar or a building. Without any doubt, the terminological accuracy of what I call, *grosso modo*, extraurban sanctuaries⁴ is very important for the analysis of the religious space of a community. But this work has been and is being made by well-known scholars. In my experience, I only use this expression in a broad meaning. I refer to those sanctuaries and/or sacred localities which, far away from the inhabited centres of the community, help to define its territory. Thus, both the temple of Apollo at Bassai and the small sanctuaries that mark out the mountains of Phigaleia respond to the same need: arrange territories in order to control them, always justified by divine will.

Extraurban sanctuaries are used to create the community. They are the final bastions of the social group, as opposed to the wild nature. They are a focal point of identification when facing a political enemy, a meeting point with neighbours at the occasion of religious holidays, the refuge of fugitives and travellers and, frequently, the womb that turns ephebes into citizens. They are to the community, to the social body, the same as the *agora* is to the *polis*: its centre of reproduction, its mark of identity.

These sanctuaries need a specific place in order to change this place into a part of the social landscape. The limits of the territory are suitable for this because the extraurban sanctuary is the answer to two types of needs: political

4. The terminology is very varied. Depending on geographical, ideological and social factors we can speak of extraurban, extramural, political, rural, peripheral, ethnic sanctuaries. I would like to emphasize some works concerning this issue: de Polignac 1984 and the revised edition, de Polignac 1995; Snodgrass 1980; Forsén, Forsén and Østby 1999; Voyatzis 1999; Edlund 1987; etc.

control over a territory, and domestication of the mythical space. That space belonged to the gods. Therefore, the building of an extraurban sanctuary involves a radical transformation of space. The choice of the locality, the deity and the type of sanctuary, as well as the choice whether to build monuments there or not and of what type, are decisions which physically represent various social situations and interests, a hierarchical order, and power relations that may need to be emphasized.

An interesting example to demonstrate how landscape archaeology can help us to understand better a territory and its images is the well-known sanctuary of Apollo at Bassai. I am going to focus on the function of the sanctuary as a representation of the community against foreigners.

Bassai was the most important sanctuary of the Phigaleian community⁵ and a great image for the Arcadians, a sacred expression of the alliance between Arcadians and Messenians against the Spartans. The earliest remains of cult are from the first years after the First Messenian War, ca. 725-700 B.C. The first temple and the first evidence of an important cult activity appear from about 650 on, some years after the defeat of Phigaleia and Eira to the Spartan power. About 575, 25 years after the new defeat at Eira to the Spartans, the temple is rebuilt. There is a new reconstruction about 500, again in a time of war. The construction of the final temple by Iktinos begins in 429. It is interrupted from 421 to 415 by the Spartan pressure against Phigaleia. In 414 the works continue and are concluded by 400, when the territory is invaded by Agis.

Avoiding the discussion whether there were four successive temples here or only two,⁶ it can be said that every increase of building or ritual activity coincides with the periods of war or warlike tension with the Spartans. Moreover, the temple is dedicated to a deity devoted to fighting: Apollo Epikourios.⁷ Bassai is not simply a temple. It is a sanctuary in a more or less peculiar landscape, but also an extraurban sanctuary: an identity signal, an expression of power, a conquest and a physical and mental reconstruction of a territory. Such

5. The discussion about Arcadian political and social organisation is complicated and extensive. I use the general word 'community'. More information is given in the papers published by Nielsen and Roy 1999; Jost 1986; Burelli Bergese 1995; Roy 1972.

6. Was there a remodelling of a previous structure, or a building of a new temple? There is a discussion between Cooper, who believes that there were four temples (Cooper 1996), and Kelly 1995, Voyatzis 1990, 37-43 and *ead.* 1999, 136-8, who think that there were only two temples: the first, built at the end of the 7th century, and the classical temple by Iktinos.

7. I follow Cooper 1996, 2. He thinks that the warlike character of Apollo Epikourios is related to mercenaries. Jost, on the other hand, suggests that the epithet Epikourios refers to a healing cult, as Thucydides states. The war would be a first priority, but there is no relation to mercenaries (Jost 1985, 485-7).

a sanctuary represents the community, because its enlargement helped to build a specific mental landscape: the reality of a powerful community, strong against its enemies.⁸

If perception is able to build landscape and reality, are not then the physical place where the sanctuary is built or the deity who is chosen for it, important? Absolutely not, because the chosen places are answers to the spiritual and physical needs of the community. These needs are involved in a network of meanings composed by each of the elements that constitute a part of it. By these means a way of looking and a subject of observation are constructed, one specific mental landscape and not another.

Concerning Bassai, Phigaleia needed new places to represent the fight against Sparta and the alliance with Messenia, as well as its social and cultural identity. For this, Bassai was a perfect place. On one hand, it is located on the axis of a mountain range with plenty of sacred spots (Mount Kotilon to the north, Mount Lykaion to the northeast, Berekla to the east) and roads connecting Arcadia with Messenia. Although we do not admit Cooper's hypothesis that the temples of Artemis and Aphrodite were included in the same sacred planning as Bassai,⁹ the relation between the different sacred spots in this mountain range is one of the elements that help to build landscape, supporting the perception of the place as sacred, identifying, common. A landscape is not created only by a temple, a sanctuary, a rural settlement, or a road. The elements which build a landscape are not lost in the middle of nowhere, but landscape it in a context, involving spatial and cultural relations, a historical dimension that can include the localities in a meaningful whole.¹⁰ On the other hand, the place was very meaningful also to the Messenians because Mount Eira, south of Bassai, was used by them as a refuge against the Spartan threat.

In addition to the physical confluence of Arcadian and Messenian frontiers and roads in a special geographical area, Bassai was located on a transhumance road. The sanctuary protected the political and military alliance between Messenians and Arcadians. Moreover, it took care of the security of a very important economical activity for such mountain communities as Phigaleia.

8. Cardete 2003.

9. Cooper 1996, 58-61.

10. The archaeological concepts 'non-site' and 'off-site' are very important in this discussion, as we can see in Cherry *et al.* 1991 or Dunneil 1992.

2b. *The mountain as perception*

Arcadia is a particularly mountainous area. That contributes to shape the ways of life of its inhabitants. The mountain was a source of raw materials for daily life – wood, charcoal, stone; a privileged economical environment – hunting, husbandry, gathering; a space for human and political meetings and confrontations – warlike skirmishes, stations on trading routes.¹¹ As an essential place for survival, it is logical that the mountain attracted people who needed it. It developed a complex mixture of images, where the material reality of the mountains was perceived with less intensity than the conception that people had of it.

What did this conception include? It is not a question of mere orography. The Greeks used the word for mountain, *oros*, both for Mount Lykaion, whose highest summit reaches 1420 m, and the Kronion hill at Olympia, with only 123 m. 'Mountain' is conceived as an opposition, the other side of the mirror; it is far away from the *polis*, *asty* or *kome*, but still makes part of the human environment. It is sacred in its own right; it is bigger than mankind. Literary sources describe the mountain as a dangerous and ancient place. Mountains encourage violence; they are the setting of bloody deaths, like Actaion's, and/or deaths *contra naturam*, like Callisto's. Rites that take place in the mountains reflect this cruel, barbarous atmosphere. Mount Lykaion is a good example because every kind of outrage is to be found on its summit: human sacrifice, cannibalism and lycantrophy. I do not want to discuss the historical truth of these images; there are several studies about this.¹² For understanding how a mental landscape is built, it is more important to know if people believed in that reality. As for the question whether humans were sacrificed or not on Mount Lykaion, literary sources seem to show that the Greeks believed it;¹³ and in that sense the sacrifices are real. Those sacrifices are used as a way of building a landscape, and thus as a way of building reality.

Although the mountain may seem to be a place where the rules of human coexistence are broken, it is connected with human communities by many links. It is a meeting point for men and gods, a centre of social and economic reproduction. Processions, which connect the mountain summit with the core of the community, are both physical and mental representations of the gathering of

11. An interesting study of Arcadian economy, with an analysis of mountains, is found in Roy 1999. See also Buxton 1992, who discusses the interaction between economical and religious interest in mountains.

12. The question of human sacrifice at this site has been discussed by Borgeaud 1979; Hughes 1991; Bonnechere 1993 and 1994; Georgoudi 1999; etc. See also the papers by Gundersen and Zolotnikova in this volume.

13. Paus. 8.38.7; Plin. *HN* 8.81; Ps. Plat. *Min.* 315 c; Porph. *Abst.* 2.27.2; Pl. *Resp.* 565 d; etc.

both worlds. These worlds were always connected by contrast: each defines the other. Thus, Mount Lykaion's werewolves returned to an existence as animals, but this was in order to maintain their community at the opposite side of the mirror.

When circumstances change for rural communities because of the development of poleis and new power relations that draw a more complicated and extensive landscape, mountain cults decline or change towards different realities, as stated by de Polignac.¹⁴ Mountains are no longer limits of human environment, but peripheral localities. Landscape is understood in a different way. The material elements are the same, but the perception of them has changed. A rebuilding of mental landscapes takes place.

One example of the essential role of perception is offered by Mount Parthenion. The mountain is on the highway from Tegea to Argos. It is a key point in a very important road-network with an interesting economical dimension. People from Tegea consecrated there two sacred spots with a strong sense of identification in order to distinguish themselves from others. On one hand, there is the sanctuary of Telephos, a Tegean hero whose adventures were sculpted in the metopes of the principal temple of Tegea, the temple of Athena Alea. On the other hand, there is a sanctuary of Pan, the most particularly Arcadian god. The characteristics of both sanctuaries described by Pausanias¹⁵ are typical of mountain sanctuaries. Each sanctuary materializes, in one way or another, the images that participate in the building of a mountain landscape, as much as the physical height by itself. The sanctuary of Telephos commemorates an event which took place in mythical time: Auge, daughter of king Aleos of Tegea, priestess of Athena Alea, was raped by Heracles and became pregnant. To avoid Athena's rage the baby was abandoned on Mount Parthenion. Telephos did not die, but was suckled by a hind. Heracles sent some shepherds, and they took care of him until the boy wanted to know about his origin. The story of the child-hero who is abandoned in order to die, his encounter first with a friendly animal and then with some generous shepherds who take care of him, is a mythological topic, and in Greece the setting is almost always a mountain. The mountain is perceived as a meeting place of realities that would not necessarily meet, but they attract each other and have a common space on the summit, far away from human rational action. Man changes realities at the very same time as he covers them with his mental ideas. It is a way of understanding and living the world.

The mountain is not like the temple, the cult statue, the votive offerings or

14. de Polignac 1998, 148.

15. Paus. 8.54.6-7.

any other human creation.¹⁶ Pausanias says: “Mount Parthenion also rears turtles most suitable for the making of harps, but the men on the mountain are always afraid to capture them and will not allow strangers to do so either, thinking that they are sacred to Pan.”¹⁷ Parthenion is Pan’s mountain because the very existence of the mountain is sacred. Turtles cannot be caught because they are Pan’s, because the mountain is his territory.

The Tegeans used the religious argument to build an identifying landscape because such an argument was very strong. Religious beliefs and faith in the gods modify – in a very different and easily manipulated way – the way of looking at the world and the way of perceiving it, understanding it and controlling it. We see what we want to see, and religion is – almost by definition – what we want to see in the world. A system of belief that does not develop some way of altering, changing and maintaining the perceptions that people have about the world will mess up. Again Mount Parthenion provides a good example.

Everybody knows the story told by Herodotos and Pausanias about Pheidipides’ meeting with Pan at Mount Parthenion.¹⁸ How was that myth born? Several scholars have considered that the messenger might have had a hallucination.¹⁹ According to my point of view, the Athenian aristocracy used, very cunningly, images of mental landscapes in order to create a myth that satisfied determined political interests.²⁰ In a pre-war atmosphere, Athens needed to reinforce the alliances with the Arcadians, the most important mercenary soldiers in Greece. Athens had to strengthen its relations with Tegea, a politically very important *polis*. In spite of the strong conflict between Sparta and Tegea, the Athenians had to remember that Tegea did not always have bad relations with Sparta.²¹

One way of reinforcing ideologically the Athenian-Tegean relationship was the construction of a myth manipulating collective perceptions. First of all, the meeting between the god and the messenger does not take place in any casual setting but in a very special one: at a mountain perceived as sacred, or, differently expressed, a focal point of the Greek religious landscape that people saw as a meeting place. It is an ambiguous space where man could communicate with divine forces, a place chosen by the gods for appearing to poor humans. Se-

16. Very interesting studies of sacred mountains in Buxton 1994; see also Buxton 1992.

17. Paus. 8.54.7.

18. Hdt. 6.105 and Paus. 1.28.4.

19. Parke 1933, 172; Dodds 1973, 115; Borgeaud 1979, 133-62, although he thinks that there are political and economical reasons to explain Pan’s success in Attica in the 5th century.

20. Cardete 2004, 215-22.

21. This can be checked in Thuc. 4.134; 5.32; 5.57, 5.64-78; Xen. *Hell.* 3.5.7; 4.2; 4.13-21; 5.1.33; 5.4.37; 6.4.18 and 6.5.6-7.

condly, the meeting takes place at Mount Parthenion, Tegea's sacred mountain, the focal point of the Tegean landscape and consecrated to the most popular god in Arcadia and the identifying Tegean hero. So, the meeting between Pheidippides and Pan stands for establishing a connection between Athens with her civic symbols and Tegea with hers. These new elements enrich the landscape and, when they interact with other elements, they build realities.

Mount Parthenion, Lykaion, Mainalon, Lampeia... these and other mountains are seen as sacred, focal points of power, basic elements for communities which believe in their sacred status. However, not every mountain was perceived as sacred. This difference of conception between similar physical realities adds force to the power of a culturally based perception towards creating an understanding of the world.

3. Conclusion

Religion is a key element in defining a society. It is an active part in the process of building a landscape. Ideological interests have wanted to make landscape into something aesthetic, picturesque and timeless, but it is also a process, a construction, a human decision with a very strong symbolic aspect. Human perception breaks up, crushes and undermines what we have called, in an artificial way, 'Reality'. If we admit that 'Reality' is only a concept that changes according to historical circumstances, in the same way as any other concept, we will arrive to mental landscapes.

The Arcadians lived their world according to their own laws, their moral, political, economical, institutional and religious references. In the same way they understood the world, built their world, shaped their reality and lived their own landscapes.

Existential landscapes, mental landscapes, religious landscapes... everything defines the same issue: the way in which a community builds its world.

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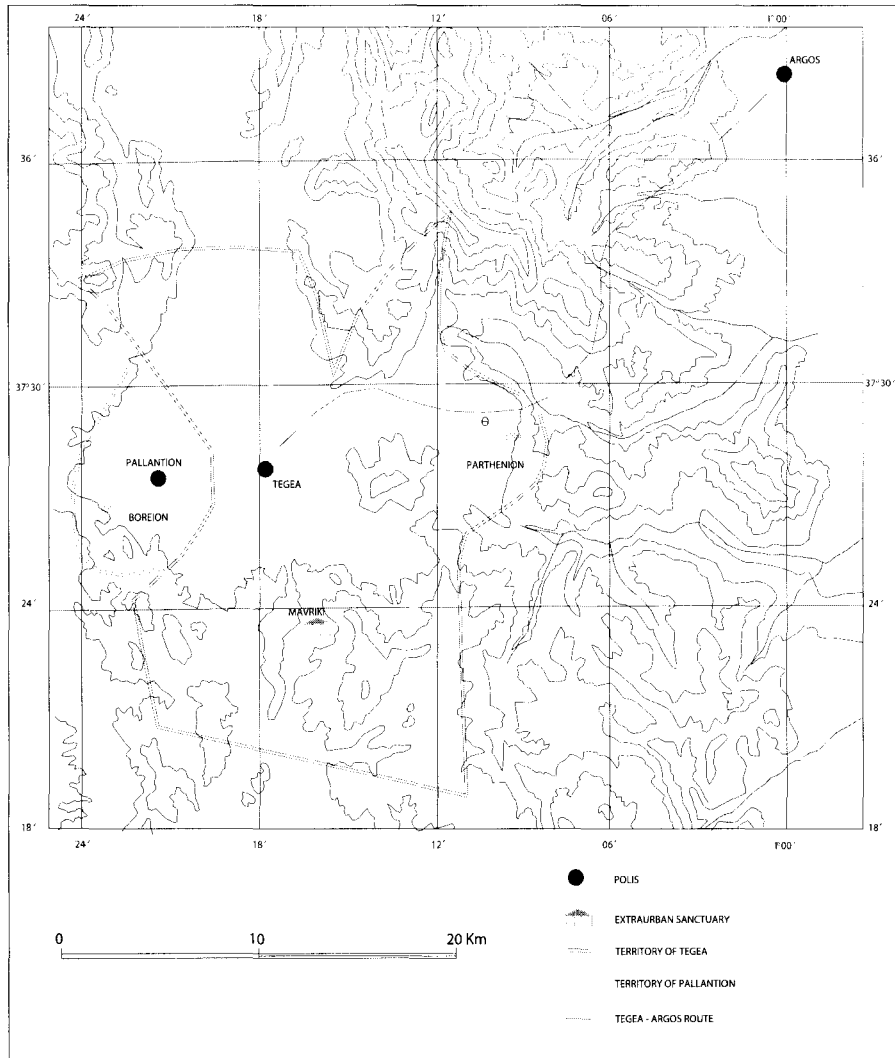


Fig. 1. Phigaleia and its territory. (Drawing: author, based on map from the Hellenic Statistical Service.)

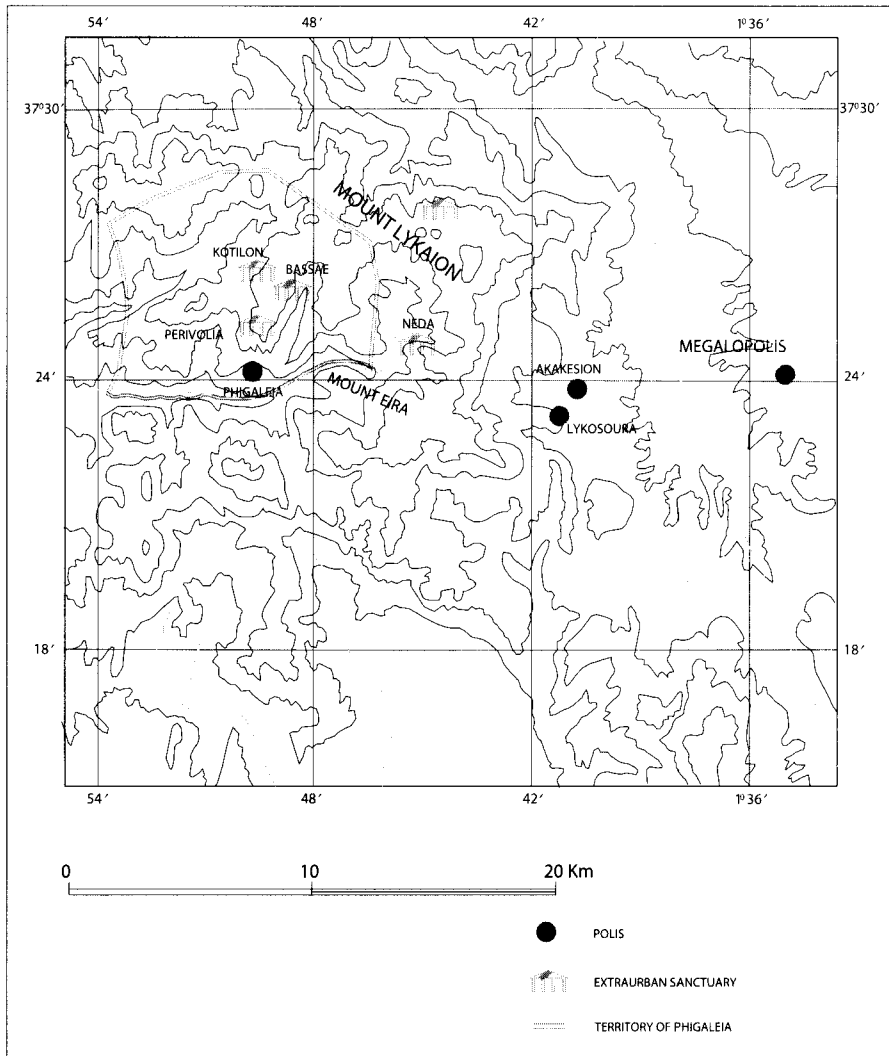


Fig. 2. The sacred area of Mount Parthenion. (Drawing: author, based on map from the Hellenic Statistical Service.)