

RECONSTRUCTING GREEK SACRED LANDSCAPES



**RECONSTRUCTING GREEK SACRED LANDSCAPES:
DYNAMICS AND APPROACHES FROM THE FIELD**

Edited by

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*In memory of
Dominique Jaillard*

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The coastal site of Amarynthos, with Paleoekklisies Hill in the foreground and the Servouni range behind (J. André, ESAG).

INTRODUCTION

Amarynthos: Looking eastward from the foot of Paleoeckklisies Hill, where the sanctuary of Artemis Amarysia stretches out, the eye meets the long ridge of Servouni. Along the horizon, nine wind turbines stand out, their blades set in motion by the winds sweeping in from the Aegean. They are impossible to miss. They dominate the landscape. Erected to capture the energy of Aeolus, they encapsulate the needs and convictions of our time. Below the ridge, the eye is drawn to the monastery of Ag. Nikolaos, whose origins date back to the Byzantine period, and further on, the later monastery of Panagia Myrelaiou—two sites connected to a dense network of chapels scattered throughout the surrounding countryside. The Servouni is crowned by rock, and aside from a few cleared areas near the monasteries, the slopes are covered in maquis. In Antiquity, these lands likely belonged to Artemis's domain—spaces for grazing and hunting, perhaps already bearing the name Amarynthos, like the sanctuary itself. One glance captures three interwoven temporal layers—where it is tempting to recognize the enduring traces of successive “sacred” landscapes.

The 2023 roundtable, titled “Reconstructing Greek Sacred Landscapes: Dynamics and Approaches from the Field” (French “Reconstruire un paysage religieux grec: dynamiques et approches de terrain”), held at the *Fondation Hardt pour l'étude de l'Antiquité classique* in Vandœuvre (2–4 February 2023), finds its origin in ongoing research on the Artemision of Amarynthos and the portion of territory that surrounds it. From the pioneering work of Denis Knoepfler onward, this research has taken a multiscale approach—whether through the systematic field survey to locate the sanctuary or through historical analysis aimed at situating Amarynthos within the religious, political, and territorial structure of the Eretrian city-state. The recent identification and excavation of the Artemision, with a particular focus on the temple of the goddess, alongside intensive field survey between Eretria and Amarynthos have followed this same approach. It soon became clear that one way to connect the different scales at play was to consider them through the lens of the “sacred landscape,” and to bring together scholars to critically explore this concept.

Clearly, the current focus on landscape—whether sacred or of a different nature—reflects a broader contemporary concern. But this is not just a passing trend. We believe that a cautious use of the concept of landscape is a valuable tool for investigating how the Greeks conceived, structured, and experienced space—perspectives that rarely emerge in the writings of ancient geographers, historians, or philosophers, and which often require sources beyond the textual.

All the scholars gathered for the roundtable committed to applying the framework of “sacred landscape” to their study subjects, yet each did so in their own distinct way. That is hardly surprising, since multiple definitions of both “landscape” and “sacred” coexist. This variety of perspectives can sometimes be a hurdle when trying to put the concept into practice. But it can also fuel fresh momentum in research, provided we clearly define the different viewpoints and make the most of how they complement each other, as argued by François de Polignac in the introduction to his contribution. The first chapter to this volume also takes a step in that direction. Outlining two common approaches to sacred landscape, it offers methodological considerations that the contributors of the other chapters had the opportunity to engage with. It is written in both French and English—not just to make it easier for readers, but to highlight how the idea of sacred landscape is understood and expressed differently across languages and scholarly tradition. While the framework set in the first chapter is quite narrow, the following contributions broaden the perspective with their rich methodological reflections and diverse approaches to the case studies.

The studies collected here focus almost exclusively on the archaeology of ancient Greece. Still, we wanted to start by giving the floor to ethnography, which can observe “living” sacred landscapes—along with the perspectives of those who shape and experience them. This comparative detour is all too brief, and a broader meeting would be needed to foster dialogue among specialists from diverse cultures. But it still offers a refreshing source of inspiration, especially when exploring the often arid terrain of archaeological research. Indeed, the two ethnographic contributions by Romain Simenel on southwestern Morocco and Raphaël Rousseleau on the

Indian state of Odisha show similarities to Greek past realities: protected spaces, sacred sites placed in border zones, sanctuaries connected to the surrounding world through the movement of divine statues, to name but a few.

Within the contributions focusing on the Greek world, the diversity of approaches is evident in several ways, beginning with the choice of vocabulary, which reflects the methods adopted. The title assigned to the volume (echoing that of the original roundtable) was, of course, in no way prescriptive. It merely opened up a lexical field within which each scholar could define their own position. For some, it seemed more appropriate to avoid combining the terms “landscape” and “sacred,” which they considered inadequate to describe the realities under study (see, for example, Bintliff *et al.*, Knoepfler, Fachard *et al.*); others opted to pair “landscape” with different qualifiers, such as “cultic/ritual,” emphasizing the space socially shaped by religious practices (Crielaard, Kerschner), or “mythical,” highlighting either the spatial grounding of myths or the way narratives shape the landscape (Eder, Kerschner). The use of the concept of a “cultic network” (Baumer), for its part, draws attention to the sociopolitical structures underlying any “religious landscape.” These choices are not mere stylistic variation; rather, they signal the specific angles of inquiry each study seeks to foreground (while leaving room for others).

The variety of scales considered, both from one chapter to another and within individual contributions, highlights the multidimensional nature of the sacred landscape. While the geographic unit of analysis is sometimes the territory of a city—particularly when that territory is extensive (as in the cases of Athens and Eretria, see Baumer and Knoepfler)—it becomes clear that analysis must also operate at both narrower and broader scales. Thus, studies range from “micro-topographical” approaches to a sacred site (see Crielaard with Karababa), to monastic sites (Kondyli), the Valley of the Muses (Bintliff *et al.*), or the city of Ephesos (Kerschner), to investigations of supra-regional networks of intervisibility (Polignac), and to detailed surveys of regions such as Elis-Triphylia (Eder), Phokis (Sporn), Karystia (Crielaard), Arcadia (Jost), and northwestern Greece (Morgan). Three chapters devoted to Amarynthos, gathered at the end of the volume (Knoepfler, Fachard *et al.*, and Verdán *et al.*), likewise exemplify this multidimensional approach and offer intersecting perspectives on the sanctuary of Artemis and its integration within a more or less extensive geographical context. All these regional studies reveal specific features arising from both topography and sociopolitical organization, which is hardly surprising in the Greek context. At the same time, they raise an important question: does the shaping of the sacred landscape represent a conscious strategy of

identity expression? (On regional identity, see the contributions by Eder, Crielaard, and Morgan.)

Several studies take as their anchor points major sanctuaries well known through written sources and/or archaeology (Olympia, Kalapodi, Amarynthos), while at the same time broadening the focus to situate these sacred places within a much richer context. Nonetheless, a gap remains between these well-documented sites and others whose histories remain unknown and which amount to little more than dots on a map. This can create the impression of a contrast between sites that appear almost immutable and a surrounding landscape in constant flux. Does this reflect gaps in our current knowledge, or does it, in fact, correspond to an ancient reality?

This question brings us to the temporal dimension of the studies. Although not a prerequisite, most analyses focus on a relatively long timespan. The historical periods receive the greatest attention, yet the Bronze Age substratum is alluded to in several contributions (Eder, Crielaard) or serves as the starting point for a diachronic analysis (Polignac, Sporn). One chapter extends into the Late Roman period (Bintliff *et al.*), while another provides a stimulating opening onto the Byzantine world (Kondyli). All contributions underscore the relevance of a long-term perspective on the transformation of sacred landscapes. This approach is not without its challenges, as the nature, quality, and quantity of available data vary significantly from one period to another; nonetheless, it is precisely such transformations and dynamic processes that the volume seeks to bring to light.

Survey, as a fundamental method for reconstructing a consistent picture of ancient landscapes—even idealized ones—proves particularly well suited to this diachronic perspective, as it allows for the recovery of surface-level traces from across all historical periods. In this respect, it is especially effective for grasping the very structure of a landscape, which blends elements from all ages—as layers of a palimpsest or pieces of a patchwork. Several chapters in this volume stem directly from survey projects or draw upon data collected through this method (Bintliff *et al.*, Eder, Sporn, Crielaard, Fachard *et al.*). They demonstrate not only the value of field survey but also the need to combine it with textual analysis. Ultimately, it is only through the comprehensive mobilization of all available sources that one can hope to reconstruct sacred landscapes long vanished from view.

Like any reconstruction, that of a religious landscape involves a considerable degree of uncertainty and conjecture. We are grateful to all the contributors for undertaking this challenging exercise—particularly to Madeleine Jost, for exploring Arcadia without the guidance of Pausanias. The reward is the strongly forward-looking nature of this volume, rich in theoretical models to test, hypotheses to verify in the field, and suggestions for future research.

To conclude this introduction on a deliberately provocative and paradoxical note—given both the title and the contents of this volume—it could be argued that there is, strictly speaking, no such thing as a “sacred landscape.” What exist are systems of thought and configurations of ritual practices through which human societies position themselves within the world and engage with it. These systems structure the ways in which people perceive, make sense, and shape the world they live in. The outcome of this interaction—at once tangible and intangible—between the ancients and their environment, as mediated by the sacred, is elusive: how can we name it, observe it, study it, and make it intelligible, despite the distance imposed by time and by our own mindset? For lack of a better term, we tentatively speak of a “sacred landscape”—a field of inquiry still wide open to exploration.

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During the roundtable, a “hybrid” session devoted to ethnographic examples and studies of the Byzantine period was moderated by Dominique Jaillard. With his

enthusiasm, deep knowledge of polytheistic systems, and experience in comparative approaches, he was exceptionally well placed to encourage us to shift our perspective and to build bridges between the different fields represented by the contributors. During the sessions and in the informal discussions that followed, he generously contributed to the richness and vitality of the debates. We had intended to invite him to contribute to this volume, to offer his own reflection on the concept of the “sacred landscape.” Dominique Jaillard passed away prematurely in June 2024. In recognition of the inspiration he has provided to our work, and will continue to provide, we dedicate this volume to his memory.