

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Why investigate Greek sanctuaries? A cursory answer might be that these places were central to the practice of Greek religion, that they constituted the main physical manifestation of the belief system of the ancient Greeks, and that the study of belief systems is integral to the study of cultures. A more focused answer might say that the defining act of Greek religious life was sacrifice and that sacrifices often took place in sanctuaries. These holy places accordingly provided the spatial context for the most sacred acts. Studying sanctuaries therefore clarifies our understanding of how Greek religion was practiced.

Sanctuaries are found all over the Greek world (Figs. 1–4), both on the mainland of Greece and in distant Greek settlements, which range from the coast of the Black Sea in the north to Egypt and Libya in the south, and from Asia Minor in the east to Sicily and Italy in the west. They are located both inside and outside a city’s walls, deep in the countryside, on mountaintops, on riverbanks and promontories, near springs of water and other phenomena of nature. They were numerous, of many different shapes and sizes, with many purposes that, albeit primarily and profoundly religious in nature, successfully served other social, economic, and political ends too; they are replete with problems. This book seeks to explain the nature and development of these sanctuaries. Its aim is to outline the characteristics these sacred places have in common, to show how and why they differ from one another, and how and why they change over time.



1. Map of the Greek world. Drawing after Paul Butteridge in Pedley (2002), fig. 0.2.

1. Themes

The first part of the book addresses major themes:

- (a) location of sanctuaries,
- (b) defining features (structures, spaces, and offerings),
- (c) structures and rituals,
- (d) experiences of the individual,
- (e) sanctuary functions, and
- (f) transformations.



2. Map of Greece and the Aegean. Drawing after David Bosse and Mary Pedley in Pedley (1990), fig. 7.

(a) Location

Place marks the origins of sanctity. Where sanctuaries were situated in the landscape, or in town, and the significance of their siting are two of the important questions we face. Phenomena of nature – caves, hilltops, unusual rock formations – excited interest in the supernatural and became centers of religious devotion. Some remained small and remote, while others grew, with the addition of buildings, into more monumental places of worship. The counterparts of such shrines in nature were those that were man-made from the start, some located at prominent points within city walls, others outside the urban nucleus. Each city-state, or *polis* (*pl.*: poleis) was provided with both urban sanctuaries and



3. Map of southern Italy and Sicily. Drawing after David Bosse and Mary Pedley in Pedley (1990), fig. 1.



4. Map of Attica. Drawing after M. Djordjevitch in Camp (2001), fig. 248.

sanctuaries outside the city’s walls but within the city’s territory. Other sanctuaries, such as the great Sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia (Fig. 5), developed in places not controlled by a major polis; these became Pan-hellenic (for all Greeks) or interpolis sanctuaries where rival individuals and states could meet and compete.

(b) *Defining Features*

Throughout the Greek world sanctuaries shared certain characteristics. The two most necessary features of a Greek sanctuary are, unsurprisingly, directly related to ritual: a place of sacrifice (an altar, Fig. 6) and a boundary line marking the space within which sacred rituals could be performed. This boundary could be in the form of a wall, or it could be marked merely by rocks or boulders linked by imaginary lines.

Sanctuary buildings, spaces, and offerings vary in number, size, shape, and materials, but in the larger sanctuaries you can see general similarities: altars, temples, and stoas, trees or groves, statues and other offerings both communal and individual. All these elements were sacred and, taken together in various combinations, comprise a sanctuary. The spatial arrangement, the architectural forms, and the dedications found in Greek sanctuaries are primary topics in this survey.



5. Sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia. Aerial view from the west showing remains of major features, temples, and treasuries. Photo: A. Loxias.



6. Drawing of a sacrifice scene showing an altar (*foreground*), a herm (*background*), and three participants: One pours a libation onto the altar (*at the left*), another (*center*) holds a receptacle for the sacrificial instruments, while the third roasts the sacrificed animal's entrails on a spit. Detail of an Attic red-figure krater (Naples, National Museum no. 127929). After *Monumenti Antichi* 22 (1913), pls. vol., no. 80.

(c) *Structures and Rituals*

Smaller sanctuaries might have hardly anything at all that could pass for a structure, beyond an altar (or hearth) or two and a built (or imagined) boundary. But larger sanctuaries had many buildings, several of which were constructed, in terms of location and accessibility, with ritual activities in mind. Ritual and architecture often went hand in hand.

Religious ceremonies, including processions, formed part of the communal experience of the populace and had to be accommodated. In some sanctuaries, a gateway, or *propylon* (*pl.*: propyla) announced the entrance to the sanctuary, the passage from the profane to the sacred, through which a sacred route (the Sacred Way), sometimes paved, marked the processional path toward an altar (Fig. 7).

Most altars were in the open air, and the main sanctuary altar (most sanctuaries had several altars) was generally positioned to the east of the main temple. It was usually on a direct sight line from the cult statue,



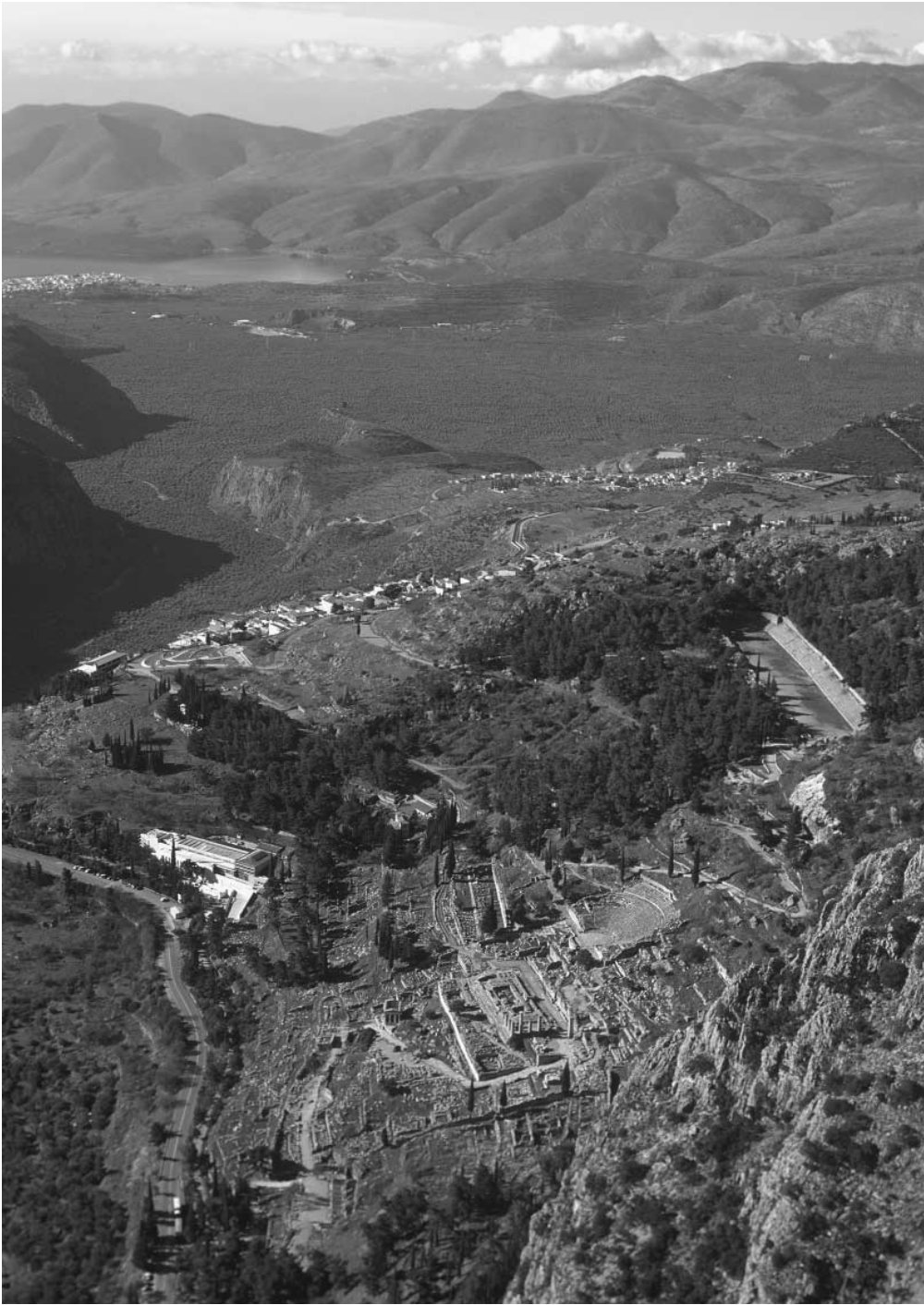
which faced east in the temple's interior; the deity was therefore able to see the rituals at and around the altar through the opened doors of the temple. The altar's location also offered maximum visibility of the sacrifice and other rituals to worshipers. What's more, it took care of the dispersal of smoke from the altar fire, from the burning of meat and incense for the gods, and from the roasting of other parts of animal carcasses. Public rituals were performed on and near the major altars; private acts of worship took place at any of the smaller altars inside the sanctuary.

The (main) temple occupied the most prestigious location in the sanctuary. Facing or adjacent to the main altar, it was linked visually and conceptually to the altar's rituals: The sacrifices and libations performed at the altar were to honor and supplicate the deity resident in the temple. Some sanctuaries had more than one temple, more often than not planted close by and parallel to the main temple, each with its own altar. So links between temple and altar (rituals) were repeated and intensified. The temple itself was not, however, intended as a place for public ritual or for individual worship. Nevertheless, the grandeur of a cult statue and the quantity of gifts of precious metal arrayed on shelves or pinned to interior walls could be counted on to have a profound impact on visiting worshipers.

Other sanctuary buildings include halls or clusters of rooms correlated with rituals. Some provided special facilities – washrooms, kitchens, dining rooms – for the preparation and consumption of food and wine in ritual settings, while others served the needs of initiation rites.

Another sanctuary structure is the treasury, built to house the more precious gifts of a particular polis, and itself a spectacular votive offering. Since there was little reason for local sanctuaries to receive dedications from other states, the most notable examples of treasuries are found in the Panhellenic sanctuaries. At Olympia they line up side by side along the northern edge of the sanctuary, facing the path to the stadium. At Delphi most treasuries stand adjacent to the Sacred Way or to paths linked to it. Most were not oriented toward the temple or altar, but all were situated to be visible to worshipers making their way through the sanctuary. Rising up the hillside they led the eye (and the feet) of the visitor all the way up to the culminating point, the altar and its rituals. They do not however seem themselves to have been the sites of organized ritual activity.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-80935-1 - Sanctuaries and the Sacred in the Ancient Greek World
John Pedley
Excerpt
[More information](#)



7. Sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi. Aerial view from the east showing sanctuary structures, the Sacred Way, the museum, the modern village, the plain below, and ocean beyond. Photo: D. Benetos.



Nor does it seem that the *stoa*, another sanctuary building, was commonly a site of public ritual. A stoa was the place where pilgrims could rest and sleep, and statues and reliefs might be displayed. Some stoas did, however, have other functions too; some were the places, for instance, where newcomers to the sanctuary performed the required rituals of purification and paid their entry fees. Such stoas were suitably located near the entrance way; most stoas indeed are found on the edges of their sanctuaries.

Offerings dedicated to the deity were placed as close as possible to important structures or spaces. Rich worshipers and successful states placed big marble statues along the processional way and at other highly visible spots, such as the corners of temples. Smaller offerings, such as terra-cotta figurines, piled up near altars and other hallowed places or hung from walls or trees; all were equally sacred, and offered with the appropriate rituals. By the fifth century, we have to imagine the sanctuary – which today we see as so much empty space – crowded with statues and other offerings. From time to time, in fact, it became so crammed with gifts that sanctuary servants had to gather many of them up and bury them in specially dug, sacred pits inside the sanctuary.

(d) *Experiences of the Individual*

Beyond participation in communal processions and festivals, what private acts of worship did the individual undertake, with what hopes of success, purification, blessing, or healing? In this context, it's worth noting that most sanctuaries were used by all ranks and classes – men, women, girls, youths, slaves, resident aliens, rich, and poor. At the same time, it's worth asking whether some activities were at times class or gender specific. For instance, it was only girls of elite status who became *arktoi* (see §VI.7(b)) in the service of Artemis at Brauron, and only married citizen women (though there are rare exceptions) who could participate in the festival of Demeter Thesmophoros, the Thesmophoria.

Individuals went to sanctuaries to ask for divine help. They asked for success in life and for protection, and they sought advice. They asked for victory in battle and in competition, and for good crops; they asked for good marriages, success in childbirth, healthy and plentiful children. They gave thanks for benevolences received. They brought gifts. They of-