SANCTUARIES AND
THE SACRED IN THE
ANCIENT GREEK WORLD

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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. 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.

(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.
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 Panhellenic (for all Greeks) or interpolis sanctuaries where rival individuals and states could meet and compete.