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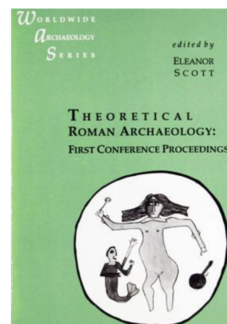

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Spaced-Out Sanctuaries: the Ritual Landscape of Roman Greece

Susan Alcock

Effects of the Roman conquest of Greece have been little studied, in favour of emphasising the 'reverse imperialism' of Greece's cultural conquest of Rome. Such a perspective masks the undoubted impact felt throughout Greek society at the time of its incorporation and assimilation into a wider imperial system. This paper examines the Greek response to their altered political and economic state through the evidence of ritual geography, specifically changes in the location and ditribution of cult places in the landscape. Several patterns are discerned, each of which reveals in its own way the redistribution of social power in Greece under Roman rule.

Introduction

A hitherto fitting motto for Roman Greece is to be found in Horace's *Epistles*: 'captive Greece took captive her captors and brought the arts to rude Latium' (2.1.156). Studies of Greece within the Roman empire have concentrated upon the cultural gifts of Greece to Rome, the processes of 'reverse imperialism' or 'reverse acculturation'. Much of this emphasis stems from the nature of the research conducted. Of the relatively few scholars who have dealt with 'captive Greece', almost all were trained first and foremost as classicists, preferring to consider the Greeks as unique, even in their response to external conquest. Looking to other provinces, such as Roman Britain, for useful *comparanda* and scholarly inspiration was never on the agenda of such individuals. This disciplinary divide between 'classicists' and 'Romanists' has proved an insidious problem, not least because it has isolated Roman Greece (and to a lesser extent the eastern

empire at large) from more wide-ranging discussions of Roman imperialism and 'Romanisation'. What cannot be forgotten is that Rome, through its military power, conquered and annexed Greece, forcibly uniting its various constituent polities to form the relatively insignificant province of Achaia. The dynamics of social change under Roman rule require attention here as for any other Roman province, with explorations of issues such as instability or continuity in landholding patterns, residential preferences, demographic trends, and civic organisation (Alcock 1989a; 1989b). In its turn, this paper considers the composition of Achaia's sacred landscape in the early imperial period.

The concept of landscape as social document is currently what might be termed a 'hot property' among Roman archaeologists (e.g. Barker and Lloyd 1991). Human geographers, anthropologists and archaeologists have long recognised the power contained within the sacred or ceremonial landscape, framing it through questions such as: where were public ceremonies performed? Where precisely were megaliths, mounds, temples or tombs? How did these locations relate to places of human settlement or naturally occurring features? How were territorial claims, both social and geographic, defined through the organisation of sacred space? Underlying these questions is the assumption that the ritual landscape is a social construct, with its patterning a result of various human decisions and strategies. In addition, if concepts of space and place are viewed through the 'perspective of experience' as Tuan puts it, then clearly landscapes are not only culturally constructed, they are historically sensitive as well (Tuan 1974). The creation of a people's perceived environment follows the shifts and changes of their fortunes. The sacred landscape will not be immune from such developments, instead affecting and reflecting its larger social and political context. Imperial incorporation might be expected to result in the reorganisation of sacred space; the ritual landscape will respond to the imperial presence.

Accompanying the Roman presence in Greece (formal annexation occurred in 27 BC after almost two centuries of military activity and political intervention), fundamental changes took place in many spheres of Greek society. If spatial order reflects and reinforces social order, and if sanctuary placement can be linked with changing relationships of power and influence, what then of the sacred landscape? How do our 'cultic maps' alter under the early empire? To reconstruct this 'landscape of the gods', a mixture of archaeology, epigraphy, and Pausanias (a second century AD traveller interested in religious activity) can be employed. Three different cate-

gories of cult – displaced cult, centralised cult and rural cult – will be identified in this discussion, and transformations within each category traced. In the end, of course, each is allied with the others, forming part of the overall symbolic system of the province as a whole, and of its individual political components. For this initial analysis, however, we will explore them individually.

DISPLACED CULTS

Displaced cults, as the name suggests, are those which, through the process of conquest and incorporation, were deliberately shifted from one place to another. It must first be noted that Roman intervention resulted in certain significant territorial rearrangements in Achaia. Chief among these were major *synoecisms* creating Nicopolis (Victory City), a free city established near the site of Augustus' camp at Actium, and Patras, a Roman colony on the west end of the Corinthian Gulf. Large areas of western Greece, notably Aetolia and Epirus, were placed under the sway of these cities, and local populations forcibly dragooned to settle them. The regions involved were not arbitrarily selected for the treatment received; instead they represented areas of concern to the imperial authorities, not least for their history of opposition to the Roman presence. These imperial foundations have received much attention. What has been less appreciated is evidence for an accompanying symbolic reorganisation in these areas. Removal of long-established cult images, and their ceremonial installation in a new and imperially chosen location, formed one chief tactic of domination, and one with frequent cross-cultural parallels. Kalydon in Aetolia, heart of the area affected by these *synoecisms*, gave up cult images, among them a famous Artemis Laphria (Pausanias 7.18.8–13). These images reappear being worshipped in, not surprisingly, Nicopolis and Patras. Two small cities annexed to Patras by Augustus (Pharae and Triteia) also lost cult statues, as Pausanias was informed by natives still aggrieved some 150 years later (Pausanias 7.22.5, 9).

Preferences shown to imperial foundations may not seem to call for special explanation. It could be argued that such actions were merited by the ordered depopulation of places like Kalydon or the newly dependent status of communities like Triteia. But it is possible to trace episodes of cult displacement in Roman Greece somewhat further afield. From the famous sanctuary of Athena at Tegea in Arcadia, Augustus took to Rome the goddess' image and the tusks of the Kalydonian boar (Pausanias 8.46.1–5). Car-

rying off part of a city's legendary past to the imperial capital, where they become objects of adornment or mild curiosity, could be taken simply as imperial whim or artistic fancy until one asks why Tegea was the target. The city's former opposition to Augustus was not unusual (most of Greece supported Antony at Actium), but its status as an important and influential center in the Peloponnese was another matter. Augustus here deliberately struck at the Tegean sense of history and, above all, independence.

To the victor belongs the spoils; in general, the effect of transferring or removing Greek cult images on Roman authority has been under-estimated. The images are too easily perceived as *objets d'art*, with Roman generals cast in the roles either of boors or of connoisseurs. If instead the removal of a city's deities is viewed as a deliberate tactic of control, a more realistic understanding of displaced cult emerges. The symbolic violence of such an deed would undercut local loyalties, shattering established relationships of authority and allegiance (Gordon 1979). At worst, loss of a patron god or goddess could represent the symbolic destruction of a community. On the other hand, some centers (Nicopolis, Rome) benefited from these ritual reshufflings, just as they did from associated concentrations of population and economic resources. For good or ill, such behaviour chiefly affected areas of especial imperial interest or sensitivity. Displacement of a cult then can be summed up as an externally motivated act, designed to disrupt or override local symbolic systems in the interests of the new political order.

CENTRALISED CULTS

The second category, centralised cults, concerns those sanctuaries located overwhelmingly within the urban centers. The early imperial period witnessed the appearance or florescence in Greece of new or newly popular gods: Isis, Serapis, Antinoos and, most especially, the emperor. All of these fall directly within this second category, but I shall concentrate here upon the imperial cult. As Simon Price discovered in Asia Minor, there is an overwhelming urban bias in the distribution of imperial cult centres (Price 1984). More than that, in Achaia they are inevitably found at the most central and prominent locations of the ancient city, most frequently on the acropolis or in the agora. As just one example, on the Athenian acropolis a temple to Roma and Augustus was set before a Parthenon rededicated to Nero. Numerous similar cases could be cited (Trummer 1980). As part of the cult celebrations at Gytheion in Laconia, a procession

moved around the city, symbolically linking key urban centres of political and religious life: sanctuaries, the theater, the agora (*Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* 9.923).

If this predilection for placing the imperial cult where it would be difficult to miss is clear, the strength of this compulsion is demonstrated by the fact that outlying sanctuaries assimilated into the imperial cult on occasion were physically transferred to the urban centre. One particularly extravagant example is provided by the movement into the Athenian agora of elements taken from fifth century BC temples (including one complete temple dedicated to Ares) from the Attic *demes* of Acharnai, Sounion, and Thorikos (up to 40 kilometers away). These transfers are assigned to the era of Augustus or shortly thereafter (Shear 1981; Camp 1986; Dinsmoor 1982). Various explanations have been advanced for these 'itinerant temples', as they are known, but by far the most convincing argument links these structures with imperial cult activity. Glen Bowersock (1984) has correlated the Ares temple with dynastic conflict in the Greek East, particularly in the succession struggles between Gaius Caesar, who left Rome for Athens in the guise of the New Ares, and Tiberius. The 'infilling' and domination by imperial monuments of the formerly open public and political space of the agora offers its own testimony about altered civic and political conditions in Roman Greece.

Why was it apparently so essential for the imperial cult to be centrally located? It might be helpful to ask which sets of political and social relationships the cult served to negotiate. In the first instance would stand relationships between the external authorities and the provincial communities. Achaia was an unarmed province, lacking any substantial body of standing troops, and possessing a typically underdeveloped bureaucratic infrastructure. In such circumstances, the imperial cult served as a prime means to represent the power of Rome to the provincial population at large. Effective communication of this message, especially to a largely urban based population, required a prominent urban setting.

Second, a relationship was articulated between imperial authorities and local civic elites. It is not new to report that under Roman rule more oligarchic regimes were encouraged in the Greek cities, as elsewhere. The need to foster this harmony of interest led to an urban based elite ready and eager to demonstrate loyalty. While Price has demonstrated that the imperial cult was not simply an elite game, it remains undeniable that wealthy members of provincial society were the most active, and indeed highly competitive in promoting cult activities. This development can be

charted from city to city in Achaia with monotonous regularity.

Finally, the imperial cult formulated new relationships within the provincial communities as well. Civic elites used the cult as one major opportunity to bolster their role in guiding or controlling the local populace. A strategic urban location not only ensured clarity about who now led the way in civic affairs, but potentially unenthusiastic elements were also more easily kept in line. Placing this particular cult 'downtown' served, among other things, to guarantee a healthy and necessary show of respect for the imperial authority.

Behind all the relationships the cult could negotiate lie some that it could not. The imperial cult held no place in the countryside, taking no part in mediating between man and natural forces or in defining the link between territory and city. Its orientation instead demanded that it dominate the space of civic decision-making and political activity. To reinforce the various roles played, the imperial cult had to be centralised.

RURAL CULTS

The third and final topic for consideration deals with the fate of rural sanctuaries. According to surface survey results, the Greek countryside in early imperial times underwent a relative abandonment, with fewer rural sites or other signs of human use detected. This development can be interpreted to suggest both increasing nucleation in the towns and an overall decline in population levels across the province. Both possibilities offer potential repercussions for the sacred landscape. Indeed, Pausanias, in the course of his travels, periodically reports temples without roofs or desolate sanctuaries. Depopulation and the economic distress of cities undoubtedly lie behind some of these losses (Jost 1985). To accept these as the only factors involved, however, is to ignore the symbolic valuation these places possessed, or rather failed to possess in times of difficulty. It also fails to explain how and why a very considerable number of sanctuaries actually survived. For every roofless temple, a dozen or more functioning rural shrines can be identified in Pausanias' account. No simple and direct correlation can be made therefore between levels of habitation in the countryside and levels of ritual activity. Pausanias and intensive survey between them evoke an early imperial rural landscape still inhabited by its daimons and its gods if not by its people.

How to account then for the maintenance of these numerous cults in the countryside? One force at work must have been the stolid archaism of

Greek life, fostered as it was by Roman cultural demands. It has been claimed that Greece at this time was 'a country learning to be a museum'; a conscious cultivation of the glorious past was clearly a common strategy among Achaian cities in their dealings with the Roman authorities (Bowersock 1965; Cartledge and Spawforth 1989). Economic and political advantage could be winkled out of the indulgent authorities if a city possessed the necessary illustrious pedigree and history. Yet continuity of rural cult cannot be assigned solely to a calculated ossification of religious life, to a desire to 'look old'.

One alternative way forward is to employ a model found useful by the French scholar Franois de Polignac in exploring the birth of the Greek city (de Polignac 1984). Among de Polignac's basic arguments is the claim that monumental extra-urban sanctuaries served as markers of cultural and territorial boundaries. Centrifugal processions from the town out to these sanctuaries helped both to define a city's territory and to foster civic unity. For the early imperial cities, with their much altered civic organisation, labouring under new external pressures and with abandoned rural hinterlands, is there any evidence that similar behaviour was perpetuated?

The continued presence of major rural sanctuaries, where urban dwellers went out to sacrifice and hold festivals, reveals that a ritual 'taking possession' of the land still formed one feature of civic cult. Several cases could be culled from Pausanias. He tells, for instance, how it was the custom of the Phigaleians (citizens of a town in Arcadia) to start their processions from the urban sanctuary of Artemis Soteira out to major civic sanctuaries in the countryside, for example to the Temple of Apollo at Bassae (8.41.4–8). He also gives us one glimpse of such a procession at Hermione in the Southern Argolid (2.35.5–6):

> The manner of it is this. The procession is headed by the priests of the gods and by all those who hold the annual magistracies; these are followed by both men and women. It is now a custom that some who are still children should honour the goddess in the procession. These are dressed in white and wear wreaths upon their heads. . . . Those who form the procession are followed by men leading from the herd a full-grown cow, fastened with ropes, and still untamed and frisky.

On one level, such activity demonstrates a continuing civic commitment to rural cult, and thus to the rural landscape during the early empire. The countryside had not become a place to exploit, then ignore. One can con-

sider in this light the problem of the disintegration of the *polis* unit, that quintessentially Greek union of town and country. Various ancient historians have occasionally asked (and imperfectly answered) what effect Roman conquest had upon that bond. Sanctuaries now can be seen to help preserve the *polis* union, long after many of the other traditional glues (hoplite military service, widespread rural residence) had vanished. When the end of the city-state in Greece is discussed, the evidence of rural sanctuaries must play some part in how that history is written.

Rural cult survival does not present, however, a uniform pattern. Surviving cults were relatively important sanctuaries, at the upper end of the spectrum of visibility or popularity. Surface survey evidence backs up the literary sources on this point. From a small sample of survey data, it would appear that relatively minor local cults, identified through surface evidence alone, go out of use at this time (e.g. Wright et al. 1990; Runnels and Van Andel 1987). Such shrines would have been dependent upon local dwellers, an individual proprietor or perhaps a small rural community: in other words the very people who now abandon rural residence. One is left with the distinct impression that the early imperial period proved a watershed time for small sanctuaries in the countryside; it was this 'minor' level of cult activity that was hard and directly hit by other changes in the rural landscape. A similar, roughly contemporaneous loss of rural shrines was noted in Italy by Martin Frederiksen. He attributed the development to a centralisation of population and economic resources, which in turn encouraged spending and attention on town based cult (Frederiksen 1976; cf. Crawford 1981; Blagg 1985). While to a point his observations match the Greek evidence, they also show by contrast that the Achaian willingness to maintain rural sanctuaries is significant and probably a centrally taken decision. What endures in the countryside are more major 'state run' cults, sanctuaries of a suitable size and prestige.

Who makes such decisions in the cities of Greece during the early empire? If anything is clear from our sources, it is the period's increasing reliance upon euergetism, the largesse of benefactors, to keep civic institutions afloat. This extended into the sphere of religious organisation. Wealthy individuals paid for temple upkeep, held priesthoods, financed festivals, revived defunct celebrations, and restored rural sanctuaries (e.g. Oliver 1971). What can we make of this elite involvement, especially in the case of rural cults? In some cases, a direct personal motivation can be detected behind continued celebrations; prominent families are cult priests or own land nearby. More generally, however, loyalty to local interests can

be observed among the civic elite groups. Support for select rural sanctuaries would have been one strategy selected by benefactors to maintain civic integrity and to boost the chances of civic survival. Those joyous processions from town to countryside also require re-evaluation. While not erasing or denigrating their role in bonding town and country, or even as a communal force uniting elements within the city, those individuals leading the way (Pausanias' priests and magistrates) must have taken on a new pre-eminence. As with the imperial cult, these rituals allowed civic luminaries to shine, marching in processions they often organised to sanctuaries they often subsidised. Celebration of rural cult, in addition to its other roles, created and supported the new social structure of the city.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, we can look again at the three categories of cult location:

> *Displaced cult*, the symbolic disruption of 'natural' pre-existing territorial divisions and loyalties, acted as a controlling device, occurring where Rome's hand fell most heavily or its favour most freely. *Centralised cult*, with no role to play in the countryside, mediated social and political relationships between the external authority and dependent communities, as well as within those communities. *Rural cult* helped to keep the age old bond of town and country from tension and disintegration. Civic elites played a major part in preserving such celebrations, both in order to demonstrate local loyalties and to authorise internal social strategies.

These categories express, in their different ways, changes in the distribution of social power in Greece under Roman rule. When they are reunited and viewed together, common or complementary patterns begin to emerge: the inescapable influence of the imperial authority, competition for prestige and resources among cities and among civic elites, reinforcement of new divisions within society. Observations about sacred landscapes in other Roman provinces, notably in the west, are beginning to emerge, promising a fruitful subject for cross-provincial comparisons (Blagg 1986; Wilson 1973; Picard 1983; Hingley 1985; King 1990).

The degree to which old Greece was affected by Roman conquest has for too long been severely under-estimated, with 'captive Greece' thoughtlessly celebrated as cultural victor. The sacred landscape now adds its testimony against that rather complacent perspective. Where sanctuaries are and

where they are not, which endure and which do not, all reveal new forces at work within the province. Moreover, the organisation of sacred space clearly acted to create and perpetuate this new political environment with its new allegiances. Displacements, foundations, abandonments, endurance: all can be seen in the sacred landscape of early imperial Greece. As one would expect in a human construct, one sensitive to historical change.

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