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LANDSCAPE AND CHTHONIC CULTS IN REPUBLICAN CENTRAL ITALY

Annalisa Calapà¹

¹ *Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München*

The correlation between natural environment and chthonic cults is often especially striking. Cult places for chthonic deities in ancient Italy could be situated in places with exceptional landscape features, such as volcanic crater lakes (the Avernus being the most prominent example) or caves from which suffocating vapours arose, as in the sanctuary of Mephitis at Ampsanctus. A closer examination of our evidence shows that other landscape elements were associated with underworld gods: dei inferi could be worshipped in sanctuaries located by lakes or rivers, on islands, in thick forests (*silvae*) or smaller groves, or by the sea. This paper aims to analyze the circumstances that could lead to the formation of a chthonic cult in a specific environment; this can help to assess how, conversely, the environment could be shaped to create cult places for underworld gods in suburban and rural locations. The analysis presented in this paper, which especially focuses on Etruria, Latium and Campania, can also contribute to outline and to understand other relevant issues. Firstly, many cult places for chthonic deities, because of their particular features, seem to have been characterized as liminal zones and contact zones, which could serve as transcultural meeting places and connect people from different communities with each other. The examination of these peculiar aspects could shed some light on some Etruscan sanctuaries located in border areas by lakes or rivers, which have been mostly considered by researchers as water-related 'healing sanctuaries'. Secondly, the paper will also discuss the evidence suggesting that some cult places for chthonic deities were of special significance for marginal social groups, such as freedmen or slaves.

Keywords

Cult practices, Sacred landscapes, Etrusco-Italic religion, Chthonic cults

Note/comment