

MOUNTAINS OF MEMORY

TRIANGULATING LANDSCAPE, CULT AND REGIONAL IDENTITY THROUGH ZEUS

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Mountains hold a special place in the human mind, possessing a deep ontology unlike any other natural feature. Social geographer Yi-Fi Tuan states: 'modern nations like to think that a high peak, if not the world's highest, lies within their border' (1977: 40). This was no less the case in the pre-modern world, although claims to such heights were typically framed in terms of divine power. Besides political power, mountains can also anchor a special sense of place, intersecting the spheres of the human and the divine. This paper aims to understand the triangular relation between mountains, religion, and regional identity in the ancient world by focusing on three different peak sanctuaries of Zeus: Zeus Lykaeos on Mount Lykaion, Zeus Akraios on Mount Pelion, and Zeus Stratios on a mountain plateau by Amaseia. Each of these peak sanctuaries are assessed for their role in providing a regional focus within emerging political landscapes.

The analysis focuses on the physical mountain, the narratives associated with it, the visibility through viewshed analyses, and the role of ritual and festival as the cult becomes absorbed by a nearby city. Through our analysis, incorporating material evidence such as epigraphy and numismatics, we show that visual prominence was not always their main asset. Local myth and legend played a part in foregrounding these cults in the surrounding regions, helping the mountains to acquire a symbolic and political importance over time.

We conclude by suggesting that these mountain sanctuaries of Zeus provided a focus of social memory, were storied places that became important in the political landscape, and were places claimed by nearby cities to legitimise their own place in the landscape, thereby creating a sense of region.

Keywords

Zeus Cults, Peak Sanctuaries, Mountains, Social Memory, Viewshed Analysis

Note/comment