

Minoan Peak Sanctuaries of East Crete: A Walking Perspective

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*The aim of this paper is to rethink the Minoan peak sanctuaries of East Crete from a walking perspective. Walking will be used as a mean of understanding and embodying the landscape of East Cretan peak sanctuaries, as the only way that someone could reach to a peak sanctuary was (and is) on foot. This relationship can be traced both on Minoan iconography, and on a group of findings from the peak sanctuaries of East Crete, the clay models of human lower limbs.**



Figure 1: View from Petsophas hill. Photo by K. Glaraki.

Introduction

The district of Siteia consists of series of mountain ridges separated by small valleys and where the Early and Middle Bronze Age habitation areas are located. These mountains, the Thryphti or Siteia Mountains, can also give access to high upland plains suitable for summer pasturage (Fig. 1). Overlooking each valley is the highest peak of the enclosing mountain ridge.¹ On these mountains, Minoans chose to establish cult places, the peak sanctuaries. The cult of peak sanctuaries was a manifestation of popular religion,² at least during late Prepalatial and Protopalatial period.³

Since the 1950s and onwards, one of the main goal of the Minoan archaeological research has been the establishment of specific criteria, based on which a site could or couldn't be deemed a "peak sanctuary."⁴ In the last few years, archaeologists have argued that the choice of a specific location for the

establishment of a peak sanctuary was stipulated by topographic factors, like visibility and inter-visibility.⁵ Visibility has to do with the view which the peak commanded. This meant that in some cases the peak sanctuary was not placed on the summit of the relevant mountain, but on a lower peak, which gave better view of the surrounding countryside. Congruent with the view down, equally important seems to have been the view to the peak sanctuary from the settlement. Intervisibility is the visibility in between peak sanctuaries. It is likely that the high intervisibility of early Protopalatial peak sanctuaries in East Crete may have served to unite the settlements in religious practice, as is evidenced in the finds from the peak sanctuaries.⁶

Recent research indicates that a site's topography was the key determinant of a peak sanctuary.⁷ All East Cretan peak sanctuaries lie within the boundaries of agricultural exploitation, either arable or pastoral. People

who established them had experienced the landscape, and the places within it were known entities. It appears that the Minoans chose particular mountain summits to establish a peak sanctuary. Elevation is less important than the necessity of an open, easily accessible area that could accommodate a large number of people.⁸ The nearest settlement associated with a peak sanctuary is regularly oriented towards the steeper and most characteristic side of the hill or the mountain, on which the sanctuary is founded. Thereby, the settlement has achieved the highest degree of visibility to the most prominent and noticeable point of the sanctuary. Their proximity to areas of human activity and exploitation, visibility, and accessibility were factors to transform a place into a cult site that would have functioned as a landmark, a reference center of ritual.

A visit to an East Cretan peak sanctuary makes clear that the landscape is its most dominant feature.⁹ This fact has been underlined by the relevant research and is a reasonable conclusion by taking into account that peak sanctuaries were open-air places during late Prepalatial and Protopalatial period.¹⁰ By the term “landscape,”¹¹ we mean the cognitive or artificial delimitation of the space.¹² Space is the board of action, of existence and is perceivable on its dimensions based on countable features. Place is an area with definite or indefinite boundaries, a portion of space.¹³ Space is a more abstract construct than place. It provides a situational context for places, but derives its meanings from particular places. Without places there can be no spaces and the former have primary ontological significance as centers of physical activity, human significance, and emotional attachment.¹⁴ When landscape is perceived by the human senses all the elements that form it become part of the human memory. Furthermore, when the embodiment of the landscape¹⁵ is performed by a wider group of people, then the landscape becomes part of the communal memory.¹⁶ Thus, through this process each place emerges from a background that people already understand to a degree.

Peak Sanctuaries and Landscape: The Kinetic Experience

From the above mentioned it could be argued that landscape played an important role in choosing the location for a peak sanctuary. Tim Ingold argues that according to what he has called a ‘dwelling perspective’, the landscape is constituted as an enduring record of —and testimony to— the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left something of themselves therein.¹⁷ Landscape tells —or rather is— a story: “a chronicle of life and dwelling.”¹⁸ It enfolds the lives and times of predecessors who, over the generations, have moved around in it and played their part in its formation.¹⁹ This formation is connected to the understanding of each place that constitutes the landscape. The understanding of each place is largely affected by the means we use to engage, and to embody it.²⁰ Moreover, there is a debate about the extent to which the physical abilities and practical habits subconsciously provide the necessary background of human actions.²¹ As Tilley has pointed out, the “discovery” of the loci is accomplished through the human body.²²

The ways to interact with the landscape of the peak sanctuaries are both through visual contact from a distance and through the visit to them. The relevant research, so far, has focused on the visual experience (e.g. visibility and intervisibility). Nevertheless, as the kinetic activities of human beings create apprehension of the landscape and create it as human,²³ it is almost certain that the walking must have played a decisive role in the embodiment of the places that we call “peak sanctuaries.” The only way could someone reach to a peak sanctuary is on foot, and in most of the cases, after a trying climbing. *Kinesthesia*²⁴ is a useful term that helps someone to understand that beyond the allegedly superior senses of vision and hearing in a sedentary world, as our world is, the sense of movement and its attendants could be of high significance in a pedestrian world. As Rockefeller points out, movement



Figure 2: Path leading to Petsophas peak sanctuary. Photo by K. Glaraki.

patterns collectively make up locality and reproduce locality.²⁵ And this is the case for someone living in Bronze Age Crete. Thus, by walking, and daily interaction the sites were incorporated into the individual and collective memories and were emitted as cult places and landmarks. People who visited them, marked the limits with their steps, shaped paths (Fig. 2), and inhaled into the landscape.

Minoan Iconography: Approaching a Peak Sanctuary

Walking is a common activity in Minoan cult practices, as iconography demonstrates. Regarding the iconography that is referring to the peak sanctuaries there are two examples that show men performing cult practices, both dated in Neopalatial period. The first comes from a fragmentary stone rhyton from Gypsades near Knossos. It features a tripartite building on a mountaintop, in front of which a man is bending to handle the contents of a basket. The rocky landscape and the steep slope on which the worshiper has climbed

indicate the location.²⁶ This scene depicts the time after the climbing to a peak sanctuary and shows us a stage of the ritual that was taken place there. A second scene related to the peak sanctuaries is from another stone rhyton fragment from Knossos. The depiction on this fragment features two votaries carrying bowls in their outstretched hands in the foreground. In the background, there is an altar with attached masts or a series of walls forming a type of monumental entranceway to a shrine further uphill.²⁷ These two examples show that the procession towards a peak sanctuary, and walking in general, was an important stage of the ritual practices related to the peak sanctuaries.

Although these two Neopalatial iconographic examples are indicative of the crucial role that walking played at the cult practices related to the peak sanctuaries, a close look at the findings from the peak sanctuaries will shed some more light.

Models of Human Lower Limbs

The Data

There will not be an extensive reference to the findings from the East Cretan peak sanctuaries,²⁸ but I will limit myself to the presentation of those findings, which could be considered reflections of the experiencing the landscape on the ritual practices. I will therefore focus on the findings associated with representations of human lower limbs. These include clay models of leg (namely the thigh and the foot) and clay models of feet only. Clay models of legs have been located in the majority of the East Cretan peak sanctuaries²⁹ and they often have a suspension hole.³⁰ Clay models of feet have been discovered at Etiani Kephala,³¹ Traostalos,³² and Petsophas.³³ Into the group of the models of human lower limbs we can include some clay plaques, on whose upper surfaces are models of human pairs of feet. This kind of plaques has been found so far at Modi and Traostalos.³⁴ In some of the models in reference shoes are indicated.³⁵ Finally, in the same group we can include a clay plaque with an engraved imprint of human foot from Traostalos.³⁶ All these models are dated in Middle Minoan period and are small in size. Since the majority of East Cretan peak sanctuaries remain unpublished yet, it is not easy to present the exact numbers of them. Nevertheless, the preliminary excavation reports show that this group of findings was common in East Cretan peak sanctuaries.

Possible interpretations of the models of lower limbs

Petsophas was the first peak sanctuary that came to light in Crete. The excavation was conducted by Myres in 1903 and yielded models of human lower limbs, among other findings.³⁷ According to Myres, these models were offerings by the pilgrims given to the goddess in gratitude for healing.³⁸ This theory was in accordance with the long Greek tradition of offering anatomical votives to the healing god Asclepius and the modern votives (*tamata*)³⁹ of the Greek Orthodox churches. Nilsson seriously doubted this interpretation

and without offering a cogent alternative explanation, stated that the clay anatomical models were offerings to the “Mistress of the Animals.”⁴⁰ Alexiou shared Nilsson’s view about the receiver of those offerings. He also noted that the anatomical votive symbolized the person who was dedicating it and that there was a practice of throwing these votives into a bonfire as a symbolic purification of the individual.⁴¹ A few years before Alexiou, Marinatos connected the assignment of models of human lower limbs with invocations to treatment and the *iamata* (i.e. votives for healing) of the Asclepius temples. Marinatos argued that these models were so numerous because of the Minoans’ lifestyle and that the gout was a common illness during the Minoan era.⁴²

A kinetic interpretation of the human lower limbs

The interpretation that the clay models of human lower limbs functioned either as gratitude offerings due to a subsequent cure or as an indication of a diseased limb and an invocation for healing has the most supporters.⁴³ However, it is possible to address an alternative interpretation.

Today, as well as during the Bronze Age, the paths that lead to the peak sanctuaries are full of rocks, low vegetation and spiny-brooms. Thereby, walking to a peak sanctuary is a trying activity, and as a result, painful for someone’s feet. A very characteristic example that shows the reaction of the peak sanctuaries’ morphology on people’s feet is the place name of the Petsophas peak sanctuary. Petsophas means “the one who eats the leather soles,” indicating the type of terrain that one must have endured to reach the cult site.⁴⁴ Ingold has stated that modern boots deprived wearers of the possibility of thinking with their feet.⁴⁵ One must imagine that in the Bronze Age Crete people were not equipped with modern soled shoes, anatomically correct or hiking shoes to facilitate their gait. By acknowledging the greater difficulty to access the peak sanctuaries without proper footwear, one could assume that the above-mentioned offerings (clay models of

feet and legs) functioned as symbols of the pilgrims' effort and their embodied experience to reach to that cult place rather than votives for cure. As mentioned above, shoes are indicated in some clay models of lower limbs. Also, clay models of tiny shoes have been found at the peak sanctuary of Traostalos.⁴⁶ The shoe indication at the models of lower limbs and the shoe models of Traostalos endure the idea that these offerings were references to walking, as shoes would be important, necessary, and precious⁴⁷ for someone moving on the rocky terrain trying to reach to the peak sanctuary.⁴⁸ Through the dedication of these offerings, pilgrims were sending a message to the deity that in order to reach to the peak sanctuary, they either hurt their legs or they sacrificed a valuable possession (shoes) in her/his honour. Therefore, it is likely that pilgrims could have dedicated real shoes that have left no archaeological traces to the present.

Conclusions

The relationship between landscape, its embodiment from the people who visited the peak sanctuaries, and its reflection on the findings and the cult practices could be further studied. Nevertheless, the aim of this paper is to examine whether we can assume an embodied perception of peak sanctuaries' landscape in East Crete and if the archaeological record can verify this embodiment. Thus, I believe that something like this is possible. On the one hand, there is the strategic choice for the placement of peak sanctuaries, places integrated in the everyday life experience and the communal memory, but on the other hand there is a high quantity of models of human lower limbs —and in some occasions clay shoe models. These artifacts function as reflections of their dedicators' perception of the lived landscape and therefore as indices of a kinaesthetic process and transferors of this embodiment to their receiver, namely the deity.

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Endnotes:

- 1 Peatfield 1987, 274.
- 2 Peatfield 1990, 127; 1994, 23.
- 3 Peatfield 1987, 90; Nowicki 1994; Wright 1995.
- 4 Platon 1951, 96-160; Faure 1962, 1963, 1967, 1969, 1972; Rutkowski 1972, 152- 156; 1986, 73-75; 1988, 74-76.
- 5 Peatfield 1987, 1990, 1994; Nowicki 1994; Morris and Peatfield 2002; Soetens et al. 2002, 2; Soetens et al. 2003, 485.
- 6 Soetens et al. 2006.
- 7 C.f. Rutkowski 1972, 152- 156; 1986, 73-75; 1988, 74-76; Peatfield 1983; 1987, 90; 1994, 22; 2009; Nowicki 1994, 34-39; Morris and Peatfield 2002, 107.
- 8 Peatfield 1983, 274-275; 1994, 23.
- 9 During the summer of 2012, I visited 14 East Cretan peak sanctuaries as part of my research for my MPhil dissertation. Visits were made at the peak sanctuaries of Thylakas, Prinias, Petsophas, Piskokephalo, Trachilos Phaneromenis, Modi, Kalamaki, Traostalos, Ksykephalo, Vigla, Etiani Kephala, Plagia, Korfi toy Mare, and Trachilas Ksirokampou.
- 10 Cf. Rutkowski 1988; Nowicki 1994, esp. 40- 41. During Neopalatial period buildings are erected at two East Cretan peak sanctuaries, Petsophas (Vavouranakis 2011b) and Traostalos (Chryssoulaki 2001).
- 11 According to *New Oxford American Dictionary* (NOAD) there are two main meanings for landscape: it can refer to the visible features of an area of land, or to an example of the genre of painting that depicts such an area of land.
- 12 *NOAD* determines space as a continuous area or expanse that is free, available, or unoccupied. For an alternative definition cf. Ingold 1993, 155.
- 13 For a thorough consideration of the terms landscape, place, space, and landscape archaeology in general cf. Vavouranakis 2011a, 14-17; 2012.
- 14 Tilley 1994, 15.
- 15 According to Low (2003, 10) embodied space is the location where human experience and consciousness take on material and spatial form.
- 16 In contrast see Bastien 1985 and Fernandez 1988, who regard landscape as a container of memory, morality and emotion and Massey 2006 who sees landscape as a provocation.
- 17 Ingold 2000, 189.
- 18 Adam 1998, 54.
- 19 Ingold 2000, 189.
- 20 According to Csordas (1994, 12) embodiment can be seen as an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world.
- 21 Taylor 1993, 2000; Wrathall 2000.
- 22 Tilley 1994, 13; 2004, 10. Vice versa Brown (2000) discusses how the “performativity” of space, through its metaphorical properties, constrains and defines the body and personal identity.
- 23 Tilley 1994, 13.
- 24 Coined based on ancient Greek κινέω (I put in motion) + αίσθησις (sensation) and means the sensation or perception of movement/ the perception of the position and posture of the body.
- 25 Rockefeller 2001.
- 26 Alexiou 1963, pl. IST; Shaw 1978, 440-441, fig. 10; Marinatos 1993, 121, fig. 87.
- 27 Evans 1928, fig. 486; Shaw 1978, 440 n. 21; Marinatos 1993, 121.
- 28 The most common finds from peak sanctuaries are human figurines, models of human limbs, animal figurines, pebbles and pottery. See Watrous 1995.
- 29 Petsophas: Myres 1902/1903, 347-375; Rutkowski 1991, 91- 102, pls. 45- 46; Thylakas: Reinach 1913, 278- 300; Maza: Platon 1951, 109- 110, pl. E: 2, 9; Traostalos and Etiani Kephala: Davaras 1980, pl. II left; Chryssoulaki 2001, 62 – 63; Prinias: Davaras 1983, fig. 42; Trachilos Phaneromenis: Nowicki 2012, 150.
- 30 For the examples from Petsophas see Rutkowski 1991, 32 and 34, who states that the suspension hole was for hanging the votive limbs in a sacred image or idol, obviously influenced by the modern practice of suspending offerings in Greek Orthodox churches. Nevertheless, there is not a single example of the presence of sacred images in the Minoan Crete. For the discussion on the presence of Minoan sacred idols see Watrous (1996, 39) who mentions the finding of a part neck, shoulder and head that belonged to a figurine, whose total height is estimated at 3 m. See also Cromarty 2008, 57.
- 31 Davaras 1980, pl. II, down left corner.
- 32 Chryssoulaki 2001, 62.
- 33 Davaras 1980, pl. II down right.
- 34 A clay model that represents a foot encased in a pointed boot with slightly up-turned toes was found at the Neopalatial Syme Sanctuary in Crete (Muhly 2012).
- 35 Davaras 1980, pl. I; Rutkowski 1991, pl. 45:9
- 36 Davaras 1980.
- 37 Myres 1902/1903.
- 38 Myres 1902/1903, 381.
- 39 *Tamata* are a form of votive offering or ex-voto used in the Eastern Orthodox Churches, particularly the Greek Orthodox Church. *Tamata* are usually small metal plaques, which may be of base or precious metal, usually with an embossed image symbolizing the subject of prayer for which the plaque is offered. *Tamata* may be offered to an icon or shrine of a saint as a reminder of a petitioner's particular need, or in gratitude for a prayer answered.
- 40 Nilsson 1950, 74- 75.
- 41 Alexiou 1964, 89-90.
- 42 Marinatos 1959, 30. In East Crete, clay models of feet seem to have been more numerous than hands. This predominance of feet over hands corresponds to later Greco-Roman votives —where indeed there is a predominance of the offered limbs (Lang 1977, figs. 14, 25; Arnott 1999, 5). From a medical point of view Potter (1989, 97-98) has proposed that feet are more

vital than the hands, because injuries on the former affect the sufferer much more and healing is more difficult.

43 Ghiannoulidou 1979, 39- 40; Van Straten 1981, 146; Verbruggen 1981, 115-117; Warren 1988, 27; Peatfield 1990, 120- 122; 1992, 73- 74; 1995, 220; Sakellarakis 1994, 197; 1996, 84- 85; Arnott 1999, 5; Chryssoulaki 1999, 314- 316; Georgoulaki 2006, 388; Morris 2009, 179; Davaras 2010, 76.

44 Spanakis 1964, 435.

45 Ingold 2011, 39.

46 Chryssoulaki 2001, 62

47 Black high-boots are part of the Cretan men's traditional costume. Even today, Cretan shepherds of the old school, who spent their time on the mountains, wear black high-boots on ordinary occasions (Rackham and Moody 1996, 154).

48 Muhly (2012, esp. 137) referring to a clay model of a foot encased in a pointed boot that was found at the Syme Sanctuary states that "the Syme model would have also served as a commemoration of a pilgrim's arduous journey through the mountains to participate to the rituals carried out at remote Syme and perhaps also as a request for protection to ensure his eventual return to the sanctuary."

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