

Greek Idylls: Temples, Gods, and the Landscape

Multiple Locations

Photographs by Alan Ward 1977-2006

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

During the Classical period in Greece from about 500 to 300 BC., mountains, coastlines, and groves were symbolic and invested with meaning. Selected sites that epitomized these types of landscapes were experienced as hallowed ground, a threshold to the divine experience of the gods. The first four photographs are emblematic of landscapes that activated these feelings and sensations, beginning with sacred groves of olive trees and carob trees (1,2). Groves were transitional spaces where the everyday perception of the world gave way to the subjective consciousness of the deities. Many groves included shrines and altars, and occasionally temples, such as the Temple of Concordia in Argento, Sicily, where visitors believed they could hear the voices of the gods (5). A sacred olive tree at the Acropolis in Athens (24) honors the myth of Athena and her gift to the people of the first olive tree. A sacred grove, a memorial to the hero Academus, was the prominent setting for Plato as a sanctuary for teaching and learning, just outside the walls of Athens; it was a middle ground between the ordered and built *polis* (the city) and nature; and the term “academy” has its origins from Plato’s teaching in this landscape setting. Zeus and Poseidon were born under olive trees, and these sacred groves were so venerated by the classical Greeks, that they are some of the earliest landscapes to be considered for preservation.

Mountains and water were also vital symbols to the ancient Greeks in their conceptual scheme of the world. Mountains were, of course, the

home of the gods, as well as the meeting point between earth and the heavens. The mountainous topography of the Greek peninsula was sacred, but it also shaped political divisions leading to the formation of the independent Greek city states in the valley landscapes between mountains. Water was also metaphorical as a sacred force and symbol of creation. Coastlines were mythical zones between humans and the gods. For example, the rocks of Aphrodite, off of the coast of Cyprus near Paphos, achieve a mythical status as the birthplace of Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty (3). The panoramic photograph shows the distinctive shape of the land which comes to a point, along with a series of large stones stepping into the sea, each decreasing in size, to make this distinctive and recognizable allegorical landscape.

The siting of the Temple to Poseidon at Sounion is experienced as a balanced fusion of mountains and water with a simple Doric structure perched on a sixty-meter-high promontory overlooking the Aegean Sea (6,7). It was a highly charged symbolic location, as well as a navigational beacon, because Poseidon was the god of the sea, one of twelve Greek Olympians, which led sailors seeking safe voyages to frequent the site. Common to numerous locations across the Mediterranean, temples were oriented toward conical-shaped mountains, as can be seen in the photographs of the temple at Sounion (6,7).¹ The temple represents Poseidon, prominent in the landscape and represented in the structure itself, while in a dialogue

1. Vincent Scully, Jr., *The Earth, the Temple, and the Gods: Greek Sacred Architecture*, 1962

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

with the sea and the horizon. Another temple site with an enduring relationship to the sea can be seen in the photograph of Kourion, near Limassol in Cyprus, which is a strategically located site that was later overlaid with Roman and Byzantine structures (8).

My first trip to Greece was decades ago as a student in architecture to experience directly classical buildings in their context. As a guide, I took a marked-up copy of the 1962 book by the architectural historian Vincent Scully: *The Earth, the Temple, and the Gods*. Scully's work was a comprehensive study of how the architecture of Greek temples embodied an expression of the gods, as well as the site planning of these sacred buildings, and the significance of their relationship to the landscape as having divine attributes and sacred connotations. Scully described and illustrated in example after example across the Mediterranean, how the landscape and especially sacred mountains, figured in the siting of temples to the gods. It was a powerful introduction to the potential to experience both meaning and symbolic expression in the landscape.

The landscape was fundamental to the siting of Greek theaters that were built into the natural, concave topography of hillsides. The view outward of mountains, sky, and the sea was a natural and meaningful backdrop to events and performances (32). The shape was remarkably beneficial for both acoustics and sightlines to performers, allowing up to

15,000 people to see and hear clearly the actors. The theater at the Asklepios of Epidaurus (30-32) and the theater of Dionysus at the Acropolis in Athens (29), each functioned as a combination of a civic center, entertainment venue, and religious sanctuary. The theater at the Acropolis was named after Dionysus, the Greek god of wine-making, orchards, as well as theater. Dionysus was honored at evening events, that were basically drinking parties, where entertainment was first provided, that evolved over time into theatrical performances staged at these open-air theaters.²

The title of this portfolio: *Greek Idylls: Temples, Gods, and the Landscape* recounts Vincent Scully's research on Greek temples, as well as idylls. Popularized by Theocritus, an idyll is a poem that is the first literature about the everyday, inhabited landscape. Around 300 BC, Theocritus wrote thirty poems, which had a realism that praised both urban life and the simple beauties of a bucolic and pastoral landscape outside the city. His work was rediscovered in the Renaissance, influencing Romantic poets and writers in England in idealizing the countryside, including Alexander Pope in the eighteenth century, whose designs and writings had a profound influence on the making of the English Garden. Pope advocated for designs that were pastoral and naturalistic with the "simplicity of unadorned Nature."³ Many of the sentiments first put forward by Theocritus were echoed in Pope's writings and continue to resonate today.

2. Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat, *A History of Food*, translated from French by Anthea Bell, 1992

3. John Dixon Hunt and Peter Willis, *The Genius of Place: The English Garden 1620-1820*

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