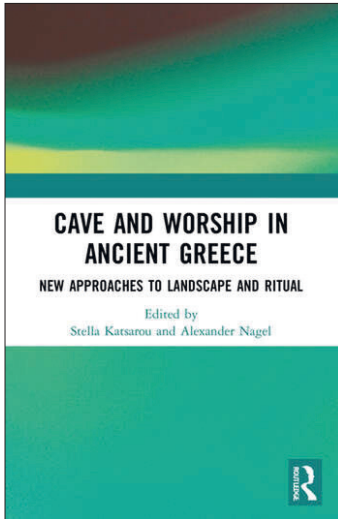


## CAVE AND WORSHIP IN ANCIENT GREECE




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DARK CAVES ARE LIT BY FLICKERING FLAMES, AND THE REFLECTION of water dances upon the ceiling, where stalactites hang, dripping with condensation. Such are the images one encounters when thinking about cave sites in the ancient world as places for potential religious experience. *Cave and Worship in Ancient Greece. New Approaches to Landscape and Ritual* edited by Stella Katsarou and Alexander Nagel contains an assortment of essays on the topic of ancient Greek cave shrines. According to the editors, the goal of this volume is “to situate the ancient Greek cave shrine

on the forefront as an independent and important source of archaeology, providing insights to the practical, behavioral, and social aspects of worship and their relation to the ancient Mediterranean environment” (p. 1). The edited volume presents a cohesive sample of case studies that positions the work within broader scholarship on the archaeology of ritual, sensory/phenomenological archaeology, and gender archaeology. The essays address the following questions: Who were the worshippers in these caves? What types of sensory experiences did those who worshipped in these caves encounter? What types of rituals occurred within the caves? Finally, what can a study of these caves reveal about social and political networks regarding local and non-local use of these spaces and their possible relationship to polis religion? Despite the array of case studies and the diverse approaches of the authors, these questions are considered in each chapter, thus creating a coordinated and balanced volume.

The archaeology of caves and cave shrines typically engages with phenomenological or sensorial practices when trying to reconstruct ancient religious ritual and experience, and the essays within this volume are no exception. Phenomenology, which became popular in archaeology in the 1990s and 2000s, emerged from British archaeology’s post-processual movement, and there have been many criticisms of it over the years.<sup>1</sup> Mainly, scholars have challenged the assumption that what we see and experience now would have been conceived of in the same way in ancient times, and critics argue that phenomenological claims cannot easily be evaluated using archaeological methods. More recently, “sensory archaeology” has become popular, especially in classical archaeology.<sup>2</sup> However, to some scholars sensory archaeology appears to be a rebranding of phenomenology, or, at the very least, most researchers acknowledge that it is a movement that grew directly out of phenomenological research.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, despite some of the very valid critiques of phenomenology and sensory archaeology, I found the discussions of sensory experiences in caves in this volume intriguing. In particular, Nassos Papalexandrou (ch. 3, “Caves as Sites of Sensory and Cognitive Enhancement. The Idaean Cave on Crete”, pp. 49-69) discusses compelling case studies from cultural anthropologists who have documented a seemingly similar response to the use of caves for religious practices and rites across the globe throughout different time periods and locations, and Erica Angliker (ch. 9, “Cult and Ritual in Cycladic Caves”, pp. 188-213) likewise offers examples of caves that have continuously been used since antiquity as spaces of religious worship and

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1. Johnson, 2012.

2. Hunter-Crawley, 2019.

3. Skeates & Day, 2019b.

places of epiphany. Both chapters link the specific physical features of caves to the perception of caves as numinous, liminal spaces both in the past and in more recent times. Papalexandrou's argument goes a step further, incorporating material studies to discuss how exotic materials and sensory driven objects housed within caves such as the Idaean Cave on Crete would further contribute to a unique experience. Angliker, on the other hand, focuses on the spatial accessibility of the caves and how their physical location combined with the caves' geologic features create unique experiences sought by the individual worshipper. This theme of a person's sensory experience in caves appears throughout all chapters of the volume, but both Papalexandrou and Angliker forefront this theme in their analysis in a particularly captivating way.

The authors of the volume also take on the Herculean task of attempting to reconstruct cave rituals and identifying the worshippers. The archaeology of ritual, while part of a theoretical and methodological turn that emerged nearly twenty years ago, continues to offer a valuable way for archaeologists to attempt to identify religious activity in the material record.<sup>4</sup> For cave sites, which generally lack stratigraphic data due to both human and natural activities such as looting and natural erosion, reconstructing ritual is particularly difficult. Nevertheless, the authors of the volume put forth some fascinating evidence for different types of ritual practices in Greek caves. This evidence consists mainly of hearths, ceramics, graffiti, and votive assemblages. Here I will highlight a few examples of the volume's exciting approaches to ritual. In ch. 4, "Caves and Consumption. The Case of Polis Bay, Ithaca" (pp. 70-92), Catherine Morgan and Chris Hayward undertake a comprehensive study of all ceramic material from the Polis "cave" site in Ithaca to explore evidence of ritual feasting, leading to a reinterpretation of the site, which scholars have previously discussed only in "Homeric" terms. Their results indicate that a more robust approach to ceramic analysis at other cave sites could produce further meaningful data. Alexander Nagel in ch. 6, "A River Ran Through It. Circulating Images of Ritual and Engaging Communities in Aitolokarnania" (pp. 115-143) discusses the appearance of large collections of shells, which he posits were brought by worshipers who picked up these shells from the Acheloos River. He makes interesting connections between these offerings and what they may imply for the nature of water and worship at the Mastro cave sanctuary. In ch. 8, "The Face of Cave Rituals. Terracotta Figurines in Greek Sacred Caves" (pp. 167-187), Katja Sporn asks the very important question of whether terracotta figurines were only used as gifts left in caves for the gods, or whether these figurines could have served an active role

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4. See Insoll, 2004, pp. 65-100, and the edited volume by Kyriakidis, 2007.

in ritual acts. Her identification of examples of burned terracotta figurines pushes the conversation of religious offerings and their use in ritual to a new level and opens the door for future research on this topic.

Another subject that connects several chapters in the volume concerns the identity of Greek cave worshipers. Ch. 5, “Communities, Consumption, and a Cave. The Profile of Cult at Drakaina Cave on Kephallonia” (pp. 93-114) by Agathi Karadima, ch. 7, “The Cave of Pan at Marathon, Attica. New evidence for the Performance of Cult in the Historic Era” (pp. 144-166) by Jorge J. Bravo III and Alexandra Mari, and ch. 8, “The Face of Cave Rituals. Terracotta Figurines in Greek Sacred Caves” (pp. 167-187) by Katja Sporn attempt to reconstruct the gender identity of worshippers based upon the votive offerings recovered from cave sites. The authors of these chapters appear to have been influenced by the recent work of Stéphanie Huysecom-Haxhi and Arthur Muller, who push back against the traditional narrative that the votives represented the deities being worshipped, and instead argue that many female votive figurines from the 4<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE onward represent the people making the dedications and not the gods.<sup>5</sup> Several authors in the volume deploy this theory to argue that the terracotta votives must be from female dedicators. The argument by Huysecom-Haxhi and Muller is interesting, as is Karadima’s, Bravo III and Mari’s, and Sporn’s suggestion that such a reading of the material may allow us to make further conjectures about who was worshipping at Greek cave sites. If we follow the traditional theory that the votives represent deities and not the dedicator, then men as well as women could have dedicated these figurines. However, if we think of these votives as representations of humans and not deities, we open up new potential avenues of investigation. The argument by these authors that the votives could represent the worshipers is certainly possible, but it is not the only option. I offer a third alternative, which is that these votives could represent a human female family member on behalf of whom the dedicator made an offering. Just as the votives representing children and babies were likely not dedicated by the children themselves, but rather by an adult seeking help or protection for that child, the votives of women could represent a female relative or wife for whom the dedicator is seeking protection. In this case, we cannot assume that the gender of the worshipper is in alignment with that of the individual represented in votive form. The question of who dedicated these votives is strongly tied to how we interpret the figurines and whom they are meant to represent.

Another possible way to think about the question of who left these votive offerings in the cave is to try to identify materials that belong to a certain gendered

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5. Huysecom-Haxhi & Muller, 2007 and 2015b.

“sphere” based on what we know about gendered activities within a particular culture. This is the tactic used by Rebecca Miller Ammerman in ch. 10, “Grottoes and the Construction of Cult in Southern Italy” (pp. 214-247) and, to an extent, by Bravo III and Mari in ch. 7, which I find to be a more compelling approach than aligning the worshiper’s gender with that of the gender represented by a votive figurine. However, one can also critique this method. For example, it is often assumed, when trying to identify items involving women and female spheres, that any type of votive of a child or baby was likely dedicated by a woman who wanted to have children. However, I do not think that we can assume that men in the ancient world were not also concerned with the prospect of conceiving children. I agree with the authors in this volume that we should attempt to better distinguish traces of people who historically are difficult to detect because they come from more marginalized or silenced communities, such as women, children, and the non-elite. Although there are still some possible pitfalls, I personally am more convinced by arguments that discuss materials pertaining to generalized spheres of gendered activity reinforced by other types of evidence, including artistic, archaeological, literary, and epigraphic sources.

Beyond gender, the authors in this volume also investigate evidence of local versus non-local visitors to the caves. Many of these studies suggest that the caves under examination were used primarily by local inhabitants. Nagel’s argument in ch. 6 about the evidence of local choroplastic production and how it was linked to ritual use of the Mastro cave during community gatherings is very persuasive. In ch. 9, Angliker reveals that while many of the examples of material from cave sites in the Cyclades were likely made by locals, there is also the example of the cave of Antiparos, where graffiti commemorate the presence of foreign visitors from various Greek islands, colonies in Africa, and places on the Greek mainland. Thus, while a surprising number of sites in these essays showed local use of cave sites, the types of evidence preserved (*i.e.* material object versus epigraphy or graffiti) may also impact our understanding of the types of visitors who worshiped at Greek cave sites.

According to the editors, the overall goal of the volume is to identify Greek cave shrines as their own unique category. The authors of the various chapters approach this subject primarily through archaeological evidence of rituals performed inside of or in front of caves. Yet, ritual activity is not necessarily indicative of religious activity, as several of the chapters note. Rituals are repeated actions, but they are not inherently of a religious nature.<sup>6</sup> In ch. 2, “The Dawn of Ancient Greek Cave Cult. Prehistoric Cave Sanctuaries” (pp. 17-48), Katsarou provides a very interesting discussion

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6. Bradley, 2005.

of the differences in the use of caves for both sedentary and non-sedentary societies. She presents evidence that cave spaces in the Neolithic period functioned not only as religious spaces, but also as spaces for domestic and funerary activities. While Katsarou's investigation clearly indicates that ritual evidence can denote religious and non-religious activity, the use of the term ritual is not as consistent throughout the entire volume. Reconstructing ritual and ritual intention is a complex process, and the addition of a definition of ritual in the introductory chapter could help clarify for the reader the relationship of "ritual" and "religion" as discussed in this book.

This volume lays the groundwork for future exciting inquiry into how we define Greek cave cult sites. One particular point that became evident after reading these essays was the broad definition of what constitutes a "cave". As most of the authors note, there is no formal shape to many so-called "caves" in Greece because they are the result of karst terrain. In ch. 1 "Introduction. On Reading Caves and Ancient Greek Cult" (pp. 1-16), Stella Katsarou and Alexander Nagel note that Greek caves can vary greatly "from rock shelters and shallow cavities, usually appearing on eroded cliffs and littoral zones, to very deep and complex horizontal and vertical subterranean chambers manifesting rich natural decoration by speleothems and active water resources around dripping stalagmites, lakes, or even rivers" (p. 3). Part of the difficulty with trying to link caves to particular types of cultic rituals is that we approach caves as if they were all the same. The studies in this volume demonstrate that different caves had a variety of physical shapes and characteristics; thus, moving forward, perhaps a study that takes into account the different types of cave formations, shapes, and ease of accessibility might further be able to define whether certain types of caves were, indeed, associated with particular types of ritual and religious activities. The foundation for such a study has already been laid by Katja Sporn, Jere Mark Wickens, and E. Loeta Tyree, who have catalogued Greek cave sites in Attica and on Crete.<sup>7</sup> A systematic study focused specifically on comparing the physical aspects of caves alongside the evidence for how they were used in ancient times appears to be a necessary next step for understanding Greek cave cults.

The essays in this volume also raise the question of how the ancient Greeks conceptualized cave sanctuaries. For example, in ch. 4, Morgan and Hayward demonstrate by means of geological study that the Polis "cave" was never an actual cave with a covered roof, and yet the finds are not dissimilar from those found in other Greek cave cult sites. In ch. 6, Nagel discusses the idea of "wilderness" being associated with the Greek conception of a "cave", and indeed the location of these cave sites and their

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7. Tyree, 1974; Wickens, 1986; Sporn, 2020.

proximity to known cities is a recurring theme in many chapters. The final chapter by Ammerman, which is a bit different from the others in that it investigates Greek cult sites in southern Italy, explores votive representations of caves to the nymphs to better understand what particular traits of cave shrines were important. These questions about the mental conception of caves are inherently rooted in the physical, geological, and topographical characteristics of caves, as this volume has shown. A future, systematic examination of the typology of Greek caves and their material remains may give us a better idea of how the ancient Greeks conceptualized natural cave features and how some caves became sites of cultic rites.

Overall, this volume does an excellent job of foregrounding the idea of the cave as a site of distinct ritual activity in ancient Greek culture. Despite the scanty, fragmentary, and often highly disturbed contexts of archaeological material, the authors of this volume present cohesive arguments regarding cave ritual and religious worship. The authors also ask such questions as who the worshipers in these Greek cave sites were, and how might we begin to investigate gender identity and local versus nonlocal identity of ritual participants. Incorporating the methods of cultural anthropology into archaeological investigations of sensory experiences allows the authors to present interesting data and theorize how ancient viewers may have perceived cave spaces. The volume offers substantive contribution to the study of cultic cave sites and provides interesting avenues for future scholarship on the topic of Greek cave sites as places of cult practice.

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