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Spatial Performativity in the Natural Environment. On the Origins of the Asclepieion at Epidaurus

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Abstract

Spatial performativity is the capacity of the environment to influence the performances and mental and emotional states of its occupants. Within the natural environment, sacred places would be those with the greatest spatial performativity, becoming the centres that have structured territories throughout history. The choice of certain places as sacred would have been determined by their being important territorial landmarks, structurally, visually and semantically relevant, and also emotionally charged.

The sanctuary of Asclepius at Epidaurus is located on the slopes of Mount Kynortion, in the pass that connects the Argolid plain with the Saronic Gulf. Mount Kynortion was an important territorial landmark and the plateau on its slopes, where the sanctuary of Asclepius was located, was soon associated with curative properties, which reinforced its importance as a territorial landmark and gave it the status of a sacred site. The spatial performativity of the landmark, combined with the social practices that took place at the important crossroads where the plateau is located, together with the qualities of the environment, gave rise to its sacred healing character, standing as one of the most famous Panhellenic sanctuaries of antiquity.

Keywords: Spatial performativity, ritual space, sacred space.

Spatial Performativity in the Natural Environment

As part of the research on the performativity of ritual space that we are currently conducting, taking as a case study the choice of place in the origins of the Sanctuaries of Apollo Maleatas and Asclepius at Epidaurus, this paper aims to clarify how the spatial performativity of the natural environment could influence the choice of a place as a sacred space and how it could determine the type of cult that was established there.

Spatial Performativity¹

Drawing on Ervin Goffman's (1958, p. 8) definition of performance as “an action carried out by a participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way in any of the other participants”, we define “spatial performativity” as the potential of space to influence the activity of its occupants.

Spatial performativity acts when the occupants of a space are exposed to the qualities of the space: shape, size, lighting, temperature, acoustics, humidity, smell, colours and textures of its constituent elements, etc. The responses that these spatial qualities evoke in the occupants of the space may be genetically or culturally predetermined, or they may be learned through the individual's own experience. In most species, responses are genetically predetermined by evolution in their adaptation to the environment, whereas in humans, cultural responses and those generated by the individual's own experience predominate.

Over thousands of years of interaction with the environment, humans have created their own environment, unconsciously experimenting with the spatial performativity offered first by the natural environment and then by the modifications they made to the environment to inhabit it, to make it their home. Some authors understand the process of the construction of the environment as a process of ritualisation, in which the ritualised environment would act as a means of ritualising its inhabitants; that is, the ritual action would be imprinted on the space in the form of spatial performativity which in turn would ritualise its inhabitants, thus completing a circular process of ritualisation of the individuals in a society (Bell, 2009a, pp. 98–99).

Obviously, within the ritualised environment, spatial performativity is particularly intense in what we commonly recognise as ritual spaces. The ritual space could be defined as a space in which ritual activities take place and which is characterised by formalism, traditionalism, immutability, is governed by rules, contains sacred symbolism and is a highly performative space.² These characteristics are materialised in ritual space as architectural mechanisms of ritualisation through which spatial performativity operates. In addition, Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw (1994) argue that the only thing that distinguishes ritual action from any other kind of action is the state of mind with which it is performed, what Evangelos Kyriakidis (2002) has called a specific “frame of mind.” To a large extent, the sensory stimuli produced by spatial qualities could help to generate the specific “frame of mind” of ritual action. The spatial qualities

¹ In the essay *The Performativity of Ritual Space* (Berzal Cruz, 2023), the concept of “spatial performativity” is further developed.

² Since the publication of Catherine Bell's work, *Ritual. Perspective and Dimensions*, many authors have adopted as characteristics of ritual what she listed as “six neither exclusive nor definitive categories for assessing the degree of ritualisation of an activity: formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule-governance, sacral symbolism and performance” (Bell, 2009b, pp. 138-164). Bell argues that these ritualisation categories or characteristics of the ritual are also categories of ritualised space or characteristic of ritual space.

of the natural environment produce the sensory stimuli from which humans learned and reproduced in their construction of the environment. In the early days of environmental construction, the spatial performativity produced by sensory stimuli must have been fundamental in the choice of a place to establish a particular activity, especially in the choice of sacred sites as fixed centres of human space.

Sacred Space

All ritual spaces have a certain degree of sacredness, as sacred symbolism is one of their characteristics, and it is common to find in them a fixed point where the highest degree of sacred symbolism is reached. Rituals can be performed in a sacred space, but as it attains its status as the “centre of the world”, the sacred space becomes a forbidden space, accessible only to the chosen, and often the rituals associated with it are performed in its immediate vicinity, as in the *sancta sanctorum* of temples and shrines.

Mircea Eliade (1959, pp. 21-22) defines sacred space in opposition to profane space; sacred space would be strong, meaningful, while profane space would be amorphous, without structure or consistency.³

In the homogeneous and infinite expanse, in which no point of reference is possible and hence no orientation can be established, the *hierophany* reveals an absolute fixed point, a centre. From this “centre” the human being can construct the sacred space and ritualise space.

We could say that the *hierophany* that reveals the sacred place would be produced, among other factors, by the spatial performativity of the place; that is, the sensory stimuli produced by the spatial qualities would create an “emergent mood” in its occupants that would cause them to perceive the place as sacred.

The most primitive of the “sacred places” we know of constituted a microcosm, (...) a landscape of stones, water, and trees (...) The place is never “chosen” by man; It is merely discovered by him; in other words, the sacred place in some way or another reveals itself to him. Eliade (1958, pp. 269,369)

In other words, sacred space is part of the natural environment before it was discovered. Of course, humans have constructed sacred spaces, just as we have constructed the rest of our environment, even creating a portable sacred space, as in the case of the tabernacle of

³ More recently, Marc Verhoeven (2011, 125-126) has argued that the profane-sacred dichotomy established by, among others, Mircea Eliade, and still used explicitly or implicitly, is too simplistic. For him, it is obvious that there are sacred and profane contexts, but he believes that it is probably more productive to see the sacred and the profane as two ends of a continuum. Many contexts and activities lie somewhere between these extremes, with varying degrees or qualities of the sacred and the profane. This approach has a clear example in ritual space where, as we have said, there are different degrees of sacredness.

Moses, at the command of Jehovah. But here we are interested in exploring how spatial performativity in the natural environment works to make a place perceived as sacred.

Searching for a Study Method

So how can we systematise the study of the spatial performativity that causes the perception of a place as sacred in the natural environment? Richard Bradley (2000, p. 48) points out that in archaeology sacred places are usually studied through the biography of the objects that were used in offerings; he suggests that we should turn our attention to the biography of the places where these processes occur. Places that were dedicated by different peoples to different supernatural powers and to which they probably offered sacrifices and offerings for different purposes. He argues that the choice of place was probably linked to the characteristics of the deity with which it was associated, as was the type of sacrifice offered to it. In other words, the spatial performativity of the place would evoke a specific “frame of mind” associated with the characteristics or attributes of a type of deity. For example, shrines on particularly prominent peaks in the landscape would be associated with the gods of the sky, storms or rain. Shrines at springs would be associated with the powers of youth, spring, healing, and so on. Very fertile lands would be associated with deities of abundance, motherhood, even agriculture. Places like caves or dark passes would be associated with death, hell, but also rebirth and mystical states.

But not all mountain peaks, springs, fertile lands or caves were considered sacred places. Eliade gives the key to the difference between why some would be considered sacred and others would not: Sacred places are “centres of the world” that organise the amorphous territory; that is, they are landmarks that help to orientate the territory, to structure the land, to give it shape.

At the dawn of humanity, navigating the environment in search of resources required the use of landmarks as spatial references for orientation and recognition of routes, resources and places of social opportunity. As the Palaeolithic archaeologist Paul Pettitt (2011, p. 336) argues, it is easy to imagine that very early in our evolution these landmarks could “begin to be imbued with meaning –places of life, places of opportunity, places of danger, places of death” until they became transcendent.

Massimiliano Palmiero and Laura Piccardi (2017) suggest that topographical memory is strongly supported by object location memory. In particular, they consider that landmarks would play a key role in the construction of cognitive maps of the environment; landmarks being understood as salient environmental cues that function as spatial references. Landmarks are effective for navigation when they are structurally, visually and semantically relevant; structurally with a prominent spatial location, visually with a particular size, colour or shape,

and semantically depending on cultural, historical or personal influences. In addition, landmarks can be emotionally charged, either positively or negatively, which enhances the ability to construct a cognitive map. In the natural environment, effective landmarks can be mountains, rock outcrops, trees, springs, lakes, rivers, etc. with special characteristics that make them recognisable, easily distinguishable from other similar elements in the same environment, whether by height, colour, smell or texture. In other words, they are elements of the landscape that provide a high level of sensory stimulation. In addition, the emotions associated with these elements would make them more effective as landmarks.

On the basis of these clarifications, we can reformulate Bradley's observation as follows: In the natural environment the choice of a place as a sacred space occurs because: first, it is a landmark with high spatial performativity that produces high sensory stimulation and provokes a series of emotions linked to certain supernatural powers; second, these emotions reinforce the effectiveness of the landmark and increase its spatial performativity. Therefore, in order to study how spatial performativity influences the choice of a sacred place, we propose: first, to assess the character of the landmark by observing the sensory stimuli it produces; second, to find possible cultural reactions to these stimuli; and third, to find associations with supernatural powers through which the place was "revealed." We will use this method to try to understand why a place between the mountains of the Saronic and Argolic Gulfs was chosen to found one of the most famous sanctuaries of antiquity, the sanctuary of Asclepius and Apollo Maleatas at Epidaurus.

Spatial Performativity in in the Surroundings of the Asclepieion of Epidaurus

Situated on the slopes of Mount Kynortion (Fig. 3), in the natural corridor between the Argolida and the Saronic Gulf, the sanctuary of Epidaurus was one of the most important and longest active Pan-Hellenic sanctuaries of antiquity, dedicated from its origins to deities associated with healing. The earliest records of human activity date from the end of the Neolithic period and were found on the site where the sanctuary appears to have originated, a terrace of the Kynortion at 482 m above sea level, 1 km away, and 60 m above the plateau on which the Asclepieion would have stood. This hill is the site of the earliest surviving structures, dating from the 3rd millennium BC and corresponding to a settlement of an active Early Helladic community. In the Late Helladic period, the site was the site of an important Mycenaean sanctuary, which included an open-air altar and a large terrace for ritual meals. Around the 7th century BC, the sanctuary was dedicated to Apollo Maleatas. The sanctuary dedicated to Asclepius seems to have been founded at the same time, and the two sanctuaries functioned together without interruption until the end of antiquity (Theodorou-Mavrommatidi, pp.1167-1168).

We have evidence that humans have inhabited the Argolid since at least the Upper Palaeolithic, as evidenced by finds from the Franchthi cave dated to around 38,000 BC (Douka et al., 2011). Since then, the passage between the Argolid and the Saronic Gulf must have been an important route, in which Mount Kynortion must have played an important role as a territorial landmark.

Figure 1

Mount Kynortion from the Ancient Agora of the Asclepieion. (Photo by the author).



The Landmark

Using a cognitive approach, the archaeologist Natalie M. Susmann (2021) examines the importance of Mount Kynortion as a cult landmark. She proposes the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to measure the visual prominence of the elevations surrounding the site. Specifically, she uses the method proposed by Wesley Bernardini et al. (2013, pp, 39-46) to measure the “visual impression,” or the shape of a landform against the horizon. She concludes that Kynortion is the most visually prominent mountain in the valley of the sanctuary of Epidaurus, compared to other surrounding mountains such as Arachnaion (1199 MASL) and Limnes Mountain⁴ (685 MASL). Nevertheless, being the most visually prominent mountain in

⁴ Pausanias describes that above the sanctuary rise two mountains; the “Titthion” (Nipple), formerly called “Myrtle” and “Kynortion” (2,27,5). On Mount Titthion, Asclepio would have been abandoned as a newborn baby and there he was suckled by a goat and protected by a shepherd dog (2:26,5). We use the current common names of the mountains and hills surrounding the sanctuary, with the exception of Kynortion, which seems to be clearly identified. Sussman (2021) identifies Mount Limnes with Mount Myrtle or Titthion, which seems justified given its prominence from the sanctuary, but the small mountain Agios Ilias has also been identified with Mount Titthion, given its more nipple-like shape. Another

the valley does not necessarily make Kynortion an important landmark, and certainly not a sacred site. In order to better understand the choice of the sanctuary's location and its possible connection with Kynortion, we should perhaps analyse the spatial performativity that the mountain exerts on the territory.

The passage between the Argolic plain and the Saronic Gulf (Fig. 3) must have been an important route from the beginning of occupation in the region. Indeed, it certainly was during the Helladic period, especially in the later Helladic period, as evidenced by the surviving Mycenaean roads and bridges. However, looking eastwards from Argos, Tiryns, Midea or Nauplia, Mount Arachnaion is undoubtedly the most important landmark, with a sanctuary on its summit with a similar chronology to that of Mount Kynortion, although it was never inhabited and the only buildings were small altars (Psychoyos & Karatzikos, 2015). Travelling from the plain of the Argolid towards the Saronic Gulf via the two possible routes, it is not until we reach the vicinity of the acropolis of Kazarmas, near where the two routes meet, that Mount Kynortion comes into prominence. Its isolated pyramidal shape, set against the backdrop of the corridor formed to the north by Mount Arachnaion running from west to east and to the south by the similarly developed Mavrovouni, makes Mount Kynortion an important landmark marking the descent towards the port of Epidaurus (Fig. 2).

Figure 2

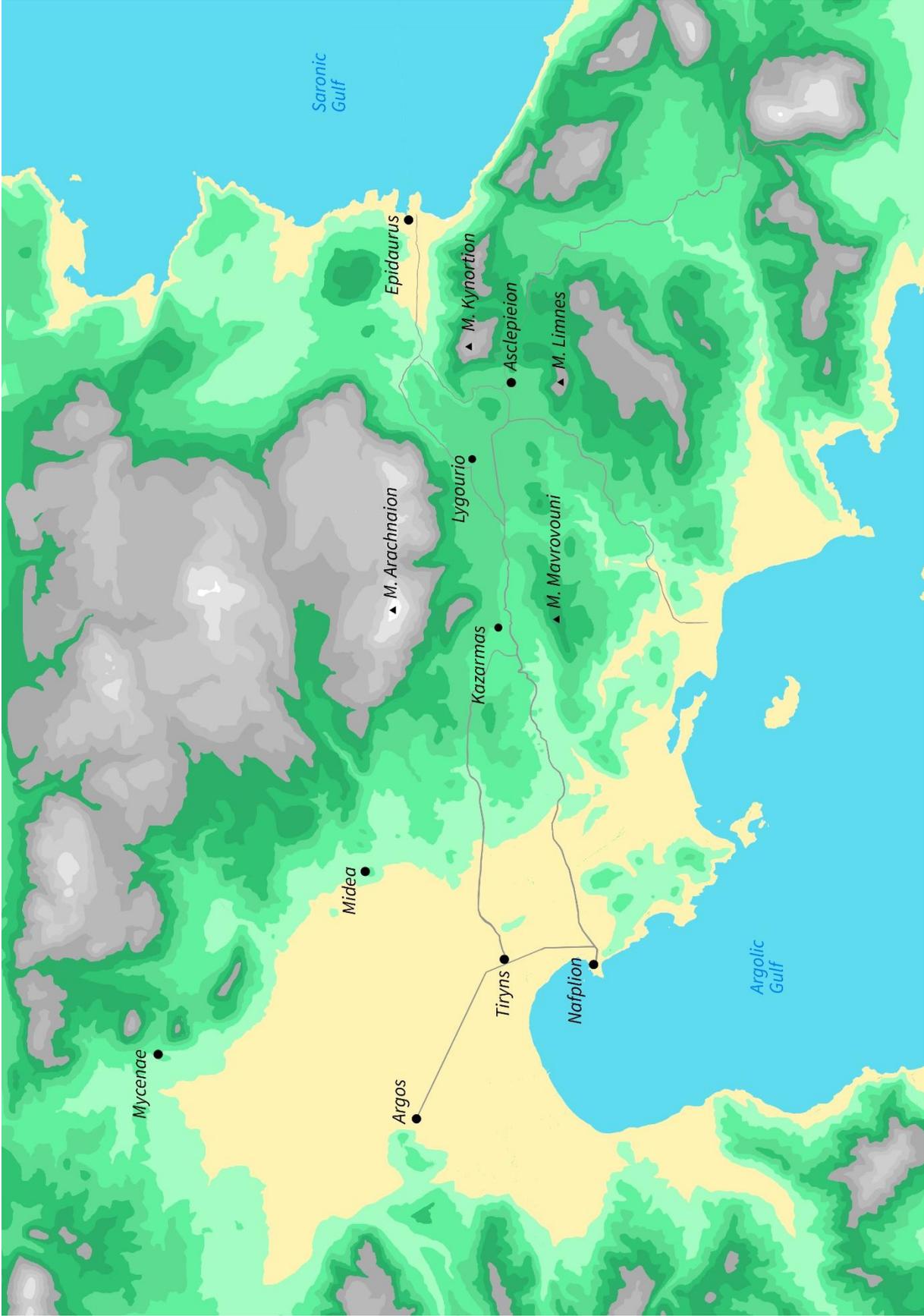
View of the Corridor to Epidaurus from the Crossroads at Kazarmas with Mount Kynortion in the Foreground. (Photo by the author).



mountain mentioned by Pausanias is “Coryphum”, on the top of which stood the sanctuary of Artemis Koryphaeas (2, 28, 2), which has also not been identified. We are inclined to think that Mount Coryphum is also Mount Kynortion.

Figure 3

Map of the Argolida. (Map by the author).



The ancient road to polis of Epidaurus from the Argolid ran along the northern side of the valley and led to Koroni to reach the plateau of the sanctuary, skirting the small Mountain Agios Ilias (471 MASL) that hides it behind it. From the sanctuary, the route continued to the ancient polis of Epidaurus by following the sacred road around the Kynortion down into the valley where the Tsipianiti stream flows, crossing it to continue along the north flatter side of the valley until it reached the harbour. However, the quickest and easiest route was to continue along the north side of the valley, without turning towards Koroni, towards Ligourio and then along the north side of the Tsipinai valley to the sea.

Because of its spatial performativity, Mount Kynortion was an important navigational landmark on both routes and in both directions, Epidaurus-Argolida or Argolida-Epidaurus; once you reach this point from the Epidaurus pass, the valley leads directly to the Argolid plain, and in the opposite direction, from there you only have to descend to the Tsipianiti valley to reach the Saronic Gulf.

Possible Cultural Reactions

As far as we know, the first occupation of the sanctuary took place in the Late Neolithic (5300-4500 BC) or Early Helladic (3200-2000 BC), it was located on Mount Kynortion and its use was for habitation. It was not until the Middle Helladic period (2000-1550 BC) that, after a period of abandonment, the site was used again for sacrificial rituals. Susmann proposes, in line with Joseph Maran's (2016) observations on Tiryns, that the site begins to acquire a sacred character from the Middle Helladic onwards as a product of the social memory of the place. If we accept her hypothesis, then we should first consider how the spatial performativity of the site influenced the construction of a settlement there.

In the vicinity of the first settlement of Apollo Maleatas, sherds from the Early Helladic period have been found in the lower layers of the "Baths of Asclepius," at Asclepieion. Two other Early Helladic sites have been found in the area, on the peaks of Stochos and Pouliou Rachi. Remains from the EH II period (2650-2200 BC) have also been discovered at Palaia Epidaurus (Theodorou-Mavrommatidi, 1168). This means that the area was fairly well settled since at least the Early Helladic period.

The natural terrace of the future sanctuary of Apollo is in a somewhat remote location, off the Argos-Epidaurus road, but it is sufficiently elevated, with a topography that makes it relatively easy to defend, with springs nearby but no running water. It is not the ideal place to settle, but it was obviously possible. Perhaps the most important feature of the site chosen for the settlement is that it is a terrace overlooking an important crossroads at the foot of an important territorial landmark, Mount Kynortion. The plateau where the sanctuary of Asclepius would have been located is not only an important point on the Argos-Epidaurus route, but also

the starting point for the routes to the south leading to Troezen, Poros, Kandia and Hermioni or Koilada. In other words, Kynortion was not only an important landmark, but at the foot of its western side, on the plateau where the sanctuary of Asclepius was founded, it was a place of social occasion, to use Clive Gamble's (1999, pp. 73-79) terminology. This place of social opportunity could have been located where the agora of the sanctuary would later be, or perhaps in the temenos of the sanctuary itself, and it would have been a place of exchange, of marketing, of social encounters. In this sense, it would make sense to choose the site of the terrace of Apollo Maleatas as a place to live, a place from which to contemplate the plateau where these exchanges took place. A place to see, a natural "*theatron*", a few hundred metres from where the most perfect theatre of antiquity was built. The spatial performativity remains in place throughout the millennia.

Cultural Associations with Supernatural Forces

On the summit of Kynortion, only a few, little-studied remains have been found, consisting of a pit lined with stones and filled with dark earth, and an arrangement of stones suggesting the base of an altar, which some authors (Windell & Webb, 2021, 30) have interpreted as the summit sanctuary of "Artemis Koryphaion" (of the Peak) mentioned by Pausanias (II.28.2). Could this possible sanctuary have had the same character as the one on the summit of Mount Arachnaion? Pausanias (II.25.10) mentions that there were altars dedicated to Zeus and Hera on the top of Arachnaion, where the inhabitants of the area offered sacrifices in their honour when they needed rain, and recent studies have shown that the sanctuary was in use from the Mycenaean period (Psychoyos & Karatzikos, 2015). No studies have been carried out on the possible peak sanctuary of Kynortion, but in any case, it did not have the same success as that of Apollo Maleatas or Asclepius, and this is logical, since it was located in a difficult to reach place, more than 480 m above the Asclepieion plateau. Sussman (2021, pp. 80–94) suggests that Mount Kynortion may have followed the process of acquiring a sacred character very early on, with the establishment of a peak sanctuary on it. In time the sanctuary would have descended to lower ground, first to the site of the sanctuary of Apollo Maleatas and then to that of Asclepius, with the mountain remaining an important element of the religious landscape.

The sanctuaries of Apollo Maleatas and Asclepius functioned as one, dedicated to healing. Some authors argue that the Mycenaean sanctuary on the terrace of Apollo Maleatas was dedicated to a healing deity. What we do know is that the sanctuary became one of the most important centres for healing in antiquity. What did the site contribute to its recognition as a place of healing? How did the spatial performativity of the site function in this sense?

Tim Ingold (2000) describes what makes a point in the territory become a “place” as follows:

A place owes its character to the experiences it affords to those who spend time there—to the sights, sounds and indeed smells that constitute its specific ambience. And these, in turn, depend on the kinds of activities in which its inhabitants engage. It is from this relational context of people’s engagement with the world, in the business of dwelling, that each place draws its unique significance. (p. 192)

In other words, spatial performativity conditions the activity of the place and the activity carried out in a place can transform its character and the cultural associations that its spatial performativity activates.

One of the things that gives the plateau on which the Asclepieion stands the character of “place” –in Ingold’s sense– is that the air there feels lighter. The air there has a spatial texture that is felt on the skin and is experienced as refreshing, invigorating, renewing, leading to a more awake, more aware state of mind. It is an experience shared by many visitors to the site, perhaps conditioned by the knowledge of the activity that took place there for centuries. The truth is that it has little to do with the healing rites that were performed there, related to dreams and altered states, so the knowledge may have little to do with the real experience offered by the site.

Since at least the late Neolithic, the site has been visited and recognised as a “place” of social opportunity. Did visitors who experienced the qualities of the air at Epidaurus attribute healing properties to the site? Did they associate the site with a healing deity? Or was it a practice that took place there that gave the site its healing character? Or could it have been a combination of the two? It seems more likely to be the latter, as the site was perceived from its origins as a place of social opportunity and as a special place with revitalising qualities, so the practice of healing must have been initiated there very early on, reinforcing its character and thus its spatial performativity.

Conclusion

The study of spatial performativity in the Asclepieion of Epidaurus shows us how the site could be considered a sacred place marked by a healing character since the Neolithic period. Its origin as a place of social opportunity, associated with the landmark represented by Mount Kynortion, the crossroads at its foot, and the characteristics of the site, initiated a process of interaction with space that over time transformed it into the most famous healing sanctuary of antiquity. From this point in the research, we can begin to study the space of the sanctuary and understand its design, its orientations, the location of each element and the relationships it establishes between them and with the landscape.

Here we present only a preview of an ongoing investigation into spatial performativity in the foundation of sacred space, taking as a case study the Asclepieion of Epidaurus, adopting a perspective somewhere between phenomenological and cognitive. As Christopher Tilley (2010, p. 26) argues, the phenomenological study requires time spent observing and experiencing the place, while the cognitive perspective requires the observation of our own mental processes. But spatial performativity can only be studied by experiencing the place, performing in it, and observing what mental and bodily processes occur in response to our performance in the place. In the coming days,⁵ during the workshop, we will have the opportunity to experiment with the methodology proposed here, in significant sites such as Tiryns, Mycenae, Nafplio and Epidaurus. We hope that this experience will greatly enrich this research.

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⁵ The conference was followed by a 4-day workshop using performance to understand the archaeological sites of Tiryns, Mycenae, Epidaurus and the city of Nafplio.

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