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In Search of Lost Landscapes: Mt. Anchesmos in Athens and the Shift from Performative Perception to Official Cartography

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In Search of Lost Landscapes: Mt. Anchesmos in Athens and the Shift from Performative Perception to Official Cartography

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Abstract

The paper studies the shifts in the perception of spatiality resulting from the gradual institutionalization of *Official Cartography* as the dominant medium for describing landscapes and cities in modernity. Using Mt. Anchesmos as a case study—an ancient mountain identified by geographers in the landscape of Attica, whose exact location remains unclear today—the paper highlights how this ambiguity reveals two ontologically distinct modes of landscape articulation: one rooted in performative relations and the other in abstract, supposedly objective representations conveyed by maps. The study explores how the landscape of Athens was perceived and articulated in antiquity, prior to its representation within a continuous mapped space. It then provides a brief analysis of historical maps from the 18th century onward, documenting the agency of mapping in shaping our perception of space. Drawing on Karen Barad's concept of *apparatus*, the paper challenges the assumed predominance and objectivity of certain mapping practices since purposive questioning and focusing on aspects of interest are inevitable in any representation. Instead, it proposes perceiving every map as the *performing space* where the world re-presents itself in diverse, dynamic and equally robust ways.

Keywords: Map, Performative mapping, Representation, Conventions, Apparatus, Athens, Anchesmos

The First Articulation of Landscape: From Myths and Rituals to Names

In antiquity, long before the landscape was depicted within a continuous mapped space, the hills to the north of the city of Athens gained significance through their association with weather events. Due to the predominance of north and northwest winds, rain clouds would often appear over this landscape as they approached the City. The Athenians believed that Zeus, the god of weather and sky, stood upon these hills when unleashing his thunderbolts, sending rain to the City. So, they erected sanctuaries atop these high points—simple structures with low, oval, or circular walls enclosing an altar—and, during periods of drought, conducted processions and rituals to pray for rain (Langdon, 1976; Camp 1979; Lauter, 1985).

These dynamic relationships—between myths, rituals, and everyday life practices on one hand, and landscape and environmental phenomena on the other—highlighted certain territories and articulated distinct entities within the otherwise continuous terrain. Pausanias, in his book *Attica* writes about the sanctuaries of “Rainy Zeus” near Athens: The shrines of Rainy Zeus [...] are on Mount Parnes where there is a bronze statue of Zeus Parnethios and the altar of Zeus Semelaïos [...] Also, the small mountain Anchesmos has the statue of Zeus Anchesmios¹ (Pausanias, 1989, p. 75). Strabo in his book *Geography* writes about the northern landscape of Attica: Of the mountains those which are most famous are Hymettus, Brilessus, and Lycabettus; and also, Parnes and Corydallus (Strabo, 1924, p. 275).

Of the locations mentioned in these texts, the only one whose name has not been preserved today is *Anchesmos*. The section of the landscape referred to by the Athenians as Anchesmos remains a subject of debate, with scholars proposing various theories linking the name to hills known today—primarily Strefi Hill, Lycabettus, or Tourkovounia (Lauter, 1985; Μπίρης, 2005). Others have suggested that in antiquity the name Anchesmos, but also the name Lycabettus, referred to all these hills collectively as a single undivided entity (Σουρμελής, 1846; Παγκαβής, 1888). This theory is based on the observation that the names Lycabettus and Anchesmos never appear simultaneously in any text from antiquity, as if they refer to two distinct mountains. Moreover, the dynamic articulation of landscape through everyday performances suggests that place names may overlap, as the world is perceived and imbued with meaning through diverse experiential and cultural perspectives.²

In the case of Anchesmos and Lycabettus, the etymology of both names reveals a topological relationship, pointing to the same section of the landscape. Anchesmos (Αγχεσμός), is a compound word derived from “Anchi” (Αγχί = adjacent) and “Esmos” (Εσμός = outbreaks) and it can be interpreted as the adjacent cluster of hills. Lycabettus comes from

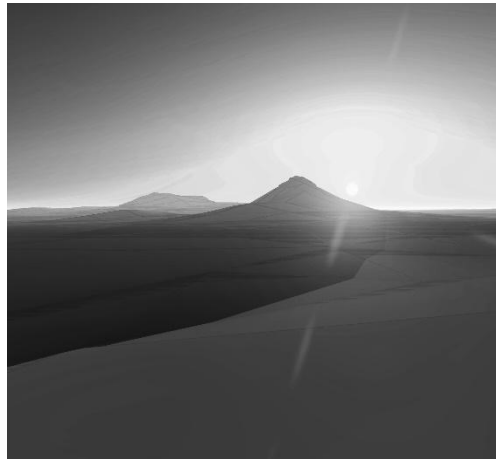
¹ Translated from the original Greek by the author.

² A well-known example is the planet Venus, which was called *Avgerinos* (Αυγερινός) when visible at dawn and *Esperinos* (Εσπερινός) or *Aposperitis* (Αποσπερίτης) when visible at dusk.

“Lyke” (Λύκη = morning light) and “Veno” (Βαίνω = progressing). The name refers to the direction where the sun rises. Indeed, the hills—now known as Strefi Hill, Lycabettus, and Tourkovounia—form a cluster of massifs near Athens, behind which the morning light emerges when viewed from the City (Figure 1).

Figure 1

View North from the Acropolis of Athens, 21 June 6:27 AM, 430 BCE. 3D rendered image by the author, for the purposes of this study.

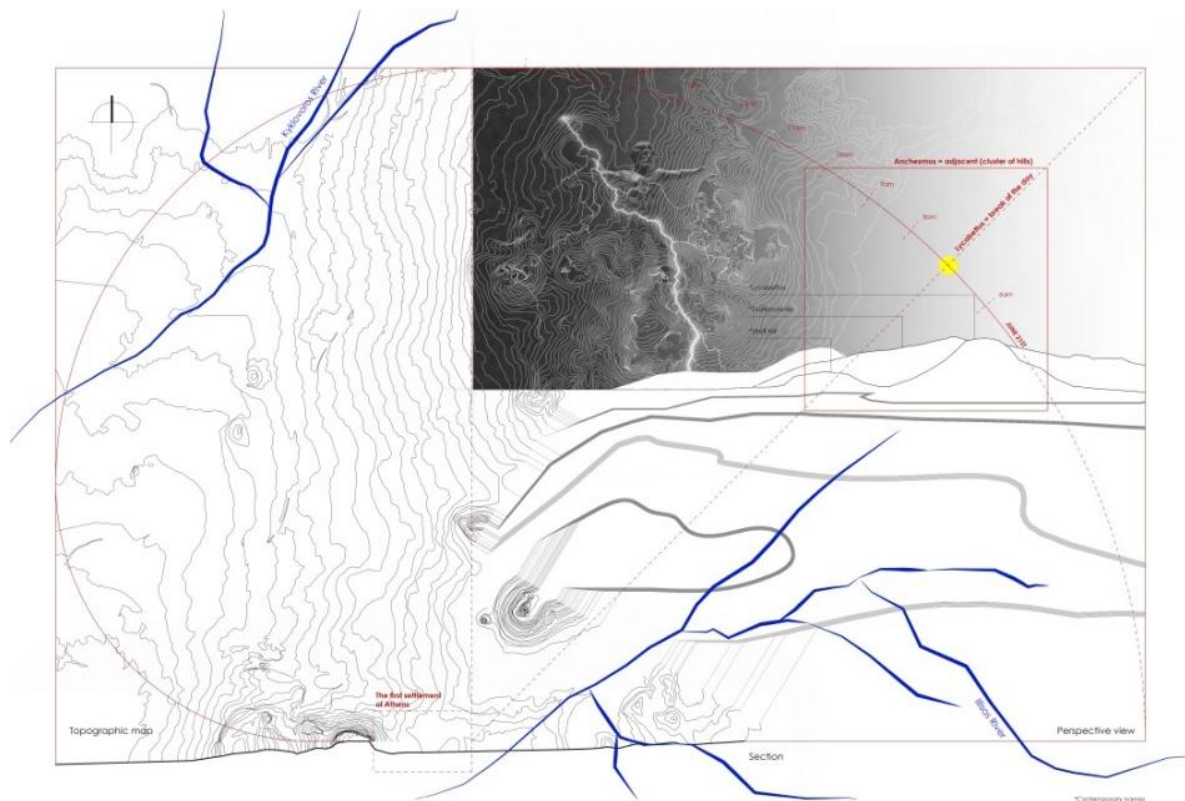


Regardless of the historical legitimacy of this theory, it is important to recognize that this primal articulation of the landscape does not conform to modern conceptions of accuracy and precision of the semantic reference to objects. It emerged from dynamic interactions between the material environment and lived experience, where everyday activities continuously shaped or reshaped spatial perception, making it inherently open-ended. Space was not conceived as stable or conclusively articulated, as we often perceive it today through clear-cut, objective boundaries.

For that reason, it is impossible to reconstruct or represent such an articulation of the landscape as its presence was dynamically intertwined with lived experience. If we want to attempt to draw a “map” that adheres to such perceptions of space, we must transcend conventional concepts of mapping that prioritize clear and well-defined outcomes. We ought to simultaneously consider perspectival, planar, and sectional relationships and address not only the visible but also the invisible aspects that structure our experience. Such mapping could never be definitive and complete: it is inherently open-ended, reflecting the continuous and dynamic interplay between culture and nature. Ontologically, it comes closer to a *work of art*, open to multiple interpretations, as its elements bear manifold meanings rather than fixed references (Figure 2).

Figure 2

The First Articulation: An Open-Ended Map. Drawing by the author (Kaleris, 2023, p. 47).



The Second Articulation of Landscape: From Maps to Parcels

The division of Anchesmos into three distinct hills we know today as Strefi Hill, Tourkovounia, and Lycabettus will be linked to the practices of modern cartography that established a new way of articulating the landscape. While the contemporary urban fabric makes this division obvious (Figure 3), it was the maps used for the design and planning of the urban expansion of the 19th and 20th century that implied it.

The institutionalization of mapping has its roots in 16th and 17th century Western Europe. Kagan and Schmidt use the term *Official Cartography* and suggest that its origins relate with “the concept of territorial sovereignty: the idea of the state as a precisely defined and delimited geopolitical unit” (Kagan & Schmidt, 2007 p. 662) and “contributed to what has been called the ‘geometrization’ of space, the view that land could be measured and described in precise, mathematical terms” (Kagan & Schmidt, 2007 p. 663). During the same period, the idea of land property was pronounced as a right by philosophers such as John Locke (1689). These advancements aided the revival of cadastral mapping, which had perished since the fall of the Roman Empire, progressively establishing the geometric description of properties as an absolute system for articulating cities and landscapes.

Figure 3

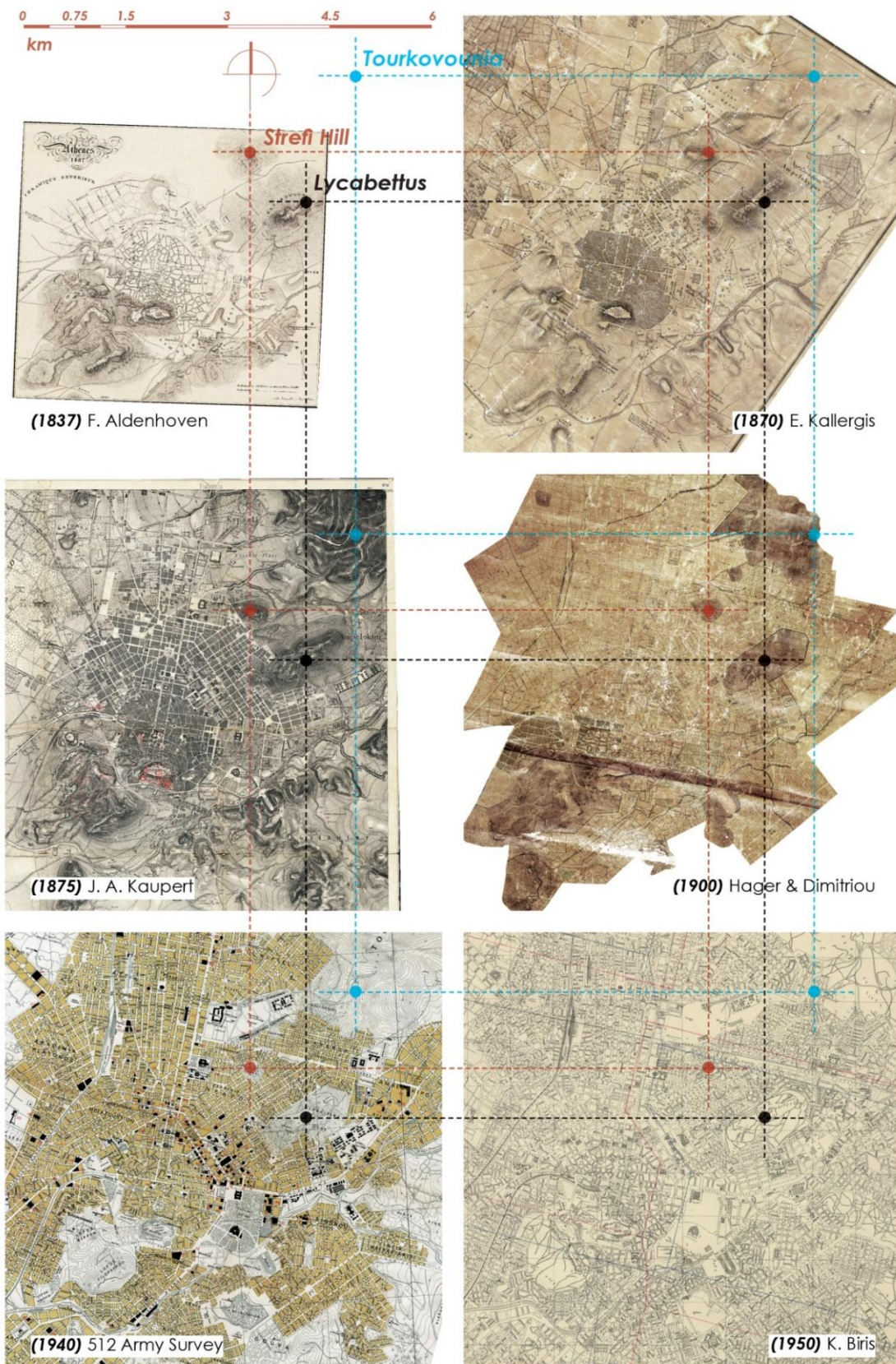
Antiquity vs. Modern-Day: North view from the Acropolis of Athens. 3D rendered image and photograph by the author for the purposes of this study.



After Greece's independence in 1830, the hills surrounding Athens were valued as sites for material extraction and were granted to individuals and used as quarries. Aldenhoven's map from 1837 is one of the first to depict the territory referred to in antiquity as Anchesmos as two separate mountainous formations, noting active quarries on each. By analyzing a series of maps from the subsequent decades, we can observe the gradual formation and geometrization of distinct hills in this territory (Figure 4). The agency of maps in this process becomes clearer when compared to other forms of representation, such as painting or photographs from the same period, where the landscape retains its unity and continuity. The maps of that time created a geometric articulation of the landscape driven by their representational apparatus, prioritizing the depiction of the division of land into parcels—an entirely abstract and fictitious concept that did not reflect in any way the everyday experience.

Figure 4

The “Invention” of Hills: Collage of Historical Maps of Athens. Collage drawing by the author (Kaleris, 2024, p. 190).



Maps as a Performing Space: Understanding the “Apparatus”

The aim of the analysis of the previous example was to demonstrate that maps are neither objective nor neutral: they are inherently fictitious and biased. Each map constructs its own version of the world. Our exposure to its representational remit compels us to analyze and interpret the world in a specific way. The widespread adoption of certain forms of mapping has trained us to see the world solely through their perspectives. However, they do not convey an objective truth; rather they have staged one.

This *performative* perception of the agency of mapping is rendered in the title *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (Theater of the World) given to one of the first modern atlases by Abraham Ortelius (1573). The title suggests that maps act as a theatrical stage where the world is presented. The problem is that, ever since, we have been confined to watching the same performance repeatedly. Despite the 20th-century’s criticism of modern cartography for its biases, colonial character, and power-centric nature, we are still struggling to accept alternative mappings as legitimate (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Corner, 1999; Kaleris, 2024).

To challenge the established status quo of maps, it is suggested to perceive every mapping attempt as an *apparatus*, in the way the term is used by Karen Barad (2007). Barad notes that “apparatuses are not passive observing instruments; on the contrary, they are productive of (and part of) phenomena” (Barad, 2007, p.142). In any apparatus, “certain properties become determinate, while others are specifically excluded (...) different quantities become determinate using different apparatuses” (Barad, 2007, pp.19-20). Similarly, we must understand that the content presented in a map is neither something preexisting nor something definite. There is no inherent ontological distinction between types of mapping in terms of objectivity, as all maps are equally fictive and structured. We have simply been culturally trained to view the world through certain maps while disregarding infinite possible others.

The significance of such alternative conceptions of the word through noninstitutional mapping is crucial in the context of architecture, where maps serve as the substrate of design, shaping creative thinking and insinuating what, where, when, and how to build (Kaleris, 2024). As maps become increasingly standardized and institutionalized, so does architecture. The theorization of mapping through the notion of the apparatus opens up a methodology that embraces the shift between different apparatuses, revealing the plurality of ways we can perceive our spatial reality. This encourages architects to explore alternative conceptions of space that reflect the diversity of lived experiences, rather than imposing a singular, authoritative vision embedded in conventional maps. This way, we can explore opportunities for novel conceptions of our cities and landscapes and open new creative domains for space-making (Kaleris, 2023).

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