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PART IV. LIVING IN THE MOUNTAINS

ILLUSTRATIONS

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Summit Altars

Divine Presence and Human Culture

When the god Zeus comes down from Mount Olympus[1] to Mount Ida above the city of Troy in Book 8 of the *Iliad*, he installs himself in a space that is poised strangely between the human and divine spheres. The poet tells us that Zeus 'came to Ida with its many springs, the mother of wild beasts, to Gargaros, where his sanctuary (τέμενος) was and his smoking altar' (*Iliad* 8.47–48).[2] Later, in Book 14, he is seduced here by his wife, Hera. The earth on the mountain's summit sends up a growth of new flowers as a bed for them to lie on: that passage has repeatedly been taken as an allegorical one, to describe the bounty that springs from the union of different natural forces.[3] 'Do not be afraid', Zeus says, 'that any god or man will see us, for I will cover us with a golden cloud' (14.342–44). Only the poet's divinely inspired voice can pierce that cloud and allow us to spy on the opening moments of their lovemaking, just as the voice of the poet is the only source that can give us access to the charmed life of the gods on Mount Olympus. And yet in other ways Mount Ida is a place of regular human presence. The word 'sanctuary' or 'precinct' (τέμενος) in the passage quoted earlier implies a clearly delineated, presumably human-made space surrounding Zeus's altar on the summit. And then in the climactic battle scene of the poem, as Achilles is chasing Hector round the walls of Troy, closing in on him, the poem slows for a moment to give us a divine perspective. All the gods are watching, but it is Zeus who speaks first: 'my heart is mourning for Hector, who has burned the thighs of many oxen in my honour on the peaks of many-valleyed Ida' (*Iliad* 22.169–71). It seems that Hector has been himself, many times, to this place of divine mystery and pleasure, to sacrifice to the gods.

Those passages are typical of a tension that runs right through the long history of representing mountains in ancient Greek and Roman literature. The

mountains of the Mediterranean were both divine and human places. Part I of this book explores the intertwining of those two different perspectives in a selection of texts written over a period of more than 1,000 years, from the epic poetry of archaic Greece[4] through to the Christian pilgrimage writing of late antiquity. In order to understand those portrayals, however, we need to look first at the wider context of ancient religious practice.[5] Mountains were dwelling places of the gods within mythical narrative,[6] and places associated with divine epiphanies and miracles beyond human understanding, but they were at the same time places of human presence where one might gain special access to the gods via sacrifice.

Those practices are in many respects quite alien to what we are familiar with from modern Western culture. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did see an increase in 'sacralisation' of the mountains, for example in the increasingly common use of religious language to describe mountain experience.[7] In many cases that involved seeing divine presence in nature through an encounter with the sublime.[8] Mountains have a power to inspire awe and astonishment that can transport us momentarily beyond our usual human perspective on the world. This idea in itself had ancient precedents.[9] From the very late eighteenth century onwards it became common to erect crosses on peaks in the Alps and elsewhere in Europe,[10] partly in imitation of earlier practices of mountain pilgrimage which had their origin in the Christian culture of late antiquity. But those strands of religious thinking in postclassical culture do not help us much in entering into the experience of those involved in the processions and sacrifices that wound their way to the hilltops and peaks of the Mediterranean over many hundreds and even thousands of years. It takes a certain effort of the imagination, along with close attention to the still patchy and inaccessible archaeological record, to be able to understand what that might have been like.

Let us go back first to Mount Lykaion to look a little more closely at what lies on the slopes beneath the summit. This was a site that mattered for Arkadian identity.[11] It must have been viewed as significant partly because it stood beyond the boundaries of normal human civilisation. We should probably imagine hundreds of people travelling out from the cities to the mountain for fairly short periods for festival occasions, before returning to their homes. Sacrifice at this kind of location was a way of integrating wilderness within the culture of the city and a way of asserting control over the whole of a city's territory (or in this case cities in the plural, since Mount Lykaion seems to have been a focus for the region of Arkadia as a whole). And the idea of encountering space outside civilisation may have had a particular significance in an

FIGURE 1.1. Ruined columns from the temple of Zeus Lykaios, with the summit of Mount Lykaion behind. Photo: author.

Arkadian context. The Arkadians had a reputation in the ancient world, like many mountain communities, for being a very ancient people, and for being distant from the norms of urban civilisation, not least because of the poverty of the region—for example in the common image of them as 'acorn eaters'. That image of a wild culture took on a more idealised form in the poetic stereotype of Arkadia as a pastoral paradise.

And yet we need to be cautious about an excessively romanticised view of the ancient Mount Lykaion as wilderness. The peak itself was very far from being wild, especially in the later centuries of its history. This was a built environment. Just below the summit stood the precinct of Zeus, which seems to have been more than 100 metres in length and 50 metres wide. Two column bases still stand there (figure 1.1), not far from the base of the summit cone.

Zeus was not the only god worshipped here: we know from the second-century CE travel writer Pausanias (who will feature again in a later chapter) that there were two other sites, in honour of Pan and Parrhasian Apollo, also

on the mountainside.[12] Close to the latter was a place thought by some to have been the birthplace of the god Zeus.[13] Large numbers of surviving coins produced in the fifth and then again in the fourth century BCE show images of Zeus Lykaios, perhaps a depiction of a throned statue of Zeus which stood as a cult object in the shrine. These coins seem to have acted as expressions of Arkadian identity, although the political unity of the region as a whole was always fragile.[14] Further down, at a height of roughly 1,200 metres on the mountainside, is the stadium and the hippodrome (figure 1.2), roughly 300 metres long, the only fully visible example of a horse-racing track in the whole of Greece; also a row of stone seating or steps, a fountain house, a bathhouse, a stoa 67 metres in length, and another building commonly identified as a hotel, but which is more likely to have been an administrative building for the sanctuary and a venue for dining, with a partly subterranean passage leading from it towards the stadium and hippodrome.[15] Most of these buildings date from the second half of the fourth century BCE; by this stage the summit altar seems to have dropped out of use as a place of sacrifice, as the main focus for ritual activity shifted a little way down the mountainside. They were constructed primarily for the great festival of the Lykaia, which had been held there (probably every four years, but perhaps every two) also through much of the archaic and classical periods.[16] Some scholars think that it may even have predated the games at Olympia, just over 20 miles to the west (in line with the claims of the Elder Pliny, who describes Mount Lykaion as the site of the very first athletic contests in Greek history).[17] It was a famous festival. Pindar refers to the Lykaia repeatedly in his victory odes, in lists of the festivals where his patrons have won victories.[18] Two inscriptions recovered from the site, both dating from the late fourth century BCE, list victors in the standard range of ancient Greek athletic and horse-racing events—the majority of them local athletes from Arkadia, but also including a number of famous competitors from much farther afield, as far away as Macedonia and Rhodes and Sicily.[19] Like all ancient athletic festivals it would have been viewed as an opportunity to celebrate the communal identity of the city or region that hosted it. In the victory lists from the festival we find unusually frequent use of the regional identifier 'Arkas' ('Arkadian'), in contrast with the usual custom of identifying oneself with one's city, which suggests that Mount Lykaion was viewed as a particularly appropriate place for displaying Arkadian identity.[20] Presumably hundreds or even thousands of spectators attended. It is hard to think of a more vivid illustration of the fact that going up mountains could be a regular and important activity for the inhabitants of the ancient world.

FIGURE 1.2. View from the summit of Mount Lykaion looking northeast towards the stadium and hippodrome. Photo: author.

Memory and Embodied Experience

Mountains like Mount Lykaion were thus places of memory. They were widely viewed as ancient places, linked with pre-human events in mythical narrative.[21] It seems likely that those involved in mountain rituals would have felt a sense of engagement with that past in their ascents, a thrill at being momentarily close to the places of myth, even as they knew that that old world of divine presence was hard to access in everyday experience. Equally important, however, was the way in which the mountains linked communities with their own human pasts, as locations of repeated sacrifice over many generations. One function of mountain ritual was to assert control over the edges of a city's territory, and to win divine support for the city's land and institutions.[22] For many cities the visibility and proximity of their mountains would have helped to maintain those links. It was not only the view from the summit that

mattered in mountain ritual, with its ability to encompass the territory down below, but also the view upwards from the city. When you see the smoke of sacrifice on the mountain you know that you are seeing a view that generations of others have seen before.

These were also places of bodily engagement. As we have seen already in the preface, there has been a reaction over the past few decades against approaches that envisage landscape as terrain viewed from a distance, with their implications of an outsider or elitist viewpoint. Some scholars have emphasised instead the way in which human experience of landscape involves a bodily immersion appealing to all of the senses, where landscape and the body are mutually intertwined and give meaning to each other. Tim Ingold has used the phrase 'taskscape' to describe the way in which particular spaces become marked by repetitive human actions, often over many generations, and in turn give meaning and direction to those who pass through them in their day-to-day lives.[23] The mountains of the Mediterranean must have been taskscapes in exactly that sense—not only their lower slopes, which were used for farming and other kinds of productive activity, as we shall see further in part IV, but even their remote summits, with their paths and their altars, where worshippers toiled their way upwards in procession, and where the detritus of centuries of sacrifice was piled together, as a feature of the landscape that was fixed but also nevertheless grew year by year with each sacrifice. The physical experience of the mountain's slopes and summit must have helped to make the experience of memory and the sense of access to the divine more intense and more personal. At the same time these mountains were places of performance, associated with kinds of bodily engagement set apart from normal day-to-day life, as mountains still are, albeit in different ways, in the present, not least in the cultures of mountaineering.[24]

Of course it is difficult to reconstruct those experiences precisely. That is the problem we face. Detailed accounts of involvement in mountain ritual from the ancient world are very rare. There has been a tradition over the past two centuries of interpreting that absence in rather patronising terms as a sign of the relatively primitive nature of Greco-Roman interactions with landscape, on the assumption that people who live close to mountains are less likely to describe them and engage with them with the sophistication that comes from elite detachment.[25] It is easy to see why that is a tempting view, but in some manifestations it can lead us to endorse a self-congratulatory exceptionalism, which sees modern engagement with landscape as uniquely sophisticated. How do we move beyond that explanation? Seeing these places for ourselves can help. You

get a sense of the scale of the mountains, a sense of what it might have been like to move through them on paths that in some cases must be largely unchanged today, of their proximity to and intervisibility with communities on the plain and with each other, and even something of the thrill of standing in places where others have stood before over many millennia. But we also need to be aware of the distance between modern and ancient. There is a risk of imposing an outsider viewpoint on spaces that we cannot possibly experience exactly as they were experienced in the ancient world.[26] The alternative, I suggest, is to try to read the textual evidence with more alertness to the theme of embodied experience. When we do that, we begin to see traces of the kind of corporeal engagement with landscape and with the divine that I have been describing, side by side with more detached ways of interacting with mountain terrain.

Mediterranean Mountain Religion

Before we turn to the texts, however, it may be helpful to set out in a bit more detail some of the range and variety of mountain religion in the ancient Mediterranean. When we do that, we see some remarkable continuities across centuries and across cultures, but also lots of local variations—just as the surviving literary depictions of mountain religion project their own distinctive visions against a background of shared assumptions and practices.

There are similar sites to Mount Lykaion right across the Mediterranean.[27] We know of nearly 100 ancient shrines in Greece on or near mountain summits, some of them just from literary sources, but many with identifiable archaeological remains.[28] There must be others not yet identified. Mountain shrines rarely included monumental buildings, so their traces are often inconspicuous. Some important summits in Greece have military installations on them, and that has hindered investigation too. Occasionally the process of building those installations has led to new discoveries, as on Mount Parnes in Attica: a rescue excavation conducted there in 1959 during the construction of a military barracks uncovered a 100-square-metre ash altar very similar to the one on Mount Lykaion (including among other things around 3,000 iron knives, along with the usual pottery and bone fragments), apparently confirming ancient literary reports of a pair of altars to Zeus on the summit.[29] And yet even with those problems of neglect and inaccessibility there is more than enough for us to see just how widespread the practice of mountaintop ritual was. Despite their architectural modesty these are some of the most spectacular and undervisited ancient sites in the whole of Greece.

Summit sanctuaries were most often in honour of Zeus,[30] but there were also countless sanctuaries on the lower slopes, in honour of many different gods. Artemis is a good example: her sanctuaries tended to be located not on summits but in border territories and in passes, in line with her role as a goddess who watched over places associated with danger and threat.[31] In many cultures around the world, including some ancient Near Eastern cultures, mountains have themselves been sacred objects of worship,[32] but there is very little sign that the same was true for the ancient Greeks and Romans,[33] although we do see occasional traces in Greek poetry and art of what are probably quite ancient traditions of personifying mountain gods.[34] Of the summit altars, not all are ash altars—in fact we know of only ten securely identified examples in Greece. In other cases, the altars for sacrifice were made of stone or rubble, or in some cases were even cut into the rock.[35] The finds at Mount Lykaion are fairly typical: bone fragments, pottery, votive offerings of many different types, often including figurines. And it is typical too in chronological terms: the number of sanctuaries with clear evidence for extensive use as early as the Mycenaean period is small; it often seems to be the case that these sites flourished as places of sacrifice, like Mount Lykaion, above all in archaic Greece. Nevertheless there is a lot of variation even in chronological terms, and in several cases, as we shall see, there are even signs of a revival of ritual activity at pagan mountaintop shrines in the Christian centuries of late antiquity.

When we look beyond mainland Greece and the islands of the Aegean some things change and some things stay the same. Crete, for example, has its own distinctive culture of mountaintop religion, in the remains of dozens of what are usually referred to as 'peak sanctuaries' from the Minoan period, most of them dating roughly from 2000–1500 BCE.[36] Most of the evidence for ritual activity is in the form of votive offerings, often figurines, some of them apparently representations of worshippers at the shrines themselves, and also large numbers of pottery fragments which suggest that feasting and the pouring of libations were important. Sacrifice, however, seems to have been very scarce, and that sets the Cretan sites apart from their Greek equivalents. Even more so than in mainland Greece, these sites tend to have been situated on relatively low summits close to communities, rather than remote mountaintops. Visibility between sanctuary and community and between different sanctuary sites was clearly very important.[37]

Asia Minor too is rich with mountain shrines.[38] Strabo talks about the large number of sanctuaries maintained by the Paphlagonians in the remote territory of Mount Olgassys (modern Ilgaz Dağları), which is part of the Pontic

Alps, the chain of mountains, rising to more than 2,000 metres, that stands to the south of the Black Sea in northern Turkey.[39] A little farther east the temple of Zeus Stratios on the summit of Büyük Evliya, east of Amaseia, was a place of sacrifice and dedications from communities in the whole surrounding area of Pontus. Mithridates, the great enemy of Rome, is said to have offered a victory sacrifice there.[40] All of this is in line with what we find in the Greek sites farther west, but Asia Minor is also a good place to see the influence of the rather different Near Eastern traditions which viewed mountains themselves as sacred, rather than just as places connected with particular divine figures. The worship of the so-called Mother Goddess was widespread across Asia Minor. She seems to have been equated with some of the mountains of the region rather than just worshipped on them—for example with the various mountains named Dindymos in Phrygia, Tmolos above the city of Sardis, Ida in western Asia Minor above Troy, all of which gave water to the plains and life to the flocks which were driven up onto their pastures in the summer.[41] Farther south, Mount Kasios, modern Jebel Aqra (Kel Dağı in Turkish), is another place where we can see glimpses of a pre-Greek history of mountaintop ritual. Here again the mountain itself was an object of worship. It was a sacred place for the Hittites to the north in the late Bronze Age: their name for the mountain was Hazzi, and the mountain god who occupied it was Teshub. To the south the Caananites worshipped the storm god Baal and named the mountain Sapuna. We know from texts discovered in Ras Shamra, the ancient port city at the foot of the mountain, just north of Latakia in northern Syria, that Baal is said to have lived on the mountain summit in an ornate palace built for him by the gods, along with the goddess Anat. When the mountain began to be a place of sacrifice for the Greek populations in the area—the first attested example is from the late fourth century BCE—they inherited a site that had already been used for hundreds of years by the cultures that preceded them. And those many centuries of sacrifice have left their mark on the mountaintop, which is the site of the biggest ash altar surviving from the ancient world: 55 metres wide and 8 metres deep, more than five times head height—although now the site of a Turkish military base.[42]

In Italy and the western Mediterranean too mountains and hills were places of the gods. There is evidence for a distinctive religious culture in the Alps, which increasingly combined local religious tradition with Roman influences as Roman involvement in the region intensified. For example, the temple of Jupiter Poeninus stood at a height of 2,472 metres above sea level on the Great Saint Bernard Pass; it was previously a site sacred to a local deity Poeninus.

Surviving from there is a remarkable series of fifty-one bronze votive inscriptions, most of them dedicated by Roman soldiers, asking the god for safe passage.[43] Farther south, perhaps the most important mountain site of all in mainland Italy was Mount Albanus (modern Monte Cavo), thirteen miles southeast of Rome. It is the highest point of the Alban hills, and the site of a famous shrine consecrated to Jupiter Latiaris. This was a place of memory for the Roman people. Celebrated there every year was the festival of the Feriae Latinae, where all the members of the old Latin League (a grouping of communities in Latium which first formed to resist Rome, but later came under Roman leadership) would offer sacrifice as a way of reaffirming their loyalty. Officiating was one of the most important tasks given to the consuls and other senior Roman officials—in fact every magistrate of Rome was required to attend. You can still see the remains of the road that led up to the summit temple. In 44 BCE, Julius Caesar, after celebrating the Feriae Latinae on Mount Albanus, entered the city in a solemn procession, and was proclaimed by some sections of the population as king. At the centre of the ritual was the sacrifice of a pure white heifer which had never been yoked, provided by the Romans. The representatives of the Latin cities would receive a share of the sacrificial meat in return for their gifts of lamb and cheese and milk. Once a year, then, this mountain would be the focus of an extraordinary display of power and community, attended by some of the most important political figures in the city of Rome, using that space outside the city and elevated above it in order to celebrate their history and their cohesion.[44]

The Summit Altars of Mainland Greece

But it is mainland Greece where we see the greatest concentration of these sites, and the ones that are most relevant to the texts that I want to look at in most of the rest of this chapter. The Peloponnese is full of evocative and surprisingly accessible mountain sites (many of them with roads or dirt tracks leading almost to the summits). The vast majority have had little or no archaeological attention by comparison with Mount Lykaion. To the south of Mount Lykaion, for example, and visible from it, is Mount Ithome,[45] which stands at just 800 metres above sea level, closely above the extensive remains of the ancient city of Messene (figure 1.3); the relatively low altitude of the summit is a sign that prominence was more important than absolute height in the categorisation of mountains in ancient Greece.[46] We know from Pausanias that there was a sanctuary of Zeus there.[47] Plutarch tells us that Philip V of

FIGURE 1.3. View south from the summit of Mount Ithome over ancient Messene. Photo: author.

Macedon climbed to the summit temple in the late third century BCE, after a bloody intervention in the civil conflict within the city, 'in order to sacrifice to Zeus and to see the place'.[48] The word θεωρήσων ('in order to see') is the standard word for the kind of viewing that accompanies visits to religious sites and festivals (the gap between tourism and pilgrimage was much less clear in the ancient world than it is for us). But there is almost no sign of the ancient cult on the summit plateau today: most of the space is taken up by deserted monastery buildings. It is possible that the ancient sanctuary had an altar cut out of the rock, but if so it has now been built over, and the stone tripod base which is said to have been built into the walls of the monastery is hard to find. But what you can still experience is the ancient descent from the top of the mountain to the city below. As you start down from the summit on the dusty track to the east, you see a faded sign pointing off into the undergrowth to the right, leading to a path that winds through undergrowth over rocky ground all

FIGURE 1.4. Mount Apesas with its flat top from the stadium at Nemea. Photo: author.

the way down the mountainside. It is not much used: when I went down by that route on a visit in 2014 it was overgrown, with spiders' webs stretched across the path; sometimes the way ahead was hard to spot. It brings you out finally opposite the tavernas in the village of Mavromati, at the Clepsydra spring with its mulberry tree. Pausanias tells us that water was carried every day up to the summit from that same spring in a ritual designed to commemorate the washing of the infant Zeus by the two Nymphs, one of them named Ithome, who nursed him.[49] (Ithome was one of many mountains, including Mount Lykaion, which were claimed as Zeus's birthplace or his place of upbringing). Presumably this is the path they took, or another one very much like it.

Farther north and east in the Peloponnese is Mount Apesas (modern Phoukas),[50] which stands above the stadium at Nemea, the site of one of the four great athletic festivals of mainland Greece (figure 1.4). It seems likely that the cult of Zeus on the summit and the festival below were linked with each other. According to some ancient accounts there is an etymological connection between the name of the mountain and the Greek word *aphesis*,

the starting area for horse races at the games. The mountain's distinctive flat top is recognisable from a great distance, and well placed also for viewing many of the other religiously important summits of the Peloponnese. There is no way of telling for sure, but it seems likely that this kind of 'intervisibility' enhanced the sense that mountaintop worship gave one access to a community which stretched right across the Greek world. You can still see today the remains of a huge ash altar at the eastern edge of the summit plateau: ashy soil, the usual mixture of pottery and bone fragments. It may have been as much as 50 metres wide.

And then to the east again is Mount Arachnaion,[51] close to the ancient site of Epidauros near Argos. Pausanias mentions the existence of two altars, of Zeus and Hera, on the summit, where people made offerings for rain.[52] Throughout much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries these altars were associated with stones found on the saddle between the two summits, but that identification has since been corrected: in fact the altars were situated on the western summit, which stands at around 1,200 metres. This too seems to have been a very ancient site: as at Mount Lykaion, there have been extensive finds of Mycenean artefacts, including large amounts of pottery, and more than 100 fragments of terracotta figurines.[53] The mountain dominates the view to the east from Argos and Nafplio: you can spot it straight away by the wind turbines on the summit ridge. It is not much visited, but it is a strangely evocative site despite that. You get to the top by a wide, ugly track, carved out of the mountainside for the wind farm. It was empty of people when I went there, apart from some engineers mending one of the huge turbines away in the distance. There was just a fox sitting on the path ahead of me, and some swifts and ravens in the breeze at the summit. Once again, there is not a vast amount to see: some desultory plastic sheeting from the last excavations, lots of rubbly rock, and a couple of brick foundations, one unidentified, one from a ruined chapel to Prophet Elias. But on the ground there are hundreds of pottery fragments, concentrated in two patches just to the south of the summit marker. It feels now like a place outside civilisation. And yet people did come here, trudging up the mountainside to make their offerings and sacrifices, for hundreds if not thousands of years, and what they left is still there for you to see. As they stood on the summit they would have seen the cities of the coast spread out to the view before them (figure 1.5), with the knowledge that their fellow citizens were looking up to the smoke of sacrifice from below.

If you are in Athens, the easiest mountains to reach are the ones that you can see ringing the city on all sides. These too were places of regular human

FIGURE 1.5. View from the summit of Mount Arachnaion, looking west to Argos. Photo: author.

presence. Attica seems to have had particular enthusiasm for the worship of Zeus. Pausanias tells us that

> the mountains of the Athenians also have statues of the gods on them. On Pentelikon is a statue of Athene, on Hymettos, one of Zeus, along with altars of Zeus Ombrios [Zeus of the rain] and Apollo the Foreseer. And on Parnes is a bronze Zeus Parnethios, and an altar of Zeus Semaleos [sign-giving Zeus]. There is also on Parnes another altar, and they sacrifice on it, sometimes invoking Zeus Ombrios and sometimes Zeus Apemios [Zeus averter-of-evil]. Anchesmos is not a large mountain; it has a statue of Zeus Anchesmios. (Pausanias, *Periegesis* 1.32.2)

The archaeological evidence backs up Pausanias' account. The most important sanctuary, close to the summit of Mount Hymettos, which stands just ten miles or so to the east of Athens, is surrounded by antennae and military buildings. Access was forbidden for several decades in the late twentieth century,

but these days you can drive right up to it: it stands on the left, a few hundred metres before the end of the road. As you go up, you pass cyclists and walkers, first through the trees but then emerging onto the bare upper slopes of the mountain. The remains of the altar stand in a natural depression about half a mile north of the highest peak, without a view. Findings included a large volume of pottery fragments inscribed with some of the earliest surviving examples of written Greek from the whole of Attica, dating from the seventh to late sixth centuries BCE. It seems likely that the majority of offerings brought to Zeus at the altar were offerings for rain, probably for the whole of the Athenian plain to the west of the mountain rather than just Athens, in line with Pausanias' report of an altar to Zeus Ombrios ('Rainy Zeus') on the summit. That is no doubt in part because of the mountain's status as a weather indicator: clouds on the summit tend to indicate approaching rain. The role of Zeus as rain god is widely paralleled, both in Attica—at the sanctuary of Zeus Ombrios on Mount Parnes—and beyond, on the island of Aigina, at Megara, and also on Mount Lykaion according to Pausanias.[54] We have an inscription from the island of Kos, dating from about 200 BCE, recording a decision made by 'the association of those who process together to Zeus of Rain (Zeus Hyetios)'.[55] On Mount Hymettos we should probably imagine not just formal processions of that type, but also visits by individuals to bring dedications to the mountaintop without sacrificing: the usual combination of ash and burnt animal bones is mixed with a strikingly large volume of pottery fragments. The bulk of the material dates from between the twelfth and sixth centuries BCE, but there is some later material as well, from the Hellenistic period, and even fragments of 120 lamps from the fourth to fifth centuries CE.[56] Those signs of a revival of attention to mountain sanctuaries in the imperial period and late antiquity have a number of parallels in sites from mainland Greece.[57]

And then when you go north, you come very quickly to some of the most famous and most sacred of all mountains of ancient Greek culture. Some of these mountains are bigger and higher than their counterparts in the Peloponnese, and it is striking that they often show fewer signs of mountaintop ritual. It does seem to be the case that lower and more accessible mountains were more likely to be places of sacrifice, especially when they had an intimate spatial relationship to particular communities: Mount Ithome is a good example of both. The huge bulk of Mount Parnassos, for example, with its double summit, shows no sign of an altar, even though it was such a crucial place of divine presence in mythical narrative: to some extent mythical and

ritual engagement with the divine seem to have been separate from each other, at least in this case.

For many years it was assumed that the same was true for Mount Olympus, and even now the evidence for mountaintop sacrifice there is little known. The textual evidence is brief and obscure, and the archaeological finds have been unspectacular. Their implications, however, are fascinating. People did come to these summits, regularly and religiously, for centuries on end, to offer sacrifice. That fact is almost unacknowledged within modern scholarship on the Homeric and Hesiodic Olympus. Solinus, writing probably in the third century CE, talks about an altar on the summit, and tells us that offerings left there are found again undisturbed a year later.[58] We find a similar view ascribed to Plutarch by an ancient commentator on Aristotle, and also in one of the works of Augustine: both explain that phenomenon by the claim that Olympus is above the clouds, and so windless.[59] All three are presumably writing from hearsay, and Solinus in particular seems like a doubtful source, given that so much of his work is taken up with the collection of marvels, many of them even more implausible than this one. But the material evidence for sacrifice is unequivocal. Traditionally the cult to Zeus which all of these texts refer to was associated with the chapel of Saint Elias on the northernmost peak, Profitis Elias, but the only significant remains are those which were found on the southern peak of Agios Antonios (which stands at 2,817 metres, just 100 metres lower than the highest summit Mytikas) between 1961 and 1965 during the building of a meteorological station: among other items ash, bone fragments, fragments of pottery, and three inscriptions to Zeus Olympios, two of them Hellenistic, one of them perhaps later, from the imperial period.[60] The third mentions a priesthood, which suggests an organised cult of the kind usually associated with important sanctuaries. Perhaps the most remarkable discovery of all was a set of coins, some of them Hellenistic, from the fourth century BCE onwards, but many of them from the fourth or even fifth centuries CE, which suggests that the sanctuary may have been visited most of all in late antiquity, even after the christianisation of the Roman Empire.[61] The worship of Zeus was widespread in the surrounding area, too, especially in the city of Dion on the northern slopes of Olympus, where the sanctuary of Zeus Olympios is still visible. It seems to have been important in the Hellenistic period in particular. This was also the venue for the festival of the Olympia which took place every four years from the late fifth century BCE onwards, with musical and athletic contests, the former in honour of the Muses. The festival of the Olympia at Dion is not the same as the original Olympic games

at Pisa, hundreds of miles away in the Peloponnese: dozens of other festivals in the Greek world tried to share something of the prestige of the Olympics by taking on their name, but Dion, unlike those others, clearly had a good excuse for doing so. Regular processions of people and animals for sacrifice must have wound their way from the city up the mountain, on the same tracks that are used still today, as they did in so many other parts of the Greek world too.[62]

GENERAL INDEX