

REVISITING MOUNT TAYGETOS: THE SANCTUARY OF ARTEMIS LIMNATIS

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TOPOGRAPHY

Mount Taygetos dominates the Southern Peloponnese, separating the Laconian and the Messenian plains, cutting through the Mani Peninsula. Despite the devastating fires of 1998 and 2007, Taygetos remains one of the most forested mountains of the Peloponnese, hosting rare species of the Greek fauna and flora. Its highest peak, Prophetes Elias, 2404 m. high, is one of the highest Greek peaks, famous for its pyramidal, three dimensional shadow, cast over the Messenian Gulf in the summer. Summits and peaks, an impressive rocky ridgeline, forested and arid gorges and high cliffs, fertile valleys and remote plateaus, rivers, brooks and waterfalls, compose a multicolored mosaic of unique wild beauty, a real challenge for adventurers.

Local tribes or early “nations”, inhabiting the area, shepherds and travellers, were probably the first to give names to the distinct parts of the mountain. The foundation of the South - Peloponnesian poleis - states and the “marking” of boundaries turned the area into a disputed region, originally subdivided into two zones:

1. The northern area, Aegyitis, extending from the Arcadian settlement of Leondari, to the Xerila Valley and the turning point of Malevos and
2. The southern, Dentheliatis or Ager Denthaliatis, a fertile mountainous area, famous in antiquity for the production of the Denthis wine, extending from the southern edge of Aigyitis to the gorge of Rindomo / Koskaraka. The area was of great strategic importance, as the main gateway from Laconia to the fertile Messenian plain, the crossroad of the mountainous road network connecting Laconia, Messenia and Arcadia, all in all an integral part of the Spartan defence system.

HISTORY OF THE AREA

Denteliatis is closely related to the famous sanctuary of Artemis Limnatis, located by Strabo and Pausanias to the ancient site of Limnai. As with border sanctuaries elsewhere, the sanctuary was probably in the beginning a meeting point for people, tribes and nations of the Southern Peloponnese. Kings, local magistrates and worshippers of Artemis gathered there to venerate the goddess in her annual festival. The situation unexpectedly changed in the late 8th century B.C. after a fatal incident; according to Strabo, during a common festival in the sanctuary, a *panegyris*, the Messenians harassed Laconian maidens that participated in rituals. Later on, after prevailing in the 1st Messenian War, the Spartans founded a new sanctuary of Artemis Limnatis, at a place also called Limnai, near Sparta.

Pausanias refers to Limnai as a remote area related to the kome of Kalamai, where the sanctuary of Limnatis was located, citing both versions of the story: according to the Spartans, their virgins were sexually harassed during the festival by Messenian youths, while their king Teleclos was murdered¹. Nevertheless, the Messenians opposed this argument by claiming that young beardless Spartans were disguised as maidens, in an attempt to kill their magistrates; in the end the assassins, including king Teleclos, were punished by death. Both Strabo and Pausanias assert that this incident is closely related to the outburst of the 1st Messenian War and the gradual conquest of Messenia by the Spartans.

¹ By that time, Fintas was the King of Messenians. A second incident took place, while Alcamenes was king of Sparta and Antiochos and Androcles were kings of Messenia. The Spartan Euaiphnos cheated on the Messenian Polychares, selling his oxen to merchants, and killed his son. In retaliation, Polychares killed many Lacedaimonians.

The occupation of the region lasted long, until the Theban General Epameinondas liberated the area and founded Messene in 369 B.C. It seems that shortly after the liberation of Messenia, Dentheliatis became once again a disputed area: in 338 B.C. Philip II offered the region to the Messenians, whereas in 270 B.C. the Dentheliatis passed to the sovereignty of Sparta. In 222 BC, after the battle of Selasia, Antigonos Doson gave it back to the Messenians. An inscription on the base of the statue of Nike of Paionios at the sanctuary of Olympia provides testimony that Dentheliatis was assigned again to the Messenians on the second half of the 2nd century B.C., with the arbitration of six hundred Milesian judges, suggesting that its status had been disputed before by the Lacedaimonians. After Julius Caesar's death and the battle of Philippi in 42 B.C., Octavian and Marcus Antonius offered it to Sparta.

In the early years of the reign of Tiberius, the Spartans appealed to the Roman Senate, questioning the decision of the Praetor of Achaia Atidius Geminus to recognize the Messenian right over the Ager Denthaliatis (the Roman name of the area) and the sanctuary of Artemis Limnatis. As both embassies appeared before the Senate and Emperor Tiberius requesting arbitration, they attested their claims calling upon myths, texts and monuments built up in the shrine of Limnai, as well as their recent history. In the end the region was given to the Messenians.

MODERN RESEARCH

The first modern reference to the sanctuary of Artemis Limnatis is noted on Regas Pheraios Balkan chart, the famous Charta, published in 1797. In 1835, the Prefect of Messenia and Curator of Antiquities Pericles Zographos reported to the Ephor of Antiquities in Athens, the Bavarian Ludwig Ross, the discovery of a small church in a remote site called Volimnos, at an altitude of 900 m., above the gorge of Langada and the old road from Kalamata to the villages of Nedousa, Artemisia and Alagonia. The church stands on the southeast of a fertile valley, at a remote natural terrace, difficult to access. In his study *Reisen und Reiserouten durch Griechenland – Reisen im Peloponnes*, Ross notes that inscribed spolia, attesting the presence of a Limnatis sanctuary, had been built into the church. A few years later the inscriptions were recorded by Philippe Le Bas, republished by Paul Foucaurt and finally published in the *Inscriptiones Graecae* by Walter Kolbe.

In 1896, a fragmentarily preserved stele found in the Messene excavation, dated to the Vespasian era, was associated to the story of Roman arbitration to the Messenian – Laconian dispute, narrated by Tacitus, as it records the demarcation of Ager Denthaliatis and the borders between Messenia, Laconia and the newfangled territory of the Eleutherolaconian League, with landmarks incised on rocks, along the ridgeline of Mount Taygetos. At the end of the text a sanctuary dedicated to the cult of Artemis Limnatis is attested, located above the natural boundary of the Choireios Napē gorge.

As the stele is fragmentarily preserved, it is still unknown where exactly the boundary line started. The discovery and identification of *horoi* along the ridge of the mountain complicates the issue; the northern *horos* was discovered at Malevos, a site regarded as the southern border of the Aigytis, while the

southern horos was discovered on the peak of Neraidovouna, at an altitude of 2002 m., over the Koskaraka / Rindomo Gorge. According to the finds and the text of the Messene stele, the gorge of Koskaraka may eventually be identified as the ancient Choireios Napē.

The Swedish archaeologist Mattias Natan Valmin located the sanctuary of Limnatis at the Messenian village of Brinda, modern Voreio Gaitsōn, on a fortified hill overlooking the gorge, a few kilometres to the west of Neraidovouna. Obviously, as the text implies, the sanctuary should be located below the Neraidovouna peak, in close vicinity to the mountain, above the Koskaraka gorge.

FINDS

Objects recovered from Taygetos by Philippe Le Bas, bearing inscriptions written in Laconian alphabet, have been related to the sanctuary of Volimnos.

A bronze archaic shoulder pin found at Mystras and dated to the 6th century B.C., bearing the inscription:

Πριανθὶς ἀνέθεκε τᾷ Λιμνάτι

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Two bronze inscribed cymbals also dated to the 6th century B.C.:

i) Λιμνάτις²

ii) Ὅπωρις ἀνέθεκε Λιμνάτι³

The discovery of another bronze cymbal at the site of Volimnos, that can plausibly be dated to the 6th or 5th century B.C., is an extra reason to entertain all possibilities concerning the origin of the aforementioned items.

An archaic, bronze mirror, a *Flach Spiegel* of the Peloponnesian type according to Petra Oberlander, kept now in Munich, has also been related to Sparta and the sanctuary of Artemis Limnatis. The mirror bears an inscription written in Laconian alphabet:

Λιμνάτις

Of the same type, two Archaic bronze mirrors, exhibited today in the Archaeological Museum of Kalamata, derive from the area of Volimnos. The first preserved intact and dated to the early 5th century B.C. attests the name of a Messenian woman (a *peroikos*?), who dedicates the mirror to Limnatis:

² Kept in Cabinet des Médailles, Paris

³ Kept in Berlin Museum

Λιμνάτιο[ς]· Φιλίππα μ' ἔθεκες

The latter bears incised decoration – the depiction of a young woman wearing a peplos, identified as Artemis.

Obviously, the Limnatis sanctuary was a place of great importance not only for the neighbouring poleis – states, but also for people who paid tribute to their beloved goddess. Other finds from Volimnos, including Protogeometric pottery, a Late Geometric horse figurine and fragmentarily preserved bronze pins affirm that the cult was active in the Geometric era.

Among the Archaic items from the area delivered to Kalamata, are a few bronze shoulder pins, the bronze figurine of a siren or a harpy standing on a fibula, a bronze lion figurine, part of a brooch or a handle of a vessel, the bronze handle of an oinochoe depicting two detached snakes - the other handle probably belongs to a vessel of the 5th century B.C.⁴, finally bronze pendants, such as a miniature one depicting a lion. Of major importance is the fragment of a bone item, probably belonging to an Archaic four faced seal; comparanda can be traced among the finds from the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia in Sparta.

Potsherds and intact vessels dated mostly to the Hellenistic period have also been delivered from the area⁵, whereas items such as a bronze die, a miniature bronze bell now missing, the bezel of a bronze ring, beads, and a miniature lead object, either an amulet or a shield of an Archaic warrior figurine, are typical in Laconian sanctuaries.

⁴ Many thanks are owed to Panagiotis Riganas for providing me with the photo.

⁵ Ugentaria, lamp and skyphos are dated to the 3rd century B.C. The rest are of the Hellenistic period as well.

All bronze items delivered from Volimnos, including the inscribed mirror, the pin and the cymbals, seem to be crafted either in a Laconian or a Messenian workshop. The lavish artefacts, identified as votive offerings to the goddess, suggest that a local sanctuary of profound importance flourished at Volimnos, from the Geometric period until the Hellenistic era and in the years after.

SURVEY

Following the steps of Ludwig Ross, archaeologists of the Ephorate of Messenia, escorted by local guides, visited the area in order to record all present data providing information about the sanctuary of Limnatis. A proper survey is rather difficult to be organised, as the area remains a refuge for bandits.

The church of Panayia Kapsocherovoloussa built in the 19th century at a small natural terrace overlooking the Volimnos valley, is still a cult place for locals. As it is dedicated to the offering of the Holy Garment of Panayia (*Timia Esthēta*), a festival is organized there every year, on the 2nd day of July. According to the myth Virgin Mary punished the local farmers who ignored her festival, by burning their cherovola, the bunches of grain and burley just been harvested from the fertile valley.

The church was exclusively built of spolia from ancient monuments, abundant everywhere in the terrace, such as bases of stelai, columns, cornices and epistyles. In search of the inscriptions published by Ludwig Ross, Philippe Le Bas and Paul Foucart, we managed to trace five out of seven inscriptions of the *Inscriptiones Graecae* volume. All of them have been incised on spolia built into the church.

On the south-western corner of the church, we traced a small part of a grey limestone base (?) bearing the inscription:

A]PTAM[ITOΣ]

..

First published by Walter Kolbe as ΠΑΜ and dated to the 5th – 4th c. B.C., the inscription has been reread and transcribed correctly by Olivier Gengler, to whom my gratitude goes for this information.

Just below it, a part of a white marble geison adorned with an ionic cymation, bears on its south-western side the inscription:

Βορθίη θεῶ - - - - - Λ[ι]μ[νατ - -]

Αὐρ(υλία) Ἐλιξὼ ἀγωνοθέτης θεᾶς Λιμνάτ[ιδος]

On its other, north-western side, another inscription can be read:

[Ἔτους - - ἀγωνοθέτης θ]εᾶς Λιμνάτιδ[ος]

[Ἔτους - - ἀγωνοθέτης θ]εᾶς Λιμνάτιδ[ος]

The epithet *ΒΟΡΘΙΑ* was used to invoke Artemis, both in Sparta and Messene. It is obvious that even in the Roman period, when the sanctuary was mostly under Messenian sovereignty, Limnatis bore the properties of the Orthia, patron goddess of both Spartans and Messenians. It seems that the epithet Orthia was linked to the goddess only in the Flavian period, thus the inscriptions may be dated to the late 1st c. – 2nd c. AD.

Built into the north-western facade of the church, another oblong part of marble geison adorned with an ionic cymation, bears the inscription:

Ἔτους σμθ' Αὐρ(ήλιος) Πρεῖμος

[ἀ]γωνοθέτης θεᾶς Λιμνάτιδος

The date given is 218 AD, based on the date of the Actium battleship, 31 BC. The name Aurelius Preimus is also attested in an ephobic catalogue of 246 A.D. found in Ancient Corone, implying that at least three Messenian cities were represented in the sanctuary's festivals.

[Ἔτους - - ὁ δεῖνα ἀγωνοθέτης] θεᾶς Λειμνάτειδ[ος]

Two other inscriptions carved on a two side marble epistyle, also built in the church, were unfortunately not found. The epistyle was probably removed and placed elsewhere, by the time the modern roof of the church was constructed:

2 ---- τα . . σεβαστο[ῦ νί]ός----

 4 -- νος σεβαστοῦ, θεοῦ σεβαστοῦ ---
 ----- σεβ[αστο ---- -]

Χάρτος Εὐθυκλέος ἱερεὺς Ἀρτέμιτος.
 Θεοξενίδας Εὐθυκλέος [ἰε]ρ[εὺς Ἀρτ]έμιτος
 Νικήρατος Θέωνος. Στράτ[ων Σ]τράτ[ω]νος

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The names of the two priests of Artemis *Chartos* and *Theoxenidas* are not attested either in Messenia or Laconia. The name *Euthecles* is of Spartan origin, while the name *Théon* was common among Messenians, Lacedaimonians and Eleutherolaconians. The names *Nikeratos Théonos* and *Straton Stratonos* are of Messenian origin, as two religious magistrates supervising the cult of Artemis Phosphòros in Messene, also known as *Gerontes tēs Oupēsias*. Their names are attested in a Messenian honorary decree of 42 A.D. Furthermore, as the name of a magistrate called *Mosschos* is attested in association with the city of Abia, it is obvious that by the time the sanctuary was under Messenian control, independent Messenian cities were represented in the Limnatis festival by their prominent magistrates.

Finally, an inscribed base found at Volimnos by Eleni Papakonstantinou and delivered immediately afterwards to the Museum of Kalamata, bears the inscription:

[- - - - -]οιος Ω Τ [- - - - -]

[- - - ἄγων]οθέτης Ἀρτέ[μυδος - - -]

ἐκ τῶν εἰδίω[ν]

Apart from the aforementioned elements, there are lots of others, unfortunately with no inscriptions, traced along the terrace of the church, as well as on the northern slope of the valley of Volimnos. All of them were made of local solid, grey limestone, abundant on the mountain. Not far away, to the southeast and northwest of the church, smaller and bigger parts of the bedrock seem to be carefully cut off, indicating the function of local quarries that provided ashlar. As affirmed by adjacent spolia, monuments at Volimnos were

eventually constructed of local grey limestone, whereas decorative parts of them, such as epistyles and cornices, were made of white marble.

Apparently, it seems that at least private and probably public monuments related to games during the Limnatis festivals, were constructed on the terrace of the church or in vicinity to it during the Roman era, overlooking a valley which looks a lot like a large stadium or an amphitheater. As we know nothing about the exact origin of the miscellaneous objects delivered to the Kalamata Museum, we may entertain all possibilities about the site of the sanctuary or the temple of the goddess, definitely not before an extensive survey along the valley and the slopes of the plateau. All in all, it is certainly a fact that the conspicuous sanctuary of Artemis Limnatis attested by Strabo and Pausanias as the “trophy” of the conflict between the Messenians and the Laconians, can be located at Volimnos, also identified as the ancient Limnai of the Ager Denthaliatis.

THE CULT

Artemis was the prominent goddess of the Southern Peloponnese. Her name is attested in the Linear B texts from the Mycenaean Palace of Pylos, next to the name of a goddess named Orthia. According to Pausanias, Artemis affected the outcome of the conflict between the Spartans and the Messenians. Eventually, after the liberation of Messenia in 369 B.C., the goddess was venerated all over the region, especially in Messene, as Orthia, Phosphòros, Oupēsia, Laphria, Eleia and Limnatis. On the other hand, she was widely venerated in Laconia, bearing many epithets, such as Hēgemonē, Knagia, Dereatis, while Orthia was regarded as the patron deity of the city of Sparta.

Especially Limnatis, the goddess of lakes, wetlands, springs, rivers and swamps was venerated all over the Peloponnese⁶. Sanctuaries of the goddess were usually located at remote, disputed areas, such as Volimnos, the lake of oxen, in order to emphasize her role as a guardian of boundaries.

Ornaments such as shoulder pins, bronze mirrors and jewellery, underline the piety and strong presence of women in the sanctuary; the goddess was primarily venerated as protectress of pregnant women, labour, infants and children during their “transition” from a social or biological stage to another. At Brauron, Mounichia, Lousoi and Messene, young girls served the goddess during their childhood and adolescence, until adulthood and the age of marriage (*arkteia*). Artemis took care of them, providing all necessary facilities and skills appropriate for a Greek lady, the future wife of a citizen and the mother of a hoplite. During their service in the sanctuary, the young girls took part in rites of passage, supervised by the goddess herself, in order to demonstrate their

⁶ Patras, Sikyon, Troizen, Kompothekra Heleia, Laconia between Voiai and Epidauros Limera

ability to support their new social status (*gyne*). Meanwhile, their pious parents dedicated to the goddess either statuettes of the *arktoi* or personal belongings related to their previous social status, such as mirrors, ornaments and toys. In the Limnatis sanctuary on Taygetos, Pausanias states the presence of young girls dressed in ἐσθῆτι καὶ κόσμῳ, ritual clothes and jewellery, implying that processions of adolescents took place during the festival. All in all, we can hardly ignore the fact that the modern church of Volimniotissa is dedicated to the offering of the Holy Garment of Panayia (*Timia Esthēta*), a story related to the vision of Jesus' presentation at the temple of Jerusalem, 40 days after he was born. The Christian myth eventually resembles beliefs and customs concerning the role of Artemis Limnatis as *Eileithyia* and *Kourotrophos*. Pins, brooches and fibulae, garments and shoes worn during labour, were common votive offerings after the postnatal 40 days confinement, when new mothers delivered their infants to the goddess in order to bless them.

Bronze figurines attest the local elite's interest in displaying its growing wealth through lavish offerings at prominent sanctuaries of the area. Dedications of wild animal figurines emphasize the role of Artemis as Mistress of Animals (*Potnia Therōn*), while bronze cymbals were probably used both as offerings and musical instruments in orgiastic rituals. A modern Carnival ritual dedicated to land fertility and the coming of Spring and Easter, held every Ash Monday, the first day of Lent (Greek Sarakosti, before the Orthodox Easter), in the modern village of Nedousa, a few kilometers away from Volimnos, may reflect the orgiastic ritual of the Mistress of Animals held in the Limnatis festival.

It seems that at least in the Roman era, the Limnatis festival was a major event for independent Messenian cities, such as Messene, Abia, Corone, as well as the neighbouring city of Farai, to which the sanctuary was linked through a road

constructed along the bed of River Nedon. According to Pausanias, the sanctuary was also related to the kome of Kalamai, located by scholars to the modern village of Elaiochori.

EPILOGUE

Artemis Limnatis was venerated on Mount Taygetos for at least 1.000 years as guardian of boundaries as well as protectress of women and children in crucial moments of their lives. After the conquest of the Dentheliatis, the Lacedaimonians founded a new sanctuary of Limnatis at Sparta, at a site called *Limnai* or *Limnaion*, declaring explicitly their sovereignty over the disputed area. Nevertheless, the perioikoi and probably the helots of the region never stopped visiting the sanctuary on Mount Taygetos, paying tribute to their beloved goddess. After 369 B.C. and the foundation of Messene, the perennial struggle for the control of the Dentheliatis and the sanctuary continued, apparently provoking the foundation of a new sanctuary on the western slope of Mount Ithome. In a small shrine facing the city, next to a spring, a small Ionic or Corinthian temple was constructed in the 3rd century B.C., dedicated to the cult of Limnatis. In its cella stood a cult statue of the goddess, depicting her as huntress, a *kynegetis*.

Later on, in the Roman era, both the sanctuary and the Dentheliatis region were still regarded as disputed areas. The emphatic presence of high ranking Messenian magistrates in the Limnatis festivals and Tacitus' testimony of the Senate's arbitration in the old aged conflict, accentuate the importance of the area. As the finds from Volimnos testify the presence of a flourishing sanctuary, it may also be suggested that a second sanctuary of Artemis Limnatis was founded over the Choireios Napē (modern Koskaraka gorge), marking the new borderline between the Messenian, the Laconian and the Eleutherolaconian state.

Apparently, it seems that the Limnatis sanctuary and Ager Denthaliatis were more than valuable trophies of an infinite struggle between Laconians and

Messenians. Actually, as Nino Luraghi aptly suggests, “...*the sanctuary of Artemis Limnatis was a true icon of Spartan power and Messenian freedom*”.

Thank you very much.-