

Albania: A Road Trip Through Time

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ZEUS. SCION OF THE TITANS, ruler of the Olympian gods, and infamous seducer of both mortals and immortals alike. Within the canon of Greek mythology, there is no figure as central and none as sacred. According to one story, Zeus was born on the remote peak of Mount Lykaion in the heart of the Peloponnese. Throughout antiquity, the mountain was revered as hallowed ground where the cult of Zeus Lykaios performed solemn rituals in the god's honor. Pilgrims from all over Greece came to bestow offerings

and constitute the oldest material yet uncovered associated with the cult of Zeus. They are providing new insight into early Greek religious practices, Greek culture, and the origins of Zeus himself. Mount Lykaion is, quintessentially, a place where mythology and reality are interwoven.

IN THE SECOND CENTURY A.D., the Greek travel writer Pausanias documented his trip to Mount Lykaion in the bucolic region of Arcadia. By then, the Sanctuary of Zeus had already fallen into disrepair, but he marveled at the ruins that



A VIEW FROM THE

Excavations at the Sanctuary of Zeus on Mount Lykaion have revealed the earliest evidence to date associated with the cult of ancient Greece's most powerful Olympian god

by JASON URBANUS

by burning animal bones, pouring libations of wine, or proffering gifts. These rites were even rumored to include human sacrifice. These tales must surely belong to the realm of myth and legend. Yet, recent archaeological work atop the nearly 5,000-foot peak has unearthed fascinating evidence left behind by worshippers of Greece's most powerful god that is lending credence to the age-old myths. The remnants of these rituals, accumulated over a period of 1,300 years, date back to the sixteenth century B.C.

remained: the hippodrome and stadium, the marble plinths, now statue-less, and most of all, the sacred altar of Zeus. Eighteen hundred years later, although some of the stones had been carried away, the site did not appear much different to archaeologist David Gilman Romano when he visited the sanctuary in the 1970s. No roads had yet been built to the top of the mountain, so Gilman Romano and two colleagues hiked four hours from the closest village accessible by taxi. "When I


got up there I thought, 'Wow, there is something special about this place.' I was so impressed with the beauty and majesty of the site. Not only was there a stadium and hippodrome, but it was also the birthplace of Zeus with the famous altar. From the beginning," he says, "there was a kind of emotional bond that I had with the site, so I pledged to myself that I would return one day to work there."

Today, Gilman Romano is codirector of the Mt. Lykaion Excavation and Survey Project, under the directorship of Anna Vasiliki Karapanagiotou of the Ephorate of Antiquities of

of ancient Greek religion. To codirector Mary Voyatzis, the rugged, isolated nature of Mount Lykaion offers a potentially unparalleled glimpse into early Greek culture, since the area was not subject to outside influences. "We are dealing with a place that is just so old, it's like going back in time. It's not Athens or Corinth, it's not a major cosmopolitan area, so older aspects of culture seem to be preserved, and that is what we see when we look at the evidence," she says.

The sanctuary actually comprises two separate areas, an upper and a lower district, both of which are currently being

BIRTHPLACE OF ZEUS



The top of Mount Lykaion offers sweeping views across the Peloponnese. The ancient Greeks believed the mountain was the birthplace of Zeus. Near its summit lies the Sanctuary of Zeus Lykaios.

Arcadia. The project is a collaboration between the University of Arizona, the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, the Arcadian Ephorate, and the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports. Although the site was briefly excavated by Greek archaeologists in the early twentieth century, this project is the first to systematically explore, excavate, and document the far-flung Sanctuary of Zeus. The work over the past 14 years has rewritten the history of the site and, possibly, the history

studied. The upper sanctuary is located at the very top of the 4,534-foot southern peak (Mount Lykaion has two peaks) and consists of the sacred precinct and the altar of Zeus. The lower sanctuary, situated in a meadow several hundred feet below the summit, contains the complex of buildings associated with the Lykaion games, which were held every four years in Zeus' honor. It includes the only extant ancient Greek hippodrome.

Sanctuaries in ancient Greece were places where people



The ash altar of Zeus (top), located at the peak of Mount Lykaion, is made up of the ash and bone of sacrificed animals and other votive offerings, all of which were part of the ritual worship of Zeus. A collection of broken Mycenaean *kylikes*, or drinking cups (above, left), has been found. A stone platform (above, right) was likely constructed for the placement of offerings.

communicated with their gods. They were considered portals to the divine world where deities and humans could interact, places where mortals could pray to the gods and the gods could listen, if so willing. Although Mount Lykaion is not the tallest mountain in the Peloponnese, it offers commanding views across almost the entirety of the peninsula. It is easy to understand why the Greeks felt the presence of their sky god Zeus there—his many epithets included “bringer of rain,” “storm gatherer,” and “lightning wielder.” Zeus’ companion was often the eagle, who, as ruler of the skies, was his counterpart in the animal kingdom. Even today, these elements of Zeus’ mythology remain eerily present at the site. Turbulent weather and lightning storms can arise at a moment’s notice, causing archaeologists to scramble. “When a storm blows in, everyone has to get down out of there in a big rush,” says Gilman

Romano. They also have the occasional close encounter with eagles. “One day we were up here and two eagles just floated up,” he says. “You don’t see anything and then all of a sudden, there they are flying right above us.”

While these environmental and meteorological phenomena may have led prehistoric Greek communities to first identify the spirits of the mountain with Zeus, two other natural features of Mount Lykaion were even more influential in the foundation of the sanctuary. “I think it has more to do with the water and the seismic activity here,” explains Gilman Romano. Just below the peak, a large natural spring emanates from the ground. Springs like this were thought not only to possess mystical properties but were also essential aspects of Greek sanctuaries since worshippers were required to undergo a purification process before they were allowed to enter the sacred precinct.

But ancient Greeks were also equally mesmerized by seismic disturbances. Although it may seem counterproductive given the likelihood for destruction, some of the most important sanctuaries, like that of Apollo at

Delphi, were built on or adjacent to active fault lines. Understandably, the literal moving of the earth was equated with mysterious energies and divinities. According to geologist George Davis, Mount Lykaion’s topography has been distinctly shaped by its seismic history. He identified several different faults running through the site, which would have captivated the ancient Greeks. “Ground movement due to earthquakes, nearby landslides, and ground rupture are the ingredients for a sanctuary full of divine power,” he says. “I suspect that the Zeus cult followers approached the altar summit with awe.”

The altar of Zeus is not a standing structure, as we might think of an altar today, but instead a mound of ash and pulverized bone. Upon first glance, it appears rather inconsequential. “When you go to the site and see the ash altar, it looks like nothing. It just looks like a hill,” remarks Voyatzis. But that hill is effectively an

enormous pile of debris accumulated from more than a thousand years' worth of sacrifices and dedications. The mound has a diameter of over 100 feet, reaches five feet deep in places, and covers an area of 7,500 square feet, the entirety of the summit.

Greek ritual worship was an elaborate affair, consisting of processions, purifications, dancing, and feasting. At its heart, though, was the presentation of offerings on the altar, where a mortal might request a favor from the god or goddess, offer their thanks, or simply seek to foster good relations. A worshipper might pour out a wine libation or leave a small votive gift. At the Sanctuary of Zeus at Mount Lykaion, a major component of this ritual was the *thysia*, in which an animal was slaughtered and sacrificed. Some parts of the animal were set aside for human consumption at the celebratory feast, while others were brought to the altar and burned as an offering to Zeus. The bones were stripped of their meat, wrapped in fat, and set on fire. The dedicator hoped that the aromatic smoke from the fires would radiate upward to grab Zeus' attention and please him. The recent excavations have shown that it is the remains of this process, performed repeatedly for millennia, that are visible today. "They started making dedications on the bedrock and then over time the burning of the animal bone, the fat, and the mud, the liquids, and pottery fragments accumulated and it became this huge mound," Voyatzis explains.

It is impossible to estimate exactly how many burned animal bones are buried within the ashen mound today, perhaps tens of thousands. Recent analyses of samples taken from the altar indicate that 98 percent of the faunal remains belong to either sheep or goat, with much smaller amounts of pig and cattle. Ninety-eight percent of the animal bones were also classified either as thighbones (femur and attached patella) or tailbones. Since the thighbone was the largest bone in the body, it would seem fitting that Zeus be presented with that as an offering, but Voyatzis says that the tail was burned for different reasons: "These bones were put on the fire because they would curl up in a certain direction and provide an omen depending on which way they curled."



The first clue that worship at the sanctuary might be older than previously thought came with the discovery of a 15th-century B.C. Minoan rock-crystal seal depicting a bull.

GILMAN ROMANO AND Voyatzis were aware of the ash altar's existence prior to their excavations; they just did not know precisely how old it was. The early twentieth-century excavators dated the altar to around the seventh century B.C. and for more than a hundred years that date was accepted by scholars. For the past century, Mount Lykaion has often been overshadowed by another famous Sanctuary of Zeus located at Olympia, 22 miles away. Olympia, which contained one of the wonders of the ancient world—the statue of Zeus and its own ash altar dating to the eleventh century B.C.—was long considered older and more important. However, as Gilman Romano and Voyatzis began their excavations on Mount Lykaion, they soon encountered signs that the altar there might be older than anyone expected—much older.

The first major indicator of just how old the altar was came with the discovery of a Minoan rock-crystal lentoid, or lens-shaped, seal depicting a bull. The object dated to the fifteenth century B.C. "The Minoan seal stone blew us away," says Voyatzis. "We thought maybe this was our first clue that we have material here earlier than people previously thought." The archaeologists were initially cautious not to read too much into the singular find, which could have been left or dropped at the altar centuries after it was made. But as the team continued to dig, they unearthed massive amounts of Mycenaean drinking vessels, hundreds of them, which dated as far back as the sixteenth century B.C. In fact, they even found evidence that human activity on the peak extends all the way back into the Neolithic period (4000–3000 B.C.), although they are currently unsure how to characterize that behavior. The combination of Mycenaean pottery and radiocarbon dating of the animal bones indisputably confirmed that organized ritual cult activity had begun at the sanctuary by the sixteenth century B.C. The history of Greeks worshipping Zeus on Mount Lykaion had suddenly been pushed back nearly 1,000 years, further back than anywhere else in Greece. "This was a real surprise," says Gilman Romano.

Offerings left by worshippers on the altar of Zeus include (left to right) animal figurines, silver coins, including one bearing an eagle, known to symbolize Zeus' power, and this Mycenaean askos, or cup.





Archaeologists were surprised to discover a human skeleton buried within the sacrificial altar to Zeus. The grave is currently believed to belong to an adolescent who was laid to rest in the 11th century B.C.

In addition to the burned animal bones and the array of ceramic vessels—cups, goblets, and bowls used for drinking wine and pouring libations—archaeologists have recovered scores of other small artifacts that were left on the altar as offerings. These include miniature bronze tripod cauldrons, lead wreaths, coins, iron axes, and human and animal terracotta figurines. Finding these small votive objects was somewhat expected, as excavations at other sacrificial altars have shown that these types of artifacts were commonly deposited. The discovery, however, of a human skeleton on the altar was completely unexpected. A number of ancient writers allude to the practice of human sacrifice on Mount Lykaion, making the find even more intriguing. Could this human burial actually confirm the veracity of these tales?

The skeleton was carefully laid out in a shallow grave with stone slabs covering only the pelvic area. It has now been removed from the altar and sent to a laboratory where it is currently undergoing testing to determine age, sex, and cause of death, but preliminary analysis suggests the remains are those of an adolescent who was buried around the eleventh century B.C. Although it is still too early to draw any conclusions concerning human sacrifice, Gilman Romano does recognize the suspicious nature of a human burial within the altar of Zeus, especially given the cult's nefarious reputation in antiquity. "Obviously, we have a lot of unanswered questions about all of this," he says. "The one thing that is clearest is that we are not digging a cemetery. This is a sacrificial altar to Zeus, where thousands of animal sacrifices were made in antiquity. And in the middle of it, right in the middle, we found a human skeleton."

THE OTHER MAJOR component of the Sanctuary of Zeus is the area associated with the athletic contests of the Lykaion games. This lower sanctuary contains a hip-



The lower sanctuary at Mount Lykaion is situated on a small plain several hundred feet below the summit. During the 1st millennium B.C., the athletic contests of the Lykaion games were held here.

podrome, stadium, stoa, bath facility, fountain house, administrative building, and other structures. Many of these buildings were investigated a century ago, but the current excavations are continuing to reveal new information about this part of the site. Last year workers unearthed a large staircase and corridor, presumably used by athletes processing toward the competitions. For Gilman Romano, excavations in the lower sanctuary have the potential to answer key questions about the connection between religious rituals and athletic games. Athletic contests were also held at other sanctuaries of Zeus, most famously at Olympia (hence, the modern "Olympic Games"), but it is not known precisely when games in general originated. "It appears that those who competed in athletic competitions at Greek religious festivals were competing to please the god or goddess. One of the important questions that I have concerning Mount Lykaion is when and why athletic contests were associated with Zeus," says Gilman Romano. According to tradition, the first Olympics were held in Olympia in 776 B.C. At Mount Lykaion, the earliest evidence uncovered so far in the lower sanctuary dates only to the seventh century B.C.,

postdating the original Olympic games. But Gilman Romano and Voyatzis do not think this definitively means that the Olympic games were older than the Lykaion ones. They point out the fact that for decades the Sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia was considered the older of the two sanctuaries and that this has only recently been proved incorrect. With their project slated to continue for several more years, they hope to finally uncover conclusive evidence about the origins of the Lykaion games. “We now think Mount Lykaion was the precursor to Olympia, and that the Zeus cult began here in the Bronze Age, during the sixteenth century B.C., and then was later transposed to Olympia. Athletics could have been a part of the religious festivals from early times, since according to ancient sources the Lykaion festival was very old. Some sources even suggest older than Olympia,” Gilman Romano says.

TOWARD THE END of the first millennium B.C., activity at the Sanctuary of Zeus began to diminish. One of the main reasons for this was the founding of Megalopolis in 370 B.C. on the plains below Mount Lykaion. Megalopolis was the first urban center in Arcadia and eventually housed its own Sanctuary of Zeus Lykaios. The Lykaion games were also subsequently transferred there. The Sanctuary of Zeus’ decline on Mount Lykaion may have simply been a result of logistics and convenience, as it was much easier to travel to Megalopolis to seek the favor of Zeus than to hike up a mountain. By the end of the third century B.C., dedications on the altar ceased altogether, but the legacy of the site was kept alive through the



A staircase and corridor recently uncovered in the lower sanctuary may have been used by athletes on their way to the stadium. Researchers are investigating the relationship between athletic competition and the worship of Zeus.

centuries by ancient writers who continued to recognize the remote Arcadian peak as the birthplace of Zeus.

For the directors of the Mt. Lykaion Excavation and Survey Project, the “birthplace” of Zeus has a more figurative than literal meaning. “I think the term may be derived from a memory in antiquity when Zeus’ worship became associated with the site,” says Voyatzis. “My guess is that prior to Zeus there was another ancient divinity or force worshipped on the mountaintop. In my opinion, the idea of his being born here is really a memory of the beginning of the new cult.”

Gilman Romano believes that the notion that Zeus was born on Mount Lykaion can even be interpreted as a reference to the birth of Greek culture itself. “I like to think that there may be more to the story and that the ‘birthplace’ connotation could have a broader meaning,” he says. “It could be a metaphor for the beginnings of Greek religion, culture, language, and Greek civilization in general—the beginnings of everything that is Greek is wrapped up into the place.”

For the local villagers living near the sanctuary today, the



Just a few hundred feet from the altar and sacred precinct of Zeus can be seen the roof of the small church of Prophetis Elias, where villagers today celebrate their most important religious festival.

heritage of their ancestors and their awareness of ancient Greece’s most powerful god remains very much alive. The Lykaion games have been restarted, held every four years again at the site of the ancient stadium. The village’s most important religious festival is celebrated at a small church located just a few hundred feet from Zeus’ sacrificial altar. Although there are other sites in the Greek world that are purported to be the birthplace of Zeus, particularly Mount Ida in Crete, there is no place other than Mount Lykaion that can boast such a long and pervasive connection to the god. As for it being his birthplace, Zeus himself seems to have put that debate to rest in a third-century B.C. poem by Callimachus. Even at this later date, there was enough speculation about Zeus’ actual birthplace for the exasperated poet to ask Zeus directly whether he was born in Arcadia or Crete. Zeus responds crisply, “Cretans are liars.” ■

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