

# The Cosmos in Ancient Greek Religious Experience: Sacred Space, Memory, and Cognition

By Efrosyni Boutsikas

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When was the last time you consulted the stars? If it has been too long, reading Efrosyni Boutsikas' latest book will certainly make you feel like it; *The Cosmos in Ancient Greek Religious Experience* is remarkably akin to a stargazing experience.

Its main thesis is unequivocal: there is an important element missing from our current understanding and study of ancient ritual performance and architecture, and that is the skyscape. From within our light-polluted cities, where artificial light is ubiquitous and a centuries-old given, we tend to forget about the vital role that the elements of the sky played in our ancestors' lives, for instance, as light sources and time-keeping tools. Especially when it comes to the nocturnal ancient Greek experience, as Boutsikas poignantly highlights, 'because we do not think of the night sky, we assume the ancients did not either.' (1) Lamenting the

majority of the current body of research into the ancient Greek concepts of 'landscape, space, and movement' as undertaken according to the assumed context of daylight, Boutsikas' motivation is an attempt at an enriched, multidisciplinary reconstruction of the *totality* of the environment of our ancestors (11). Her plea to researchers is to take into consideration all the evidence at their disposal, including 'the most impressive cognitive artefact' that is 'the canopy of stars in the night sky.' (2)

Informed by the science of archaeoastronomy – 'the study of the sky in past societies'- and further facilitated by the discipline's new-found momentum in virtue of the application of virtual reality simulation models, the book's methodological proposal is, for all intents and purposes, the definition of 'cutting-edge' (5). It serves not only as an argument for the inclusion of a largely ignored

type of evidence, namely the night sky, but also for the utilisation of a new analytical concept of ‘ritual timing’, and the idea of its impact on the overall perceptual experience of the night-sky as it changes during a ritual performance (4-5). By tapping into contextual evidence and, more specifically, the non-physical evidence to be gleaned from the ancient narratives and myths embodied by ritual performance, this research differentiates itself from its probabilistic peers and predecessors. By demonstrating a repeated pattern in a data set, such research has been predominantly occupied with the advancement of the claim that the placement of Greek temples was intentionally governed by astronomical observations.

For Boutsikas’ purposes, orientation data is *but one* aspect of the evidence, and the first three chapters of the book gradually embellish and illustrate this claim. For one, she argues, the patterns emerging from the available orientation data sets are weak and the criterion of orientation according to what is most commonly just one star, such as the sun, further weaken the urge to warrant meaning to these patterns. Secondly, even if we can safely warrant meaning to the patterns, the meaning seems to be superimposed, anachronistic, or incomplete. The *a posteriori* ascription of meaning onto correlations between data is not tantamount to having evidence for such a correlation, say, between a performance or architectural structure and an entity in the sky. Further, it is no use hypothesising about the deliberateness of such correlations when we can barely fathom them. For instance, probabilistic analysis of the data set of ancient temples, rather counter-

intuitively, suggests that most sun-oriented structures were in fact those *not* devoted to the sun-god Apollo but to other deities, such as Hera and Zeus – a puzzling result indeed, considering that the link for which we could posit a plausible and verifiable explanation would be the exact opposite.

The experience of ancient ritual activity is much more complex than probabilistic approaches seem to suggest and assume. For Boutsikas, the ancient Greek Classical world is the perfect case study in demonstration of this, not only because their religion was rife with celestial myths and nocturnal festivals, but mainly because the presence of the skyscape permeated ancient life. For them, the observation and knowledge of the movements of the elements of the sky was part of daily life and, as a tool of both religious and agricultural timekeeping, was what made the difference between a thriving *polis* and one out of the favour of the gods. Divine offerings and consultations had their proper time and place, and for what we nowadays turn to clocks and specialists, our ancestors looked to the sky. The in-depth analysis of Apolline cults and festivals in chapter four informs us that at the famous oracle on Delphi celebratory dates, such as Apollo’s birthday, the start of operations of consultation were carefully timed to coincide with the visibility of Delphinus’ major events in the night sky. The constellation, linked with Apollo through the foundational myth of the sanctuary of Delphi, is further argued to have been what the Athenian delegation watched the sky for, a sign of permission to depart for Delphi each year. Considering these suggestions, Boutsikas urges

us to understand the constellation as a possible Panhellenic marker for participation at the oracle's events.

Boutsikas would like us to appreciate that what united them was the human experience. In particular, ritual experience and collective memory, are intricately connected to the time and place wherein they occur, a specific context through which specific memories can be accessed, enriched, or generated. What catalyses this process of extended and embodied human cognition are the myths and narratives that are re-enacted in ritual, blending 'time, landscape, and memory'; ritual, fed by myth and the cognitive environment, feeds memory, and assists in remembrance (111). For Boutsikas, the temples and ritual structures of the ancient Greeks speak to the fact that our ancestors were not only aware of the importance and impact of landscape and architectural forms to ritual experience but, importantly, that they intentionally manipulated that relationship. In the Asian Minor sanctuary of Apollo and Artemis at Klaros, a cave-like environment combined with a labyrinth layout of the crypt floor suggests an intended low-sensory 'cognitive staging' (98) of the visitor's experience of consulting the resident oracle; an 'intention to inspire contact with the divine and intensify ritual experience.' (100) Through the conditions set up by such a 'cognitive ecology', which activates and generates social and group memory and identity, an understanding of the cosmic structure is also constructed (114). It is no wonder, as Boutsikas points out, why the ancient Greek words for 'memory' (*mnemosyni*) and 'monument' (*mnemeion*) have the same

etymological root.

The book's most admirable feature is its immersiveness. Despite the occasional reference to calculations with azimuths and the astronomical terminology surrounding them – for which there is a helpful glossary provided – it reads effortlessly. Boutsikas very prudently reminds her reader that her observations do not serve as definitive counterarguments or alternatives to previous and competing hypotheses. Reading this book will urge you to appreciate that our ancestors' experience was as rich as ours, if not richer, despite their lack of advanced technologies and the sensory overload of modern living. Whilst most of us continue to believe in the idea of progressive history, and tend to think of our ancestors as knowing *less* than us, this book helps us understand that their intelligence was simply calibrated differently than ours.

Given the chance, *The Cosmos in Ancient Greek Religious Experience* will incite in you a symphony of thoughts and reconsiderations and will fire up your imagination. It is sure to sit with you for days thereafter. If it does its job well, it will be with you next time you find yourself visiting an ancient ritual structure looking up and around: to the sky, the horizon, and the *totality* of it all.

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