

## Parsing the Mountain: Significance of Mountain Landscapes in the Homeric Hymns

From Ida to Olympus to Kyllene, the Greek gods populated nearly every mountaintop in the Greek world. For instance, the Homeric Hymns sing of Pan bounding over Arcadian mountains where his father Hermes was reared and of Apollo watching over Delphi from the peaks of Parnassus. But why does the poet of the Hymns, and ancient Greek culture at large, make mountains the habitat of the gods?

In his article “Imaginary Mountains,” Richard Buxton broaches the subject of the ancient Greek understanding of mountains: wild places where gods made their homes, sought refuge, or interacted with nymphs or shepherds. Buxton compiles an impressive catalogue of examples of mountains and their varying uses, from sources of wood, to military refuge, to ritualistic spaces for cults. Yet, he aims at defining mountains in the abstract and looks at the mountain from a distance, as he admits, from the polis. He even disregards the mountain as producer of its own significance and concludes, “The ὄρος needs to be seen in the light of that which is not the ὄρος” (15). While this “reflection” of meaning from the polis to the non-polis may factor into the landscape’s significance in the ancient Greek mind, it does not encompass the whole meaning: the Homeric Hymns to Apollo, to Hermes, and to Pan often treat mountain landscapes as entities unto themselves, divorced from the context of cities and towns, and thus having its own quality.

A significant sticking point in Buxton’s argument is his treatment of mountain landscapes as a monolithic whole. In the search for the abstracted, mythological importance of the ὄρος, he reduces a diverse, ecologically stratified area to a convenient antithesis of the polis. Just as a polis consists of many parts, and as those parts hold their own distinct characteristics, a mountain can be parsed into different ecosystems, which I term *τέμνεα*. Each *τέμενος* has its own characteristics and connotations for humans while, in turn, contributing to the whole of montane

ecology. The poet of the Homeric hymns directly acknowledges this diversity in the Hymn to Pan. In his “Hymn to Pan,” Thomas Oliver touches on how Pan adapts his actions to his surroundings, like an actor playing his part to fit the scene (154). Oliver, however, moves on without detailing Pan’s haunts on the mountain.

I will develop further the *τεμένεια*, those settings in the Hymn to Pan, by terming them *πίση* (subalpine meadows; l. 2), *ὄλη* (woodland; l. 13), *λειμών* (alpine meadow or tundra), and *κάρηνα* (peaks and scree fields; ll. 4, 6-7). In this direction, Oliver Rackham, J.R. Sallares, and others have elaborated on Mediterranean ecological history and provided more diverse vocabulary and imagery of actual landscapes. Applying this language to the Homeric Hymns leads to a more vivid rendering of the texts' landscapes and an interpretation closer to that of an archaic Greek listener/reader who had intimate experience with the world around him. By parsing the mountain and understanding the diverse ecology of montane landscapes, I argue that mountains are the home of the gods not just because of their contrast with cities but, moreover, because of the perception that they are entire desolate worlds unto themselves.

### Bibliography

- Buxton, R. 1992. “Imaginary Greek Mountains.” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 112: 1–15.
- Grove, A.T. and Rackham, Oliver. *The Nature of Mediterranean Europe : An Ecological History*. Yale University Press, 1991.
- Sallares, Robert. *The Ecology of the Ancient Greek World*. Cornell University Press, 1991.
- Thomas, Oliver. “The Homeric Hymn to Pan” in *The Homeric hymns: interpretative essays*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Pr., 2011.