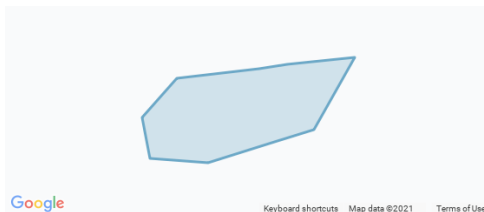


The Cave of the Nymphs at Pharsalos

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Entry tags: Indo-European Religion, Graeco-Roman, Greece, Hellenistic Religions, Sacred Groves, Cave Shrines, Nature Sanctuaries, Open-Air Sanctuary, Shrine, Religious Place, Greek Religions, Greek Cult, Aegean, Religious Group, Thessaly

On the north slope of a hill called Karaplas, 1 km to the southwest of the city of Farsala (ancient Pharsalos), is a cave, well-hidden by its location on a small cliff and the surrounding vegetation. The site was first studied in the 1920's by the Italian Archaeological School at Athens. The cave was discovered to have been a sanctuary to the nymphs, as was ascertained by the two inscriptions carved at the entrance of the cave, as well as numerous votive terracotta figurines offered at the site. The finds at the site date from the 6th c. BCE to the end of Antiquity but the site was only certainly in use as a sanctuary from the 5th c. BCE to the Hellenistic period.



Date Range: 499 BCE - 30 BCE

Region: Karaplas/Alogopati

Region tags: Europe, Southeastern Europe, Southern Europe, Eastern Mediterranean, Greece, Aegean, Thessaly, Northern Greece, Central Greece

The site of the cave on Mount Karaplas/Alogopati in the vicinity of Farsala (ancient Pharsalos). The cave is hidden on a small cliff, surrounded by heavy vegetation and is not readily visible nor accessible on foot.

Status of Participants:

✓ Elite ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

General Variables

Sources and Excavations

Print Sources

Print sources used for understanding this subject:

- Source 1: Levi, Doro. 1926. *L'Antro delle Ninfe e di Pan a Farsalo in Tessaglia*. Bergamo: Istituto italiano d'arti grafiche.
- Source 2: Wagman, Robert. 2016. *The Cave of the Nymphs at Pharsalus: Studies on a Thessalian Country Shrine*. Leiden: Brill.
- Source 3: Aston, Emma. 2012. "Welcome Visitors: Religious Inclusivity in a Pharsalian Cave Cult." Edited by Alexandros Mazarakis-Ainian. *Αρχαιολογικό Έργο Θεσσαλίας και Στερέας Ελλάδας 4*. Athens: Ministry of Culture. 223-227.

Notes: Mili, Maria. 2015. *Religion and Society in Ancient Thessaly*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Canlas, Gino. 2021. *Sacred Space and Community Identities: Sanctuaries in Broader Thessaly from the*

Archaic to the Early Imperial Periods. PhD Dissertation. University of Alberta. Larson, Jennifer. 2007. "A Land Full of Gods: Nature Deities in Greek Religion." In *A Companion to Greek Religion*, edited by Daniel Ogden, 56-70. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell. Larson, Jennifer. 2001. *Greek Nymphs: Myth, Cult, Lore*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Online Sources

Online sources used for understanding this subject:

— Source 1 URL: <https://epigraphy.packhum.org/>

— Source 1 Description: "Searchable Greek Inscriptions" provides access to the two inscriptions from the cave. They are found in Central Greece > I.Thess I > nos. 72 and 73

Has this place been the focus of excavation (pre-modern, illicit, or scientific):

Answer 'Yes' for each period or type of excavation.

— Yes



Type of excavation:

— Scientific



Years of excavation:

— Year range: 1922



Name of excavation

— Official or descriptive name: The Cave of the Nymphs and Pan at Pharsalos in Thessaly

Topographical Context

Is the place associated with a feature in the landscape

— Elevation

— Tree, grove, or forest

— Water source

— Cave



Type of elevation

— Hill

Does the place involve human-made features besides structure:

Other features might be ground clearing, terracing, other modifications of the local environment.

— Yes



Type of feature

- Terracing
- Plantings
- Other [specify]: Cuttings on the rock of the cave (niches, inscriptions).

Is the place situated in an urban or significantly urbanized area:

- No

Is the place situated in a rural setting:

- Yes



Are there settlements in close proximity to the place:

- Yes

Notes: It is 1 km SW of ancient Pharsalos/modern Farsala.



Are there routes of travel in close proximity to the place:

- Yes

Notes: A major road from Pharsalos to Lamia would have run less than a kilometer to the north of the cave. The ascent up the hill and into the cave, however, is not easily accessible. One of the inscriptions on the cave states that Pantalkes, the man who built the sanctuary, carved steps up the shelf in order to make the cave accessible. Those steps no longer exist.

Is the place situated far removed from non-religious places of habitation:

- No

Structures Present

Are there structures or features present:

Instructions: Answer once for each structure/feature or group that can be differentiated.

- Yes



A single structure

- No



One single feature

- Other [specify]: No



A group of structures:

– No

↳ A group of features:

– Yes

Notes: They include stairs, niches, inscriptions, gardens.

↳ Are they part of a single design/construction stage:

– Yes

↳ Is it part of a larger place/sanctuary:

– No

↳ What is the function of the structure/feature or group:

Answer "Yes" once for each distinct function

– Worship

↳ Worship:

– Individual

↳ Is the structure/feature finished:

– Yes

↳ Was the structure/feature intended to last beyond a generation:

– Yes

Notes: It lasted from the 5th c. BC, possibly from the 6th c. BC, and lasted until the Hellenistic period at the earliest, possibly until the end of Antiquity.

↳ Was the structure/feature modified through time:

– No

↳ Was the structure/feature destroyed:

– No

↳ Has the structure/feature been reconstructed:

– No

Reasons for Creation/Construction/Consecration

Is the place used for the worship of/communication with non-human supernatural beings:

– Yes



Dedicated to a supernatural being:

– Yes [specify]: The nymphs

Notes: The surviving portion of the earlier of the two inscriptions (early 5th c. BC), states: Πάνταλκες ἀνέθηκε θεαῖς τοῦ ἔργου τᾶν δὲ δάφναν [...] (Pantalkes dedicated this work to the goddesses, and the laurel...) The goddesses probably refer to the unnamed nymphs of the area--nature spirits to whom the later inscription (late 5th c. BC) refers more explicitly.



Dedicated to more than one supernatural being:

– Yes [specify]: The later of the two inscriptions mentions the nymphs, Pan, Herakles, Asklepios, Chiron the Centaur, Hygieia, and Apollo

Is the place used for the worship of a semi-divine human being:

– Yes

Notes: Of the supernatural beings mentioned in the later inscription, Asklepios is known in mythology as having been a mortal from Trikke (in Western Thessaly), who was granted immortality after death.



Is it a cenotaph:

– No



Does it commemorate a family/clan/group:

– No

Is the place used for the worship of non-divine ancestors:

– No

Notes: I would, however, add that the later inscription seems to have been written after the death of the sanctuary's building, Pantalkes, and this inscription was set up in his honour. The place itself was not a place for his cult.

Was the place commissioned/built by an official political entity:

A political entity is a local power structure that leverages a workforce.

– No

Were the Structures built by specific groups of people:

– No

Notes: The structures were built by one man, Pantalkes.

Was the place thought to have originated as the result of divine intervention:

– Yes

↳ Specify

– Revealed by other kind of supernatural being(s) [specify]: The later of the two inscriptions seems to indicate that Pantalkes had at one point become a nympholept (someone who had encountered and been abducted by the nymphs), after which episode he decided to establish a cult site for them at this cave.

Was the place created to mark or commemorate the birthplace of a supernatural or human being:

– No

Was the place created as the result of an event:

– Yes

Notes: The later of the two inscriptions seems to indicate that Pantalkes had at one point become a nympholept (someone who had encountered and been abducted by the nymphs), after which episode he decided to establish a cult site for them at this cave.

↳ Specify

– Other [specify]: The founder of the cult had been abducted by nymphs and he decided to honour them afterwards.

Was the creation of the place sponsored by an external financial/material donation:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: The inscription seems to indicate that the founder of the sanctuary established it on his own. Whether the polis of Pharsalos or another community of cult decided to fund the continued maintenance of the sanctuary is unknown.

Was the establishment of the place motivated by:

– Expectation of favor in return

Notes: The later inscription states that Pantalkes was rewarded with various blessings by various gods for his devotion to building and maintaining the sanctuary. Herakles blessed him with strength; Pan blessed him with laughter, good sense, and just the right amount of hubris; Apollo and Hermes gave him health and good life; and Chiron made him a good singer.

Was the place built specifically for housing scriptures/sacred texts:

– No

Design and Material Remains

Overall Structure

Is the place made up of multiple built structures:

– No

Is monumental architecture present:

Monumental architecture is defined here as a built structure that surpasses average human proportions and in general is larger and more complex than is necessary to fulfill the structure's utilitarian function(s). Examples of monumental architecture include Mesopotamian Ziggurats, Egyptian Pyramids, Greek and Roman temples, Mesoamerican Pyramids, North American and Aegean burial mounds, etc.

– No

Is the structure/feature made out of natural materials:

Answer [Yes] for each material type

– Yes



Earth

– Yes



Is this material sourced locally:

– Yes



Is this material lacking in the local natural environment:

– No



Sand

– No



Clay

– No



Plaster

– No



Wood

– No

↳ Grass
– No

↳ Stone
– Yes

Notes: The limestone of the cave was carved by Pantalkes in order provide a stairway into the upper level of the cave and niches on the walls of the cave for offerings.

↳ Is this material sourced locally:
– Yes

↳ Is this material lacking in the local natural environment:
– No

↳ Other
– Other [specify]: The inscription indicates that Pantalkes cultivated a garden/sacred grove at the cove formed by the entrance of the cave. This garden included both natural and cultivated vegetation.

Is the structure/feature made out of human-made materials
– No

Decoration

Is decoration present:
– No

Iconography

Are there distinct features in the places iconography:
– No

Beliefs and Practices

Funerary Associations

Is this place a tomb/burial:
– No

Is this a place for the worship of the dead:

– No

Is this a place for treatment of the corpse:

– No

Are co-sacrifices present in tomb/burial:

Co-sacrifices are animal/human sacrifices prompted by the death of the primary occupant of the tomb/burial.

– No

Are grave goods present:

– No

Are formal burials present:

– No

Supernatural Beings

Is a supreme high god is present:

– No

Does the supreme high god communicate with the living at this place:

– No

Are previously human spirits present:

– Yes

Notes: Asklepios is technically formerly human in mythology and he is acknowledged at this sanctuary.



Human spirits can be seen:

– Field doesn't know



Human spirits can be physically felt:

– Field doesn't know

Do human spirits communicate with the living at this place:

– No

Are nonhuman supernatural beings present:

– Yes

↳ Human spirits can be seen:

– No

↳ Human spirits can be physically felt:

– No

Do nonhuman spirits communicate with the living at this place:

– Yes

↳ In waking, everyday life:

– Yes

Notes: The later inscription seems to claim that Pantalkes, the founder of the cult, was a nympholept, i.e. believed to have been abducted by the nymphs for a time.

↳ In dreams:

– Field doesn't know

↳ In trance possession:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Through divination practices:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Only through religious specialists:

– No

↳ Only through monarch:

– No

↳ Other

– Other [specify]: NA

Are mixed human-divine beings present:

– Yes

Notes: Two of the deities worshipped here, Pan and Chiron, are half-animal and half-human. Pan himself is the son of a mortal and a god, and Chiron was the son of a Titan and an Ocean nymph.

↳ Mixed human-divine spirits can be seen:
– Field doesn't know

↳ Mixed human-divine spirits can be physically felt:
– Field doesn't know

Do mixed human-divine beings communicate with the living at this place:
– Field doesn't know

Is the supernatural being/high god present in the form of a cult statue(s):
– No

Supernatural Interactions

Is supernatural monitoring present:
– No

Do visitors communicate with the gods or supernatural beings:
– Yes

Notes: The last two lines of the later inscription says: "Sacrifice, pray, and be glad, all of you. Here you can forget all bad things, be given good things, and overcome conflict." Sacrifice and prayer would be forms of communication with the divine and the divine was thought to reciprocate.

↳ Do visitors communicate with gods:
– Yes

↳ Do visitors communicate with other supernatural beings:
– Yes

Ritual and Performance

Sacrifices, Offerings, and Maintenance

Are sacrifices performed at this place:
– Yes

↳ Are there animal sacrifices:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: The verb θύω (to sacrifice by burning) is used in the inscription but it does not specify whether that sacrifice is animal. No references were made to faunal remains in the excavation reports. I would consider it likely but not certain.

↳ Are there human sacrifices:

– No

↳ Are the sacrificed humans associated in some way:

– No

Are there self-sacrifices present:

– No

Are material offerings present:

– Yes

↳ Are material offerings mandatory:

– No

↳ Are material offerings composed of valuable objects:

– Yes

Notes: There is only one possible valuable offering at this site, and the only evidence for this is a fragment from the lip of what would have been a large bronze vase.

↳ Are material offerings composed of daily-life objects:

– Yes

Notes: Pottery was dedicated at this site from the 4th c. BC to Late Antiquity. Whether the post-Hellenistic pottery assemblage were still part of cultic activity at the site is uncertain. Metal finds consist of a vase pendant, a ring, and a fragment of a bronze vase. There was also one coin dating to the reign of Antigonos Gonatas (277-239 BC).

↳ Are material offerings interred at this place (in caches):

– Yes

Notes: The majority of the votive material at this place consisted of terracotta figurines. The earliest (late 6th c. BC) of these were kourtophobic female figures, women carrying jars, seated and reclining women (one with a deer), protomai, and votive plaques depicted women. Several terracotta protomai date to the 4th c. BC. And female protomai, terracotta head of Dionysos (?), figurines of a possible Aphrodite and Eros, of Pan, of Hermes, satyrs, and

doves date to the Hellenistic period.



Other

— Other [specify]: NA

Is attendance to worship/sacrifice mandatory:

— No

Notes: The first few lines of the later inscription greets those passing by, and the last few lines encourages visitors to relax and take comfort at this site. This indicates that not all who worshipped here necessarily intended to come to worship (i.e. they were not being compelled).

Is maintenance of the place performed:

— Yes



Is it required:

— Field doesn't know



Is there cleansing (for the maintenance):

— Yes



Are there periodic repairs/reconstructions:

— Yes



Is the maintenance performed by permanent staff:

— Field doesn't know

Notes: One man, Pantalkes, is said to have performed the maintenance of the sanctuary but whether there was a permanent staff in charge of the sanctuary after he died is unknown.



Other

— Other [specify]: NA

Pilgrimage and Festivals

Are pilgrimages present:

— Field doesn't know

Is this place a venue for feasting:

— Field doesn't know

Notes: There seem to have been sacrifices performed at the site, but since we do not know the nature of the sacrifices, we would not be able to say if feasting occurred in connection with those sacrifices.

Are festivals present:

— No

Divination and Healing

Is divination present:

— No

Is healing present/practiced at this place:

— Yes

↳ Incubation
— Field doesn't know

↳ Healing magic
— Field doesn't know

↳ Cleansing
— Field doesn't know

↳ Offerings of models of body parts:
— No

↳ Expiation
— Field doesn't know

↳ Other
— Other [specify]: The cave does not seem to have been a specialized site for healing but healing is implied in the later inscription by the presence of Apollo, Asklepios, and Chiron (all healing deities), and the same inscription indicates that healing is one of the blessing bestowed upon by the gods of this place. How that healing occurs is not specified.

Do rituals occur at this place:

Rituals are visibly enacted behaviors by one or more people for the purposes of religious observance.

– Yes

↳ Do large-scale rituals take place:

– No

↳ Do small-scale rituals take place:

– Yes

↳ On average how many participants are present in large-scale rituals:

– specify: Unknown

↳ How often do these rituals take place:

– specify: Unknown

↳ Are there orthodoxy checks:

– No

↳ Are there orthopraxy checks:

– No

↳ Are there synchronic practices:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Are there intoxicants used during the ritual:

– Field doesn't know

Institutions and Scriptures

Religious Specialists

Are religious specialists present/in charge of this place:

Religious specialists are individuals whose primary duties within a population group are not concerned with subsistence or craft production but the maintenance of the religious landscape and culture of the group.

– Yes

Notes: Only one religious specialist is mentioned concerning this sanctuary, and that is the cult's founder Pantalkes. He seems to have undertaken much of the work to build the sanctuary and maintain. Whether his work was carried on by other specialists after he died is uncertain. It seems likely, as someone/some people took it upon themselves to carve a dedicatory inscription after the

death of Pantalkes, and the cult persisted until at least the Hellenistic period, possibly into Late Antiquity.

↳ Present full time
– Field doesn't know

↳ Present part time
– Field doesn't know

↳ Are the religious specialists of specific sex/gender:
– Yes

↳ Are the religious specialists of specific ethnicity:
– Field doesn't know

↳ Are the religious specialists of specific class/cast:
– Field doesn't know

↳ Are religious specialists dedicated to the place for life:
– Field doesn't know

↳ Are the religious specialists stratified in a hierarchical system:
– No

Does this place incorporate a living space for religious specialists:

– No

Notes: The site is a cave on a wooded hill.

Is this place used for the training of religious specialists:

– No

Are there formal institutions for the maintenance of the place:

Institutions that are authorized by the religious community or political leaders

– No

Bureaucracy

Is there a formal bureaucracy present at this place:

A bureaucracy consists of a hierarchical system of accounting and rule maintenance primarily concerned with material wealth.

— No

Does this place control economic resources (land, goods, tools):

— No

Public Works

Does this place serve as a location for services to the community:

— No

Writing/Scriptures

Is non-religious writing stored at this place:

Economic documents, records etc.

— No

Notes: The only writings found at the cave were two dedicatory inscriptions carved on the walls of the mouth of the cave.

Are there scriptures associated with this place:

— No

Bibliography

General References

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