



THE ATHENS GREEK RELIGION SEMINAR, Tuesday, March 12, 2024

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Rethinking the Ancient Greek Temenos: Boundary or Frame?

ABSTRACT

The temenos is traditionally considered the boundary of the sacred space: everything within constitutes the space of the gods. Sometimes it was demarcated by a physical wall, sometimes it was bound by natural features of the landscape, and other times it was simply understood. Indeed, this area was strictly for sacred purposes, and it was forbidden to 'pollute' this space. This paper, however, problematises the concept of the temenos and breaks down its traditional boundaries by turning to frame theory. It considers how the interactions between people, built sanctuary space and the wider natural landscape together created religious experience and meaning. It asks, where does the sacred space end and wider landscape begin? To what extent can we separate the two, conceptually and materially, in such a way? How can we understand the blurred religious boundaries between what we find within and beyond the temenos, as a physical boundary or otherwise?

Sanctuary building projects often cut back the natural rock at the site to create appropriate terraces for worship, sometimes also using this same rock as part of building materials for the religious monuments within the sanctuary, for example for the temples of Apollo and Athena at Karthaia on Kea. Choices about sacred rites were often made with the cosmological environment in mind: several ancient sources associate the Eleusinian mysteries with the night's sky. The temenos was permeable; it allowed people and things to enter, leave and re-enter, and also allowed worshippers to be affected by what was happening, visible, heard etc. in relation to the earth and sky on the other side. The temenos facilitates movement; things are not contained within the physical frame, so the scholarly dismantling of the strict definition of temenos allows for the penetration of space. Religious experience, in other words, does not begin and end within this physical sanctuary space. And the sacred space could be (and should be) defined not only by what is within, but also by what is outside, this frame.

The seminar takes place on **Tuesday, March 12, 2024, at 17.00 (Athens)** with live presence at the Swedish Institute or online via Zoom.

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