

On Natural Sanctuaries and ‘Temple Towns’ : Religion at the Crossroads between Nature and City in Ancient Anatolia and the Aegean

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Keywords

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Introduction

Since the second half of the 20th century, a growing ethical turn has been taking place all over the world, sparked by the enormous transformations which have taken hold along with industrialisation and the dramatic destruction of the natural environment. The increasing ecological problems humanity is facing, such as the loss of biodiversity or human-induced climate change, have led us to rethink our attitude towards nature in an ever-changing world. The rising number of natural catastrophes, like the recent floods in Western and Central Europe in July 2021, causing widespread damage and tragically costing the lives of at least 221 people, including 184 in Germany ([Die Zeit 2021](#); [MDR 2021](#)), are exposing the need for more for more sustainable environmental policies. The international protest movement Fridays for Future, which started in 2018 by Greta Thunberg, is probably the most prominent outgrowth of this rethinking process. Moreover, environmental concerns have long since reached theological discourses, and new religious movements such as Neo-Paganism, Animism, and Wicca reflect the desire of many people for a new harmony between humans and Mother Nature.

Despite this growing awareness, the exploitation of natural resources and the transformation of natural environments into human-dominated cultural spaces is increasing enormously. This also includes the advancing urbanisation. By now, more than fifty percent of the world’s population lives in cities ([Rüpke 2020, 1](#)). For many of these people, city living has become the only lifestyle imaginable. Yet, it is likely that the above-mentioned movement towards nature conservancy is still related to the experienced cultural environment of these city spaces. The concept of ‘cultural environment’ refers to the very process of human appropriation and the mutual relationship between social and belief systems and their environments ([Weiss 2021, 126](#)). As Rüpke aptly summed up in the introduction of his recently published work on urban religion, urban centres not only are “the motors of innovation and the epicentres of globalisation” ([2020, 1](#)). New ideological movements are also always a result of the cultural environment of cities and the experiences of their citizens ([2020, 2–3, 17–18](#)). Due to that, many archaeologists and scholars of Religious Studies see religion as a predominantly urban phenomenon and consider the urban context and its different agents as being very

important for the appropriation of religious traditions (Lätzer-Lasar et al. 2021, 3). Ultimately, the current outcry in the face of our dying world seems to reflect the distorted relationship between the living conditions of the Anthropocene¹ and the general concept of nature prevalent in modern societies, a concept deeply rooted in the traditions of ancient agrarian and urban civilisations.

But what was this relationship between nature and urbanity like at other times in history? As one outcome of the student research project ARELINCO of the Center for Religious Studies (CERES) at Ruhr-Universität Bochum, which focuses on the identification and examination of contemporary religious phenomena, conflict situations and their historical parallels or possible precursors in antiquity, the present article seeks to answer this question by addressing the following points:

- 1) What is the role of religion in the process of urbanisation and how does the urban context influence religious traditions?
- 2) How was sacred space created in antiquity and were there specific forms of both urban and non-urban religion?
- 3) What was the prevailing understanding of nature during antiquity and in what ways was nature being worshipped?
- 4) How was nature and its sanctuaries incorporated into the city and its surroundings?

The geographical and temporal focus of this paper is on Anatolia and the Aegean coast at the time of the Hittite Empire, as well as the Greek Archaic and Hellenistic periods. First, a general discourse on the ancient Mediterraneans and Mesopotamians and their attitude toward nature will be discussed. Next, the phenomena of nature worship and the different types of Hittite and Greek natural sanctuaries along with their characteristics will be explored. Finally, the question about how natural sanctuaries have been integrated into an urban environment and how they relate to the cults of the temples are discussed on the basis of a number of selected examples.

The Concept of Nature: Now and Then

Nature is a purely human concept and, paradoxically, without human culture, there would be nothing that we could define as nature (cf. Ehlers 2008, 11). In fact, the whole perception of nature as the antithetical counterpart to human culture is deeply rooted in the ancient traditions of agrarian civilisations. Agriculture means the transformation of unspoiled nature into a monopolised cultural landscape by human labour in order to ensure continual energy supply in the form of harvest; a process which Siefert describes as the replacement of an uncontrollable nature by a more controllable environment (2003, 14). Hence, nature and wilderness are still associated with danger and demons in many cultures, while culture is usually related to work, security and prosper-

¹The term Anthropocene was introduced by the Meteorologist and Chemist Paul Crutzen and the Biologist Eugene F. Stoermer in 2000 to describe a new geological era. This is characterised by the drastic effects human activity has on Earth's system since the second half of the 18th century (Ehlers 2008, 9, 13). I will use the term Anthropocene to also refer to the specific cultural environment of this time period.

ity. Sieferle speaks in this context of an “ancient régime” to which we still hold fast (2003, 13–14).

The nature philosophical traditions of the ancient Greek philosophers of the 5th and 4th century BCE laid the foundations of the current concept of nature prevailing in Western societies. Whereas Socrates (ca. 470–399 BCE) and Plato (427–347 BCE) still shared a holistic view of the world in which plants, animals, humans, and gods live together in a big picture, it was Aristotle who first emphasised the special position of the human race within the cosmos. This enables man to subdue nature and use its resources as he thinks best (Ehlers 2008, 14, 57–59). This anthropocentric concept of a nature ‘made for humans’ was later taken up by Christianity and manifested, e.g., in the creation myth of the Bibel (Gen. 1:28). The following section deals with both modern and ancient concepts of nature, its perception and representation in art and literature as well as its impact on religious ideas and beliefs systems.

Our Modern Understanding of Nature

Now that I am one with the forest, I can see there is another way for us to live—Shunach

In modern society, there is no unanimous opinion about nature. An extreme definition could be that nature in an ecological sense, is all which obeys the laws of physics. According to this, nature would be everything and non-nature could only exist outside the physical world, such as in our imagination (Sieferle 2003, 13; see also Engels, Huy, and Steitler 2019, xii). Another definition would be that nature is all that is largely untouched and independent of human activity (Sieferle 2003, 13; Brandes and Hillenbrand 2018, 5; Pruß 2018, 33; Engels, Huy, and Steitler 2019, xi). Brandes and Hillenbrand call this idea of nature “geogenic nature” (2018, 6). At least nowadays, however, it seems hard to find such a place.

What most concepts of nature have in common is the above-mentioned idea of a controllable nature subjugated to human will and shaped at his own discretion. However, beginning in the second half of the 20th century, we see a growing ethical transition that takes place all around the world released by the huge transformation that has taken hold along with the industrialisation and the dramatic destruction of natural environments (Sieferle 2003, 13). The increasing ecological problems humanity faces, such as the loss of biodiversity or human-induced climate change, have caused a paradigm shift among many people regarding the concept of and their relation to nature in an ever-changing world (Engels, Huy, and Steitler 2019, xi). The realisation that nature cannot be completely controlled not only leads to a demand for a more considerate and sustainable relationship with nature, but also, as Brandes and Hillenbrand call it, a rising desire for a “new symbiosis” (Brandes and Hillenbrand 2018, 5).

The re-thinking of the concept of nature can be observed not only in politics but in nearly all parts of society. The quotation above is from the 2006 Japanese animated science fiction movie *Origin: Spirits of the Past* (Jap. original title: *Gin-iro no kami no Agito* 銀色の髪のアギト [Silver-Haired Agito]). The movie is set three hundred years after the obliteration of the human civilisation by the awakened powers of nature.

The villain Shunach (シュナック), who represents human culture and industry seeks to overcome nature and to revive humanity's exploitative lifestyle. After he gets defeated by Agito (アギト), who fights for the unification of humans and nature, he becomes part of the forest's consciousness and realises that humanity needs to live in harmony with nature. Other movies dealing with environmental topics and the unification of human culture and nature are, e.g., James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) as well as the Disney Pixar animation movie *WALL·E* (2008).

Apart from entertainment media and popular culture, environmental concerns have long reached theological discourses, too. Eco-theology has already become an important topic in all major religious traditions, like Judaism (Meir 2021), Christianity (Vogt 2017), and Islam (Arnez 2014; Amirpur 2021; Kowanda-Yassin 2021). These are represented by famous theologians and philosophers such as the Iranian Muslim philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr or Rabbi Abraham Yitzhak ha-Cohen Kook. The same development can also be seen in Buddhism (Sørensen 2013; Stargardt 2014; Darlington 2014), Daoism (Coward 2003; Jackson 2013), and Hindu traditions (Coward 2003; Michaels 2003; Batabyal 2014). While the membership of institutionalised religions is declining as a result of the differentiation of social structures, individualisation, and privatisation, (at least in the Western world (Luckmann 1990, 127, 132–38), since the end of the Cold War) a general revival of religious movements has emerged as part of the so-called New Age movement and has even gained popularity. Knoblauch explains this renaissance of religious beliefs with the decline of social ideologies, such as socialism or nationalism, and, instead of the hitherto widespread claim of secularisation, he speaks of a resacralisation of the modern world (2014, 29).

A great number of these new religious movements can be classified under the term 'Neo-Paganism'.² One of the key elements of neo-pagan spirituality is a high affinity for nature. Many Neo-Pagans consider nature in a pantheistic way: the most sacred, all-embracing principle and the main source of divine inspiration. Accordingly, nature is often the place for religious practices and rituals (cf. Futterlieb 2008, 116–29; Gründer 2014, 274). The belief in an animate nature does not only find expression in the veneration of nature deities and the transcendent powers of nature, but also shapes the attitudes and ethics of followers of Neo-Paganism towards environmental-related topics such as living an ecological lifestyle, sustainability, and animal welfare. As a consequence, many Neo-Paganists join the social call for *another way* concerning the treatment of nature (Futterlieb 2008, 117–18). This political orientation of Neo-Paganism is often referred to in the literature as Eco-Paganism.

Even though the Neo-Pagan conception of nature may appear to us as archaic and pristine, it is nonetheless surprising that in many respects this idea does not correspond to the concepts of nature in ancient Mesopotamian and Mediterranean. In fact, the belief

²The term (Neo-)Paganism was coined by the Catholic Church in the 19th century during the time of secularisation in Europe to label those ideologies which did not go along with Christian morality, such as Atheism (Gründer 2014, 261). In German academia, publications about Neo-Paganism have long been confined to phenomena such as Wicca and (right-wing extremist) Heathenry (see, e.g., Schnurbein 2014). Only recently, the movement received broader attention among scholars of Religious Studies, as for example by Futterlieb, whose PhD diss. covers the particular importance of the World Wide Web and social networks for the development of Neo-Paganism in Germany and its beliefs (2008)

in nature as an all-embracing entity (Gr. *phýsis*) seems to be more a romantic idealisation than a historical fact, at least with regard to Near Eastern and European antiquity (cf. Engels, Huy, and Steitler 2019, xii).

Ancient Civilisations and Their Understanding of Nature

Reflections about human–nature relations were not a common theme among ancient writers. Many texts only speak of nature and wilderness as a place ruled by chaos and demonic forces. For example, Herodotus characterises some distant landscapes as “empty” (Gr. *ἐρημος*) and “without water, wildlife, rain, or timber” [4.185.3] (Konstantopoulos 2017, 3, 9). However, the reluctance to address this topic does not mean that we do not have information. The implicit representations of nature found in Mesopotamian, Anatolian, and Greek art and literature provide a broad insight into how these civilisations addressed nature both in daily and religious life (Engels, Huy, and Steitler 2019, xi–xii).

Mesopotamia

The Mesopotamians presumably did not have a comprehensive concept of nature as we do. Neither in the case of Sumerian nor Akkadian do we know a specific term for “nature” (Ambos 2018, 19; Pruß 2018, 33). Nevertheless, it is not surprising that in the land between the rivers, which brought forth the first cities in human history (Trigger 2007, 94), many texts distinguish between life in the city and the uncivilised character of the outer wilderness and its people (Ambos 2018, 19; Pruß 2018, 33). Only urban life was considered civilised. What distinguished the city dwellers from the uncivilised ‘savages’ of the wilderness were their cultural skills. According to the Babylonian writer Berossos, man learned the cultural technologies such as agriculture, domestication of animals, and writing from the fish man Oannes, which enabled him to emancipate himself from his primordial state of existence in nature (Ambos 2018, 19, 23–24). The knowledge of how to cultivate the fields and maintain the irrigation systems was considered the basis of life (Akk. *napištu*) and depictions of nature in Mesopotamian art were usually limited to domesticated plants and animals, e.g., depictions of ears of grain or cattle on cylinder seals (cf. Pruß 2018, 36).

Everything outside the city gates, on the other hand, was seen as uncivilised and threatening. The deserts, mountains (Sum. *kur*; Akk. *šadu*), swamps, and grasslands (Sum. *edin*; Akk. *šēru*) were thought to be the realm of demons and evil creatures (Feldt 2016, 354–55; Hutter 1996, 52; Ambos 2018, 19–20; Pruß 2018, 33). The wide range of demons and low-ranking supernatural beings of the Mesopotamian cosmology usually represented abstract concepts, natural phenomena, and disastrous events like storms, droughts, and illnesses. Many of these creatures were classified as ‘wind demons’ because like the wisp of wind they enter the houses and bodies of the people causing illness. Since the third millennium, the prevalent chaos that reigns over nature was iconographically represented by the serpent-necked lion and the unnamed evil which befalls people in their dreams causing nightmares was portrayed by the so-called dragon snake (Sum. *Mušhuššu*) (Wiggermann 2008, 102; Frey-Anthes 2008, 28–29). The fol-

lowing incantation illustrates how the demon Samānu³ comes from the wilderness into the city by crossing the river to spread sickness among the people.

Samānu came down from the mountain; Samānu crossed the river [(the act of leaving the wilderness)]. Samānu poured di' u like water down over the black-headed people. It afflicted the ox on his horn, the donkey on his hoof, the young woman on her breastbone, the sucking infant on the muscles of his neck (Scurlock and Andersen 2005, 65; see also Leick 2003, 223).

In order to cast out a demon, it was often sent back into wilderness (Ambos 2018, 21). The so-called *Lamaštu Series* (Lam I–III), the most comprehensive textual sources on Lamaštu found in the library of King Ašurbanipal in Niniveh, consists of about 600 lines describing the demon and how to expel it (Wiggermann 2000, 237). Some incantations illustrate the entire process of the rituals to cast out the demon by means of the production of three figurines representing Lamaštu, which were either to be buried or sent back down the river (Lam II 43) (Wiggermann 2000, 239–40; Farber 1987, 85). The texts correspond to several protective amulets depicting Lamaštu on a boat which can be explained as the very act of her expulsion (cf. Wiggermann 2000).

Anatolia and the Aegean

Not much is known about Hittite conceptions of nature. However, it is not surprising that in the remote mountainous regions of Iran and Anatolia, rain and weather deities took a prominent place in the local panthea. As shown below, mountain cults and open-air sanctuaries at springs and lakes played an important role (Pruß 2018, 34).

It is sometimes claimed of Greek art that it is not interested in the representation of nature. And indeed, ancient Greek art was particularly anthropocentric. Yet there are a few depictions of nature on pottery of the Protogeometric (1050/30–900 BCE) and Geometric Epoch (ca. 900–700/675 BCE) (Mandel 2018, 59). The style of these periods is characterised by abstract ornamentation and sequences of patterns such as meanders and crosshatchings, while figurative representations of humans, animals, and plants are very reduced (cf. Mandel 2018, 60–61). Nevertheless, the 8th century, depictions of nature in vase painting became more common. The characteristic dividing lines gradually developed into ground lines and geometric shapes such as triangles signifying ground vegetation and trees (Mandel 2018, 68, 74). Towards the end of the Geometric Period, curved lines were introduced giving plants and foliage a more organic look (Mandel 2018, 68, 74).

Urbanisation and Its Consequences for Religion and the Understanding of Nature

As J.A. Wilson aptly puts it, “there is no evidence of a civilisation without cities” (Wilson 1960; see also Trigger 2007, 120). It is similar with religion. If there were

³Samānu is a nasty demon that has been blamed for problems regarding sexual intercourse, amenorrhoea among young girls, and male impotence.

no cities, religion seems to have formed at least around ceremonial centres or in the vicinity of human settlements (Trigger 2007, 120). As aforementioned, nature is principally experienced in contrast to human culture and urban environments. The following section focuses on the history of urbanisation in the Mediterranean, Asia Minor and Mesopotamia while investigating its impact on the development of religious traditions, worldviews, and consequently, the notion of nature as something outside this realm.

Urbanisation

The term ‘urbanisation’ refers to the densification and diversification of living space as well as the emergence of specific economic and social developments (Lätzer-Lasar et al. 2021, 1; Rüpke 2020, 50); a process that started along with the neolithisation of the Fertile Crescent around 9500–5000 BCE (Gaydarska 2017, 177).

The end of the Mesolithic is marked by the development of humans from pure hunter-gatherers to sedentary, agrarian societies and the advent of animal husbandry, food production, and a manufacturing economy. This development was certainly not a “Neolithic Revolution,” as coined by Gordon Childe in 1936, but a continuous process caused by the low food supply, among other things, due to the Pleistocene–Holocene climate change as well as the extinction of the megafauna by human hunting (Ehlers 2008, 38, 43). Despite the worsening climatic situation, humans found perfect living conditions in the Fertile Crescents. According to Schmidt, only there did humans find everything that made a sedentary lifestyle possible, including all the wild forms of the early cereals (wheat and barley), sheep, goats, cattle, and pigs (Schmidt 2020, 59–60; see also Hroudá 2008, 14; Eliade 2002, 38). In the course of the 7th millennium, the neolithisation also took place across Greece, the Balkans, Sicily, and Asia Minor. The first European examples of a settled urban population are the so-called “first-generation secondary states” of the Minoans (Gaydarska 2017, 177; Eliade 2002, 55).

The new lifestyle, however, also brought new tasks which had to be mastered. For example, seeds had to be sown, and fields needed to be cultivated and harvested several times a year. Furthermore, irrigation systems had to be maintained and products from the fields and livestock had to be safely stored and processed (cf. Eliade 2002, 41).

Next to the cultivation of plants and the keeping of animals, the domestication of space was another consequence of sedentarisation. With the invention of the mud brick during the Late Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPNB, c. 9000-8000 BP), the construction of permanent multi-storeyed buildings divided into several rooms with different uses increased. In addition to living quarters we now also find constructions for political or festive gatherings, or for the performance of ritual activities. There were also buildings for the storage and distribution of goods representing the first signs of urbanisation (Bolger 2010, 512).

The Domestication of Space and the Emergence of Towns

Two examples *par excellence* of early urbanised settlements are the biblical city of Jericho (ca. 6850 BCE, present-day Tall as-Sultān), located in the Jordan Rift Valley,

about 10 km from the Dead Sea, and Çatalhöyük in Anatolia, about 40 km south-east of Konya (Gaydarska 2017, 182–83; Ehlers 2008, 38–41; Schmidt 2020, 27–28). The latter is a 7th millennium CBE settlement discovered in 1958 by James Mellaart and Alan Hall. The site includes about 150 buildings, which could have presumably housed a population of about 3,500 to 8,000 people (Hodder 2014, 8; Schmidt 2020, 52).

Jericho is sometimes referred to in literature as the oldest city in the world, and Çatalhöyük gained public attention as “the city from the Stone Age” (Schmidt 2020, 52). However, whether these two sites can be actually called cities is disputed among scholars. In fact, the term ‘city’ is difficult to define and depends on the size of the settlement (Gaydarska 2017, 178–79). In any case, a simple distinction between urbanity and countryside should be avoided, as will be shown later. Instead, according to Gaydarska and Trigger, cities should rather be seen as central places of a centre–periphery system, characterised by their role in the reproduction of social networks and their provision of various opportunities and specialised services, thus distinguishing them from the hinterland (Gaydarska 2017, 180; Trigger 2007, 120). Political and religious activity, craft production, marketing, long-distance trade, higher education, etc., all take place in cities (Trigger 2007, 121). Thus, urbanisation is usually associated with the emergence of stratified societies, aristocracy, and administrative structures (Gaydarska 2017, 182–83; Ehlers 2008, 38–41).

Even though archaeologists have been unable to find evidence of hierarchical structures in Catalhöyük (for this its status as a city is disputed), the development of an overall city culture is of extraordinary significance for the topic discussed in this paper. The trend towards the separation of public and private spaces is not only fundamental for the evolution of private space and gender roles for example (Peterson 2010), but also for the development of social structures, religious practice, and, of course, for the understanding of nature (Ehlers 2008, 37). The next section addresses the significance of urbanism and urban culture for the development of religious ideas.

Urban Religion

According to Eliade, all technological and social achievements had a direct influence on the development of religious traditions and practices of the people of early civilisations (Eliade 2002, 51, 55). For example, after humans became sedentary, it was only a matter of time before fertility, harvest, or rain gods were worshipped and religious ideas associated with agriculture and animal husbandry found their way into the myths. It is quite similar with the cultural environment of the city. The importance of urban environments on the development of religion had not received much attention within the studies of religion until recently (Lätzer-Lasar et al. 2021, 1). And yet, religion plays a decisive role in the process of urbanisation since religion not only facilitates hierarchical relationships but also creates collective memory and heritage, and is deeply interconnected with the political and economical sphere (Rüpke 2020, 50, 57; Lätzer-Lasar et al. 2021, 1).

In his latest groundbreaking work on urban religion, Rüpke describes religion as communication carried out by religious agents. This communication, Rüpke argues, is a

spatio-temporal practice that is always related to the environment, and, by giving meaning to this environment, religious communication, activities, and identities actively change urban space (Rüpke 2020, 48–49).

The smallest unit of urban life is certainly the house. In the ancient cultures of Anatolia and the Aegean, the house was of particular sacredness. Already in 1864, the French historian Fustel de Coulanges emphasised in his work *La Cité antique* the special significance of the house for the history of religion. According to him, Greco-Roman religions were initially limited to the house, the hearth and the family tomb. Only as time went on, a ‘second’ kind of religiosity emerged alongside this form, which located the divine powers in the outside world. Due to the similarity of people’s living conditions and realities, very similar deities emerged, which in the course of time became equated with each other. The emergence of the second form of religion favoured the growth of society beyond the domestic sphere, which eventually gave rise to temples (Rüpke 2020, 33–34).

Regardless of whether or not Fustel de Coulanges’ theory can be questioned, many historians and scholars of religion consider a development from house to temple to be plausible (see, e.g., Haas 1994, 249). The idea of the house as a sacred place can be traced back as far as the Aceramic Neolithic period (Haas 1994, 249). Among the Hittites, the house was considered a representation of the world (*imago mundi*) and different parts of the house were considered as holy and inhabited by certain deities. These household gods were regularly offered food and libations (Haas 1994, 262). Some Hittite texts also document elaborate rituals involved in the construction of the house. According to Haas, the five most important rituals include the selection of the building material, the burring of the foundation block, the construction of the roof, the plastering of walls, and the installation of the hearth (Haas 1994, 250–56).

In the Hittite worldview, not only the house but the entire city had a sacred character. Each city had one or more of its own city gods, who were both patron and personification of the city. In some cases, the city and the god even bore the same name, and, in many texts, cities are given the determinative for gods together (Sum. DINGIR) (Haas 1994, 539). The Hittite capital city of Ḫattuša is surrounded by the former Hattic towns Katapa, Arinna, Zippalanda and Takhurpa whose cults form the oldest layers of the Hittite religious traditions. Together these cities form a cohesive cultural space whose customs and rituals were strongly interwoven with the history and the respective functional role of the cities.

Natural Sanctuaries and Cult in Ancient Anatolia and the Aegean

The following section will focus on natural sanctuaries in both Hittite and Greek religion and their role in the religious landscape of ancient Anatolia and the Aegean coast. After a general discussion about the terminology and a definition of natural sanctuaries, the most prominent types of sacred natural spaces, their characteristics, and their integration into the local Hittite and Greek cults will be discussed based on the most

recently published archaeological and philological research conducted in this area.

Terminology and Definition

Nature is a spatially determining component of many Hittite and Greek temples and sanctuaries were often built on impressive landmarks or near natural water sources, groves, gardens, festive meadows, and public green spaces (Neumann 2018, 258; Schimpf 2018, 209). In many cases, due to their sacred and iconic character, these natural formations themselves became places of worship. We commonly call these places ‘natural sanctuaries’ (Ger. *Naturheiligtümer*), but what exactly is meant by that?

Human–nature relations were generally not often thematised in ancient texts in particular and the same holds true for written accounts on the quality of natural sanctuaries. There are, however, some records such as that of the Greek satirist Lukian who writes:

Zuerst haben sie [die Menschen] für die Götter Haine abgesondert, Höhlen geweiht, Vögel geheiligt und jeder Gottheit eine besondere Pflanze beigelegt; und dann habe jedes Volk für sich eine Gottheit verehrt und die als bei sich wohnend betrachtet [...]. Zuletzt endlich habe man den Göttern erst Tempel errichtet, damit sie nicht ohne Haus und ohne Herd sind, sowie Bilder, welche die Götter darstellten (Engels, Huy, and Steitler 2019, xiii–viv).

Besides Lukian’s very ironic undertone, the passage reveals very important information about religious practice in the context of natural sanctuaries. Lukian mentions groves and caves next to temples as places designated for the gods. Indeed, all natural sanctuaries that have been discovered by archaeologists, seems to be related to the same canonical cults belonging to those gods who were also worshipped in the temples. Among the Greeks, sacred springs, groves (Gr. *άλσος*), and gardens (Gr. *κήποι*) were often associated with the goddess Aphrodite or the nymphs (Neumann 2018, 259–61). None of these cults were constituted by the belief in a primordial or impersonal power of nature (Engels, Huy, and Steitler 2019, xvi–xvii), as is the case in contemporary Neo-Paganism. Therefore, the term ‘nature cult’ (Ger. *Naturkult*) seems to be inadequate and should be avoided in this context. In fact, as Engels et al. conclude, there is no systematical differentiation between natural sanctuaries and other ‘canonical’ sites, like shrines and temples (2019, xviii; Engels 2019, 129). Thus, it seems reasonable to define natural sanctuaries not by specific cult practices, but by the local context and natural features these places display (cf., Engels, Huy, and Steitler 2019, xiii). For example, a large part of spring sanctuaries served a practical purpose in supplying water to the cities (Schimpf 2018, 2010–11; 2019, xiv). The proximity and relation of natural sanctuaries to the city is of particular importance and will be discussed in more detail further below.

Rock and Cave Sanctuaries

Rock Stelae

Rock, cave, and grotto sanctuaries are by far the largest group of natural sanctuaries in terms of numbers. The oldest examples of rock sanctuaries in Anatolia are the so-called Dragon Stones (Arm. *višap*), 2 to 5 m high basalt stelae whose occurrence extends over eastern Turkey, southern Georgia, the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan and Armenia with the Ararat Plains as their primary distribution area. An Urartian inscription found on one of these standing stones proves that they have been erected during a time predating the Iron Age. They were usually sculptured in the shape of a fish or as if a bovine hide was draped over them. In some cases, these features were also combined. A secondarily carved Urartian inscription evidenced that dragon-stones are a phenomena pre-dating the Iron Age (Hnila, Gilibert, and Bobokhyan 2019, 283–85).

The meaning of Dragon Stones and the cult associated with them cannot be reconstructed any more. However, landscape analyses have shown that the stelae were commonly placed near mountain springs. According to Hnila et al., the iconography of the fish and the sacrificed bovine may symbolise the limits of wilderness and the domination of nature by an agrarian society (Hnila, Gilibert, and Bobokhyan 2019, 298).⁴

Dragon Stones are by no means the only examples of rock sanctuaries in Anatolia. In later times, cult stelae also represented a characteristic element of Hittite religion whose meaning as deifying cult images is abundantly documented in Hittite cuneiform texts. (Cammarosano 2019, 303–4). For example, the Cult Inventory text KUB 38.12 speaks of two categories of cult images, i.e., the “deities of the temple” meaning the anthropomorphic or theriomorphic depictions of gods, and the “deities of the stele” (Cammarosano 2019, 308–9).

These stone stelae (Hit. *ḫuwaši*) were usually made of plain and undecorated rocks placed outside the cities near water pools or on the top of a mountain and represented the same gods, who were also worshipped in the temples of the city. The name of the Hittite god Zikkanzipa even means stela (Cammarosano 2019, 304). Nevertheless, the fact that the Cult Inventory text clearly distinguishes between the iconic representation of gods in the temples on the one hand, and the Ḫuwaši stones as their aniconic equivalent outside the urban environment on the other hand, clearly points to a special significance of nature in contrast to urbanity in the Hittite beliefs system.

The origin of the Ḫuwaši stone cult is not entirely clear. Most scholars consider a connection with the above-mentioned Dragon Stones to be rather unlikely. The same applies to the famous Palaeolithic T-pillars of Göbeki Tepe and Nevalı Çori (Cammarosano 2019, 305–6). Cammarosano suggests the stelae discovered in a number of houses in Kaneš (present-day Kültepe) dating to the time of the Old Assyrian colonies of the Kārum Period (25th–18th c.) and connected to the mountain god Aššur as possible precursors of Ḫuwaši stones (Cammarosano 2019, 305–6; see also Cancik-Kirschbaum

⁴For animal sacrifice in an agrarian or pastoral context, see, e.g., Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Domestication of Sacrifice,” in *Violent Origins*, ed. Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, 191–205 (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804766265-008>.

2015, 32–33).

Caves and Grottoes

While cult stelae are mainly a feature of Hittite rock sanctuaries, caves and grottoes used for ritual activities were frequent characteristic of the Greek ritual landscape, especially during Archaic and Hellenistic times (Koparal 2019, 342). For example, more than 33 such caves have been identified just on the island of Crete. The many rituals that were performed in these caves were as diverse as the cults in the temples and addressed the same gods. The cave sanctuary of the Athena Lindia at the acropolis in Lindos, Rhodes was part of the local Athena cult (Schimpf 2018, 214–15). Other caves give evidence of the veneration of Zeus, Aphrodite or Dionysus (Schimpf 2018, 219–20). However, the vast majority of cave sanctuaries seem to have been devoted to the goddess Cybele, an originally Anatolian ‘mother goddess’ whose cult made its way from Phrygia to Athens during the 5th century BCE (Bremmer 1993, 106). We know from Athenian sources that the cult of Kybele often took on ecstatic elements involving also possession by the gods. According to Bremmer, the growing interest in ecstatic cults among the Greeks in the 5th century was due to the desire of many participants to break out of the everyday life of the polis (1993, 107). This fact could speak for the extra-urban setting of many Cybele sanctuaries, but not necessarily. Nevertheless, Cybele’s affinity for mountains and rocky landscapes is clearly attested by ancient authors such as Homer, Herodotus, and Strabon (Schimpf 2018, 223–24).

Whether or not ecstatic practices have been performed at the many cave sanctuaries associated with Cybele can no longer be answered. Due to the large amount of findings, including Geometric and Archaic votive cups and bones indicating intensive routine sacrifices, it is however safe to say that many ritual practices took place at these cave sites over a long period of time (Koparal 2019, 342–44). The reason for the existence of such cave sanctuaries should not be seen in theological considerations but in the specific atmosphere of such a place, as mentioned before. As Schimpf points out, the rather mysterious environment, the aesthetics, and the presumed old age of the caves create a specific sacred space and contribute to its legitimisation (Schimpf 2018, 213–14).

Sacred Springs and Mountain Pool Sanctuaries

Water is the source of all life and has always been the most essential resource for every human society. Accordingly, it is not surprising that water was a frequently encountered element of natural sanctuaries. Especially in the semiarid mountainous region of Central Anatolia, springs, rivers, ponds, and basins were highly sacred spaces and have been venerated due to the life-giving power of their waters (Engels, Huy, and Steitler 2019, xv; Ökse 2019, 27).

The geographical and climatic conditions of Central Anatolia had a significant influence on the cultural and social development of the region. Pollen analyses and geological investigations have shown that the basic climatic conditions in Anatolia have not changed significantly since the last ice age about 12,000 years ago and that today’s climate is

therefore quite comparable to the conditions during Hittite and Greek times (Schachner 2011, 35). Situated between the Pontus Mountains in the north and the Taurus Mountains in the east, Anatolia lies at an altitude of about 900 to 1200 m a.s.l. and is crossed by numerous medium-high mountains. Rainfall is low, ranging from 300 mm south-west of the Great Salt Lake to 600 mm in the north, with annual fluctuations of up to \pm fifty per-cent (Schachner 2011, 35–36; see also Arkan 2014, 41).

Central Anatolia is not comparable to Syria, Mesopotamia or the Nile Valley in terms of its agricultural land use. In contrast to Mesopotamia, where sophisticated irrigation systems and an economy based on overproduction had already developed by the 5th millennium BCE (Arkan 2014, 41), rain-fed agriculture and self-sufficiency remained the only possible way of farming, and the water supply and the terrain structure hardly offered any possibility of large-scale irrigation (Schachner 2011, 33–34; Arkan 2014, 41–42).

Since rain was so important for the Anatolians, storm and mountain gods are among the most important gods of the Hittite pantheon since the time of the Old Hittite Kingdom (ca. 16th–15th c. BCE) (Haas 1994, 539–40; Ökse 2019, 27–28). As rain clouds descends from the hillsides, the Hittites considered mountain peaks home of the storm gods and the places where the gods come together (Ökse 2019, 28). Their absence or their wrath could cause severe droughts and famines, a belief that is also known from the Ugaritic Ba'al Cycle (Ökse 2019, 28). Therefore, paying homage to the storm gods and sacrificing in their name was a very important aspect of Hittite religiosity. The discovered Hittite clay tablets bear countless accounts of periodic rituals and annual festivals held at sacred springs (Hit. *altannuš*), wells or ponds (Hit. PÚHI), fountains (Hit. PÚšayattiuš) or basins (Hit. *luli*) devoted to the storm gods (Steitler 2019, 4–6). One of those sanctuaries is the spring sanctuary of Eflatunpınar (lit. 'Plato's Spring' in Turkish) situated near Lake Beyşehir, about 100 km west of Konya. The sanctuary dates back to the late Hittite Middle Kingdom Period (15th–13th c.) and includes a seven metres long and four metres high relief wall which was once part of a greater temple complex (UNESCO n.d.; Haas 1994, 466). The relief shows two central storm gods surrounded by ten smaller deities who carry the sun disk. According to Haas, the picture probably shows a representation of the cosmos [Haas (1994), 144, 466; see also Steitler (2019), 2; UNESCO (n.d.);]. Another example of a spring sanctuary is Istar-pool at Mt. Dağa near the ancient city of Zippalanda (Steitler 2019, 10–11)

These spring sanctuaries were the scene of numerous ritual activities, which Ökse interprets as part of a Hittite rain cult. Some clay tablets from Kuşaklı und Boğazköy explain the ceremonies of the annual Spring Festival (Hit. AN.TAḪ.ŠUM), during which the king visited the mountain and spring sanctuaries and offered sacrifices to the gods (Steitler 2019, 10, 16–17; Ökse 2019, 29). The celebrations usually started in the capital city of Ḫattuša. From there, the king moved from town to town to visit the temples of the respective deities. For example, text KUB 7.25 mentions the king visiting the sacred spring of Šuppitaššu, a characteristic spring sanctuary that was situated ca. 2.5 km south of Šarišša (present-day Kuşaklı) at Mt. Kulmaç (Cammorosano 2019, 319, 326–27; Ökse 2019). The area not only comprised the about 1.1 ha large pond but also three unhewn Ḫuwaši stones surrounding the sanctuary (Cammorosano 2019,

319, 326–27; Ökse 2019, 33). Another Hittite rain cult, the so-called Rain Festival (Hit. *EZENḫeuwaš*) of Nerik is mentioned in the Illuyanka myth. During the ceremony, libations of blood and drinks were poured to calm the local storm god in order to guarantee a rainy and prosperous year (Ökse 2019, 29).

Besides this, storm gods were not the only aquatic deities within the huge Hittite pantheon. Since the Old Kingdom, there are numerous accounts of deities associated to rivers or springs. There were either gods worshipped as the personification of a specific water or other popular deities (usually goddesses) who were to inhabit a river or spring, such as the Hattic mother goddess Ḫannaḫanna or Tetešḫapi, the goddess of hunting and wildlife (Haas 1994, 438, 464–65). For example, during the Thunder Festival (Hit. *EZENtethešna*), the processions went from Ḫattuša to Katapa and Ḫakmiš and finally ended on top of Mt. Piškuruḫuwa where the king offered bread to the Hattic spring deity Weiryadu alongside other gods (Ökse 2019, 29; Steitler 2019, 16–17). The quotation below shows that Weiryadu was not only considered master of Mt. Piškuruḫuwa but the personification of the spring itself.

1 dannaš-bread for Šuwaliyatt; 1 dannaš-bread is broken for Ḫalki; 1 dannaš-bread is broken for the hearth; 1 dannaš-bread is broken for the spring, Wiryatu (Steitler 2019, 17).

For the Hittites, bodies of water were not only regarded as the entrance to the underworld (Steitler 2019, 1; Ökse 2019, 29). Rivers and springs also played an important role in magical rituals. The Hittite word *šakkuni* is a special term for magical spring. Mud from these springs (Hit. *šakuniyaš purut*) was believed to have a special benevolent and magical quality (Steitler 2019, 4–6). We know of a Hittite purification ritual during which the attendant rubbed himself naked with the mud of a magical spring, while the priest called upon the goddess Ḫannaḫanna. Interestingly, this ritual was only supposed to be carried out in a natural environment “where there is no cultivation nearby and the plow does not come” (Steitler 2019, 9–10, 13).

Natural Sanctuaries in Urban and Suburban Environments

The borders between cities and non-cities are by no means clearly drawn but fluid and dynamically renegotiated through human and nature’s activity (Weiss 2021, 125; Koparal 2019, 334). There is no doubt that nature can never be completely expelled from human cities without further ado, and accordingly, even in the world’s biggest urban agglomerations, small traces of nature can still be found everywhere. Both then and now, natural areas in the form of green spaces, gardens, and parks are deliberately integrated into the cityscape to create places for people to relax and recharge and to improve the climate within the city. There is much evidence for public green space in ancient Greek poleis. However, the study of natural space in urban environments is a rather difficult task since they are hardly identifiable in the archaeological record. Often, plantings can only be recognised by means of carved planting pits or buried ceramic planters (Neumann 2018, 258). Therefore, it is not entirely clear how ancient

green space was designed. Some historians envisioned Hellenistic garden with park-like vegetation and statues like those in English gardens of the 18th century. However, as Neumann points out, there is no evidence for such a romanticised interpretation and is rejected by most archaeologists (Neumann 2018, 257).

As far as the location of natural sanctuaries is concerned, interestingly we do not find them exclusively on the summits of distant mountains or at remote lakes. Especially since the late Archaic and Hellenistic period, natural sanctuaries were consciously integrated into the urban environment without giving up their natural character (Schimpf 2018, 209–10; Engels, Huy, and Steitler 2019, xiv–xv). Along with increasing urbanisation and the emergence of extensive fortifications in the 6th century, a change in the location and spatial structure of natural sanctuaries can be observed. As the course of the city walls usually followed the crests of the surrounding hills, natural fringes and slopes that were difficult to build on were often incorporated into the city (Schimpf 2019, 356, 363–64; 2018, 216, 223). On such unused land in the outskirts of the cities, there are surprisingly many sacred sites, which we can undoubtedly interpret as natural sanctuaries.

One of the oldest natural sanctuaries to be integrated into an urban setting was the rock sanctuary of Yazılıkaya, about two kilometres northeast of the Hittite capital Hattuşa. The area lies within a labyrinthine group of rock outcrops forming two main chambers (chamber A and B) (Schachner 2011, 99–104). In the 13th century, during the reign of Tudḫaliya IV (ca. 1237–1209), a series of magnificent reliefs were carved into the rock walls inside the chambers, offering a unique insight into the Hittite pantheon of gods (Schachner 2011, 99–104; see also Laroche 1952). In addition, an extensive temple complex was built in front of the rock group, in order to both close off the cult chambers to the outside and to give the overall sanctuary the appearance of a standardised Hittite temple. However, with the exception of the reliefs, the inner walls of the rock chambers remained more or less unhewn and this part of the complex probably remained unroofed (Schachner 2011, 99–104). According to Engels et al., the rock sanctuary of Yazılıkaya is a unique example of how the untouched nature of the site, which has been used as a place of worship already since the Early Bronze Age, was integrated into the standardised Hittite temple cult (Engels, Huy, and Steitler 2019, xiv).

In Greek context, however, the most frequent of urban natural sanctuaries are the numerous rock niches found at the peripheries of many ancient Greek cities on the Turkish west coast, which Schimpf discusses in detail in several articles. More than one hundred of such rectangular niches are found carved into the slopes of the Altımağarası Tepesi in Phokaia (present-day Foça) in the direct vicinity of the city walls which can be dated back to the 6th century (2019, 356; 2018, 220). The same rock niches are also found on the slopes of the Ampelos, the local city mountain on Samos, between the sanctuary of Artemis in the south and that of Demeter in the north (2019, 356, 363–64; 2018, 216–17), as well as on the northern slope of the Panayırdağ in Ephesus (2018, 219–20).

Walls that would demarcate the cult complexes from the outside are not found at any of the sites. Instead, the rock niches are partly connected by paths and stairs carved into the cliffs, thus forming a coherent and extensive cult area terraced on several levels. The niches were used to deposit votive figures and reliefs (2018, 216). In most cases, the

goddess Cybele was worshipped in these nature sanctuaries, but excavations in Ephesus also revealed cults around Zeus and a young unidentified goddess (2018, 219–20).

The grotto sanctuary discovered in 2010 on the eastern slope of Pergamon and described by Engels is another example of a natural sanctuary which has been fully integrated into the urban context of the city. The sanctuary dating back to the 1st millennium is located on a steep rocky promontory near the Eumenian wall and consists of two caves and a terrace in front of it (2019, 117–18). Foundations of a mud-brick building are found on the terrace floor and plaster remains indicate partially plastered walls (2019, 119–22). Thus, as in the case of Yazılıkaya, the complex is a combination of built and natural structures, from which the intention to preserve the natural atmosphere of the place is clearly recognisable (2019, 117–18).

The northern grotto contains a sacred spring whose water fed a natural cistern about 4 metres deep (2019, 123). In the southern grotto, whose inner walls are all lightly carved, there was probably a cult image in a niche on the south wall. In front of this cave there was also a water basin with an inlet and outlet (2019, 123–25). The sanctuary was already abandoned in early Augustinian times and the cistern was filled up with building debris. Fortunately, this rubble provides surprising insights into the cult practices there. The largest part of the fragments were banquet ware and cooking pottery. The comparatively small size of the pottery suggests that these were probably used during smaller banquets. Since there were no permanently installed kitchens in the building, Engels suggests that the banquets were probably ephemeral camps (Gr. *stibádes*) at which a small group of guests was entertained (2019, 127–29).

However, little is known about religious practices at the grotto sanctuary. The about 130 terracotta votives are very heterogeneous. Female figurines and erotes are most common, along with figures of deities such as Cybele, Aphrodite, Serapis, and Dionysus indicating a cult revolving around the thematic field of female sexuality and fertility (2019, 130–31).

The last example to be mentioned in this context is the grotto sanctuary discovered in 1903 during excavations in the city of Miletus (Huy 2019, 145, 150). The naturally formed cave, located below the Parodos Wall on the Kalepete, sat in the political and economic heart of Miletus and was completely integrated into the frontage of the local theatre and covered with blind arches from the Imperial Period (27 BCE–284 CE) (Huy 2019, 150). The cave was probably a spring sanctuary that had been in use since Hellenistic times (Huy 2019, 145, 150). Entering through a tunnel, one reached a passage about eight metres long, which in turn led to a room about 7.5 x 8 metres in size and supported by a central pillar (Huy 2019, 151). The sanctuary contained the spring basin, several small niches and a 2.7 metres wide and 3.3 metres deep apsidial niche (Huy 2019, 151). Although there is no indication of which deity was worshipped here, a sacred use of the site is more than likely (Huy 2019, 156–57).

What makes this natural sanctuary particularly interesting is that it is not a remnant of earlier times in the city. Rather, its origins lie in the monumentalisation phase of Miletus in Hellenistic times, when the sanctuary was blended into the cityscape (Huy 2019, 173). The spring sanctuary of Miletus is thus a good example of the fact that

nature sanctuaries were by no means only part of a primordial nature worship that was inevitably located outside the cities. In fact, both the Hittites and the Greeks consciously integrated nature sanctuaries into the urban context. As in the case of Miletus, great care was often taken to preserve and emphasise the natural character of the sites (Huy 2019, 145–46).

Last but not least, the question arises as to why natural sanctuaries were often located on the fringes of urban and suburban environments. According to Schimpf, the cities' peripheries represented a break with the homogeneity of physical space (Schimpf 2019, 363–64; 2018, 225). This threshold between nature and city seems to have had an important sacred significance for the people in ancient Aegean and Anatolia in general. For example, excavations under the city walls of Olbia and Chersonesos have revealed a series of burial chambers (Huy 2019, 160). This, together with the location of the natural sanctuaries near the city walls, indicates that the peri-urban zone, where nature meets urban space, was considered a liminal space that provided the stage for a series of ritual acts as well as social and political events (Weiss 2021, 125; Koparal 2019, 334). The fact that the rock niches described by Schimpf are not surrounded by any walls reveals that the entire area received its sacred significance as a sanctuary through its special location on the outskirts of the city. Koparal calls such sanctuaries “frontier sanctuaries” and suggests that one reason for placing sanctuaries on the periphery might be for the purpose of defining those very borders between and the human world (Koparal 2019, 341).

Conclusion

The ecological crisis towards which humanity is heading due to its wasteful and exploitative lifestyle and the increase in natural catastrophes such as forest dieback, floods, storms, and droughts have recently shaken people's belief in a completely tamed and controllable nature. Along with this, the call to rethink our attitude and approach to nature within society is getting louder and louder. In many parts of society such as politics, popular culture and in contemporary religious movements, there is a growing desire for a new symbiosis and reunion with nature.

The antithetical distinction between nature and the human cultural sphere is a legacy derived from ancient civilisations, from a time when issues such as global warming and loss of biodiversity were not yet of concern, but when nature was generally considered unknown and dangerous. For the Babylonians, wilderness was the realm of barbarians and demons. The places of civilisation and security were cities and urban environments. As illustrated above, the development and reproduction of religion took and still takes place primarily in urban contexts. However, parallel to this citification of religion, we find, on the other hand, the sacralisation of certain natural spaces such as rocks, caves and grottoes, mountains, springs, and lakes. These cult places were not part of a primordial nature cult in a neo-pagan understanding and systematically did not differ from those in the temples of the cities, but whose natural character offered a special sensual-bodily experience that was thoroughly intentionalised and maintained.

At many ancient settlements in Anatolia and the Aegean, natural sanctuaries were often integrated on the fringes of urban and suburban environments. As a liminal space between nature and the city, these areas were considered sacred spaces and provided the stage for a range of ritual activities. The natural sanctuaries built at these thresholds were not only an expression of the special religious significance of these places, they also defined the outskirts of the city and served as a contact point for the city's inhabitants to get in touch with nature outside the protective city walls.

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