The Mytho-Historical Topography of Thebes

By Tzveta Manolova

A study of the topography of Thebes is particularly challenging due to the serious dearth of archaeological evidence. Centuries of continuous occupation, a series of destructions including the nearly complete razing by Alexander the Great, and modern construction have obliterated or effectively made inaccessible much of the ancient topography. Furthermore, the only coherent description in the literary evidence is that of Pausanias, to which are added a series of eclectic brief references in sources of varying antiquity, most notably Pindar who was a native resident. These significant limitations are directly reflected in modern scholarship, which conspicuously and unlike with respect to other regions of Greece is much more exhaustive about the Boeotian *chora* than the urban center itself. However, there are reasons why Classical archaeology has tended to focus on an analysis of the Greek world as one of “town dwellers” since the site of a *polis* may be literally defined as the physical nucleus of the political community.1

Ironically, the lack of physical remains of the city of Thebes is contrasted by the richness of its mythical oral tradition; this stands out, according to Effenterre, as “une des plus fournies de toute la tradition greque.”2 The scope of this paper does not allow for an exhaustive analysis of the entire Theban topography. Thus, certain elements are highlighted through a conscious selection with a focus on developments in the Archaic and Classical periods, although the evidence does not always allow for very precise distinctions in the time framework. The goal of the present analysis is to examine the ways in which ancient Thebes developed within the larger structural patterns of *polis* emergence on the Greek mainland, while pointing to the elements that provided this development with a distinctly local, Theban twist. An examination of Theban topography demonstrates the close parallels between physical space and an evolving social and political community. Theban fortifications, the Kadmeia, as well as the city’s sanctuaries and hero cults form a complex web of memory markers, physical hierarchies and boundaries which actively reflect and shape communal identity. Finally, this paper argues that local circumstances and the particular strength of Theban oral traditions resulted in a mytho-historical topography inspired by the city’s Mycenaean past to an unusual degree.

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Theban Fortifications

It is appropriate to begin a mytho-historical analysis of the topography of Thebes with its walls due to their centrality to the identity of this polis. The mythical foundation of Thebes stands out as an anomaly because it involves two distinct acts of foundation: one involving the oikistès Kadmos coming from abroad and guided by the Delphic oracle to found the city, as well as another about the twins Amphion and Zethos, who build the city’s famous seven gated walls. This duality, although acknowledged, had not been reconciled until very recently; Berman has proposed that the standard narrative combining the two stories was a late result from the work of prose mythographers and logographers such as Hekataios and Pherekydes, who combined stories that in the early Greek poetic tradition existed in parallel. Berman convincingly argues that “the two stories represent two narratives of a single act of the city’s foundation, created at two separate times and reflecting features of the milieu in which they were composed.” That is, the twins represent a Mycenaean setting while Kadmos corresponds to an Archaic Greek one.

The earliest mention of the city appears in Homer and relates directly to the twins building its walls: “they first founded the seat of seven-gated Thebe, and fortified it, since they were unable to inhabit wide-open Thebe unfortified, powerful though they were.” This statement, which implies the obvious need of an important settlement to be protected, gains great poignancy when put in the context of the local Theban topography and Boeotia more broadly. Although strategically sound in terms of access to agricultural land and water provisioning, the site contained several significant difficulties in terms of protection. Durable material was far away while the terrain on which it was built was soft, forcing the builders to dig all the way to bedrock for solid surface. Most importantly, the Kadmeia was not naturally

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3 First foundation myth: Kadmos, who is a stranger from Phoenicia and in search of his sister Europa, is given an oracle from Delphi ordering him to give up on her and rather follow a cow until she falls from exhaustion; this location should be the foundation of a new city. Having reached this location at Thebes, he defeats a dragon whose teeth he sows on the advice of Athena, from which sprang the Spartaï. These fight each other until only five are standing. These Spartaï are the first to become the race of Kadmeians under the orders of Kadmos. As his first act of establishing the city, Kadmos builds the Kadmeia – the central acropolis. For a full treatment of the oral tradition see Francis Vian, Les Origines de Thèbes: Cadmos et les Spartaï (Paris, Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1963).
Second foundation myth: In its most purified form, the twins Amphion and Zethos, sons of Zeus, build the famous Theban walls with seven gates: Zethos uses his pure physical strength while Amphion moves stones with the music of his lyre.

5 Berman 2004, 2.
6 Hom. Od. 11.260 (trans. Berman)
7 Transporting durable material was one of the biggest challenges facing ancient engineers since the nearest source of limestone is Mt. Korsika which is 5.5km west of Thebes. See Sarantis Symeonoglou, The Topography of Thebes from the Bronze Age to Modern Times (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985), 8.
high, and the irregular, low-lying terrain required a much greater human investment in order to make it practically defensible. This “necessitate[ed] the creation of terraces and landfills and forc[ed] the builders to give the walls extra height to provide any real protection.”

This geographical reality throughout Boeotia meant that the effort and extent of fortifications was unprecedented and on a much more impressive scale than anywhere else in Greece. The incredibly rich mythical narrative surrounding the foundation of Thebes, with its great emphasis on its walls, is ironically in stark contrast with the dearth of archaeological remains. The reconstruction by Symeonoglou for the Middle Helladic suggests a wall size (1,150m long) that appears almost inconceivable for the period when compared to other contemporary constructions around Greece, including the longest well attested fortifications of Malthi-Dorion in Messenia (420m long). In this context, the great emphasis and mythical centrality of the Theban walls in the identity of the city is not out of place.

In Pausanias’ description of the city, the fortifications are given attention separately; it is significant that the famous seven gates are highly personalized, each being provided with its own name. The number of gates has been seriously contested, with some scholars rejecting them as mere fabrication. Symeonoglou, however, argues for the plausibility of seven gates in the Middle Helladic which were further reduced to four in the Late Helladic. In any case, it should be stressed that in terms of their mytho-historical relevance the actual number of gates does not matter, since the notion of seven gates affected the city physically throughout its history regardless of how many gates were actually in use.

Pindar speaks of the Kadmeia as having seven gates and so does Pausanias who, visiting Thebes in the first century A.D., saw only three of them in use, but whose guides nevertheless pointed out the locations of all seven. The powerful hold of this tradition over the topography is expressed in the roles that the gates play as memory markers and central reference points in relation to which all later spaces and buildings on the acropolis are defined. It is significant that by the Archaic and Classical periods their demarcation

8 In referring to the Kadmeia I speak of the Theban acropolis as a physical location without any mythological or temporal implication for the sake of convenience. Symeonoglou 1985, 8
9 Effenterre 1989, 76.
10 The general trend of reusing stone was ever more pressing in Thebes due to the lack of close proximity of materials. Modern construction and habitation has either obliterated or rendered completely inaccessible any archaeological evidence that may provide the possibility to reconstruct anything beyond a few fragmentary sites. See Symeonoglou 1985, 21.
11 Paus. 9.7.4-9.8.7; Ten gate names occur in ancient sources, but some of the names clearly refer to the same gate. With the exception of Nonnus and Hyginus, who offer an entirely different set of names, ancient authors are in very close accord. With the exception of the Borraia, all belonged to legendary women, two of them associated with Kadmos and four with the twins. For a detailed discussion see Symeonoglou 1985, 34-36.
12 Symeonoglou argues that seven gates were strategically acceptable in the Middle Helladic, but much less so in the Late Helladic since it would have greatly weakened the fortifications. He provides the comparative example of the contemporary Boeotian citadel of Gla which had only four gates and suggests the same number for Thebes. See Symeonoglou 1985, 36.
13 Pind. Pyth.11.12; The three gates in use were Elektrai, Proitides and Neistai.
quality persists, although the *polis* greatly exceeded in size the Kadmeia of which they served as boundaries. As will become clear with regard to the sanctuaries and hero cults, the oral tradition of the city’s fortifications, founded in early Mycenaean times, played a seminal role in firmly establishing a historical depth that was hard to equal, although highly sought after, by other *poleis*. Such connections to the land figured prominent in political discourses both at the regional and international level, not only for establishing legitimacy but also for claiming a Greek identity. As one of the most significant physical imprints of the city, the foundation story of Amphion and Zethos and the building of the seven-gated walls prominently served all of these functions.

With the rise of the *polis* in the early Archaic period, the new political and social realities required for an additional foundation story along with a mytho-historical topography. Boundaries, both external and internal, were vital in providing a new tangible cohesion to communities emerging from the amalgamation of various smaller and older organizational units. In this regard, fortifications are the most straightforward means of boundary creation. André Hurst thus perceives the foundation of the Theban walls as an exemplar of a universal process of marking out territory while Camp actually argues that “fortifications were, in fact, *a sine qua non* in the rise of the Greek polis.” There is no need, however, to push the argument to its extreme in order to recognize the significance of walls beyond their purely utilitarian function. For example, it is clear that the dismantling of city walls could amount directly to the political dissolution of the community and could be used purposefully towards such an end. The foundation story of Kadmos frames the construction of Theban fortifications within a discourse symptomatic and responsive to the cultural upheaval of eighth century Greece, and fits well within a common pattern of foundation heroes for the period. Since there are no archaeologi-

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14 For a similar importance of such claims at Athens, see François de Polignac, *Cults, Territory, and the Origins of the Greek City-state* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995), 86.
15 Such debates could become particularly heated, as the case of the Persian war illustrates, where the Thebans were repeatedly accused of medism.
18 For example, the Spartan capture of Mantinea on 385 B.C.: “after this the wall was torn down and Mantinea was divided into four separate villages, just as the people had dwelt in ancient times” (Xen. *Hell.* 5.2.7). At the end of the sacred War in 346 B.C Philip II similarly demanded from the defeated Phocians to “abandon their cities, the walls of which were dismantled. All the cities of the Phocians were to be razed and the men moved to villages, no one of which should have more than fifty houses” (Diod. Sic. 16.60.2).
19 His name most likely “represents a personalized linguistic construct signifying ethnic identity,” where the
cal remains of fortifications in the Archaic period, the foundation by Kadmos, the surviving evidence for substantial population growth, and our historical knowledge of Thebes emerging as a dominant polis in Boeotia serve as significant guides. They suggest that fortifications and boundaries played a similar structural and organizational function as other developing communities throughout Greece during the period. Emphasis on ties to the land and legitimacy is provided through autochthonous origins and a divinely sanctioned foundation. Following a reconstruction by Symeonoglou, population growth required the expansion of the city beyond the Kadmeia in the area referred to as Hypothebai. Meanwhile, the Kadmeia was imbued with a second, additional meaning; it was not only a link with the Mycenaean past, but a sacred precinct ordained by Apollo.

The gradual growth of the city in terms of population, wealth and power culminates in the Classical period, which is expressed by the second ring of fortifications alluded to in Xenophon and Arrian. This second wall was a truly tremendous undertaking, and given the dearth of nearby construction material, there is no doubt that it required a great amount of communal effort and resources. Although the date of its construction is not established beyond certainty, a construction after the Theban victory over Athens at Koroneia in 446 B.C., when the polis emerged as the greatest power in Boeotia, offers the strongest case. Needless to say, this construction had very significant political implications. The inner wall of the Kadmeia, which had been extended in the Archaic period to encompass the Hypothebai, was large enough to protect the population of Thebes at this time; the city had neither the need nor the means to construct a seven-kilometer long wall. Rather, the construction was achieved through the cooperation of neighboring towns, a partnership that ensued from a realization of the need to consolidate efforts in order to provide adequate common protection. These fortifications, designed to accommodate 100,000 people,

Kadmeians provide the name for their founder Kadmos. See Daniel W. Berman, “The Double Foundation of Boiotian Thebes,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974-), vol. 134 no. 1 (Spring, 2004), 15. The story follows the relatively set pattern of Greek colonial foundation narratives, which although mostly pertain to colonies, could also be used retrospectively for the foundation of metropoleis.

20 The earliest references to Thebes as a fortified city are c.540 (Thgn. 1.1209) and 479 (Hdt. 9.41.2, 9.86–88) but the uncertainty about which fortifications this refers to (the Kadmeia or the enlarged area including the Hypothebai) is not of much help in tracing the expansion enclosing the lower city as well.

21 Symeonoglou 1985, 117.

22 The double ring is made clear in the capture of Thebes by the Spartans in 382 B.C (Xen. *Hell*.5.2.25-29) and the description of the siege by Alexander (*Arr.Anab*.1.7.4-1.10.2).

23 The greater wall was 7,000m long, nearly twelve times the size of the Kadmeia. See Symeonoglou 1985, 118.

24 The archaeological evidence for dating is limited to its method of construction characterized by regularity in terms of size of the stone blocks and precision in their execution, which for Symeonoglou suggests a Classical rather than Archaic construction, Symeonoglou 1985, 120. Furthermore, the *Hellenika Oxyrhynchia* speaks of a large Boeotian population moving to Thebes at the outbreak of hostilities with Athens (*Hell.Ox*.12.3). Hansen thus argues that the synoecism of 431 must be the terminus ante quem (Hansen 2004, 456) while the most likely terminus post quem is the liberation of Boiotia from Athenian domination in 446 (Symeonoglou 1985, 118–22).
caused the population to double, effectively causing another process of synoikism.25 The political environment which allowed for the wall’s construction and the effect of its completion in a mutually reinforcing process consolidated Thebes as the central Boeotian power.

The construction of the wall of Greater Thebes shows how political development and physical space interact and develop in parallel over time in the polis. Symeonoglou argues that “it is no exaggeration to say that the wall provided the initial impetus that brought the city to its zenith from 371 to 362 B.C.”26 To further the parallels between its political and topographical developments, it suffices to note that the life of the wall was as short lived as the political hegemony which it embodied and at the same time propelled. The siege in 335 B.C by Alexander caused both the destruction of the wall and Theban power, neither to ever recover to its previous eminence.

In the Classical period the evidence makes it possible to demonstrate that walls can also be perceived as artistic statements of identity. Camp highlights that fortifications exhibit stylistic features in the same way as other architectural monuments, often constructed with the sentiment they should be an adornment to the city, “aesthetically pleasing and deliberately so.”27 The visual display of regional styles of construction could extend its impact even outside the local scope, such as in the case of skilled Theban workers who were sent by the polis to help the rebuilding of the Athenian walls in 394 B.C.28

Thus, the evolution of the Theban walls both reflected and actively shaped the development of the community through time.29 The earlier foundation myth of its seven-gated walls provided uniquely strong memory markers that were used as points of reference for the rest of the Theban topography, granting great historical depth and claim to the land. The second mythical foundation by Kadmos conferred additional significance and divine sanction in answer to new organizational needs of the polis community in the eighth century. Similarly, the construction of the wall surrounding Greater Thebes was the most tangible expression of Theban hegemony and prosperity in the Classical period.

The evolution of the Theban walls, like the polis’ topography in general as pointed out by Kühr, can be read as a physical expression of changing and competing claims to Theban identity.30 Nevertheless, one may wonder why this single topographical feature

25 “When Athens began to fight Boeotia, the inhabitants of Erythai, Skaphe, Skolos, Aulis, Schoinos, Potniai, and many other such communities moved to Thebes because their towns did not have fortifications; this caused the size of Thebes to double”(Hell.Ox.12.3).
26 Symeonoglou 1985, 122.
27 Camp 2000, 44.
28 For the Thebans too sent 500 skilled workers and masons, and some other cities also gave assistance” (Diod. Sic.14.85.3). Participation of the Boeotians is also attested in Xen.Hell.4.8.10 and IG II 1657.
29 This is true for the polis more broadly as well, where “the characteristic organization of space in the polis is also a precondition as well as, at the same time, the result of this specific form of community life.” See Hölkeskamp, 27.
30 Angela Kühr, Als Kadmos Nach Boiotien Kam: Polis Und Ethnos Im Spiegel Thebanischer Gründungsmythen (Stuttgart, Franz Steiner, 2006).
among many others deserves such attention, or to phrase it in terms of a general critique of archaeology, why spend so much effort talking about two grains of sand? The answer lies in the second purpose of this paper’s argument, namely the examination of elements that make Thebes stand out as unique and unusual, albeit in terms of degree rather than kind. Due to circumstances that must be understood in local terms, Theban fortifications became a cornerstone for the polis’ mytho-historical topography and communal identity, which is reflected by their focal role in several of the city’s most important oral traditions.

The Theban acropolis (Kadmeia) is another topographical unit that should be discussed as a whole. As the earliest area of human activity on the site and continuously occupied throughout the entire life of the city, the Kadmeia remained the central physical space in the community with the strongest links to the past. In the Mycenaean period two typical palatial structures were constructed that are spatially distinct albeit close to each other. The first and smaller one, referred to as tomb of Semele, became subject of an extremely prominent Theban oral tradition preserving the association of a destruction by fire from Zeus’ lightning with the birth of Dionysus and the subsequent emergence of an open-air sanctuary sacred to the deity. The archaeological evidence suggests a particularly intense destruction by fire that “burned for such a long time, that it reduced the building materials to a density and hardness rarely, if ever, encountered in an archaeological excavation.” For reasons partly practical and as evidence of divine intervention, the site was converted into an open-air sanctuary of Kadmeian Apollo, thus corroborating with the main outline of the oral tradition. The ruins of the burnt palace were left as is and no structure was ever built over it until the Byzantine period. Thus it was displayed as a conspicuous relic of the distant past, imbued with new religious authority. The second larger palace was likewise converted after its destruction and abandonment into the sanctuary of Demeter Thesmophoros. The two main sanctuaries

31 This way of framing the question was presented by Ian Morris during a guest lecture at McGill University in 2009. The famous walls of Thebes were obviously no grains of sand, but the pun may be taken literally to the archaeological context where physical remains of the fortifications are extremely scanty and for some periods, virtually nonexistent.

32 The story is already well established with the earliest writers at the international level. Hesiod, Homer (Hes. Theog. 940-942; Hom. II.14.323-325) as well as Aischylos who dedicated an entire play to the myth. The story recounts that the house of Kadmos was destroyed when Zeus appeared to Semele in all the thunder and lightning of his true nature, in the process of which Semele was consumed but Dionysus saved. In Euripides, (Eur. Bacch. 1-63) Dionysos relates that the site of the burned palace called the tomb of Semele continued to smolder from the fire of Zeus for a long time. Praising Kadmos for sanctifying the site, the god covers it with vines and establishes the city as the first location of his cult. A slightly different version which Symeonoglou (Symeonoglou 1985, 45) attributes as most probably Theban, after the destruction of the palace by fire ivy suddenly grew around the columns at the same time covering the divine child to protect it from the fire (schol. Eur. Phoin. 649). This version explains the epithet “around the column” and Pausanias mentions a column fetish at the sanctuary of Dyonisus Kadmeios during Roman times (Paus. 9.12.4).

33 Symeonoglou 1985, 57; Keramopoullios, who was the original excavator of the site, found it covered by a cement-like crust one meter thick of burnt wood and mud-brick baked together.

34 Also identified by Pausanias’ guides as the previous house of Kadmos (Paus. 9.16.5) which allows for the
on the Kadmeia therefore are both directly connected with the most prominent Myce-
naean structures, leaving their physical remnants on display and as a focus of worship.

The phenomenon relates to a general larger trend throughout Greece where “the
political power that had collapsed was replaced – in a concrete topographical sense – by reli-
gious power,” but with a conspicuously local twist; the ancient remnants were not overridden
by new structures, or at least to a much lesser degree. 35 There were undoubtedly several other
sanctuaries on the Kadmeia in the Archaic period, none of which survive archaeologically but
whose evidence is preserved in Pausanias and other scattered sources. With the expansion of
the city however, a general trend can be observed where fewer temples were constructed on
the Kadmeia with a greater predominance of open-air sanctuaries due to the lack of space.
Instead, most of the temples were constructed in the new lower area of Greater Thebes.

In general then, the oldest sanctuaries associated with the mythical past occupied
the core citadel of the city while the novel creations of the Archaic and Classical Ages oc-
cupied the larger city around it. Pausanias’ description of the Kadmeia is striking for its
general richness and density of spaces imbued with mythological reference, markers that
his Theban guides readily point out everywhere as he walks around the city. In addition to
buildings and ruins, Pausanias adds a number of relics and statues such as a xoanon at the
sanctuary of Dionysus Kadmeios, allegedly fallen from the sky, and three wooden statues of
Aphrodite. 36 The Kadmeia was thus conspicuous in Pausanias’ time, and even more so in the
Archaic and Classical periods, for its rich mythical and religious topography; here, memory
markers and relics constituted the main topographical fabric for which the Mycenaean past
procured the building material. As such, the complex addressed a vital new need arising in
the eighth century, requiring the appearance of the city to express a collective memory. 37

Greater Thebes

The development of the area of Greater Thebes in the Archaic and Classical
periods provided the opportunity to shape a previously unoccupied space according to
the immediate communal needs of the rising polis in the eighth century. The increasing
elaboration and constitutionalization of the city’s social and political life was paralleled
by a physical monumental expansion and the emergence of an additional new network of
boundaries. 38 In Thebes as elsewhere in Greece, the enlarged city was first and foremost
defined by a religious topography, thus arguing that at the boundary of the late Geometric
and early Archaic periods, one of the remarkable developments was that “the polis consti-
tuted the formal expression of a religious cohesion.” 39 The growth of the predominance of
Thebes over Boeotia through synoikism can certainly be examined as a politically deliber-
deduction that it was close to the sanctuary of Dyonysus Kadmeios. Their proximity is confirmed in Pindar
(Pind. Isth. 7.3-5).

evala Italy. A. Molho et al, Eds (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1991), 360.
36 Paus. 9.12.4; Paus. 9.12.4.
38 Hölkeskamp 2004, 28.
ate process which in turn engendered resistance, but the particular importance ascribed to
cults also promoted a much less conscious cohesion where their “powers of protection and
integration was neither artificial nor forced.”

The case for an active policy should thus not be overstated since, like the developments of walls, the response was to a large extent intuitive and self-feeding. As both a mirror and an active shaper of communal develop-
ment, the religious topography deserves special attention since it is a synthesis of qualities
directly answering the new needs of cohesion, social identity and communal memory of
the emerging *polis*. As the very first cult to whom a temple was dedicated in the Geometric
period, Apollo Ismenios can be used as a particular case study exemplifying these trends
and suggesting the centrality of this deity for the emerging *polis*.

This evolution, much like that of the Theban walls, parallels the development of
the community over time. The first temple construction is contemporary with a general
flourishing of religious monumentality throughout Greece. This was followed by a long-
lived second construction, which was the one known to Herodotus and Pindar; a third
final one, that much like the walls of Greater Thebes, was initiated and halted with the
rapid rise and fall of Theban hegemony. The sanctuary housed several distinct cults, which
are indicative of the political evolution of Thebes in relation to its neighbors.

Schachter traces the development of these cults beginning with the first establishment of an oracle,
followed by an introduction of Apollo and lastly “the attraction to the Ismenion of several
cult types and practices originally associated with other parts of Boiotia.” For example,
the female/male deity pair of Melia and Teneros, first attested in Thebes by Pindar, is found in the region surrounding the Kopais; Teneros’ name suggests that the origin of this pair was in this region. Schachter argues that the movement of a cult from one area to another is symptomatic either of population movement or a shift in political power; in this case the shift occurred from a rural area to Thebes, indicating a growing influence of the polis.

Another way to examine the political environment is through cult dedications, which are always surrounded by a lively political discourse. The Isemian Apollo is conspicuous for its tripods thanks to Herodotus and Pindar, who called it a “treasury of golden tripods.” Herodotus first mentions a dedication by Croesus of a tripod of gold, suggesting the shrine was of significant international renown at the time. In a famous passage describing his visit to the temple, he speaks as an eye witness to three other tripods and quotes their dedicatory inscriptions by mythic individuals. The strong likelihood that these were forgeries is arguably irrelevant: as a foreign visitor, Herodotus provides us with an example of the effect and immediacy these tangible relics had upon the viewer, conferring great antiquity and venerability to the sanctuary. Even more interestingly, Ammonius quoting Didymos mentions a dedication of a golden tripod by the Thebageneis whom Ephoros, quoted in turn by Didymos, identifies as people who had previously lived independently in southern Boeotia, but were later absorbed by the Thebans. The dedication thus alludes to the process of synoikism and suggests, according to Schachter, the probability of a regular ritual performed in recognition of Theban hegemony.

The tradition of dedications must have been vibrant and strong, since some tripods were still observed by Pausanias. Herodotus mentions one of the most politically relevant dedications, allegedly given by Croesus, saying that “to the shrine of Amphiaraus […] he sent a shield of solid gold and a spear, also of solid gold throughout, both shaft and head; the shield and spear were still at Thebes in my own day, in the temple of Isemian Apollo.” Some scholars have interpreted this to mean that the Amphiareion consulted by Croesus no longer existed by the mid fifth century but it appears more likely, as Schachter agrees, that the dedications were transferred after a sack

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47 The female/male deity pair is found at the Ptoion, Tegyra, Thourion, Ledabeia and Telphousa. Schachter 1986, 78.
48 Pin. Pyth. 11.4.
49 Hdt. 1.92.
50 Ibid 5.59-61.
51 Ammon. Diff. 231; Ephoros FgrH 70F21. The Thebageneis described by Ephoros fit neatly with the absorbed towns listed in the Hellenica Oxyrhynchia early in the fourth century with the rise of the Boeotian confederacy, including Erythrai, Skaphai, Skolos, Aulis, Schoinos, Potniai (Hell. Ox. 16), and during the early part of the Peloponnesian War, with Erythrai, Skaphai, Skolos, Aulis, Schoinos, Potniai (Hell. Ox. 17).
52 Schachter 1981, 83.
53 Pausanias notes with some surprise that there were only a few at the time he visit, which is however to be expected, especially since they were made of precious metals (Paus. 9.10.4).
54 Hdt. 1.51.
of the oracle; this sack perhaps created hostilities still evident in Herodotus’ time, as suggested by another passage from Herodotus about a consultation of the oracle by Mys.\(^55\)

Tensions and competition between different cults and oracles were, however, not merely confined to such a local level. The Amphiareion, as made clear by Herodotus, was considered a prominent oracle in all of Greece, consulted alongside those of Delphi and Dodona. As already demonstrated, an attempt to shift its prestige towards the temple of Isemian Apollo which also housed an oracle clearly caused conflict.\(^56\) However, other cities claimed to be the true site of the hero Amphiaraus, and the oracle suffered decline after the Persian War. Hubbard argues that as in the case of other Theban cults, in response to foreign challenge Pindar counteracted in his odes by insisting on “Amphiaraus’ identity as a chthonian hero on Theban soil.”\(^57\) Symeonoglou stresses that the lack of appreciation of the Theban Apollo was certainly partly due to a deliberate attempt by Delphi to diminish its reputation. For example, in the *Pythian Hymn* to Apollo the writers record the Boeotian cities visited by the divinity on his way to Delphi, but Thebes is conspicuously excluded.\(^58\) The case of Apollo Isemenos is thus a poignant example, demonstrating the complex web of political tension, competition and prestige surrounding cults and oracles.

Finally, the topography of Thebes can be examined as a whole in terms of the numerous hero cults and other land markers alluding to mythological figures that abounded on the Kadmeia and the area of Greater Thebes alike. Like the flourishing of sanctuaries, the appearance of the worship of heroes went hand in hand with the birth of the *polis*.\(^59\) Together they functioned as carriers of mythical memory, which was central for the formation and perpetuation of Theban identity. To name only a few, there was the sacred stone of Alkmene,\(^60\) the Ampheion (joint tomb of Amphion and Zethos),\(^61\) the tomb of Hector,\(^62\) and the tomb of the

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55 V.C. Petrukos cited in Schachter 1981, 22. The story given by Herodotus in which Mys consults Amphiaraos on Madronius’ instructions is a rationalization of a clear hostility of the oracle towards the Thebans who were thus banned from its ground: he “also paid somebody to pass the night at the temple of Amphiaraus. The person he persuaded to do this was not a Theban. Thebans are forbidden to consult this oracle, because Amphiaraus, through the mouth of the Priestess, once gave them the exclusive choice of two alternatives – whether, that is, they would prefer to have him as a prophet to foretell the future, or as a friend to help them in war: and they chose the latter. And that is why no Theban may pass the night in this shrine.” See Hdt. 8.134.

56 Hdt. 8.134.1. We know that this oracle was consulted during the Peloponnesian War (Plut. *Lys. 29* (450C-D), before Leuktra (Paus. 4.32.5) and in 335 B.C. before the arrival of Alexander (Diod. *Sic. 17.10.3*)

57 Thomas K. Hubbard, “Remaking Myth and Rewriting History: Cult Tradition in Pindar’s Ninth Nemean,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* vol. 94 (1992), 107; for example, in Pindar (*Pind. Pyth. 11.3-6*), written in honor of a Theban victory in the Delphic games of 474 B.C.; he opens his ode by inviting legendary Thebans to a celebration at the temple of Apollo Isemenos, “the sanctuary of golden tripods, the treasury that Loxias honored most, and named Isemion and made the true seat of diviners” (emphasis mine).

58 Symeonoglou 1985, 97.

59 De Polignac 1995, 128.

60 Diod. *Sic. 4.58.6*; Paus. 9.11.1; 9.16.7.


62 Paus. 9.18.5; Lycoph. *Alex.* 1204-1213.
Alkaidai (sons of Herakles and Megara). The latter was connected with Herakles, perhaps the most prominent hero cult of Thebes. According to the prevailing tradition the hero was conceived and born at Thebes, where he spent his youth prior to his labours for Eurystheus. Since the hero had no conventional death, but his body was consumed, he had no tomb on earth. The solution was a celebration of tombs of his ancestors and relations, such as that of Iolaos, in addition to his main monument — the Herakleion. Situated south of the Kadmeia beyond the Elektran gates, it is first mentioned by Pindar and provided with the most exhaustive description by Pausanias. The sanctuary provides the most detailed account of sculptural reliefs which no doubt adorned many other monuments of the city. These include the pedimental sculptures of eleven of the twelve labours and a colossal relief depicting Athena and Herakles dedicated by Thrasybouloos and his followers, likely after their success in 403 B.C. The Herakleion, together with the numerous other monuments associated with Herakles, interspersed throughout the city, created a fabric providing a visual reminder of the hero’s association with the entire Theban topography as a single unit. Like Apollo Ismenios, the cult of Heracles was charged with political meaning. Angela Kühr argues that the hero was used as a vehicle for advancing Theban claims to regional pre-eminence. The treatment of heroines followed a similar pattern, as their “remains could be the object of the same covetousness, motivated by political considerations, as the relics of heroes.” For example, Alkmene was claimed by three different parties: the Thebans and the Megarians, whose discrepancy of accounts Pausanias acknowledges, and the Spartans, who opened her tomb under the order of Agesilaos with aim to retrieve her remains. Disputes over the possession of remains and the high emphasis on grave locations are characteristic of Greek heroic cults in general. They are thus a potent case in point of the importance of locality in political discourses. As in Athens and other poleis, “the mythical-religious horizon was not [that] of a general past of humankind, or even of all Greeks […] but a specific past of an individual city,” highlighting the individual profile of Thebes.

To conclude, the analysis of the topography of Thebes must take into consideration a number of less conventional sources of material, such as myths and poetry, alongside archaeology and historical texts in order to grasp the complex mytho-historical symbolism with which the physical space is imbued. In the pursuit of such an understanding, the authenticity of memory markers and monuments is not as relevant as...
the significance and meaning they were conferred by the people who lived among them. Given the unique characteristics of the polis, the connection between physical space and the political community inhabiting it is unusually strong in the ancient Greek context, making the social analysis of urban topography a particularly meaningful undertaking. The examination of Theban topography from the eighth century and throughout the Archaic and Classical periods shows all the important structural trends witnessed at the level of the entire Greek mainland. At the same time, it points to developments that are distinctly Theban and thus unique, albeit in terms of degree rather than kind. It is possible to argue that much like Athens, an examination of the topography shows that Thebes is very typical in some regards, while simultaneously exceptional and unusual in others.
Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


