SEEN & UNSEEN SPACES

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'All that we see or seem': Space, memory and Greek *akropoleis*

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For much of its history, the main form of polity in the ancient Greek cultural sphere was the *polis*.[1] Beginning in the early Greek Iron Age and ending in the troubled centuries of Late Antiquity, the *polis* endured through almost a millennium of political turmoil in the wider Mediterranean by succeeding in adapting itself to an ever-changing world (Hansen and Nielsen 2004: 16). Surviving many periods of change, the *poleis* evolved throughout this long timespan, but much of their organization and many of their institutions continued to exist from beginning to end.

In this paper, I will argue for an understanding of the spatial organization of the Greek *polis* based upon the concepts of visibility, memory and entitlement. The temporal extent of this paper has been limited to the period after the so-called Dark Ages of the early Iron Age until the time of the Roman conquest, an event that changed much of the political organization of Greece.

I will focus on one of the characteristic features of the *polis*, the fortified hilltops known as *akropoleis*,[2] and how their great visibility and commanding positions helped to create, shape and define the *polis*, ultimately making it visible in space. This, I hope, could be a starting point for a new understanding of the spatiality of the Greek *polis*, freer from the biases of our modern territorial world.

Akropoleis

The *akropoleis* stand unrivalled in size and visual prominence amongst the still-visible architectural features of the ancient Greek world (Wycherley 1949: 37–38). An approximate translation of the word *akropolis* is 'higher *polis*'; they can generally be described as walled enclosures located on distinguishable and often elevated sites in close proximity to the urban centre of a *polis*, the *asty* (Lawrence 1979: 126).[3] However, the over three hundred sites identified in literature as *akropoleis* (fig. 1) show considerable variations in these characteristics. Even if unusual, some examples are not separately enclosed (Thisbe in Boeotia, for example), some are found close to forms of settlements other than *poleis* (as at Omvriaki in Thessaly), while others do not seem to be located on elevated or otherwise distinguishable positions (Halai in East Locris). No textual definitions of the word *akropolis* survive from Antiquity, and the term is often somewhat carelessly applied by archaeologists to a wide variety of features found even outside of the ancient Greek world.

This somewhat diverse situation is mirrored in the modern scholarly interpretations of the purpose and function of these features. The monolithic presence of the *Akropolis* with a capital 'A'—that of Athens—always lingers behind descriptions and interpretations, this in spite of Athens being often regarded as the 'great exception' among *poleis* (for example Meier 2011: 240). Even if many scholarly works do not mention the existence of other *akropoleis*, there is an apparent consensus that many if not most Greek *poleis* were equipped with this kind of structure, allowing for the stated variation (Lawrence 1979: 126; Winter 1971: 6; Wokalek 1973: 13–17). On this assumption, we may perhaps deduce that *akropoleis* were integrated and defining elements of the *polis*, in much the same way as council-halls, theatres and city walls (Hansen and Nielsen 2004: 135–137).[4]

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1 *Polis* (pl. *poleis*), often translated as city or city state.

2 *Akropolis*, pl. *akropoleis*.

3 *Asty*, a term roughly corresponding to the inhabited part of the *polis* settlement.

4 That many *poleis* had by the Archaic period (800–480 BC) already located the temple of their tutelary deity on the *akropolis* further indicates the importance of these locations for *polis* identity. Examples of this are many; see for instance Thebai Phthiotides, Gonnoi, Rhodos and of course Athens.
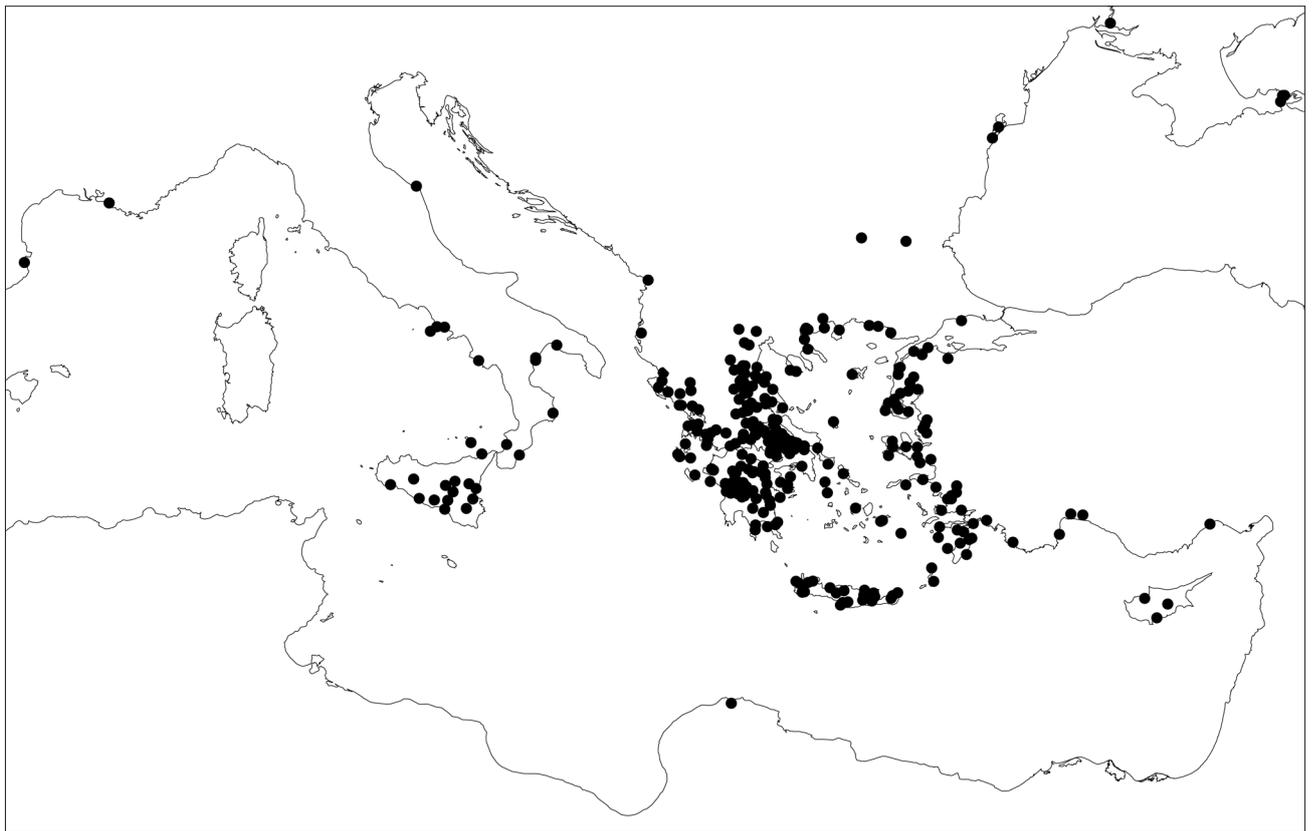
Figure 1. The distribution of *akropoleis* in the Archaic and Classical periods according to Hansen and Nielsen 2004 (drawn by Robin Rönnlund).

The most notable prevailing interpretations of *akropoleis* by modern scholars are that they were either evacuation centres or the remnants of a site's earliest settlement (or both). The former notion is probably induced by the impressive walls encircling many of the *akropoleis*, which are often interpreted as an expression of security and defence. This interpretation would imply that the monumental walls were constructed as a response to potential attack and acting as evacuation centres for the population in times of peril (Bakhuizen 1992: 187; Lee 2006: 496; Wokalek 1973: 17–18).

Scholars in favour of the latter interpretation often follow the model presented by von Gerkan (1924: 7–8). This model stipulates that the Bronze Age predecessors of early Greek settlements were located on hilltops, which by the time of *polis* state development in the early Iron Age had 'slid' downhill to locations on adjacent plains, with the old settlement remaining as a *Burg*[5] to be used in case of danger (Kirsten 1956; Martin 1956: 32; Wokalek 1973: 17–18).

A closer examination of these two models, however, demonstrates that both rely on scarce literary and archaeological evidence. The idea of the 'sliding settlement' has been criticized as a fallacy based on an incomplete understanding of the earliest history of Athens (Kolb 1984: 72; Lang 1996: 22, for example); these critics point out that

5 The German word *Burg*, often used by the cited scholars, implies a 'citadel', 'fortification' or 'castle', but also connotes 'refuge'.

there are few or no remains of Bronze Age activity at the vast majority of *akropolis* sites, making this interpretation seem highly unlikely.

Likewise, the notion that the members of the *polis* took flight to the *akropolis* when the enemy approached the settlement, however widespread, is supported by very little actual evidence. The literary examples of this phenomenon (such as Livy 42.67.10; Polybius 4.72) seem to have been exceptions that took place in unusual circumstances, such as the Social War (220–217 BC) and Third Macedonian war (171–168 BC)—both parts of a series of conflicts ultimately leading to the annexation of Greece by the Roman Empire. The lack of fresh water and shelter, together with their rather exposed positions, made *akropoleis* unsuitable for the accommodation of large numbers of refugees. Most sources instead indicate that the *poleis* chose to evacuate women, children, slaves and livestock to nearby mountainous areas, while the rest of the population stayed and defended the urban settlement proper (Hanson 1998: 114–116).

If examples of flight to the *akropoleis* are very rarely attested by textual or archaeological evidence, instances where the *akropolis* was the operational centre of a garrison are plentiful, especially in the later Hellenistic period (*ca* 300–30 BC). During this politically turbulent period, garrisoned *akropoleis* symbolized the presence of the great powers of the day. Locating occupying enemy forces in an *akropolis* also limited the potential friction between merce-

naries and locals, without the occupants losing their grasp of the *polis* (Lawrence 1979: 130).

The *akropoleis* were thus—at least in this period—locations of political and symbolic importance. This is also suggested from the entry in the *Souda* (A.1015), a tenth century dictionary:

> "For while these (*akropoleis*) seem to function largely as security from enemies—when there are any—and as a safeguard of freedom, they do also often lead to slavery and evil conspiracies …" (Benedict 2000).

As will be argued below, the political and symbolic importance of *akropoleis* was probably not limited solely to the later periods of Hellenism and Roman Rule, but rather existed previously when these features likely acted as monumental materializations of myth, power and memory.

Conspicuous walls and the visualization of entitlement

The most impressive remains of almost all *akropoleis* are the monumental walls surrounding them. The often steep sides of most *akropoleis*'s hilltop locations make their elaborate ramparts somewhat superfluous but at the same time more imposing, especially since they often consist of cut stones, in contrast to the mud brick walls more common in domestic architecture (Lawrence 1979: 35). This conspicuity gives an impression of monumentality, that the walls are not merely aimed at protection, but also at conveying a message.

Trigger (1990) interprets the universal human practise of building monumental architecture as a thermodynamic practise aiming at using as little effort (heat) as possible while trying to achieve a certain goal. He (Trigger 1990: 119) defines monumental architecture as exceeding "the requirements of any practical functions that a building is intended to perform", or more simply as being big and elaborated. By investing labour in 'conspicuous architecture', a ruling social group may express its power of directing the communal effort, which otherwise would have cost much more effort (Trigger 1990: 122). Trigger (1990: 127) also notes that this strategy is most common in the formative periods of civilizations when power is still becoming centralized, but that it loses importance as situations stabilize.

Even if this model has been criticized as a reduction of monumentality to mere scale (Osborne 2014: 5), it highlights the relation between conspicuous architecture and political aims. These aims, even if sought through the erection of walls, do not necessarily have to be of a solely military nature, as has been explored by Anderson (2013) in his interpretation of the Byzantine fortifications at Pessinus, Turkey. He (Anderson 2013: 76) argues that fortifications, apart from their more obvious military functions, also act as monuments serving "to reproduce or to disrupt existing social groupings and ways of life by reinforcing or altering aspects of the physical terrain".

To Anderson (2013: 76), fortifications are power and social status materialized in the landscape, and thus settings for the mediation of societal and class relations. This is not only conducted through the mobilisation of resources and human labour, as proposed by Trigger, but also through "longer-term negotiation of a place's use, meaning and symbolism by all social sectors". Most interestingly, Anderson (2013: 86) also notes that the often quite elaborate forms of fortification at Pessinus seem to have been constructed in periods of relative stability, and are therefore not necessarily reactions to imminent threat.

To the ancient Greeks of the pre-Roman period, the view of a settlement adorned with high walls would surely have been very evocative, as such built landscapes occur fairly frequently in the Homeric epics. The walls in the *Iliad* were even mythical in nature, as the Trojans were assisted by Poseidon in the construction of their wall, which later formed the location of many scenes throughout the epic. Subsequently, after "well-walled Troy" (*Iliad* 1.129; 2.113), we hear of the "well-build citadel(s)" of Thebes, Athens and Mycenae (*Iliad* 2.505; 2.546; 2.573), and "high-walled" Tiryns (*Iliad* 2.559). These cities' walls and fortifications were apparently their foremost attributes.

The legend of the Trojan War remained one of the key elements of ancient Greek culture throughout Antiquity, and its language, personae and symbolism became cornerstones of Greek culture. It is therefore very likely that monumental walls would evoke reminiscences of epic poetry, legends and a glorious past, lending necessary authority to their constructors.

This, together with Anderson's idea that fortifications reproduce relations between different social groups (2013: 90), suggest that we should regard *akropoleis* as monuments relating to the *poleis's* internal relations of power and authority, rather than as responses to threat only. The stated lack of examples of *akropoleis* being used for refuge, the common instalment of hostile garrisons and their monumental presence in the landscape perhaps indicate that they have more to do with a *poleis's* self-image in relation to other *poleis* (Anderson 2013: 91), as visualisations and showcases of authority over space.

Territory and the political space of the *polis*

Terminology and concepts related to political space—even if inherited to a great degree from the cultures of the ancient Mediterranean—have changed considerably since Antiquity. It is only with great difficulty that we may understand the spatial organization of the ancient *poleis*, which was surely quite different to those of modern states.

One of these differences is the abstracted space and fixed binary delimitations of the modern territorial state. Today, as long as you find yourself inside the territorial bounds of the state, you are subject to its authority; no place is 'more' or 'less' in the territory of the state, and you are either in it or you are not. The landscape of the territorial state is fully

Figure 2. The *akropolis* (upper right) of Hypata, Phthiotis, Greece. The ancient lower settlement at the location of the modern village (left; photograph by Robin Rönnlund).

isotropic with state authority evenly distributed over the terrain (Brenner and Elden 2009: 358–359).

This was certainly not the case in Antiquity. The *poleis* lacked the necessary political and technological means to establish and sustain territories in this sense, and had therefore most definitively other ways of organizing themselves spatially according to their everyday needs and practises.

This is mirrored in the word '*polis*'—often translated into modern languages as 'city'—which in Antiquity also implied the body of citizens of the *polis* as well as its spatial area of influence (Aristotle, *Politics* 1276[b]1), often translated as its 'territory'. The urban settlement (*asty*) and its surrounding hinterland, however, were referred to by the name of the social group, giving—paraphrasing Soja (1971: 16)—a social definition of space rather than a spatial definition of society. We therefore encounter the '*chôra* of the Ainians' and the 'polis of the Thronians', but not 'of Ainis' or 'of Thronion'.

The related word *chôra* is often translated as the 'territory' of the *polis*, but it is—just as *polis*—a somewhat nebulous term, abounding with different meanings.[6] As it was considered the opposite of the *asty* (Elden 2013: 39), the *chôra* can perhaps better be understood as a hinterland; without one there could not be the other and *vice versa*.

The *chôrai* of the *poleis* were limited in extent, but probably did not have spatial delimitations in the same sense as modern territorial bounds. There are examples of conflicts

between *poleis* concerning the extent of their *chôrai*, but it seems more likely that these concerned land use, rather than fixed borders.[7]

Horoi or boundary markers could be used to define and mark the owners of the *chôrai*, but there is reason to believe that these were used quite differently than modern border markers. The very few preserved inscribed *horoi* seem to have mainly delimited enclosed spaces, such as markets, sanctuaries and certainly to a certain degree fields (Paul Millet in Finley 1985: viii).

The "*horoi* of the fatherland" mentioned in the famous Ephebic oath of Athens (*Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* 21.519; Woodhead 1965) probably marked the ends of the northernmost fields of Attica rather than its border towards Boeotia (Oben 1995: 108). Yet, being the objects of an oath, they symbolized the Athenians' entitlement to their land by the authority of their past relationship with it.

Entitlement and the authoritative past

As has been noted by Fitzjohn (2007) in his diachronic study of the valley of Troina in Sicily, regional spatial identity is probably constructed more through the everyday activities and social relations of local inhabitants

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6 *Chôra* (pl. *chôrai*), according to the standard *Liddel-Scott-Jones* dictionary, can imply anything from 'space', 'locale' and 'spot', to 'position' and 'country' and 'estate' (Liddel and Scott 1996).

7 The *polis* of Melitaia in southern Thessaly seems to have been involved with its neighbours in several such conflicts at the end of the Hellenistic period. The conflicts were apparently so serious that they called for 'international' arbitration in order to be solved (see Stählin 1914).

rather than by political or topographical delimitations. In his study, persons working on a regular basis in different locations tended to have a wider definition of the extent of Troina than those whose everyday activities were limited to one location (Fitzjohn 2007: 44–46). These results can perhaps be illustrative to the situation in ancient Greece, and show that many of our present ideas of ancient spatiality should be re-evaluated and put into the context of the *polis* state. This was a culture lacking the means of establishing and sustaining fixed demarcations, in which control of and access to arable or grazable land was paramount. This situation suggests that it is perhaps more productive to seek the basis of political space in the concept of entitlement rather than territory.

The topography of the Greek landscape does not—with few exceptions—invite large fields for growing grain, which is neatly expressed by the ancient Greek word στενοχωρία (*sten-ochôria*)—'tightness of land'. This factor has been a constant defining element in Greek society, economy and politics, as can be seen for instance in Athens' enormous import of grain from the Bosporan Kingdom during the Classical period (Moreno 2007). After the fall of the great Bronze Age civilizations, however, Greece was scarcely populated, with small, scattered settlements in isolated locations (Thomas and Conant 1999: 49; Dickinson 2006: 84–98). Conflicts over resources were probably few or limited as land was widely available, at least in comparison to previous and later periods.

The population growth that took place in the early Iron Age, indicated by a rise in the number of burials and the colonization boom of the seventh century (Morris 1991: 27–34), probably changed this situation dramatically, causing rapidly increased pressure on a limited environmental resource. As a reaction to this population change, people certainly adopted different ways of regaining or securing access to resources, be it through violence, migration, collaboration or other strategies.

The *polis* itself has been proposed as one such strategy, developed to structure and stabilize relations of ownership and control in this new reality (Rose 2012: 79–80). However, such apparent change would probably not have continued without encountering some resistance and doubts of legitimacy from those not profiting from such arrangements. One might argue that the friction between different groups of interest concerning land and wealth possibly called for new ways of stabilizing relations of power, a new ideology. This "*polis* ideology" would legitimize leaders' claims to land and resources as well as the new forms of social organization (Rose 2012: 42–48).

Ideology, however, needs an authorizing element to legitimize itself. In ancient Greece—as in many other societies—this element was a mythical past, and the leaders of the early *poleis* sought to ground their legitimacy through legendary predecessors (Patterson 2010: 1–4). Through myths of heroic or divine ancestry, the *poleis* acquired

entitlement to land, often incorporating the worship of their legendary founders in state cults (Malkin 2003: 127; Patterson 2010: 38, 175).

This is very much in line with the notion of collective memory: the past, being more a social construct than a representation of actual history, is a highly authoritative element in society that may be utilized to resolve and mitigate social conflict (Halbwachs and Coser 1992: 22, 34).

In order to further legitimize claims of entitlement, the *poleis* strived to establish links between their authoritative past and the land by manipulating the landmarks of the visual landscape. Much more evidently than today, the terrain of ancient Greece at this time would have been dotted with the physical traces of the Mycenaean and Minoan civilizations, and the societies of the early Iron Age most probably related them to their myths of heroic ancestry (Antonaccio 1994: 390, 409).

One of the most well known examples of Iron Age manipulation of the mythical landscape was the reimagining of Bronze Age tumuli as tombs of venerable and heroic ancestors. The choice of ancestor had little to do with the actual history of the settlement; the goal was simply to manifest a relation to an authoritative past turning it into something visible and tangible (Antonaccio 1994: 401, 403).

Materializations of memory, and in the case of ancient Greece also of entitlement, do however visualize a message. In a period when very little or no monumental architecture was ever constructed, substantial Bronze Age ruins in stone would probably have appeared almost mythical, creating a connection between the present landscape and a legendary past (Penttinen 2011: 122–123).

Memory thus has strong material correlates. Monuments and landscapes constitute the material framework of the past and act both as its physical setting and serves in its production (Alcock 2002: 19, 23–28; Anderson 2013: 75–76). They are however also the subject of constant interpretation and re-identification as a society's requirement of these material frameworks change. What was unimportant yesterday may be important today and utterly forgotten tomorrow (Alcock 2002: 28–30).

Memory and visible landscapes

Lacking the technological means of sustaining territory, as described above, ancient Greece society was thus probably spatially organized through human activity and the somatic experience of landscape. Instead of focusing on trying to reconstruct the hypothetical sizes of *poleis* using Thiessen polygons, circles of standard diameter, cost allocation or other methods of spatial analysis, it would therefore be more constructive to understand the *polis* as a visible space.

Whereas territory is defined by borders invisible in the landscape, and is therefore a non-visible space, the *polis* (in the spatial sense) consisted of a main settlement and field

and pasture, and was thus a very visible space. In a world lacking the means of modern cartography, space was created through embodied sensual experience, and it would make more sense for scholars to approach it as such.

If we understand the geographical area of the *polis* as an absolute space formed by human needs and activities, we see that authority and power are distributed unevenly. Instead of being self-evident in all parts of the *polis*, authority and entitlement probably had to be visible or at least noticeable in order to become apparent or legitimate. This would make state presence in the *polis* unevenly distributed or "patchy", as Osborne (2013: 787) describes the distribution of power in another city-state culture, that of Iron Age Amuq, Turkey.

To claim ownership of land, the *polis* had to thus demonstrate its entitlement to it, and this, I would like to argue, was chiefly achieved visually. The invention of tombs of heroes and the erection of *horoi*—both visual markers of entitlement—were some of the methods of doing this, possibly more common than the physical evidence suggests. I would argue that monumental architecture in stone was part of this scheme too, being often far more visible than tumuli and boundary markers.

Monumental architecture can be a strategy aimed at reaching political goals, but being a symbol it is also dependent on meaning. In ancient Greece, meaning was often acquired through religious importance, as in the case of temples and sanctuaries, but one of the strongest providers of meaning was surely the past (Boardman 2002: 17, 192).

This is where we should locate the *akropoleis* of ancient Greece. Receiving their meaning from legends associating towering walls with an authoritative past, they aimed at visualizing the presence of the *polis* in the landscape. The *akropoleis*, being the 'higher *poleis*', and thus the physical manifestations of the state, intensified the presence and entitlement of the *polis* in its political space. They thus made the abstract organization of the *polis* tangible, turning it into a visible space.

Conclusions

The *polis* authorized its entitlement to its land—fields, grazing grounds, woods—through the manipulation of the past, and it sustained this entitlement by constant reinforcing its authority through myths, epics and monuments.

As demonstrated above, when addressing the question of *polis* as space it is problematic to use the term 'territory', at least without lengthy definitions. Osborne (2013) suggests "malleable territory" as a description of the spatial organization of the city-states of Amuq, and this could possibly be a suitable term in the case of the Greek *poleis*.

Paradoxically, to visualize these visible spaces cartographically is very difficult (if not impossible), as further observed by Osborne (2013: 787), and perhaps we should abstain from even trying to do this, as the lack of fixed demarcations would make these representations misleading. As a result of

the proposals in this study, it could instead be more relevant to understand *polis* space as visible space: a space defined by the typical *polis* features seen within it instead of the rather invisible space of cartographical territory.

The *akropoleis* cannot have been the only type of monument utilized to visualize *polis* space, as shrines and tumuli were surely used similarly. Even if there might be exceptions, such an understanding would help to explain why the ancient Greeks chose for hundreds of years to construct and relate to these features.

Being amongst the most widespread of ancient Greek architectural phenomena, the *akropolis* must not be treated as some kind of single-purpose feature, only meant to resist potential attackers. Such large communal undertakings surely had several meanings and functions in the *polis*, and these certainly differed between different places and regions. However, this interpretation of at least one of their functions—the visualization of the *polis* in space—can possibly lead to other understandings of ancient Greek *polis* space beyond modern territorial assumptions.

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