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### *Sounion Revisited: The Sanctuaries of Poseidon and Athena at Sounion in Attica*

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# *Sounion Revisited: The Sanctuaries of Poseidon and Athena at Sounion in Attica*

Gina Salapata

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## REFERENCES

Zetta Theodoropoulou-Polychroniadis, *Sounion Revisited: The Sanctuaries of Poseidon and Athena at Sounion in Attica*, Oxford: Archaeopress Archaeology, 2015 [ISBN 978-1-78491-154-6]

- 1 With its rocky landscape and stunning sea vistas, as any tourist who goes there can attest, Cape Sounion offers a commanding strategic location for safeguarding the Laurion silver mines and a prominent landmark for navigation along with sheltered anchorage. Unsurprisingly, it played a significant role in the economy, trade, and defence of Athens, and became an important early cult centre.
- 2 "Sounion hieron" is first mentioned in the *Odyssey*, as the place where Menelaos stopped during his return from Troy to bury his helmsman, Phrontis. Cult activity is archaeologically confirmed since ca 700 BC on two points of the promontory: on the southern edge (sanctuary of Poseidon) and on a hill ca 500m to the northeast (sanctuary of Athena).
- 3 Even though important offerings were made in both sanctuaries during the Archaic period (for example, the famous colossal kouroi), the architecture was unassuming until the early fifth century. The construction of an imposing temple at Poseidon's sanctuary was interrupted by the Persian destruction, but in the mid-fifth century grand temples were erected in both sanctuaries. Finds from that period onwards, however, have not been discovered.

- 4 Systematic investigation of the area was undertaken between 1897 and 1915 by the Archaeological Society of Athens, under the direction of Valerios Stais. His excavations remain the only extensive ones conducted to date. Stais published only brief reports in the Society's journal with a selection of finds.
- 5 The book under review, based on the author's 2010 dissertation, examines in detail and interprets a wide variety of small finds, the majority of terracotta, found in pit deposits and landfills in both sanctuaries. With a few exceptions, the finds date from the early seventh century to the early Classical period and are mostly unpublished. The author faced great challenges in her study due to the limited records left by Stais: the lack of information on the stratigraphic context and provenance of many items prevents secure association with the two sanctuaries, and the selective presentation of finds in groups and poor descriptions hinder identification of individual items. This means that several of the author's conclusions remain tentative.
- 6 Using a combination of archaeological, epigraphical, and literary evidence, the author does her best to re-examine and to re-evaluate the small finds, and to place them in the context of the sanctuaries and their structures. Chapters 1 (excavations and finds as reported by Stais) and 2 (history of Sounion and its sanctuaries) set the scene and the context for the classification. Thorough analysis and interpretation of the small finds follows in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 discusses the establishment and development of the sanctuaries, aspects of the divinities and their cults, and the socio-economic background of dedicators, all of which reveals the importance of Sounion for Athens. Then comes the detailed catalogue of objects, followed by three appendices: literary testimonia, a selection of pottery (which cannot be assigned to either sanctuary), and a list of scarabs, seals and beads, which do not form part of the study. Geometric pottery, reportedly discovered by Stais, could not be located, and around 100 metal objects are still to be published. The lack of an index is frustrating.
- 7 The numerous and varied small finds from the pits and landfills of the two sanctuaries include handmade and mould-made figurines, relief and painted plaques, fragmentary stone sculpture, Egyptian and egyptianizing faience amulets, scarabs and seals, jewellery, weapons, metal vessels, utensils, and tools (including a punch probably used for decorating surfaces or stamping ingots). In this review I will pay special attention to the terracotta offerings, as they are of principal interest to this journal's readers.
- 8 The coroplastic material is mainly local and consists of a variety of mostly female figurines and protomes, several bearing traces of colour.<sup>1</sup> There are also three Mycenaean figurines, two possibly Late Geometric male figurines, a few riders, a flute player probably from a ring dancing group, a variety of animals, plastic vases, and an interesting miniature sandalled foot. Loom weights and spindle whorls from Athena's sanctuary make a sudden 'ghost' appearance in the conclusions (pp. 132, 137, 143–44), where they are even adduced as evidence for the cult of a female divinity. Incredibly, these are mentioned nowhere else, not even in the catalogue.
- 9 Eleven relief plaques were found in the Poseidon sanctuary, six of which depict Herakles wrestling the lion, one of the earliest (end of the seventh century) and rarest iconographic types; others show a winged creature (Potnia Theron?), a charioteer, and a male or female figure.
- 10 Thirty painted plaques, some apparently decorated on both sides, probably come from Athena's sanctuary. The famous plaque by the Analatos Painter depicting a warship with

a steersman<sup>2</sup> recalls Homer's reference and hints at an early hero cult. Other plaques depict a lion, a winged creature, possibly another warship, and part of a (likely) female figure in a fringed dress moving in a ceremonial dance step or procession within a checkerboard frame.

- 11 UV and raking light photography was employed to detect the painted remains on poorly preserved plaques, but the subjects perceived by the author (e.g. galloping horse and traces of a chariot, possibly driven by a divinity, and a head and torso possibly of Athena) are not very visible in the photos.
- 12 The author carries out a thorough analysis of the material in Chapter 3, but there are several shortcomings. Firstly, there is no scale of reproduction in the photos of the catalogued finds; e.g. 23, which is of the same dimensions as 24, appears smaller; and other objects that appear equal have different dimensions (e.g. 13 and 14). The same problem occurs with metal and stone finds (e.g. 187 and 191; 252 and 253).
- 13 Secondly, classification is inconsistent: sometimes it is based on morphological or iconographic features, but other times on the state of preservation ("heads and body parts", "headless"), which is an unacceptable criterion.
- 14 Thirdly, the analysis of the material from the manufacturing point of view falls short. Often there is no attempt to distinguish mould series, even though differences in dimensions among those objects made in the same mould may be noted (e.g. p. 36). And when there is an attempt to distinguish derivative production, the methodology is incorrect. I will give two glaring examples on pages 41–42:
- (1) Protome 26, smaller than 27 in both height (0.048m vs 0.065m) and width (0.030m vs 0.044m), is considered by the author as being from a later generation. However, she does not take into account that 26 is fragmentary; if it were intact, it would have been of the same size as 27 and consequently from an earlier – not later as the author assumes – generation than 29 and 30.
- (2) Within Group C, protome 35 "is possibly the first generation mould and at least belongs with the first series of *protomai*". However, its height of 0.057m is smaller than 24's (0.060m) and 17's (0.063m), despite the fact that half of the latter's head is missing.
- 15 Some further quibbles: I cannot see how protomes 12 and 13 can be from the same mould series as 28 and 41, which have a more elongated face (pp. 40–41). How is it possible that 39 could be "of a subsequent generation of moulds of the C group" (p. 38) if it is of the same or slightly larger dimensions? Does the author mean a variant? By "the same moulds have been re-used" is it meant that the moulds are worn? The phrase which mentions that 33 is "a later generation of the above type but from a different mould" (p. 38) makes no sense; and the statement "as figures tend to get smaller when the same moulds are used repeatedly because of the shrinkage of the clay" (p. 41) is simply wrong.
- 16 One has to conclude that, despite the author's consultation with R.V. Nicholls (p. 40, n. 73), the concept of moulds and generations has not been grasped; and I would question that "he was in agreement with the views expressed here". More recent bibliography on derivative production (e.g. Arthur Muller's publications) ought to have been consulted during the analysis of the terracottas.
- 17 In other sections I found an error in terminology (*pteroma* instead of the correct *pronaos*, p. 21) and some infelicities. For example, why call 217 a "silver mask" instead of a *protome* like the terracotta ones? And why are several of the miniature weapons termed "*ex-votos*" rather than simply "miniature" or "purpose-made offerings"? All offerings, full-size or

miniature, were supposed to be dedications (which I assume is implied in the author's term "*ex-voto*"). Inconsistently, in the catalogue, 219 is called "figurine of a bull", while the similar 220 is an "*ex-voto* miniature bull".

- 18 There are further inaccuracies and inconsistencies between the text and the catalogue: in the catalogue, 206 is possibly from Athena's sanctuary but on p. 124 it is related to Poseidon's. In the text, a group of female figurines "vary in height between 0.040–0.085m" (p. 29), but in the catalogue 48 is 0.12m and 52 is 0.10m.
- 19 The photos are of very good quality. However, the decision to incorporate illustrations of the catalogued finds into the text "for easier reference" actually makes consultation rather reader-unfriendly because these are not sequentially arranged. Locating cross-references to other finds thus becomes a tedious and frustrating riffling exercise.
- 20 In the synthetic Chapter 4, the author persuasively argues that both sanctuaries likely housed hero cults in addition to divine cults. An oval enclosure in the Athena sanctuary, the earliest structure at Sounion, may have been the site of a heroic cult (likely of Phrontis) by the end of the eighth century. Associated with it may have been the bothros, in which many of the finds were found. Perhaps originally a cistern, this deep square pit cut into the rock with rock-hewn steps became a repository of offerings from at least the end of the eighth century. The Herakles-and-lion plaques from Poseidon's sanctuary may be connected with a cult of Herakles there or at a nearby harbour. The author associates them with a branch of Salaminian settlers who claimed descent from the hero.
- 21 The author rightly stresses that, despite the limited literary references before the Classical period, the variety of finds shows that both sanctuaries were thriving in the Archaic period. Initially of local importance, they received offerings presumably from residents of neighbouring communities, including miners and craftsmen, as well as from visitors from Athens and traders and seafarers. Imported objects evince the cosmopolitan character of the two sanctuaries and their connections with eastern Greek trading centres, the Levant, and Egypt. After the Persian wars, Sounion grew under Athenian patronage, becoming an important border cult centre and a major gateway to the outside world.
- 22 Theodoropoulou-Polychroniadis has provided a better understanding of the early cults in the two Sounian sanctuaries through the integrated study of material remains and ancient literary sources. She contributes new insights into the origins, development, and significance of the cults, especially of the earlier period, and detects patterns of socio-economic growth. Several questions remain which only further excavations could possibly answer. Nonetheless, the author has managed to fill in several gaps in our knowledge of the very important cult centre that was Sounion. However, the section on terracottas should be used with great caution.

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## NOTES

1. Note that the horizontal lines visible, for example in 39 and 75, are the wire holding them in place.
  2. Compare the steersman on a seventh-century dinos from the Theban sanctuary of Herakles: Morris, S.P. 2014. "Artists in Motion: Proto-Attic and Related Pottery of the Seventh Century B.C.", in *Egrafsēn kai Epoiesēn: Essays on Greek Pottery and Iconography in Honour of Professor Michalis Tiverios*, Thessaloniki, 99–100, fig. 6.
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## ABSTRACTS

Gina Salapata reviews Zetta Theodoropoulou-Polychroniadis, *Sounion Revisited: The Sanctuaries of Poseidon and Athena at Sounion in Attica*. Oxford: Archaeopress Archaeology, 2015. ISBN 978-1-78491-154-6.

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