

# Greek sanctuaries and Russian dolls: walls and religious experience

Michael Scott

Olympia, site of the ancient Olympic games, competes with the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi for the accolade of being Greece's most famous sacred space. Even the colossal statue inside its Temple of Zeus was one of the wonders of the ancient world! But what makes a space sacred? And at what point does it stop being sacred? Here we examine an overlooked aspect of Olympia – the importance of its boundary wall.



Columns in the sanctuary of Olympia today. Photo by Szilas  
([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Greece\\_2006\\_120\\_Temple\\_of\\_Zeus\\_Olympia.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Greece_2006_120_Temple_of_Zeus_Olympia.jpg)).

What did the boundaries of sacred spaces look like? Well just about anything really! Neither the sanctuary of Hera at Argos nor

that of Poseidon at Isthmia appear to have had any monumental boundary at any point in their history. And in Sophocles'

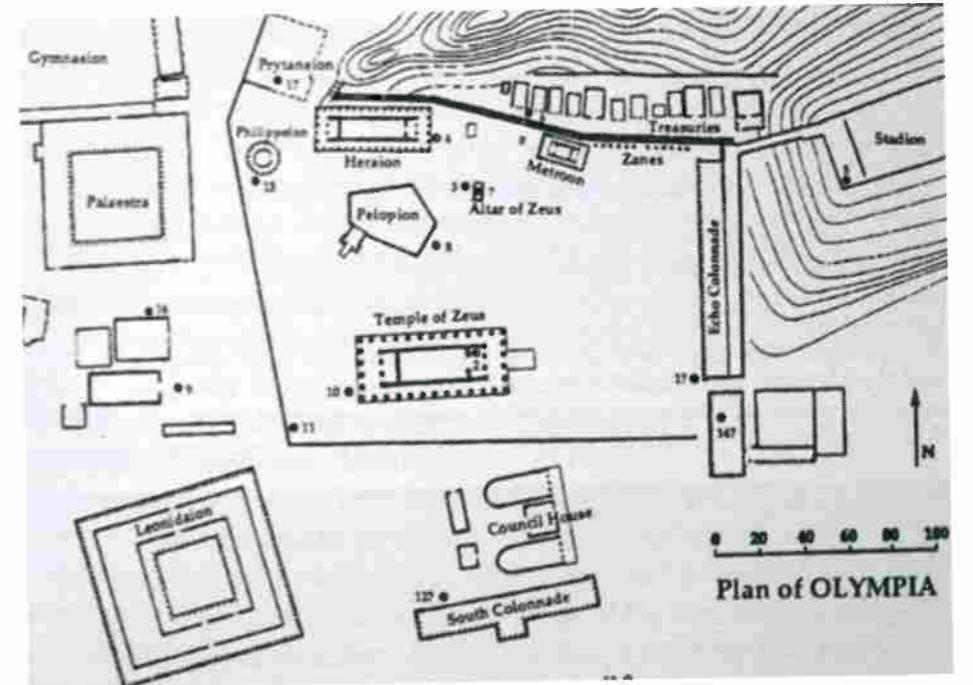
*Oedipus at Colonus*, Antigone can wander into a sacred grove without realizing it. Other sanctuaries differed in how they

signalled their separation from society: this signalling ranged from simple stones on the ground to low walls, natural banks, precipices in the surrounding landscape (e.g. the Sanctuary of Poseidon in Kalauria), banks of tightly packed Cyprus trees (e.g. the Sanctuary of Eurynome in Arcadia) through to monumental high stone walls (like at the Sanctuary of Eleusis in Attica).

What difference do these choices make? Think about your favourite park, sports club, or religious building. What kind of boundary does it have? Would you feel differently about it and about going there, if it had no visible boundary as opposed to a perimeter-fence or wall separating it and its members from the outside world? My bet is that you would. Yet rarely has scholarship thought about what difference different kinds of boundary made to the experience of visiting a sanctuary. The following response is not untypical: 'while architecturally, in terms of visual appearance, the differences [were] considerable, religiously [all types of boundary] had the same function.'

## Marking the sanctuary of Zeus and Hera at Olympia

This is where Olympia comes in. What kind of boundary did the sanctuary (or 'temenos', from the Greek verb 'temno', meaning 'to cut' or 'to divide') of Zeus and Hera at Olympia have? Until the fourth century B.C., we cannot be sure. But in the second half of the fourth century, walls were built around its central sacred area or *altis*. These walls, at least to the west and south sides of the *altis*, were, according to the German excavators of the site, about 0.72m thick and up to 1.5m high. To the north, the *altis* was defined by a natural hill, and to the east by the retaining wall of the stadium and, in time, a stoa building. Why then? The walls may have been part of the general sprucing up of the



Plan of Olympia with the hill to the north and the altars as numbered in Michael's text, below. Those with question marks are less secure in their positioning.  
Courtesy of Jas' Elsner.

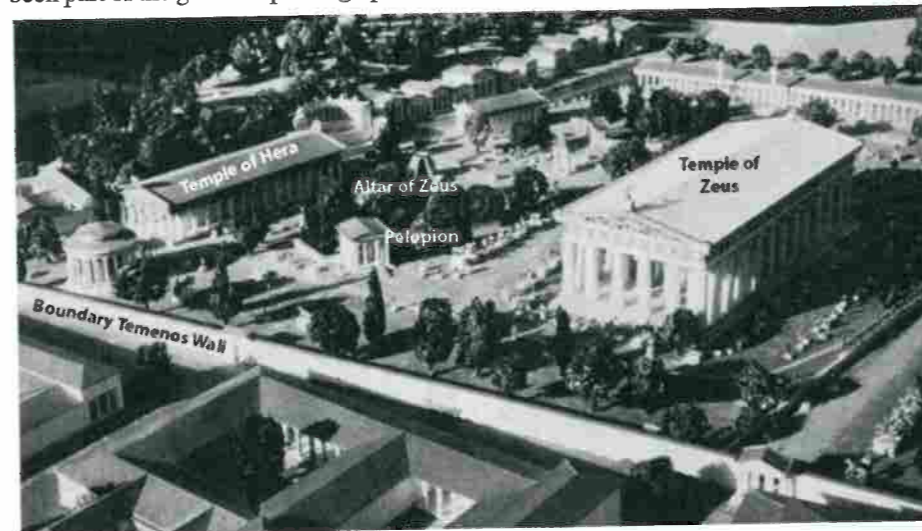
sanctuary under Alexander the Great and his father Philip. They may also have been a response to the fighting that had taken place between the local city-state of Elis and Arcadia in the first half of the fourth century within the sanctuary itself.

What impact did these new walls have? Whether one was inside or outside the sanctuary, they would have done little to prevent one from seeing the great temples of Zeus and Hera that towered over them. Nor would they have prevented people from spying the ever-growing monumental altar to Zeus, made up of the congealed remains of every single sacrifice to Zeus at the site (an altar, which by the second century A.D. was said to be 20ft high!). But they would have prevented people outside of their circumference seeing what was going on inside the *altis* at ground level,

and equally those within the *altis* from being distracted by views beyond. There were some 70 altars at Olympia (not all of them by any means as big as the great altar of Zeus). And we know that the citizens of Elis, who ran the sanctuary, sacrificed at each of them as part of a single sacred procession every month.

Pausanias, whose second-century A.D. account it is that gives us so much of our textual info on the site, tells us about these altars in the order that they were visited. If we plot them on a map, we begin to realize how the wall impacted on the experience; how boundary and ritual interact. The group making the sacrifices would have had to pass out and back inside the new boundary walls several times (via the entrances provided at the north-west and south-west corners): out into the stadium for altar 5 and back in for altar 6, out to altar 9 and back in for altar 10, out again for altars 12 and 13, back in for 15, and out again for 16, back in for 17... We are not sure today where some of the remaining altars were: the group may have been meandering in and out of the walls for hours.

In addition, it is important to note that these fourth-century 'temenos' walls were only the first in a series of boundaries confronting visitors at Olympia. Within them, there was, for example, the walled sacred enclosure of Pelops, not to mention the walls of the temples of Zeus and Hera themselves. Inside the temple of Zeus, the colossal statue of Zeus by Pheidias was protected by a series of parapet walls set into the internal columns of the building.



Reconstruction showing the main temples at Olympia plus boundary wall.  
© Michael C. Scott.

## Greek sanctuaries, Russian dolls

Walls changed the way the sanctuary of Olympia was experienced physically, but also the way in which ritual practices at the sanctuary were engaged in and understood. Their primary effect was to mark out and make more visual the process of coming into contact with the divine. Entering into the sanctuary at Olympia was akin to the experience of opening up a Russian doll, slowing one's movement through layer after layer, from the 'real world' to the *altis*, through the walls of a temple or sacred enclosure, to the final frontier between the worshipper and the

statue of the god. Each time one penetrated a boundary, a new visual landscape was revealed to the visitor, prolonging the process of coming into a god's presence, and, therefore, underlining the importance of the ritual journey and the preparation, as well as the final contact with the divine (the 'epiphany') itself. The more sacred something was in ancient Greece, the less avail-

able it was: walls were obstacles that exacerbated this sense of distance and ensured that Zeus and Hera remained sacred by being difficult to access.

The second effect of the walls, especially those that fractured the viewing of the monthly procession, may have been, conversely, to encourage ritual participation. As the group moved between the altars, slipping in and out of view, participants and spectators had to work that bit harder to keep up with them. They had to move with them, if they were to have any chance of seeing what was going on. In moving with the group, they became more actively involved with the ritual. The new boundary walls encouraged everyone to morph from being spectators of ritual to participants in ritual, thus once again bolstering the Greeks' interaction with the gods.

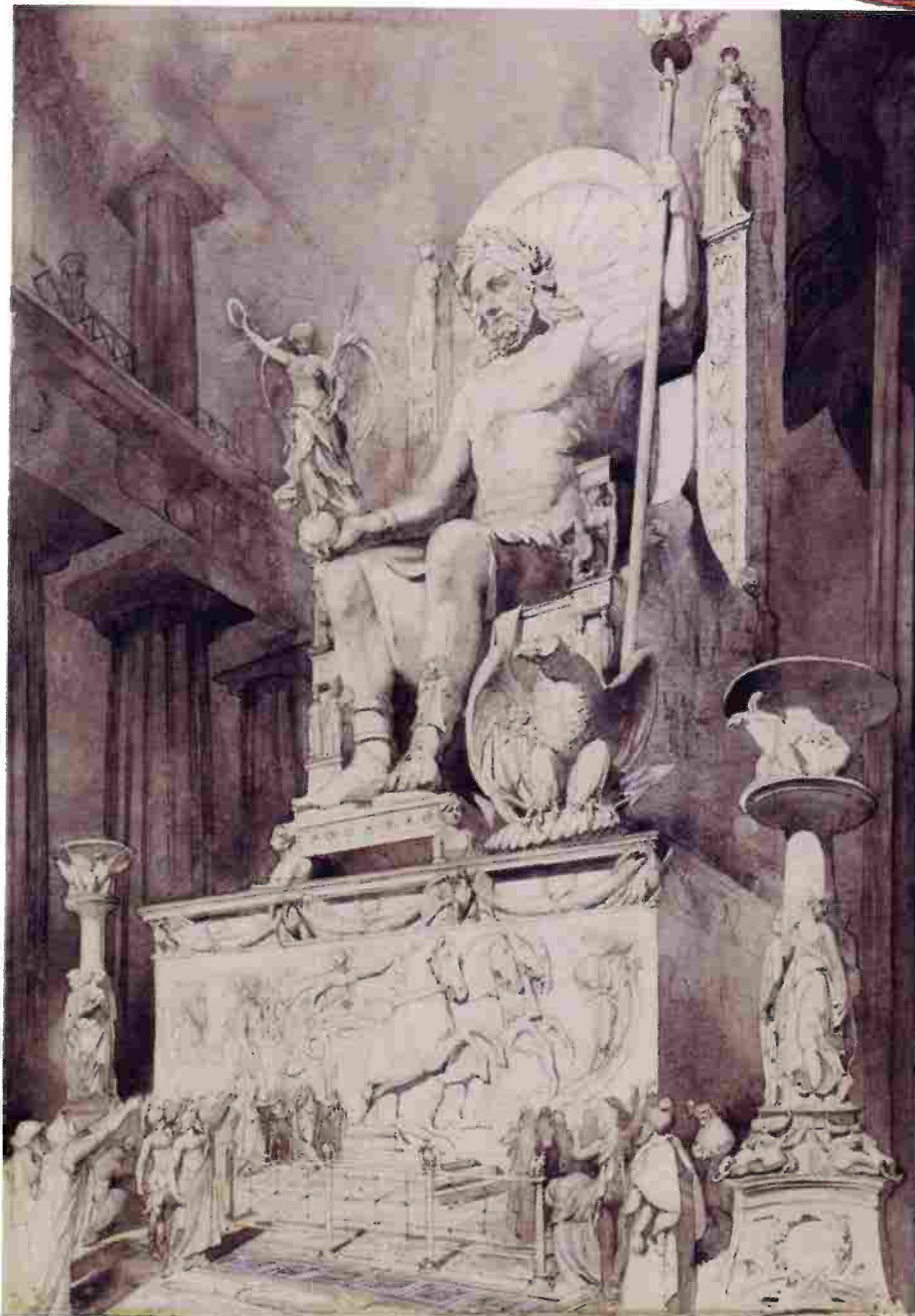
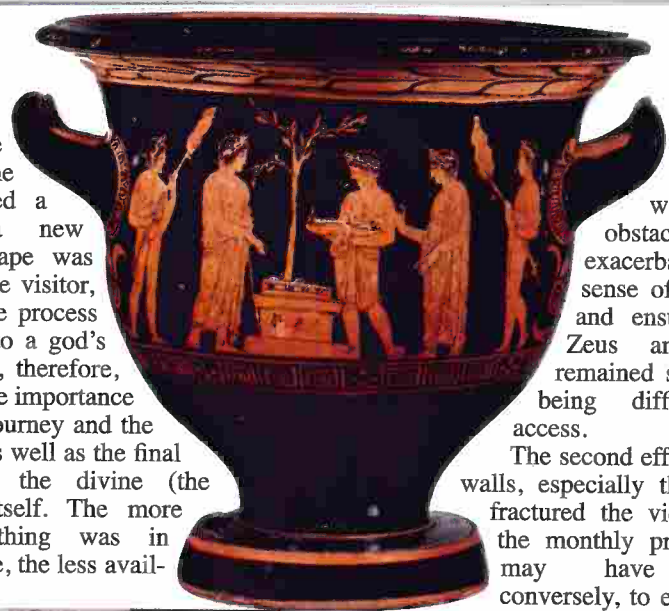
### A fly on the wall

Olympia offers us just one example of why walls are important. Next time you find yourself at a sanctuary site, whether in Greece or in the classroom, try asking not only what its temple, statues, and other dedications looked like, but how it defined its boundaries. For these boundaries are crucial in defining sacred space, not simply separating the inside of the 'temenos' from the world outside, but shaping religious experience. If you want to know what it was like to worship in Greece, you need to look both at what was happening in the sanctuary and also at, and for, its edges.

If you want to find out more about Greek sanctuaries and their organization of religious experience, you could consult the following:

W. Burkert (1985) *Greek Religion*; R. Parker (1983) *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek religion*; A. Spawforth (1996) *The Complete Greek Temples*; R. Tomlinson (1976) *Greek Sanctuaries*, and B. Wescoat and R. Ousterhout (eds.) (2012) *Architecture of the Sacred: Space, Ritual and Experience from Classical Greece to Byzantium*.

Michael Scott teaches ancient Greek history at the University of Warwick. He has written more than one book about Greek sanctuaries and was last year made an honorary citizen of Delphi. His latest book, *Ancient Worlds: An Epic History of East and West*, brings Greece into dialogue with India and China.



Above: Alfred Charles Conrade, 'Imaginative watercolour and ink drawing of the Statue of Zeus in the Temple at Olympia', 1913-14.

© The Trustees of the British Museum.

Top right: Attic red-figure bell-krater showing a sacrifice at an altar, late fifth century B.C. The Metropolitan Museum of Art ([www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)), Rogers Fund, 1941.