

Greek sanctuaries and Russian dolls: walls and religious experience

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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 Stefan (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'

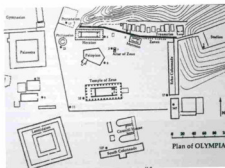
Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone can wander into a sacred grove without realising it. Other sanctuaries differed in how they

signalled their separation from society: this signalling ranged from simple stones on the ground to low walls, natural banks, precincts in the surrounding landscape (e.g. the Sanctuary of Poseidon in Kalauria), banks of tightly packed Cyprus trees (e.g. the Sanctuary of Daryneion 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 utopian: while architecturally, in terms of visual appearance, the differences [were] considerable, religiously [all types of boundary] had the same function.¹

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 on 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 spacing up of the



Plan of Olympia with the Altis to the north and the altis as numbered in Michael's text, below. Those with question marks are less secure in their positioning.

Courtesy of Jan' Elser.

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 written the sanctuary itself.

What respect 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 who visit 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.

Plausibly, 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 realise 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 entrance 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 Philip, Zeus in accession 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 walls. © Michael C. Scott.