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# Mount Hymettos, Athens: A Holy Place For Writing

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**Abstract**
This paper looks at Mount Hymettos, Athens, as a place of writing. We begin with a description of the mountain, and its prominent place in the lives of Athenians, followed by a survey of the kinds of writing performed there over more than 2,000 years. An important asset to the city and yet set apart from its bustling centre, Hymettos has been home to particular kinds of writing that welcome or necessitate removal from the everyday human gaze: particularly religious inscriptions and graffiti. Finally we consider what the performance of writing may have meant to the earliest known writers on the mountain, the worshippers at the 7th century BCE sanctuary of Zeus Semios, "Zeus of the Sign".

**Keywords**
epigraphy; writing; Greek; Athens; Mount Hymettos; sanctuaries

## 1. Introduction

People have been writing on Mount Hymettos (Υμηττός), Athens, for more than 2,500 years of documented history. Its earliest known inscriptions date from the 7th century BCE, a corpus of 150 short texts scratched on ceramic cups found at a sanctuary to Zeus on the mountain›s peak (Evzonas), and Hymettos is still a site of writing today, most visibly in the many graffiti to be found at locations across the mountain. The word "writing" is used in many ways, but here I mean quite specifically two things by it: writing as a performative action (which has aspects of cognition, embodiment and materiality) and writing as the tangible and visible product of such a performative action. We could thus say that we are dealing with epigraphy, literally "writing on [something]", although that is a word used far more often of the ancient world than the modern. This paper attempts to approach writing on Hymettos from the perspective of writing and place, understanding the location of writing as crucial to its interpretation (see *inter alia* Scollon and Wong Scollon 2003, Jaworski and Thurlow 2010, Warnke 2013, Andron 2024), and seeing the landscape and its features as "subject to constant remaking" (Kress and van Leuwen 1996, 35) through the practice of writing. Writing augments and changes places, just as landscape situates existence and human activity (Tilley 1994); inscriptions do not simply signal, they are relational, "ordered components of socially constructed spaces" (Wilson and David 2002, 7) and ways of turning spaces into places (e.g. Bradley 2000, 97). The act of inscribing on a permanent surface (or one at least unlikely to move, whether a natural feature, a wall or a heavy stone object), and the product of that act, can be seen as quite literally *taking place*, becoming part of the "visual sphere and its immediate discourse" (Chmielewska 2011, 161). Thus the visible landscape both contributes to and is changed by the act of writing.

The greater part of the scholarship on writing and place looks at urban landscapes. Looking specifically at Athens, Avramidis cites the popular song *Ο* Δρόμος ("The Street") as illustrative of the common association between writing on walls in the city and the changing visual landscape they are part of (Avramidis 2015, 518-519): there is a popular perception of what graffiti is doing in the urban landscape, as well as the ways in which its roles have changed over the years (from football slogans to name tagging, and the inscribing of political and civil unrest; see also Avramidis 2018, 2021). This paper has a different focus, on a landscape somewhat removed from the city, thus bringing out different kinds of relationships between the act of writing and its geographical setting. As a place that invited presence from afar, a promise of escape to a quieter location, Hymettos was an ideal place for 'egotic writing' (Marchesini 2024), or autotopography in the sense used by Heddon (2002), quite literally writing one›s self into the landscape. It also invited reflection and meditation, often surfacing in writing related to religious expression. We will begin with a description of the mountain before looking at some examples of writing there through the ages (intended to be illustrative rather than exhaustive) and finishing with some reflections on the earliest surviving inscriptions of the 7th century BCE. Throughout we will see that Hymettos was both an active agent, whose natural features shaped human-mountain relationships, and a variegated locus or surface for humans' peculiar ability to inscribe themselves.

**2. Mount Hymettos**

Mount Hymettos is integral to Athens, an active agent in the landscape that looms c.1,000m over the city from the eastern side, and stretches 16km down to the Saronic Gulf. Rather than a perhaps more stereotypical mountain rising to a narrow high peak, Hymettos is long, hulking, a mass of rock that acts almost like a wall on one side of the city, with a distinctly purple hue before sunset (cf. Ovid's "purpureos colles", *Ars Amatoria* 3.687) (figure 1). From a distance it is a singular imposing entity, but the closer you come to it the more its pluralistic and variegated nature becomes apparent, a mass with two main peaks, whose slopes and gullies and caves provide opportunities to explore and make the mountain your own. It is a long-term participant in the local ecosystem and a reciprocal agent in Athenians' lives, in some senses both wild and tame at the same time. For the ancient Greeks and Romans, this ambiguity was key to human-mountain relations, a locus for the divine and for the human at once (see König 2022). Its natural features have very significant agency in its relationships with human actors, making certain kinds of building or travelling or harvesting possible and others not, and dictating the best locations and methods for certain kinds of human-nature interactions. Humans, meanwhile, have long seen the mountain as not only a place to go over or around, but also as a destination in its own right, whether to meditate, to practice religion, to observe its flora and fauna, to experience its wildness as a kind of escape from the city. Over thousands of years it has attracted many stories and reflections.

Hymettos is a variegated ecosystem in itself, and an obvious source of many natural advantages that could be exploited by humans. It has always been a vital source of clean water for the city, since the first habitation in the Neolithic, and it is richly forested and home to a wide range of plants and animals. Classical sources inform us of its two most famous natural assets: honey and marble. The Greek geographer Strabo tells us that Hymettos along with the nearby Mount Pentelikos had excellent marble quarries, and Hymettos the best honey (μαρμάρου δ᾽ ἐστὶ τῆς τε Ὑμηττίας καὶ τῆς Πεντελικῆς κάλλιστα μέταλλα πλησίον τῆς πόλεως: ὁ δ᾽ Ὑμηττὸς καὶ μέλι ἄριστον ποιεῖ, Strabo 9.1). The honey was so highly prized because the bees fed on thyme, and it was the most expensive and famous in the Mediterranean according to a number of ancient writers including Pausanias, Varro, Pliny the Elder, Virgil and Columella. The marble has an unusual bluish colour, making it attractive for public building and inscription near and far. Roman writers including Horace and Pliny the Elder make reference to Hymettian marble imported to Rome, where it was seen as somewhat luxurious, while in Athens it was particularly popular for epigraphic purposes (see Ober 1981, 70-71). Cultivation

**Figure 1.** Hymettos at sunset, seen from Likavittos. Photography courtesy of Theo Nash.

and exploitation of natural resources also left its mark on the landscape, perhaps most obvious from the many quarries like scars in the mountain›s sides, and the deforestation over the years that has led to efforts to reforest and protect its microclimate (including a new Aesthetic Forest of Kaisariani, developed on the northwestern side of the mountain by the Φιλοδασική Ένωση Αθηνών). Hymettos has often more recently been in the news for its forest fires, all the more as the threats from climate change increase. Today it is also home to a new kind of resource, the radio masts that take advantage of its elevation and connect the city of Athens with the wider world.

At some point in or by the Ottoman period, Hymettos came to be referred to as ή Τρελοβούνι, the Crazy Mountain, allegedly deriving from a remark on its size in French (très long), reinterpreted as sounding close to the Greek adjective τρελός "crazy". A similar derivation is suggested via the Italian name used by the Franks, Monte Matto, which means "crazy mountain" in Italian and could perhaps be a mishearing for Monte Ymetto. The two competing etymologies suggest a persistent interest in the mountain and desire to tell stories around it. The location and size of Hymettos have a significant effect on the local climate, and it is possible that the "craziness" with which it has been associated was once connected with its changeable weather, a persistent feature of Athenians' lives. The ancient writer Pausanias briefly describes some of the religious features of the

mountain: a statue to Zeus Hymettios, plus altars to Zeus Ombrios (Zeus of the Rain) and Apollo Proopsios (Apollo the Foreseer) (ἐν Ὑμηττῷ δὲ ἄγαλμά ἐστιν Ὑμηττίου Διός, βωμοὶ δὲ καὶ Ὀμβρίου Διὸς καὶ Ἀπόλλωνός εἰσι Προοψίου, Pausanias 1.32); this seems to be further evidence of the longstanding concern with predicting the weather, although as we will see later, the archaeological remains of the Hymettian sanctuary to Zeus attest to a different epithet of the god. These early foundations of worship on the mountain were to be succeeded by many more over the centuries, and Hymettos is still home to numerous monasteries and churches today. There is little human habitation on the mountain itself beyond the foothills and the well farmed gentle slopes of the eastern side.

Many reflections on Hymettos have found their way into popular discourse over the years. John Milton wrote of the mountain: "There, flowery hill, Hymettus, with the sound / Of bees' industrious murmur, oft invites / To studious musing" (*Paradise Regained* 4.247-9). The phrase "studious musing" particularly resonates with one aspect of human-mountain relations, situating Hymettos as a place to think, or to think about, somewhere for intellectual engagement. The English traveller Edward Dodwell wrote enthusiastically about his visit to the mountain, with its idealistic views that seemed to conjure the same experiences for him as those he knew from Classical descriptions (see König 2021). According to Manos Hadjidakis, lyricist of the song Υμηττός (performed by Lisa Basiliari in 1959), there is some secret on the heights of Hymettos (Εκεί ψηλά στον Υμηττό υπάρχει κάποιο μυστικό…), suggesting the distance of the mountain as both a barrier to knowledge and an instigator of imagination: it is both tantalisingly close, just on the edge of the city and visible from elevated spots with a clear view east, and at the same time frustratingly far, a place unknowable without being there. To this day Hymettos continues to be a popular destination for the residents of Athens and for tourists alike, particularly for walking and hiking, whether to see the views, visit the caves and historical remains or observe its diverse wildlife.

**3. Writing on the mountain**

Writing has taken place on Mount Hymettos for at least 2,600 years, but it is glimpsed in snapshots, the surviving remains of the act of inscription. I do not intend to attempt a complete history of writing on the mountain, nor is there sufficient evidence to do so, but we will consider some of these snapshots as a way into understanding what is special about this particular setting - or, we should perhaps rather say *settings*, acknowledging the variegated nature of the mountain's inscribed spaces. Some themes will, I hope, become apparent. One is the unique potential for humans to write their relationships with the spiritual or divine, somehow fueled by the particular circumstances of the location. Another is the dual nature of writing as an additive and a subtractive action, depending on how and where it is done, perhaps analogous with the relationships of give and take between humans and mountain. At the same time, the mountain is an audience for the assertion of the human self. We will begin with the present day, whose writing is contemporary and in flux, but as we move towards and through some glimpses of the past, we will inevitably find that they intermingle with today's writing. This is perhaps a symptom of the constant relationship between past and present that is often seen to embody modern Athenian culture, so easily fetishised in orientalising views of contemporary Athenian graffiti as emblematic of a multicultural "socio-political paradise" (Vamvakas 2020, 165). However, it is perhaps better to see writing on Hymettos as an ongoing dialogue between humans and the mountain that occupies a special place bordering but outside of the cityscape.

The site of the earliest remains of human activity on Hymettos is, paradoxically, also a site of continued writing: the Liontari cave towards the northern end, where archaeological remains date back to the Neolithic and continue through the Classical period and beyond (Karali and Mavridis 2005, Karali, Mavridis and Kormazopoulou 2005). Legend has it that the cave was home to a lion that terrorised the countryside, hence the name. In recent years the entrance has provided a


**Figure 2.** Snapshots of the entrance to the Liontari cave (Σπήλαιο Λιοντάρι), showing the shamrock emblem of Panathinaikos, which was then crossed out and overwritten with το παιδί της Ανατολής, the slogan of AEK (though less often appearing in full in graffiti), later overwritten with ΠΑΟ, the Panathinaikos acronym. Images from Wikimedia Commons.

canvas for graffiti writers to engage in a war of football teams, with the emblems and slogans of Panathinaikos and AEK overwriting each other (figure 2). This is a practice that spills over from the city, a very common trend in Athenian graffiti. In some cases the graffiti are fairly long or elaborate, perhaps made more possible by the remoteness of the location.

The Liontari cave is just one example of a site on the mountain that attracts human visitors, a continued tourist destination in the modern day. More than 20km of hiking and biking trails are well established across Hymettos, and the curious traveller will find plenty of recommendations online for the best routes, views and destinations. These trails delight in the mountain›s wildness, the more unspoilt the better. One of the most obvious kinds of writing in this context is signage, some officially produced and printed but also much that is handpainted as well as the more iconic trail blazes using coloured dots or arrows to mark paths. Some of the hiking-related writing shows an ongoing sense of collegiality or hospitality among communities of like-minded people, especially important because most of the trails are maintained only by regular usage by visitors: like texts, they are established through continued engagement and in doing so they create relational histories and "intertextualities" (Tilley 1994, 29-30). Figure 3 shows a handwritten note found in a shack, written in a collective voice stating that it was erected in 1966 and that the authors (an anonymous "we") are trying to keep it alive however they can, "for the hikers of long-suffering Hymettos" (για τους πεζοπόρους του πολύπαθου Υμηττού) - a text of a somewhat mysterious but friendly tone that ends in an almost Homeric idiom. The shack is on the north-western side of Hymettos not far from Kaisariani Monastery, on a route from the city to the mountain that is popular because of its gentler climb and successful reforestation; the area is also home to one of the best known hiking rest stops, the Kalopoula café, whose handwritten menu boards are another kind of writing on contemporary Hymettos.

Signs are a human super-imposition on the landscape, a way of structuring it and making it navigable, a way of marking out what matters to humans. They may not change the fabric of the landscape but they change its visible surface, although in the case of mountain trails they tend to aim at deliberately minimal disturbance to the natural scenery and wildlife. Similarly, in some cases there is considerable effort to create an aesthetic that is in-keeping with the natural landscape, such as the colourful, decorated signs of the botanical trail near Kaisariani (figure 4). Others serve a more practical purpose, guiding travellers to sites of interest that can easily be missed in the variegated terrain.

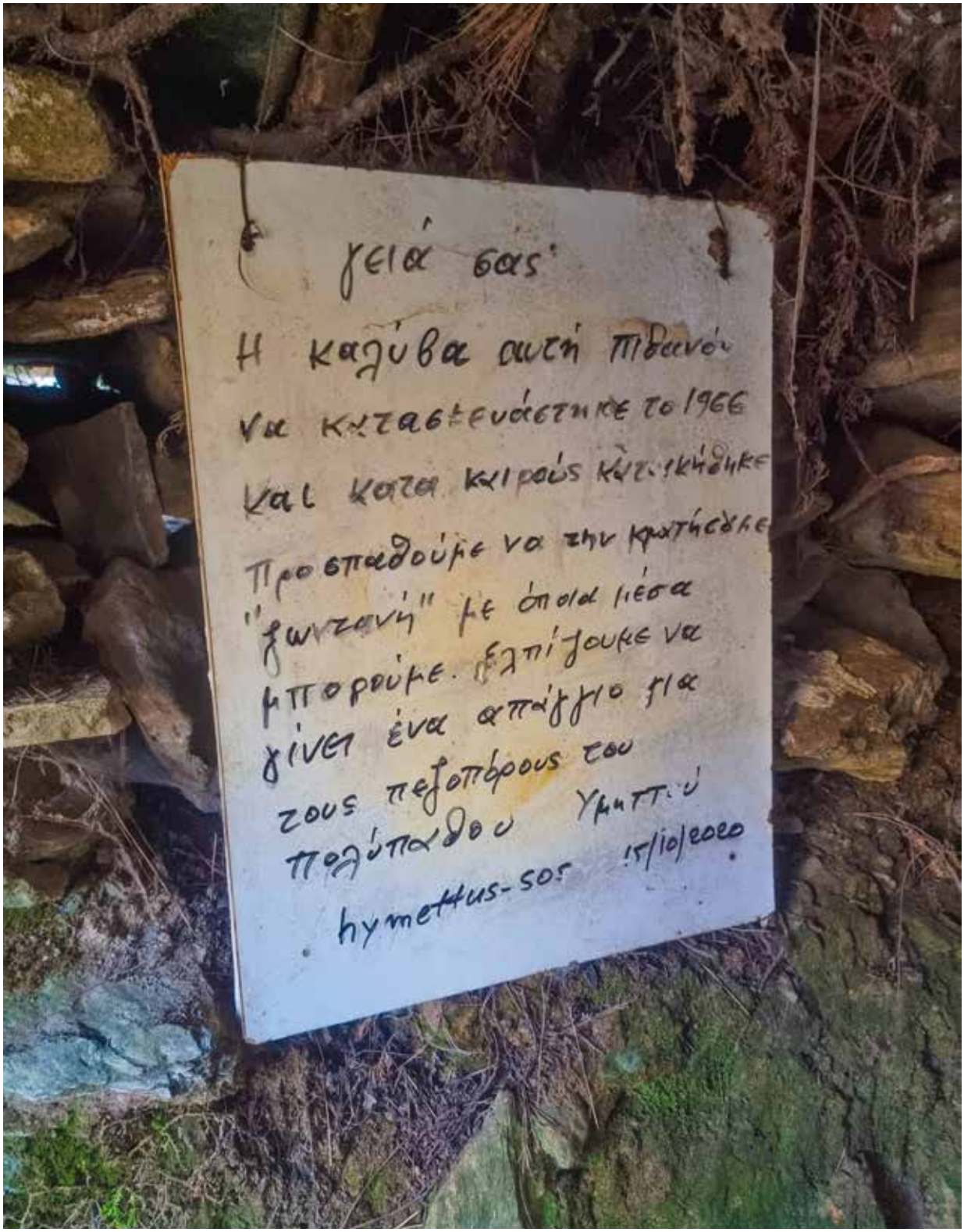


**Figure 3.** Handwritten notice found in a shack on the north-western side of Hymettos. Photograph courtesy of Stephanie Banks.


**Figure 4.** Hand painted signs from the botanical trail near Kaisariani. Photographs courtesy of Ivy Liacopoulou.

One of the most popular visitor attractions on Hymettos is the Monastery of Kaisariani, one of a number of monasteries and Christian buildings found around the mountain. Kaisariani was founded around 1100 but on a site with a longer history of religious activity, possibly a sanctuary of Aphrodite before conversion to Christian usage by the 5th or 6th century CE (see Chatzidakis 1977 and Forrest 1991 on the monastery's history). Having fallen into disrepair in the 18th century and later, the monastery was extensively restored during the 20th century. It is especially well known for its extensive murals, which themselves contain writing in the form of name labels of saints and other figures as well as short religious texts (figure 5). The depictions of books and scrolls in the murals often contain writing, a relic of the highly literate landscape of the medieval monastery, where Biblical and theological texts would have been copied and stored. Medieval Kaisariani was once famous for its library, which may have preserved Classical as well as Christian texts, and it might be imagined that the written word itself flourished in the monks' meditative practice of pen on paper. However, the library and its writings had a sad end as many manuscripts were reportedly taken and scrapped during the Greek War of Independence in the 19th century, for military uses such as touch papers and cartridge wadding. The fate of the manuscripts, however, does not and cannot detract from the devotional act of writing and creatively copying (see Alexander 1989).

As a Byzantine foundation, Kaisariani is assumed to have flourished through the medieval period; nearby is the earliest site of Christian remains on the mountain, the Church of Agios Markos (Φραγκομονάστηρο), which preserves a 6th century CE basilica with later additions. However, the monasteries of Hymettos saw a perhaps surprising period of prosperity in the 16th century under Ottoman rule, with some apparently first established at this time (such as the monastery of the Taxiarchs at Asteriou), only falling into decline in the 17th and 18th centuries (Pallis 2007). A number of the murals at Kaisariani actually date to the Ottoman period. The long-established relationship between sites on the mountain and Christian worship attest to a longstanding association between natural seclusion - seclusion quite literally built into the natural landscape - and religious practice. That association has much longer roots in time, as we will see.

I do not intend to make the present survey exhaustive, and there are many smaller instances and acts of writing that can only be touched on here. The probably Ottoman Anthousa Tower (Πύργος Ανθούσας) has become a particular site for writing and over-writing contemporary graffiti, often quite elaborately spray painted on one side. A Roman era hut made of large stones from a nearby quarry, the so-called Dragon House of Hymettos (το Δρακόσπιτο του Υμεττού), has been a site of incised graffiti by visitors over many years, one of the more

**Figure 5.** Mural inside the Monastery of Kaisariani (Μονή Καισαριανής). Photograph courtesy of Anna Judson.

recent of which reads "Gandalf"; with little evidence for dragons, it was likely originally associated with people working in the quarry. In the foothills at Alepovouni on the western side of Hymettos, ancient boundary markers (horoi) show the remains of humans quite literally imposing an inscribed structure across the landscape to demarcate areas of property and human activity (Langdon 1999). These are all snapshots of writing in different ways, so often involving autotopography whether through painted tagging, graffiti incised with a penknife or similar, or more institutionalised marking practices.

The final snapshot we will consider in this section is the Vari cave, located in the southern part of Mount Hymettos and a site of particular significance for its archaeological and epigraphic evidence of religious activity in the Archaic and Classical periods (6th-4th centuries BCE) - though it has been visited by humans for a much longer period, up to the present day as a tourist site. An inscription near the entrance labels the cave as the Σπήλαιον Νυμφολήπτου, the cave of the "nympholept", literally a person taken by or in thrall to the Nymphs. The earliest inscriptions date from the second half of the 5th century BCE, the most prominent naming a man called Archedamos (sometimes Archedemos), a Theran who features in five inscriptions (though some of them were probably inscribed later by followers), and who declares himself a nympholept, having set up the cave under the influence of these deities (and so also credited with founding a cult for their worship). He is even depicted in a relief inscription cut into the rock face in the bottom part of the cave, bearing tools symbolically used for carving or hewing the rock, a chisel

**Figure 6.** Relief sculpture of Archedamos, with inscription next to his face. Photograph courtesy of Theo Nash.

and hammer, and twisting his head round to look behind him (figure 6). The name Archedemos (using the Attic dialect rather than the Doric dialect associated with Thera) has been inscribed twice on a flat surface of rock next to the figure's face, like a speech bubble in which he declares or calls his own name. Numerous ancient inscriptions have been documented on the walls of the cave and on separate blocks of stone (some now removed to a museum setting), mostly naming individuals and/or the deities to whom they made dedications, mainly the Nymphs but also Pan and Hermes (see Dunham 1903, Hallof 2004). A number of inscriptions have also been found on sherds of ceramic vessels, mostly types associated with drinking that could have been used in cult activities (King 1903, 325-327).

The cave is a perfect example, almost a microcosm, of human-mountain relations, embodying the way in which humans inhabit, shape and inscribe themselves on the landscape while the landscape itself asserts its agency in shaping those actions through its very fabric. A cave can attract human activity because of its position or its natural features, or perhaps a quality sensed that is less easily described, some reason to regard it as a sacred

space. The cave is a natural temple, a great hollow that could accommodate humans and their activities, and humans make it their own by not simply recarving the space but rather adapting it, adding new features that complement and accommodate natural features (see Sporn 2020 on a selection of Greek sacred caves). Steps are cut into the entrance, carved niches respect water sources and channels, sculptures are "hewn from the living rock" (Weller 1903, 270) but remain part of it. In one of Archedamos's inscriptions, he is said to have "cultivated a garden to the Nymphs" (κᾶπον Νύμφαις ἐφύτευσεν), a statement that at first sounds curiously chosen for a cave devoid of greenery and sunlight - but, on reflection, a perfect analogy for the intervention of human activity in a natural setting. As deities associated with nature (rivers, trees, mountains, etc), the Nymphs seem a fitting object of worship in this context. Such human-nature relationships seem to be common to other ancient Athenian cult practices (Sporn 2019), but their interplay must have been especially heightened in the special space of the cave. It is easy to forget when you are not present in the cave that sensory experiences are different there: you cannot see without an intrusive source of light, casting shadows as it moves in human hands, and the nature of the space causes sounds to echo, to sound very different from those in the sunlit world outside (see Laferrière 2019, and cf Van Rensberg 2019 on the caves of Socotra). Writing performed inside the cave would have to be accomplished under these circumstances, and the inscriptions related to Archedamos and the other worshippers of the Nymphs have to be understood as recording the special conditions of religious activity: "a process of withdrawal from society, cultivation of the wild, confrontation with the strange powers represented in the nymph, a restructuring of personality and, perhaps, an eventual partial reintegration into a community" (Connor 1988, 189).

It is thought that the cave is still used for rituals today, according to tourist guides at least, and there is certainly evidence for sustained human engagement with the cave over the centuries (cf Marchesini 2023 on pilgrimage inscriptions in ancient Italy). Ancient finds associated with worship continue up to around the 5th century CE, while most graffiti through the ages are very difficult to date except through palaeographic and linguistic features - unless they give a date as some of the later ones do. The latest dated inscription I know of dates to 1947 (with thanks to Natalia Elvira Astoreca for the information), while some travellers in the 18th century, the archaeologists Jacques Foucherot and Louis-François-Sébastien Fauvel, left particularly bold graffiti dated to 1781 (figure 7). As with many archaeological and tourist sites, and as we saw with the Liontari cave, the entrance has now become a canvas for layers of contemporary graffiti (figure 8). Writings at the cave have fulfilled multiple functions over more than 2,500 years, but most share the feature of autotopography in that they situate a human actor, by naming them, in a particular place associated with human activities in an adapted natural setting. These are themes that we have seen recur throughout this intentionally brief and non-exhaustive survey, which I hope has been illustrative of the nature of written human-mountain relations, at least in the case of Hymettos.

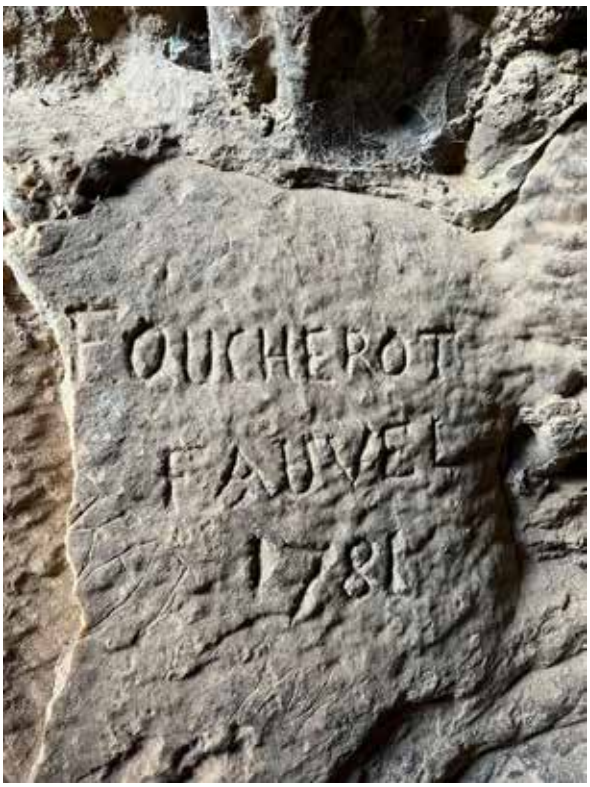


**Figure 7.** Graffito of Foucherot and Fauvel, 1781. Photograph courtesy of Theo Nash.


**Figure 8.** Graffiti at the entrance to the Vari cave. Photograph courtesy of Theo Nash.

**4. Writing at the sanctuary of Zeus Semios**

We will finish with the earliest evidence for writing on Mount Hymettos, the inscriptions of the sanctuary of Zeus on the highest peak. It is fair to say that it is not a typical peak sanctuary, taking advantage of its height to look down over the surrounding landscape. The sanctuary is in fact situated inside a large natural depression in the mountain just north of the peak itself (see figure 9), and when standing inside it, it is not possible to see out over the city or the countryside: one can only look up, a fitting gesture to the sky god Zeus. Nowadays it is not so rewarding to visit the peak because of the nearby Evzonas military base, where photography is restricted, and the landscape is considered somewhat spoiled by the concrete road and scars of military development. There is archaeological evidence for religious activity at the site between c.950 and 500 BCE, but it is the epigraphic assemblage of the 7th century BCE that is of particular historical importance. Greek alphabetic writing is not attested before the second half of the 8th century, with around 700 known inscriptions dating from the 8th and 7th centuries that constitute our earliest evidence for the writing tradition that has continued to the present day (see Elvira Astoreca 2021, Kotsonas 2022). Of these, the sanctuary of Zeus on Hymettos has produced the largest single corpus of inscriptions, with 150 texts incised on ceramic vessels and one on stone (Langdon 1976). The site is therefore of crucial importance to our understanding of the spread and practice of alphabetic Greek writing in its earliest known phases, though its epigraphic corpus also looks somewhat unusual or idiosyncratic compared with contemporary writing elsewhere.

**Figure 9.** The remains of the sanctuary of Zeus on the peak of Mount Hymettos. Photography courtesy of Jorrit Kelder.

Of the 150 inscribed pieces of pottery, quite a large number are badly damaged and preserve only a small number of letters, too little for secure identification as one type of inscription or another. But three particular trends emerge from the texts long or intact enough to interpret: dedications, abecedaria and writership inscriptions.

Dedications: Nine inscriptions name Zeus in either the dative ("to Zeus") or the genitive ("of Zeus"). One of them gives Zeus the epithet Semios ("Zeus of the Sign"), perhaps recurring in a second, broken example. There are also possible mentions of Herakles and Gaia, though these are uncertain. Nine further examples are reconstructed as having contained the verb ἀνέθεκε ("set up"), used commonly in dedicatory inscriptions.

Abecedaria: Seven inscriptions record parts of the alphabetic sequence in a type of inscription known as an abecedarium (pl. abecedaria). The sequences are brief but come from various parts of the beginning and middle of the alphabetic sequence, thus suggesting that some of the abecedaria were once complete examples, although in some cases just the first few letters might have been quoted.

Writership inscriptions: This is my coinage to denote an inscription in which an individual is declared to have written the text using the verb ἔγραφσεν ("s/he wrote"). Nine of these inscriptions are attested, one of which also mentions Zeus and so can be interpreted as dedicatory.

Most of the other inscriptions are too fragmentary to interpret, although there are a few with identifiable names that may be simple ownership inscriptions or may perhaps have fallen into one of the above categories if more of the text had survived. The cups on which most of the inscriptions are scratched are quite plain monochrome wares, intended for drinking but not decorated for display or holding any intrinsic value, making them at face value an odd choice for a dedication. While in the early stages of the Greek alphabet drinking cups were a common medium for inscribing, the mostly single-handled monochrome examples found at the Hymettos sanctuary are typologically unusual, with the only parallels from this

period found at Kommos on Crete (Kotsonas 2022, 183). Similarly, where elsewhere drinking cups were more likely to bear ownership inscriptions (see Steele forthcoming), on Hymettos there are only a handful that can clearly be interpreted as ownership inscriptions, with many of the clearer examples consisting of dedications, abecedaria and writership inscriptions. This makes it appear that something special was going on at this particular sanctuary. It has been suggested that the cups were used in feasting or communal drinking as part of ceremonial activities at the sanctuary (e.g. Morgan 1990, 28-29), but that does not in itself explain their inscriptions and many questions remain unanswered. Were they inscribed on site, for instance, or brought to the mountain already inscribed? Given their plainness and the fact that no specialist equipment is needed - only a sharp tool like a knife - it seems just as likely that they were inscribed on the mountain. It is additionally persuasive that in at least one case (the dedication to Zeus Semios) the inscription was added after the vessel was broken, on the unglazed side of the sherd, suggesting that writing came after the vessel's use for any other ritual purpose such as drinking or libations. There are probably several others examples of inscriptions added after the breaking of the vessel (see Langdon 1976, 46 and n.21). If the rituals for which the cups were used took place at the sanctuary, then so too must the writing of at least the Zeus Semios inscription and very likely many others. What I want to suggest is that the writing in itself was a devotional activity: this seems to me to make the best sense of the unusual concentration of partially attested abecedaria and declarations of writership alongside overt dedications. The inscribing of an abecedarium, which has no linguistic content or message, could perhaps be a meditative practice in itself (thanks to Alice Mazzilli for this point).

A ritualised, performative act of writing could also make sense of the longer inscription found on fragments of an early black figure amphora, depicting a lion, found at the same site and dated c.600 BCE. The vessel type is unlike the other dedicatory inscriptions, and its text is significantly longer and is arranged in a complex way around the decoration, reconstructed as a dedication to Zeus by a person whose name is only partially attested, Androg[. What is curious is that the inscription ends not with ἀνέθεκε or even ἔγραφσεν but rather ἔδρασεν, a verb that denotes taking action or achieving something. Langdon argues that it is not an obvious synonym for ἀνέθεκε, but has too much force to refer to the simple act of writing so cannot be a substitute for ἔγραφσεν. But if writing is understood to be a performative act of devotion in this religious setting, then the verb ἔδρασεν could very well refer to its accomplishment. Seeing writing as performative also makes sense of the nine inscriptions using the word ἔγραφσεν, which is clearly being used in a different way from that associated with painted artists' signatures on vases with scenic decoration, a practice attested elsewhere. In one of these inscriptions the verb follows a word written ΗΟΣΠΕΡ (where O could be short or long), taken by Langdon (1976, 18) as ὅσπερ ("the very [person]") but I think better understood as ὥσπερ ("just as"), an adverbial usage that would place the emphasis on the action, "just as X wrote" - inviting reflection on the act of writing and its accomplishment. Another inscription, which speaks in the first person (thus a "speaking object" of a type found elsewhere in early Greek alphabetic writing), brings the dedication together with a writership statement: "I belong to Zeus, but X wrote me" (the name of the writer is missing in a damaged part)..

It is difficult to say exactly what might have made the performance of writing so special in the context of worship at this sanctuary of Zeus. It is often assumed that the people who wrote here were only borderline literate, that they wrote abecedaria because they were proud of acquiring the skill of writing or even that writing was so new that it continued to have mystical properties (e.g. Langdon 1976, 46). It seems unlikely to me that writing was fetishised as new or exotic, given that Greeks of the 7th century BCE were living in a perfectly literate Mediterranean where numerous other scripts were in regular use (see Steele, Siegmund, Miller and Boyes forthcoming). However, the epithet given to Zeus in one or two of the inscriptions, *Semios*, may hold the key to understanding the importance of writing since it makes explicit reference to the concept of the *sema* / σῆμα in Greek epistemology. The σῆμα is quite simply a sign, and its usage is unsurprisingly broad, from more

general meanings, including ones relating to omens and weather predictions (perhaps not out of place for Zeus Ombrios), to some very specific ones like a grave marker (see Nagy 1983). In later Greek it did not usually refer to writing, but there is one reference in the Homeric canon that suggests this connotation may once have been more widespread. In the account of the hero Bellerophon in the *Iliad*, Bellerophon falls foul of the wife of his host in Tiryns, king Proitos, having rejected her advances; she makes up a lie to her husband, who then sends Bellerophon to his wife's father (the king of Lycia on the other side of the Aegean) with the intention of having him killed. Proitos sends Bellerophon with a folding tablet, in which are engraved "evil signs" (σήματα λυγρὰ γράψας ἐν πίνακι πτυκτῷ, Il. 6.168-9), the instruction to the king of Lycia to kill him, presumably a somehow sealed tablet that Bellerophon did not peek inside on the quite considerable journey by sea. Although there remain some sceptics (who take the participle γράψας as referring to drawing rather than writing), it is widely believed that this is a specific reference to a written message being delivered long-distance, and thus evidence of literacy. Although the Homeric canon has a complicated history of transmission from an oral tradition to its eventually quite fixed written form, and thus cannot be used as concrete evidence of dating, we can at least be certain that this reference to writing pre-dates the 6th century BCE and may indeed be significantly earlier. There is an argument to be made regarding the place of writing and the σῆμα in pre-Socratic Greek epistemology, but it is beyond the scope of the present paper; for our present purposes the most important point is that this link between writing and the σῆμα is also attested outside of the special environment of the sanctuary of Zeus on Mount Hymettos. The worshippers at the sanctuary, then, can be seen as pursuing religious activities that used the powerful potential of written letters to carry meaning, translating the concept of the σῆμα into a performative act of worship.

**5. Conclusions: Writing, place and performance**

The earliest examples of writing on Mount Hymettos have brought us to the end of our survey, and at the same time to the beginning of the mountain's long history of writing. There is no single lesson to be taken from the types of writing performed and inscribed on the mountain, and over more than 2,500 years writing has meant many different things to different people. What I hope to have shown is that Hymettos provided a special landscape for writing on. Its combination of wildness and tameness, its simultaneous proximity to and distance from the city (figure 10) and its capacity for developing human-mountain relationships make it quite different from many other places where writing is practised. Although the theoretical frameworks applied to urban landscapes provide important ways for thinking about how and where writing is done, and its effects, they take on new meanings in the mountain landscape. This sort of study is fruitful for other inscribed places that feature complex relationships between humans and natural landscapes, from caves of the Egyptian desert or the island of Socotra to the Minoan peak sanctuaries of Crete or the sacred mountains of China, each landscape featuring its own peculiarities that affect human activity. Some of the acts of writing we have seen are additive and some are subtractive, a dichotomy perhaps analogous to the human contribution to and exploitation of the special Hymettian ecosystem. Synchronically some writings are more visible and others less so, but over the centuries the mountainscape is a palimpsest of humans' peculiar ability to inscribe themselves.

**Figure 10.** (next page) Snow-capped Hymettos, seen from the southern side of the Athenian Acropolis. Photograph courtesy of Theo Nash.

**Conflict of Interests and ethics**

The author declares no conflict of interests. The author also declares full adherence to all journal research ethics policies, namely involving the participation of human subjects anonymity and/ or consent to publish.

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