

The Altars of Zeus and Hera on Mt. Arachnaion in the Argeia, Greece

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Pausaniās (ii.25.10), who traveled extensively in Greece in the 2nd century A.C., mentioned the existence of two altars of Zeus and Hera on Mount Arachnaion above the village of Lessa in the Argeia of the Greek Peloponnesos. Two travellers in the early 19th century climbed to the saddle between the two peaks of the mountain and saw there a quadrangular enclosure wall of polygonal masonry on a low hill which they assumed to be the site of these altars. Since then this identification has been accepted by most scholars, including J. G. Frazer. Since most altars of Zeus are found on or near the top of the mountains, I climbed the mountain to check this attribution.

A section of a crude polygonal retaining wall exists on the hill but no traces of the altars were found. Obsidian bladelets and sherds found on the surface suggest that the wall might mark the location of a farmstead or small settlement dating as early as the Bronze Age. On the summit of the western peak of the mountain two low foundations of rubble masonry and three concentrations of sherds and burnt animal bone fragments in a blackish-brown soil matrix were discovered. One of the foundations must represent the ruins of the chapel of Hagios Elias known once to have stood on the summit. The sherd concentrations, which date from the mid-8th century B.C. through at least the 6th century B.C., must represent remains associated with the altars of Zeus and Hera.

Introduction

As Pausanias, during his travels in Greece in the mid 2nd century A.C., was making his way from Midea to the Sanctuary of Asklepios at Epidauros he passed through the village of Lessa on the border between the Argeia and the Epidauria.¹ At this point he remarked,

ἔστι δὲ ὄρος ὑπὲρ τῆς Λήσσης τὸ Ἄραχναῖον, πάλαι δὲ σάπυς ἑλάτων ἐπὶ Ἰνάχου τὸ ὄνομα εἰλήφει. βωμοὶ δὲ εἰσιν ἐν αὐτῷ Διὸς τε καὶ Ἥρας. δεῖσαν δὲ μύρον σφίσις ἐναυθα θύουσι, (ii.25.10).²

1. I take this opportunity to thank Eugene Vanderpool and Merle Langdon for their interest and encouragement in this work and Mr. Vanderpool, Alan D. Booth, and Brunilde S. Ridgway for their comments and criticisms of this article which were much appreciated. Any faults remaining are mine. Randy Clegg executed the drawings. This work was undertaken as part of my research for a doctoral dissertation entitled, *The Greek Altars of the Northeastern Peloponnese, ca. 750/725 B.C. - ca. 300/275 B.C.*, Bryn Mawr College, 1974; this topic was briefly discussed on pp. 130-132 and 281-284. A version of this article was read at the 1976 annual meeting of the Classical Association of Canada in Québec City, Québec on June 3.

2. William H. S. Jones, Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, vol. I (Lon-

Mountaintop altars to Zeus in connection with rain and other weather phenomena were not unusual in the Greek world.³ This pre-anthropomorphic Zeus, the Bright Sky deity, the weather deity, was an anachronism from the aniconic stage of Greek religion. In the Geometric and early Archaic periods his altars were located on or near mountain summits⁴ where he was worshipped and special sacrifices were made in the time of drought.

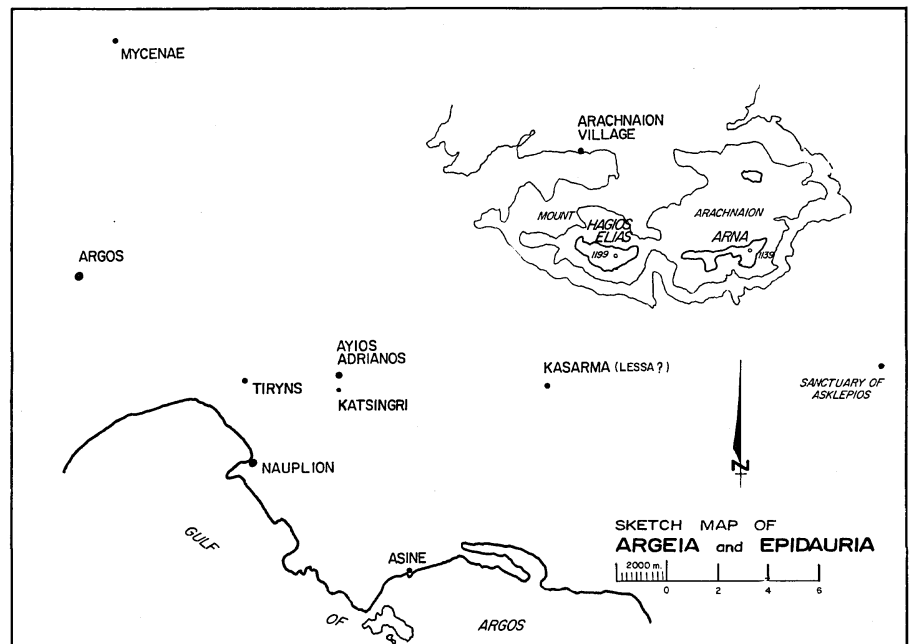
A number of 19th century travellers, using Pausanias as a guide to their exploration of the Argolid, mentioned the existence of such altars on Mt. Arachnaion. They made no attempt to confirm their existence or to

don 1918). The text of the first section of this passage is corrupt. Jones' translation is: "Above Lessa is Mount Arachnaeus, which long ago, in the time of Inachus, was named Sapyselaton. On it are altars to Zeus and Hera. When rain is needed they sacrifice to them here."

3. Merle K. Langdon, "A Sanctuary of Zeus on Mount Hymettos," *Hesperia*, Supplement XVI (forthcoming) Appendix B.

4. Arthur B. Cook, *Zeus, A Study in Ancient Religion*, vol. I (Cambridge 1914) 118.

Figure 1. Sketch map of Argeia and Epidauria with sites mentioned in text.



identify their exact location.⁵ In the early 1830s M. de Vaudrimery made his way to the saddle between the two main peaks of the mountain and saw there a square wall of polygonal masonry on a small hill. He surmised that this wall was either intended for defense or to serve as the enclosure for the *temenos* of the altars of Zeus and Hera.⁶ The latter conclusion was accepted not many years later by E. Curtius who identified the wall's construction as Cyclopean.⁷ Ever since then most travellers and scholars interested in this area have accepted this identification without reservation.⁸

Nevertheless, Pausanias wrote βωμοὶ δὲ εἶσιν ἐν αὐτῷ (“on it are altars”), thereby indicating that these altars

5. William Gell, *Argolis: The Itinerary of Greece* (London 1810) 99f.; W. M. Leake, *Travels in the Morea* (London 1830) 417, 419-420.

6. E. Puillon-Boblaye, *Expédition scientifique de Morée: recherches géographiques sur les ruines de Morée*, vol. III, pt. 2 (Paris 1836) 53-54.

7. Ernst Curtius, *Peloponnesos: eine historisch-geographische Beschreibung der Halbinsel*, vol. 2 (Gotha 1852) 418.

8. C. Bursian, *Peloponnesos und Inseln: Geographie von Griechenland* vol. 2 (Leipzig 1872) 72 and note 1; James G. Frazer, trans., *Pausanias' Description of Greece*, vol. III (London 1898) 233-234; Arthur B. Cook, *Zeus, A Study in Ancient Religion*, vol. II, pt. 2 (Cambridge 1925) Appendix B, 894, and N. D. Papachadzes, *Pavsanioy Ellados periegesis: Korinthiaka, Lakonika*, (Athens 1963) 160 note 6. Only Alfred Phillipson, *Der Peloponnesos, Pt. 1, Der Osten und Norden der Halbinsel die griechischen Landschaften*, III (Frankfurt am Main 1959) 98, and Richard A. Tomlinson, *Argos and the Argolid* (London 1972) 215 and 216, have suggested that these altars are to be found on top of Mt. Arachnaion. Neither indicates whether this supposition is based on firsthand information or on a logical interpretation of the text.

were on the mountain and not in the saddle between the mountain's two peaks. Moreover, most of the altars of Zeus of this nature have been found on or near the summit of mountains.⁹ Therefore, suspicious of the traditional identification, I made two ascents of Mt. Arachnaion.¹⁰

General Topography

Mt. Arachnaion forms a shallow east-west crescent on the eastern border of the Argeia (FIG. 1). It is divided into two main peaks: the long, lower twin-summitted eastern peak (1139 m.) is called either Arna or Mavrovouni, while the higher pointed western peak (1199 m.) is called Hagios Elias (FIG. 2, A). Between the two peaks there is a broad uneven saddle with a small hill near its SW limit (FIG. 2). Immediately below the saddle's southern edge is a cavea-like area (FIGS. 2, B; 3, B) with fertile soil and a spring near its center. Below this area the valley turns into a ravine which runs down to the lower slopes of the mountain. Traces of the ancient road connecting the northern and southern sides of the mountain via the saddle can still be seen (and used) immediately to the east of the cavea-like area and on the southern edge of the saddle. A modern unimproved road begins at the top of the cavea, goes over

9. Langdon, op. cit. (in note 3).

10. The first ascent of the Hagios Elias peak was made on November 17, 1973 (a *dies mirabilis*) in the company of E. Vanderpool and M. Langdon. The second was made on May 25, 1975 in the company of J. and A. Boegehold, J. Camp, F. Stone, and J. Mansfield.

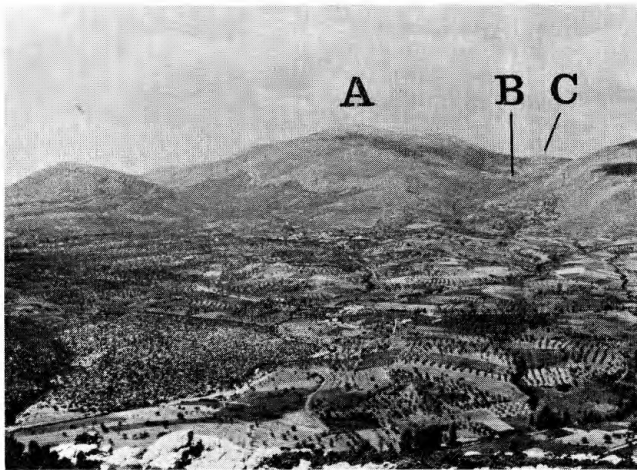


Figure 2. General view of the Hagios Elias peak of Mt. Arachnaion from SE. A. Hagios Elias peak; B. "cavea;" C. "saddle site."

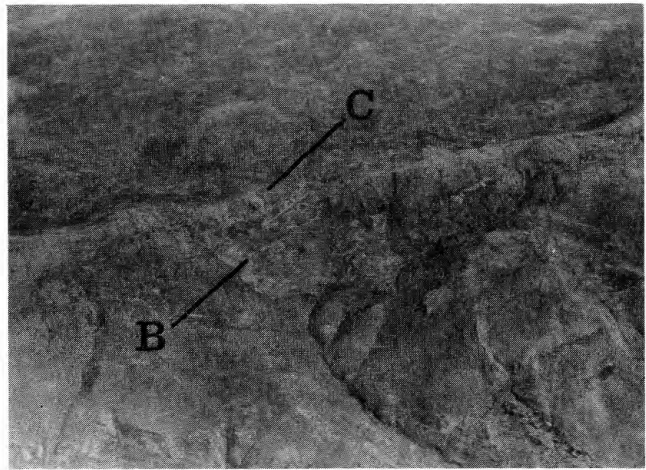


Figure 3. Aerial view of saddle between the two peaks of Mt. Arachnaion from the south. B. "cavea;" C. "saddle site."



Figure 4. View of "saddle site" from west with Arna peak of Mt. Arachnaion in the background.



Figure 5. Northern half of wall on western side of the "saddle site" from the west.

the saddle, and then down the gently sloping northern valley to the modern village of Arachnaion. The sides of this mountain of hard grey limestone are barren except for patches of holly oak and other hardy shrubs.¹¹

Saddle Site

At the SW edge of the saddle is a large out-cropping of limestone which forms a low, approximately quad-

11. "The eye of the traveller is wearied by the grey monotony of these arid mountains and desert tablelands, and his feet are cut and bruised by the sharp stones over which he has painfully to pick his steps. Nowhere else in Greece, probably, is the scenery so desolate and forbidding." Frazer, *op. cit.* (in note 8) 234.

angular hill (FIGS. 2,C; 3,C; 4). Sheer cliffs overlook the cavea from the southern side of the hill. The northern side of the hill rises no more than 2-4 m. above the level of the saddle and it does not form a uniform cliff face. On the northern half of the western side (FIG. 5), the entire northern side, and the northern section of the eastern side, walls made of large and small unhewn and roughly hewn but carefully set stones have been constructed in the gaps in the rock outcropping. The walls now vary in height 1-3 m. and once rose above the level of the top of the hill. The western section of wall is about 40 m. long while the northern section is over 50 m. long, including the section that curves to the east.

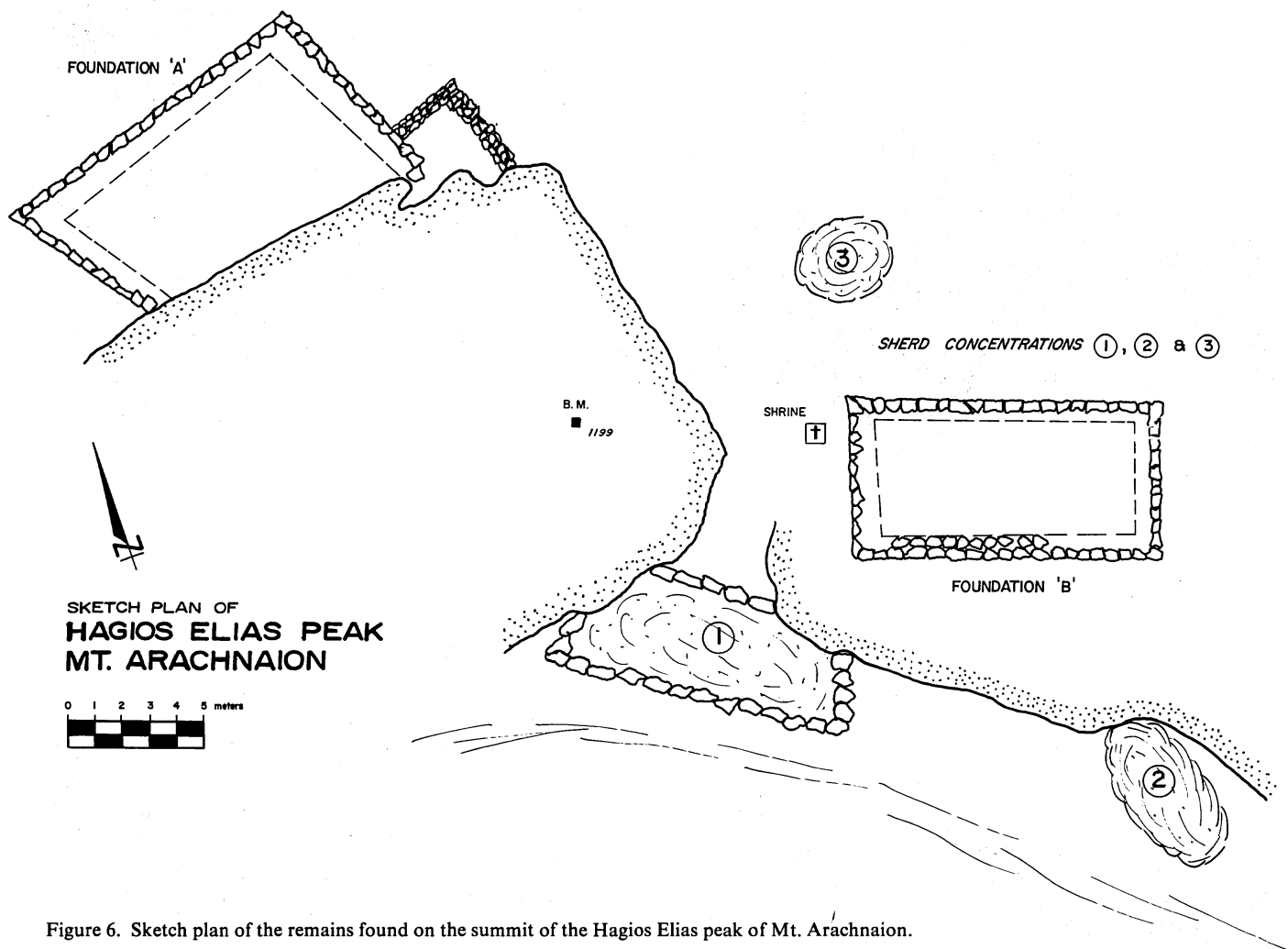


Figure 6. Sketch plan of the remains found on the summit of the Hagios Elias peak of Mt. Arachnaion.

On the northern side of the hill near the western corner a ramp leads down from an opening in the wall to the saddle floor. Since the walls follow the line of the rock outcropping, they were apparently constructed to strengthen the natural defenses of the site. The top of the hill is level but uneven. The southern half consists of limestone outcroppings and another outcropping is to be found at the NW corner. Behind the sections of wall are accumulations of earth which are used today for small fields of oats.

Behind the walls is a light scattering of obsidian bladelets and debitage, and sherds mostly of undiagnostic plain and coarse ware. Some sherds of Early Helladic (ca. 3200-2000 B.C.), Mycenaean (ca. 1600-1100 B.C.), Classical (ca. 480-323 B.C.), Roman (ca. 100 B.C.-500 A.C.) and recent fabrics were also identified. No trace of any type of altar or sacrificial debris was found on this site, which must be the one described by

de Vaudrimey and Curtius.¹² The location, layout, and finds suggest that it is the probable location, from the Bronze Age (ca. 3200-1100 B.C.) onward, of a small village or farming settlement that utilized the fertile soil of the cavea-like area to the south and the grazing lands in the saddle and on the slopes of the mountain.

Summit of Hagios Elias Peak

On the summit of the peak is a small elongated plateau with a series of level areas at different elevations. A benchmark (BM) marks the highest point of the summit which is almost entirely devoid of earth accumulation and shrubs. A survey of the summit revealed three archaeological and two architectural features (FIG. 6).

12. Puillon-Boblaye, op. cit. (in note 6) and Curtius, op. cit. (in note 7).

Sherd Concentrations

Three concentrations of sherds and burnt animal bones in a fine, dark-brown soil matrix were located on the summit. The first concentration (FIG. 6) is about 6 m. to the south of the BM, between the BM and Foundation B. Here there is a semicircular area defined by crude low rubble walls and natural rock outcroppings (FIG. 7). Its southern straight side is formed by a rough terrace wall. This area is ca. 10.50 m. long by ca. 2.50 m. deep. The walls and outcroppings provide a wind-break for the level interior area. Within this area is fine dark soil with burnt bone fragments and numerous sherds mainly from open shape vessels: one-handed cups, kylikes, skyphoi, and bowls, dating from the Archaic period (ca. 700-480 B.C.) with an admixture of some Classical (ca. 480-323 B.C.) black-glaze ware.

The second concentration (FIG. 6), ca. 20 m. to the SE of the BM and ca. 10 m. to the east of the first concentration, is situated on a slight rocky slope and extends almost 4 m. along the slope and ca. 2.5 m. up the slope. Numerous Late Argive Geometric (ca. 750-690 B.C.) sherds and some Protocorinthian (ca. 720-640 B.C.) and Early Argive Archaic (690-650 B.C.) sherds were observed with the same predominance of open shapes. The third concentration (FIG. 6) with a diameter of ca. 2 m. lies ca. 10.25 m. to the NE of the BM. These sherds appear to be mostly Archaic but again with some Classical black-glaze sherds.

A thin scattering of sherds was observed over the entire summit. Coarse and plain ware sherds predominate. While none of these sherds appeared to be diagnostic of any particular period, some were identifiable as Classical black-glaze sherds and some were possibly Roman. Fragments of curved terracotta pan and cover tiles were found in the general area of the two foundations. All of the above mentioned ceramic evidence suggests a continuous period of use of the summit from the second half of the 8th century through at least the 6th century B.C. with sporadic use probably into the Roman era.¹³

13. With the exception of what appears to be a Late Helladic truncated conical "button" found on the eastern edge of Sherd Concentration No. 2 there are no traces of any early use of this lofty peak. Despite this lack of archaeological evidence, J. H. Quincey has suggested, with reference to Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, lines 305-311, that the Hagios Elias peak would be the logical last beacon-site for relaying the signal from Mt. Ida to the palace of the Atreidae at Argos that Priam's citadel had at last fallen (*JHS* 83 [1963] 129-132). This would indeed make an ideal ἀστυγείτων σκοπή ("lookout-place for the city") as Argos can clearly be seen from this summit as well as the mountains of the Corinthia, the Megarid, and Attica on a clear day. Mycenae cannot be seen as Mt. Zara lies in the way. The suggestion of some that this beacon-site would have been on the eastern peak, Mt. Arna (Frazer, op. cit. [in note 8] 233), does not seem logical as it does not have any special advantages over the higher



Figure 7. Sherd Concentration No. 1 from NW.



Figure 8. Foundation A from NE.

Foundation A

The westernmost foundation (FIGS. 6, 8) has an irregular π -shaped plan and abuts a low rock outcropping, ca. 0.5-1 m. in height, on its open side to the south. The longitudinal axis of this foundation, whose closest point to the BM is ca. 11 m. to the NW is oriented 65 degrees west of magnetic north.¹⁴ The foun-

Hagios Elias peak and Argos itself is not directly visible from the peak. The peak of Hagios Elias above Mycenae had also been suggested as the observation station: see Alan J. B. Wace, *Mycenae: An Archaeological History and Guide* (New York 1964) 112.

14. The readings were made with a hand-held compass positioned along the best face of each foundation.



Figure 9. Foundation B from SW.

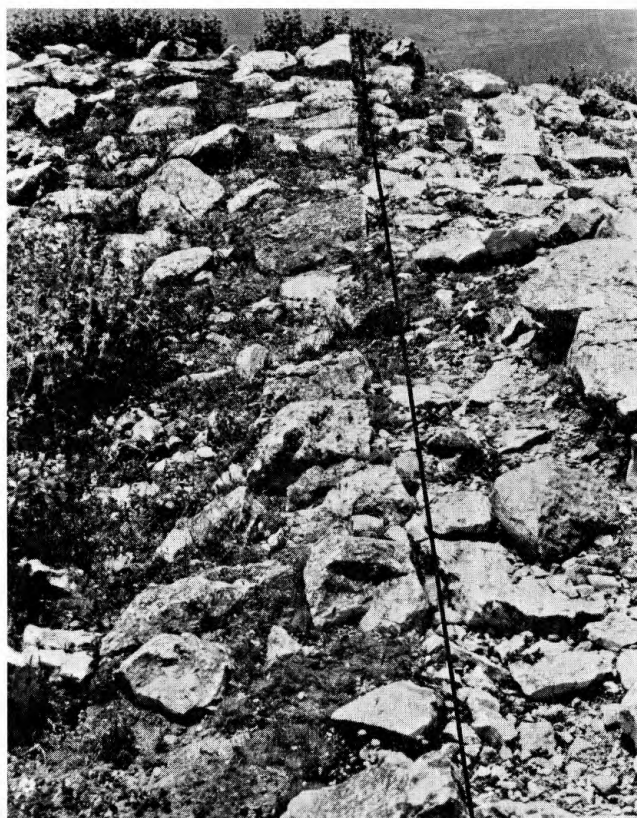


Figure 10. Southern side of Foundation B from west; black line indicates exterior face.

dation is built of roughly hewn and unhewn stones with earth packing. Only the exterior vertical faces and some of the upper surfaces have worked faces. The interior faces of the foundation are not preserved. The interior area of the foundation is filled with stones except for the central area which is ca. 1.50 m. below the level of the surrounding ground surface. A short, crudely built L-shaped foundation extends from the exterior face of the foundation near its SE corner and joins the rock outcropping slightly to the east.

Dimensions

L. NW side, 13.03 m.	L. SE side, 11.32 m.
L. NE side, 7.39 m.	L. SW side, 6.28 m.
extension: L. NW side, 2.70 m.	L. SE side, ca. 2.70 m.
L. NE side, 2.93 m.	L. SW side, 2.32 m.
minimum width of walls, ca. 0.50 m.	
preserved height of walls, ca. 0.10-0.30 m.	

Foundation B

Located 10.37 m. to the east of the BM at its closest point, this foundation (FIGS. 6, 9) is approximately rectangular in plan and its longitudinal axis is oriented 72 degrees west of magnetic north. Its walls are of a construction technique similar to those of the other foundation, although they are executed in a more competent fashion with worked faces on the interior and exterior vertical faces and on some of the upper faces (FIG. 10). The interior face of the foundation is preserved almost in its entirety. Slightly irregular ashlar blocks were used at the corners (FIG. 11). The interior area of the foundation, the center of which lies ca. 1 m. below the level of the surrounding ground surface, is filled with loose stones. Underneath this fill is what appears to be a layer of tannish earth containing numerous curved terracotta roof-tile fragments.¹⁵ In front of the western end of the foundation a small metal shrine dedicated to Hagios Elias has been erected.

Dimensions:

L. N side, 11.72 m.	L. S side, 11.52 m.
L. E side, ca. 5.90 m.	L. W side, 5.06 m.
preserved height of walls, ca. 0.20-0.35 m.	
width of walls on N, E, and W sides, ca. 0.65 m.	
width of wall on S side, ca. 0.75-0.95 m.	

Interpretation

The presence of roof-tile fragments around Foundation B and inside it below the layer of stones, its orientation, and the metal shrine in front of it suggest that

15. I was unable to determine the approximate date of these roof-tile fragments.

these are the remains of the chapel of Hagios Elias known to have stood on the mountaintop.¹⁶ Although Foundation B lacks the typical apse at its eastern end, a small niche in the now missing eastern wall might have served the function of the apse.¹⁷ The construction style of the foundation with stones with worked horizontal and vertical faces and irregular ashlar blocks at the corners for squaring and strengthening is common in rural chapel construction after the Roman era. That there are two foundations instead of one is explicable in two ways: 1) Foundation A may be for shelter of some kind¹⁸ and B for the chapel; or perhaps 2) the foundations are the remains of pre-Roman structures and the chapel was built upon one of them (B).

On the one hand, if these foundations are of pre-Roman date, their function is unclear. There are two possible explanations. First, that one (B) or both represent the foundations of *naiskoi* or small temples; second, that one or both represent the enclosure walls for open air *temenoi* ("sanctuaries") of Zeus and Hera with their altars located inside them. These altars could have been either simple ash altars, on or around natural rock platforms, or simple built-altars. The walls could have served as windbreaks as well as delimiting the *temenoi*. The concentrations of sherds, etc. could then represent the sacred refuse piles which would have resulted from the periodic cleaning of the *temenoi*. But why then no indication of entrances into these areas? On the other hand, Pausanias mentions nothing other than two altars on the mountain top. But his report is not based on personal observation, and so he offers no detailed description. However, we know that most mountaintop sanctuaries of Zeus do not have any formal architectural elements or plan but consist only of an accumulation of burnt animal bones, ashes, fragments of votive pottery, and earth often found around an outcropping of rock. *Naiskoi* or small temples are very rare in these mountaintop sanctuaries¹⁹ and Pausanias' informant(s) surely would not have overlooked these structures if they or

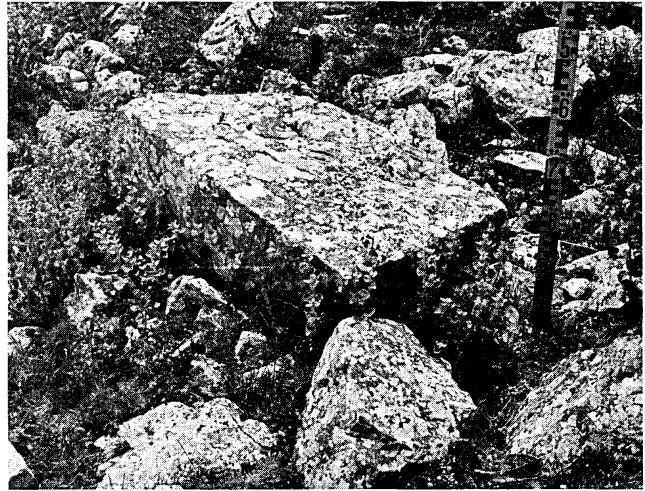


Figure 11. Irregular ashlar block from SE corner of Foundation B.

their ruins had existed. Therefore, the concentrations of sherds, ash and burnt animal bones on the mountaintop (Nos. 1-3) would be the best candidates for the location of the two ash altars. If this is true, then the question arises, which of these concentrations represent the altars of Zeus and Hera? Concentration 2 is situated on a distinct slope immediately below the base of a low outcropping of rock. Thus one has some difficulty approaching it. Concentration 3 is located in a level area, but it is not a large deposit and its sherds appear to be later in date than the other two. On the other hand, the size and extent of Concentration 1, the articulation of its irregular semicircular area by the construction of crude rubble walls in the gaps between the outcroppings, suggest to me that the two altars might well have been juxtaposed in this area. One has a clear view to the south of the probable site of ancient Lessa at Kasarma²⁰ and the valley to the south of Mt. Arachnaion. However, if this hypothesis is correct, then the function of the other two concentrations remains unclear.

An excavation of these remains is desirable to clarify and possibly solve the problems of the date and function of Foundations A and B and Sherd Concentrations 1-3. What is more, despite the remote location, the small size of the sherd and ash concentrations would allow the material excavated from them to be processed by a small-scale, manual water flotation operation. The analysis of the residue could add to our present scant

16. Goatherders encountered on both ascents informed us that there were the ruins of an old chapel of Hagios Elias on the summit. No traces of any other structures were observed on the summit. While Cook, op. cit. (in note 4) 163-186, considers that Hagios Elias followed the worship of Zeus in mountaintop sanctuaries, J.C. Lawson, *Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion* (Cambridge 1910) 75-77, and M. Hamilton, *Greek Saints and their Festivals* (London 1910) 19-23, argue that he followed the worship of Helios. Paul W. Wallace, "Hesiod and the Valley of the Muses," *GRBS* 15 no. 1 (1974) 23-24, agrees with the latter viewpoint.

17. The suggestion was made by E. Vanderpool.

18. Idem.

19. Cook, op. cit. (in note 4) 117-123.

20. For the identification of Kasarma with Lessa see Frederick E. Winter, *Greek Fortifications* (Toronto 1971) s. v. Kasarma, and Frazer, op. cit. (in note 8) 232ff. Tomlinson, op. cit. (in note 8) 42 and notes 37 and 38, suggests that either the site of the Archaic temple at Ayios Adrianos or better the hilltop fortress at Katsingri (see Fig. 1) might be the location of Lessa.

information concerning sacrificial practices in mountaintop sanctuaries with ash altars.²¹

In any case, the presence of Sherd Concentrations Nos. 1-3 and the lack of any similar remains from the saddle site definitely indicate that the altars of Zeus and Hera mentioned by Pausanias were located on the summit of the Hagios Elias peak of Mt. Arachnaion, *not* in the saddle between it and the Arna peak as was previously thought.

21. In particular, the altar of Zeus Lykaios on Mt. Lykaion in Arcadia (see K. Kourouniotes in *Arch Eph* [1904] cols. 153-214, figs. 1-29, and George E. Mylonas, "The Lykaian Altar of Zeus," in *Classical Studies in Honor of William Abbott Oldfather*, [Urbana 1943] 122-133) and Mt. Anchesmos (Turkovouni), Mt. Hymettos, and Mt. Parnes in Attica (Langdon, *op. cit.* [in note 3]).

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