

Gods in the Neighborhood: Reality and Invention in the Shrine of Pan and the Nymphs at Phyle

Large scale temples dedicated to the great Olympian gods are a lasting legacy of Greek religion. These formal structures made in permanent materials were built to honor the most powerful of deities in public and elaborate ways. Ancient authors, sculptors, and painters portray some of the rituals associated with these fine buildings because they were exceptional. However, the devotions and personal religious activities that the Greeks observed on a daily basis most often went unrecorded due to their familiarity. As the smaller and more ephemeral local shrines fell out of use, they largely disappeared from the historical record and eventually from memory.

Every year, archaeological excavations, largely rescue operations undertaken during the modern expansion of cities and highways, expose new sanctuaries and shrines dedicated to minor divinities. These discoveries have revealed the importance of small shrines in the private religious landscape of ancient Greeks. Alongside ancient roads, in caves near to shepherds tending flocks, by the spring where the women collected water, next door to houses, and in the agora, ancient Greek shrines and sanctuaries were placed in a wide range of locations. Used locally, these sanctuaries were often small and compact, dedicated to minor deities connected to natural features or the mythological history of the land.

The less formal, more private rituals that the ancient Greeks performed can be recovered today, at least in part, by considering intersections of archaeological remnants and rare literary references. This paper considers the evidence for one such local shrine, dedicated to Pan and the Nymphs in a cave at Phyle in Attica, locating its position and recreating what it looked like, the offerings dedicated there, who visited it, and the possible rituals undertaken there that responded to the daily religious devotions of the fourth century Greeks.

Although neither the shrine itself nor the rituals performed therein is the subject of the play, this monument features prominently in Menander's *Dyskolos* (317/6 BCE). The shrine itself is a major component of the theatrical program with characters moving in and around its space and performing ritual within. However, the description of the shrine is minimal; presumably Menander expected that his audience was intimately familiar already with the characteristics of a local shrine. In fact, Menander relies on that common knowledge to evoke a plausible scenario for his characters to interact.

The text makes clear that the scenes are set in a sanctuary dedicated to Pan and the Nymphs at Phyle in Attica, a site that is archaeologically attested but Menander manipulated the location of that site in his fictional recreation by placing the sanctuary much closer to an inhabited village than its actual, less accessible cave location high on Mt. Parnes. Nevertheless, an analysis of his work, along with consideration of surviving architecture and objects discovered in the course of excavations at the site of Phyle and elsewhere help us to begin to piece together at least the basic requirements for a small shrine and to understand the nature of the activities performed there.