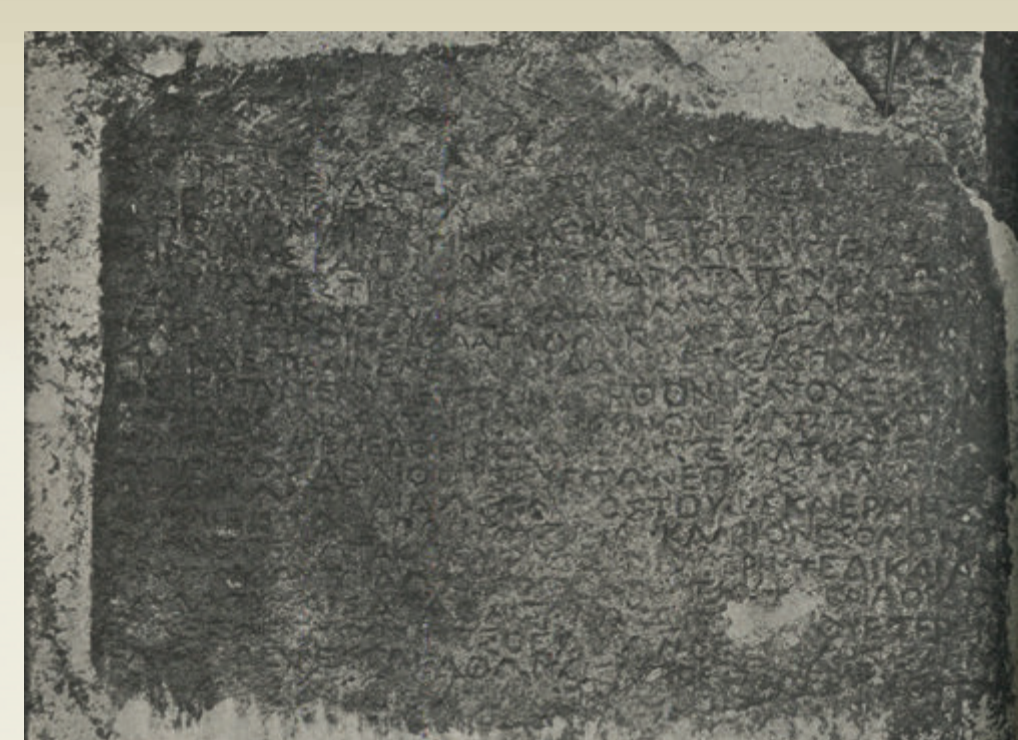


Stairs for the Nymphs: On the Inscriptions of the Alogopati Cave



Figure 1.
Aerial view of Pharsalus and environs showing location of Alogopati cave. Courtesy HMGS, edited by authors.



Figures 2-3.
Above: IThess I, 72. Courtesy SAIA.
Below: IThess I, 73. From AE 1919.



Figure 4.
Alogopati, view of lower sanctuary with IThess I, 72 and stairway to the cave.

The poster offers a new interpretation of rupestrial inscription *IThess I, 72* in relation to its archaeological context.

IThess I, 72 and its companion inscription, *IThess I, 73*, were discovered in 1911 on the outer walls of a cave in the foothills of the northern Othrys, approximately three kms southwest of Pharsalus (*BCH* 36, 1912, pp.668-669; *AE* 1919, pp.48-53). Both texts refer to the foundation of a nymphaeum in this location by a certain Pantalces (*ASAA* 6-7, 1923-1924, pp.27-42). The later of the two, *IThess I, 73*, is a twenty-line epigram of Hellenistic times relating the history of the sanctuary and its founder. The other one, *IThess I, 72*, dated to the fifth century BCE, records a dedication to the Nymphs by Pantalces himself:

Παντάλκεξ
ἀνέθεκε
θεαῖς τόδ' ἔργον.
Τὰν δὲ δάφν[αν]
ἄεθ' ἄπαξ Ε
ΦΑΝΠ.

As we are told in the first four lines of this text, Pantalces' gift entailed the planting of a laurel tree (4 δάφν[αν]) as well as an unspecified offering of a man-made nature (3 ἔργον). There has been a lot of debate among scholars as to what this offering may have been. The inscription's most recent editor, J.C. Decourt, suggested that the reference could be either to the inscription itself or to the overall refurbishing of the cave (commentary to *IThess I, 72*, p.90). It is possible however to narrow choices even further.

Additional information on Pantalces' activities at Alogopati is given in the other inscription discovered at the site, *IThess I, 73*, which summarizes the shrine's foundation as the result of two basic

landscaping acts, the establishment of a planted plot (lines 10-13),

τῶνδ' ἐπιβαινόμενοι χώρων καὶ ἐπίσκοπον εἶναι,
ὅσπερ ταυτ' ἐφύτευσε καὶ [ἐ]ξεπονήσατο χερσίν,
ἀντίδοσαν δ' αὐτῷ βίον ἀφθονον ἤματα πάντα

and the building of a stairway to the cave (lines 14-15),

Ἡρακλῆς μὲν ἔδοκ' ἰσχὺν ἀρετὴν τε κράτος τε,
ὥπιερ τούσδε λίθους τύπτων ἐπόησ' ἀναβαίνε[ιν].

If the surge in the quality of the poetry (see e.g. W. Peek, *Mnemosynon Th. Wiegand*, 1938, p.24) is any indication of how ancient visitors reacted to this second structure—a series of massive steps hacked into the side of the hill immediately below *IThess I, 72*—there can be no doubt that Pantalces' stairs were the centerpiece of his sacred foundation. Still today stairway and inscription form the visual focus of the sanctuary, inspiring the observer's imagination with images of bygone epic might. The reference to Heracles and the implicit etymological play on Pantalces' name in *IThess I, 73* confirm that the ancients responded to the view in the same way. Could it be possible that this impressive feat of rock-carving is the unnamed ἔργον which the text of *IThess I, 72* refers to?

The placement of the inscription halfway up the ascent to the cave, on the cliff wall directly above the stairway's third step, supports this hypothesis. A similar configuration is found in the 'Cave of the Nympholept' at Vari, where a rock-cut stairway in the west chamber of the cave is 'signed' with the builder's name engraved near the landing step ([A]ρχέδαμος | [h]ο Θεραῖος, *IG I³ 978*; G. Schörner – H.R. Goette, *Die Pangrotte von Vari*, 2004, p.50 n.7). The centrality of these stepped structures in the architectural and cultic layout of both sites is

undeniable: at Alogopati as well as Vari, the stairs facilitate the worshipper's access to areas of the temenos otherwise impossible to reach; moreover, they serve in the way of sacred paths, routing the worshipper's visit through the different ritual stations found at each shrine—chapels, altars, offering tables, votive displays. At the Vari cave three adjoining flights of stairs connect the cave's main sacrificial area with two secondary shrines to Pan and another unnamed deity, leading visitors alongside a remarkable series of rock-cut images, inscriptions, and other sacred apparatus (Schörner – Goette 2004, Beilage 3). At Alogopati a less elaborate but visually striking sequence of steps link the gardened plot and the poetic inscription in *IThess I, 73* to the upper level of the sanctuary with the sacrificial altar, a sitting area, and the entrance to the cave proper. Appropriately, the anonymous poet of *IThess I, 73* recaptures the ritual sequence associated with this ascent in lines 20-21 of the epigram, which invite visitors (1) to go up, (2) sacrifice, (3) pray, and (3) feast:

ἀλλὰ τύχαις ἀγαθαῖς ἀναβαίνετ[ε], θύετε Πανί,
εὐχεσθε, εὐφραίνεσθε.

If the symbolic function of stairs has been occasionally acknowledged in connection to catabatic ceremonies (e.g. the prenuptial rites described in the *Lex Sacra* from Cyrene, *LSCG* Suppl. n.115; cf. S. De Francesco in F. Giacobello – P. Schiripa, eds., *Ninfe*, 2009, p.102), stepped ascents have received much less attention by scholars. Yet, as shown by Pantalces' cave at Alogopati or better-known sites such as the Temple of Concord at Acragas (M. Miles, *MAAR* 43-44, 1998-1999), these structures served a purpose well-beyond the obvious practical one. Cave shrines are an important source of evidence. It is our hope that this brief presentation encourages further study on the subject.

Figure 5.
Alogopati, detail of the upper sanctuary with altar stone (right) and sitting area (left).



Figure 6.
Vari, detail of lower and upper stairs with shrine of Pan in right foreground.



Figure 7.
Vari, detail of upper stair landing step with builder's signature (*IG I³ 978*).

