CHAPTER SIX

COMMUNICATION ROUTES IN AND AROUND EPICNEMIDIAN LOCRES’

Eduardo Sánchez- Moreno∗∗

1. INTRODUCTION. MARKS ON THE LANDSCAPE, LANDSCAPE OF PATHS, PATHS WITH NO NAMES

There can be no doubt that within its narrow confines, ancient Epicnemidian Locris summarized the most of Greek geography: Mountain, sea and capricious topography. As in other parts of the Balkan cordillera and by extension the Mediterranean basin, its rugged relief left its imprint on history. This is particularly clear when we look at the way the network of roads that crossed their land conditioned the ancient Locrians’ relations with each other and their neighbours. There are two defining characteristics of the territory of Epicnemidian Locris and they create the paradox of a region that is both a necessary thoroughfare and a place that is difficult to cross. On one hand its strategic character as one of the keys to central Greece—making Eastern Locris, and Epicnemidia in particular, a wedge between Thessaly, Mount Parnassus, Boeotia and the Euboean Channel—made it the backdrop for armies marching from Macedonia to Attica and the Peloponnese until well into the twentieth century. And on the other, its difficult relief of small, rugged valleys cut off by a powerful barrier to the south (the Callidromus and Mt. Cnemis) and to the north (by the Malian

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∗∗ Departamento de Historia Antigua. Universidad Autónoma de Madrid.
Gulf). These are the features that structured the settlement patterns and the intra and inter-regional road network where, as we shall see, mountain passes and gorges are essential in the organisation of space. Locris' western exit, Thermopylae—so often fought for, so often defended, so often taken—is the legendary point of reference in a landscape where the geographical features determine the route and transits through them write history. Both strategic and peripheral at the same time, both unknown and unavoidable, the land of the Locrians is critical to an understanding of central Greece.

Let us begin by offering a territorial frame of reference that will serve to determine its natural frontiers and, on the basis of these, the routes available to its settlers. The eastern extension to Mount Oeta, the chain formed by the foothills of the Callidromus (1,419 m) and Mount Cnemis (947 m) extends W-E, rather more NW-SE to be precise, parallel to the coast from the mouth of the Spercheius to the bay of Agios Konstantinos and the river Dipotamos. This eastern edge marks the frontier between Epicnemidian Locris—the part of Locris around the mountain of the same name—and Opuntian Locris (Fossey 1990)—the part below Mount Cnemis—both of which are considered territorial sub-units of the Eastern Locrian ethnos (Nielsen 2000).

To the north, the mountain peaks open into narrow valleys leading down to the coastal plain, where most of the main centres of population are to be found. These valleys are progressively cut off transversally, to the point that the Thermopylae defile on the western flank and cape Cnemis at the eastern end, dropped literally to the sea, greatly restricting overland communication. While it was impossible to travel around Cnemis along the coast, at the western end, Thermopylae provided the narrow corridor giving access to the lands of the Malians, Oetaeans and Thessalians. Hence we can understand the importance of the inner passes of the Callidromus, which gave access to the Cephisus valley (Tolias 2002: 175) from Antiquity until the Lamia-Athens highway along the coast was constructed in 1937. It meant a turning point for communications which until then had traditionally followed a N-S course. Going southwards through the Callidromus passes from Epicnemidian Locris into Phocis, travellers then came to the Cephisus valley, a natural corridor between the Callidromus and Mount Parnassus, providing easy access to Boeotia and Attica. Thus until the twentieth century the connection between Thermopylae and the Callidromus passes was virtually the only way of travelling overland between the north and south of Greece, between Macedonia and the Peloponnese. The strategic importance of Locris lies at the root of the Locrians' inevitable role in History and, in part, their ruin.