CHAPTER 8

Juno Sospita and the draco: Myth, Image, and Ritual in the Landscape of the Alban Hills*

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1 Introduction

The Alban Hills, a volcanic area south of Rome, provided a dramatic scenery for anyone leaving the ancient city using the Via Appia. Although it was a highly popular location for elite villa’s in the late Republic and early Empire, parts of the region were still rather isolated, and dense woods, steep-sided crater lakes, and dozens of little streams and waterfalls provided a sharp contrast with Rome and the busy traffic going in and out of it.¹ It was also the sort of landscape where Latin poets like Ovid, Horace, and Propertius envisaged demigods, water nymphs, sacred trees, and curative springs. Because of their extensive attention to these minor divinities, the Augustans have been accused of nostalgic sentimentalism, much like the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century scholars who investigated these forms of worship in search of the genuine and unspoiled core of Roman religion.²

And indeed, the religious landscape of the Alban Hills as we can reconstruct it today through archaeological and epigraphic sources seems to have looked very different from the simple piety described by the poets. The cultic activity was dominated by three big sanctuaries: that of Juno Sospita in Lanuvium, that of Diana on the shores of Lake Nemi, and that of Jupiter Latiaris on the Alban mount. Imposing building structures were erected on highly visible locations, revealing an effort to reshape the landscape and create a scenery that

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¹ Horden and Purcell 2000, 59–65.
underlined the grandiosity of the sanctuaries themselves. They attracted large crowds and were supported by a competitive local aristocracy, who actively influenced the cult practice as well. As such, the sanctuaries have mostly been studied as a form of highly formalized civil religion, in which the literary motives of demigods and natural spirits had little or no role to play.3

These different perceptions of the religious landscape of the Alban Hills have increasingly diverged as fields of study as well, and material and literary analyses are seldom combined. In this chapter, I intend to challenge this scholarly division. I will address the religious landscape of the Alban Hills as a whole, arguing that it makes no sense to isolate the literary domain from a material sphere that was somehow ‘real’ or believable. The big deities of the Alban Hills interacted with the mythical creatures that surrounded them, and I hope to show that by studying these interactions in literary discourse as well as in material sources, we get a better understanding of the cults. In order to illustrate my point in detail, I will focus on one particular example: the cult of Juno Sospita in Lanuvium. The protective goddess and her monumental hilltop sanctuary form a prime example of civic, highly formalized religion (section 2). At the same time, however, Lanuvium is associated with a curious fertility rite, which involved a giant serpent, a mysterious cave, and terrified virgins (sections 3–6). By highlighting the connections between the monumental sanctuary, its presiding deity, and the mythical story world of ‘primitive’ religion around it, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of the religious landscape of Lanuvium and, by extension, of that of the Alban Hills.

2 Juno Sospita as a patrona of Lanuvium and Rome

In 340 BCE, the constantly expanding power of Rome provoked a final rebellion of its Latin neighbors, who had united their efforts against Rome many times before. This time, the war lasted for about two years and ended dramatically for the Latin cities: they suffered an unprecedented defeat with many casualties and, by 338 BCE, the Romans controlled the region more firmly than ever.4 For the town of Lanuvium, located about 30 km from Rome, the punishment was relatively mild. In contrast to other cities, no land was taken and the

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3 The literature on the monumental Latial sanctuaries of the late Republic is extensive; for a general overview, typologies, and references to individual sanctuaries, see Coarelli 1987, Rous 2010.