CHAPTER 17

Stones, Names, Stories, and Bodies: Pausanias before the Walls of Seven-Gated Thebes

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1 Introduction

A book dedicated to landscape should give us pause. Putting places into words distances us from them. As writers we communicate via representations—words, images, maps, diagrams. We rely on analogies and metaphors. We make our readers reconstitute these places for themselves. In recognizing the inevitable subjectivity bound up in verbal and pictorial representations, we acknowledge that landscapes exist in any number of ways and that knowledge of them takes many forms. Places can be observed, remembered, and invented, as well as inhabited. ‘Sense of place’ is produced differently through the bodily intimacy of the resident, the nostalgia of the emigrant, the strategic interests of the general, the curiosity of the tourist, the imagination of the armchair traveler, the creativity of the writer.

This chapter discusses four different facets of the famous walls of that most literary of cities, Boeotian Thebes, encountered in different ways. My title sets out heuristic categories: the stones used to construct the walls, the names given to their gates, the stories intricately intertwined with them, and the bodies of heroes who died attacking and defending them. Two of these categories (stones and bodies) relate to physical objects; two (names and stories) are verbal. I do not intend, however, to set these pairs against one another. Quite the opposite. These are deliberately flexible, porous labels. They illustrate an interlocking corpus of knowledge. Each element both depends on and inflects the others, and never tidily. In their various configurations, together they constitute the walls of Thebes.

Thebes occupies a low acropolis which rises out of the plains of central Boeotia. This acropolis (conventionally termed the Cadmeia) has been inhabited almost continuously since the Neolithic period. But Theban topography extends far beyond this site. Thebes was made famous by words; it was a distinct place on the Greek ‘mental map.’! Because particular aspects of its landscape

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1 For such ‘mental maps’, and the place of Thebes within them, see Easterling 1989. Thebes was also a distinctive place in the Latin literary landscape: Hardie 1990; Braund 2006.
were prominent in poetry (tragedy in particular), its landmarks entered into the
panhellenic repertoire. One need not have visited Thebes to be familiar with
its most famous sights. Thebes existed, then, in various ways throughout antiq-
uity. The city of Cadmus continued to flourish in verse, to defend itself against
Argive attackers and to be defeated by the Epigoni even as its blocks-and-
mortar homonym faced its own challenges, and was several times destroyed. We
should not, however, delineate these different cities too dogmatically. There is
an organic connection between them throughout antiquity, even if the Thebes
of literature maps imperfectly on the realia of the site. Landscapes, whether
gazed upon, thought up, or written down, are complex phenomena. Thebes’
walls were made famous by stories; it is equally the case that such myths kept
the city alive and its walls standing.

Because so many ancient perspectives on Thebes are the distanced ones of
poetry, Pausanias’ eyewitness account is all the more valuable. In his Periege-
sis (ca. 155–180 CE) he traces nine itineraries through the southern and central
Greek mainland. He notes the things to be seen, and comments on the traditions
attached to them. He describes Thebes as partially abandoned: ‘The name
of Thebes has dwindled to signify just the acropolis and a scattering of inhab-
itants’ (τὸ δὲ ὄνομα τῶν Θηβῶν ἐς ἀκρόπολιν μόνην καὶ οἰκήτορας καταβέβηκεν οὐ
πόλλος, 8.33.2). Yet even in this reduced state, it dominates his account of
Boeotia. Thebes’ allure was its offer of a tour of famous locations of myth. This
desire to experience mythic Thebes probably characterized the inhabitants’
sense of their city, too. The fact that Pausanias’ account accords so closely with
the poetic topography of Thebes suggests that the site itself had, through suc-
cessive restorations, been rebuilt with this mythical image in mind.

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2 This is the theme of Daniel Berman’s 2015 Myth, literature, and the creation of the topog-
raphy of Thebes. I am indebted to that author for several patient and insightful conversa-
tions.

3 I use ‘Argives’ as shorthand for ‘those who attack from Argos’; their various provenances
in fact include Arcadia (Parthenopaeus), Calydon (Tydeus), and, of course, Thebes (Poly-
neices).

4 All translations are my own. See also 9.7.6: ‘Their lower city is entirely abandoned in my day,
with the exception of the sanctuaries’ (καὶ σφισιν ἡ μὲν κάτω πόλις πάσα ἐξερχόμεσθαν ἓν ἐπ’ ἐμοῖ πλή
τὰ ἱερά). Strabo 9.2.5 describes Thebes as barely a κώμη.

5 Symeonoglou 1985, the only systematic discussion of Theban archaeology, notably ignores
the possible influence of poetic topography on successive reconstructions of the site; his
discussion of the classical city (114–141), for example, depends heavily on Pausanias’ much
later account. Recent studies are more sensitive to this diachronic dynamic: e.g., Mastronarde
1994, 650: ‘It is quite likely that the traditional topography known to Pausanias was a post-