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This paper proposes a number of novel ways of 'reading' the landscape and space of the sanctuary of Thekla at Meriamlik (south-central Turkey). Although only limited archaeological fieldwork has been carried out at this important late antique pilgrimage sanctuary, it is possible to combine the textual perspectives of the *Life* and *Miracles* and other Thekla traditions with the physical landscape that the architects of the sanctuary put to use in significant ways to emphasize Thekla's presence and local significance. The paper first investigates the construction of a sacred landscape around Meriamlik, and then turns to a discussion of the spatial politics between Thekla's shrine and the urban center of Seleukeia on the Kalykadnos. Finally, it explores how Thekla's presence was mediated within the sanctuary itself.

Meriamlik is well established in scholarship as one of the main Christian pilgrimage sites in Asia Minor.[1] Located close to the Mediterranean coast, just two kilometers south of Seleukeia on the Kalykadnos (modern

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1. The site is also occasionally referred to as Hagia Thekla or Ayatekla. The early modern Turkish name of Meriamlik, meaning 'Place of Mary,' alludes to the site's Christian origins in a less specific fashion. On toponomy, refer to Gilbert Dagron, *Vie et Miracles de Sainte Thécle: Texte grec, traduction et commentaire* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1978), 55n1.

Silifke), the site was intimately tied to the life of Thekla and her *post mortem* miracles (Fig. 1). Although many aspects of the origins and early development of the sanctuary remain obscure, it is clear that Meriamlik's popularity increased over the course of the fourth century, a crucial period for the development of the cult of the saints across the late Roman world.[2] Pilgrims from far-flung places are thus attested at Meriamlik from the late fourth century onwards, pointing to the firmly established significance the sanctuary had attained in Christian topography. Gregory of Nazianzus stayed for three years in the 370s (and referred in his writings to the sanctuary as the *parthenōna*), and in May 384, Egeria stopped by for three days on her return journey from Palestine to France.[3] In the late fifth and early sixth centuries, Meriamlik underwent a massive construction boom that included the erection of at least three churches and numerous auxiliary buildings, such as cisterns, baths, and other buildings that catered to the needs of the growing numbers of pilgrims. This phase of monumental construction is an indication of Thekla's place as one of the most important saints in late antique Christianity as well as the extent of the imperial patronage that her sanctuary enjoyed during the reign of the emperor Zeno, who not only seems to have maintained a close personal relationship with the saint but also was a native of Isauria.[4]

Although Meriamlik's archaeological significance has been acknowledged for more than a century, it is still the case today that other aspects of Thekla's cult receive the brunt of scholarly attention. The literary tradition that stretches back to the second-century *Acts of Paul and Thekla* (*ATh*) has been explored at length in a steady stream of new works (ignited by the magisterial work of Gilbert Dagron), and an English translation of the mid-fifth-century *Miracles of Thekla* has now appeared.[5] In

2. On the development of the cult of saints, refer to Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981); Ann Marie Yasin, *Saints and Church Spaces in the Late Antique Mediterranean: Architecture, Cult, and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Matthew Dal Santo, *Debating the Saint's Cult in the Age of Gregory the Great* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

3. *Parthenōna*: Greg. Naz. *carm*. I 547; Egeria, 23.1–6.

4. See Karl Feld, *Barbarische Bürger: Die Isaurier und das Römische Reich,* Millennium-Studien 8 (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 297–99, for recent discussion of this issue.

5. For Scott Johnson's English translation of the *Miracles*, see Alice-Mary Talbot and Scott F. Johnson, *Miracle Tales from Byzantium,* Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 1–201. The most important work on the cult of Thekla is the fundamental study of Dagron, *Vie et Miracles*,

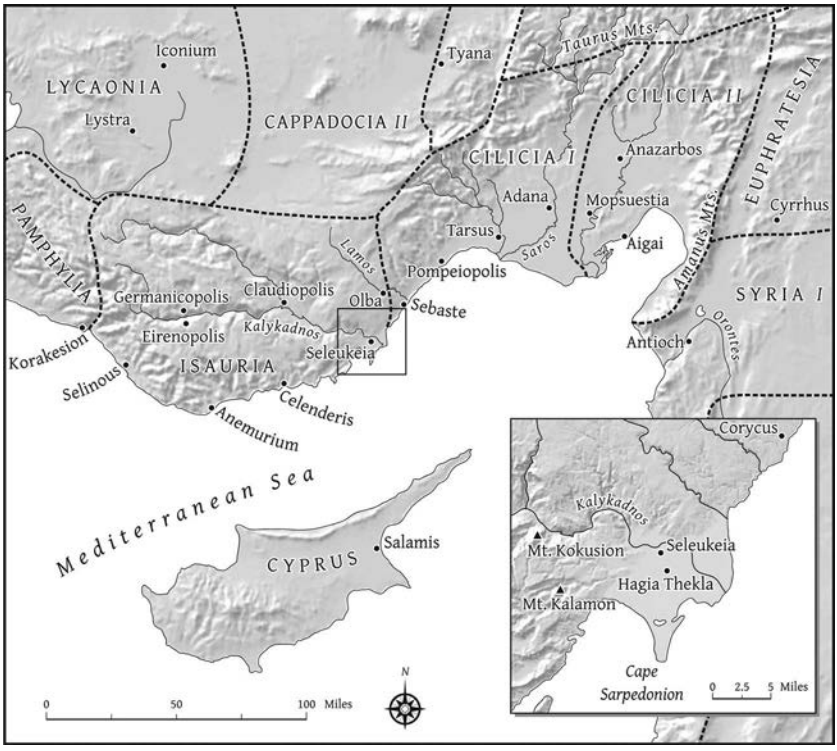

Fig. 1. Map of Seleukeia and Meriamik in the context of the eastern Mediterranean (courtesy of Martin Gamache, Alpine Mappine Guild).

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that also includes considerable discussion of the archaeological remains at Meriamlik. Important on Thekla and Meriamlik are also Kate Cooper, "A Saint in Exile: The Early Medieval Thecla at Rome and Meriamlik," *Hagiographica* 2 (1995): 1–23, as well as two newer monographs: Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of St Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) and Scott F. Johnson, *The Life and Miracles of Thekla: A Literary Study,* Hellenic Studies 13 (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2006). More narrowly on the archaeology, see Ernst Herzfeld and Samuel Guyer, *Meriamlik und Korykos: Zwei christliche Ruinenstätten des rauhen Kilikiens,* Monumenta Asiae Minoris Antiqua 2 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1930); Friedrich Held and Hansgerd Hellenkemper, *Tabula Imperii Byzantini 5: Kilikien und Isaurien,* 2 vols. (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1990), 441–43; and Stephen Hill, *The Early Byzantine Churches of Cilicia and Isauria* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996), 208–34. On *ATh*, see Jan Bremmer, ed., *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla* (Kampen: Pharos, 1996) and Jeremy W. Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla: A Critical Introduction and Commentary* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009). On visual representations of Thekla, see Claudia Nauerth and Rüdiger Warns, *Thekla: Ihre Bilder in der frühchristlichen Kunst* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1981).

contrast, research on the site of Meriamlik itself, certainly the largest and most important sanctuary dedicated to the saint, has remained limited in scope since a single season of archaeological fieldwork was undertaken there more than a century ago (Fig. 2). The 1907 excavations left many unanswered questions, and much of the site remains unexcavated to this day.[6] Considerable scholarly attention has been invested in smoothing out discrepancies between the textual sources that mostly date to before the fifth century and the rather later architectural remains that are visible today (an especially vexed issue concerns the identification of the fourth-century *martyrium*). Discussions of the typology and chronology of the site's main ecclesiastical structures have also dominated scholarship, even though there are still unresolved issues in the dating and reconstruction of particular structures.[7]

As a consequence of the relatively narrow focus on identification, typology, and chronology, Thekla's sanctuary has previously mostly been studied as isolated buildings rather than as an architectural ensemble that was integral to the religious experience of visiting Meriamlik.[8] This paper outlines a new approach that pays more attention to the constructed spaces of the sanctuary and its immediate hinterland as a way of investigating how landscape and space intersected in Thekla's sanctuary as well as how the saint's presence was mediated in spatial terms. As such, the methodology adapted here finds parallels in recent work on the construction of sacred landscapes that has emphasized experience and the interaction between space and movement, as well as how these elements were represented through text.[9] Furthermore, it puts a stronger emphasis on the regional

6. For a reassessment of the chronology of the Thekla basilica based on the original field notes, see Gabriele Mietke, "Bauphasen und Datierung der Basilika von Meriamlik (Ayatekla)," in *Syrien und seine Nachbarn von der Spätantike bis in die islamische Zeit*, ed. Ina Eichner and Vasiliki Tsamakda (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2009), 37–56.

7. These issues cannot be explored in detail here. For a summary of some of the problems related to the architectural history of the site, see Hill, *Early Byzantine Churches,* 208–34.

8. Already Dagron, *Vie et Miracles*, 60, noted the failure of archaeologists to study the site as a unified ensemble. For discussions of Meriamlik's contribution to architectural history, see Hill, *Early Byzantine Churches,* 208–34, and Cyril Mango, "Isaurian Builders," in *Polychronion: Festschrift Franz Dölger zum 75. Geburtstag,* ed. Peter Wirth (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1966), 358–65.

9. E.g., on ancient Greece: Susan Guettel Cole, *Landscapes, Gender, and Ritual Space: The Ancient Greek Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Michael C. Scott, *Delphi and Olympia: The Spatial Politics of Panhellenism in the Archaic and Classical Periods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and

Fig. 2. The ruins of Meriamlik, view towards the Mediterranean.
Photo: Author.

context of Meriamlik, the spatial dynamics of the sanctuary's proximity to the city of Seleukeia (which it was arguably both dependent on and independent of), as well as its relationship to other cults, both pagan and Christian.

Any attempt to assess these issues in archaeological terms is confronted with the difficulty of reconstructing a landscape that has changed in significant ways since late antiquity, and within which individual features can be very difficult to identify and date. Yet close analysis of the landscape, supported by documentary data from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries helps to understand fundamental features of the cult, as it was

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contributions in Kate Gilhuly and Nancy Worman, eds., *Space, Place, and Landscape in Ancient Greek Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). On medieval through modern Greece: Lucia Nixon, *Making a Landscape Sacred: Outlying Churches and Icon Stands in Sphakia, Souhwestern Crete* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2006). More general overviews of contemporary approaches to landscapes and sacred space include Gunnar Haaland and Randi Haaland, "Landscape," in *Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Ritual and Religion,* ed. Timothy Insoll (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 24–37; Julian Thomas, "Archaeologies of Place and Landscape," in *Archaeological Theory Today,* 2nd ed., ed. Ian Hodder (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 167–87; and Michael C. Scott, *Space and Society in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

constructed in late antiquity. The textual sources, on the other hand, also present problems of interpretation given that they are carefully crafted literary narratives authored with very specific agendas in mind.[10] However, I hope to show that these agendas resonate more with the archaeological remains than previously acknowledged. In what follows, I will draw on both categories of sources, while paying close attention to the problems of methodology that they entail. Each section focuses on a particular theme and begins with discussion of the texts before proceeding to the archaeology.

CONSTRUCTING A SACRED LANDSCAPE: TOPOGRAPHY AND APPROPRIATION

The broader theological resonance of Meriamlik's topography has predominantly been explored through scrutiny of the textual tradition.[11] Based on close readings of the *Miracles*, scholars have thus stressed the general importance of place in these texts (in the very beginning of the work, the anonymous author explicitly tells us that "mention of people, places, and names" adds to the credibility of his account) and also more specifically how closely the narrative is embedded in the landscape around Meriamlik.[12] Given the plethora of place names in the *Miracles*, it is indeed an important source for the region's late antique geography. In this section, I will add additional layers to previous discussions of the sacred topography of Meriamlik by bringing the text-based evidence into closer dialogue with the physical landscape of the sanctuary and the archaeological remains preserved at and around the site. It will be shown how the sanctuary appropriated the physical landscape around it in order to exploit persistent memories of earlier cults in the region, and how the construction of a Christian landscape around Seleukeia underpinned its new status in the broader Christian topography of Asia Minor. This discussion raises wider

10. See generally Timothy Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

11. Johnson, *Life and Miracles*; and Linda Honey, "Topography in the Miracles of Thecla: reconfiguring Rough Cilicia," in *Rough Cilicia: New Historical and Archaeological Approaches, Proceedings on an International Conference held at Lincoln, Nebraska, October 2007*, ed. Michael C. Hoff and Rhys F. Townsend (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2013), 252–59.

12. Translations from *Mir.* throughout this paper are by Scott Johnson and are taken from Talbot and Johnson, *Miracle Tales from Byzantium*, 1–201.

questions of how the presence of the saints was tied to physical places in early Christian cult,[13] as well as how existing *loci* of memory and religious imagination in the landscape were appropriated as part of this process.[14]

We will begin with the use of the landscape in the Thekla literature, which has been extensively mined for evidence of "Christianization" and the Christian appropriation of pagan cults in the region of Seleukeia, such as the famous oracle of Sarpedon.[15] The author of the *Life and Miracles of Thekla* uses heavily triumphalistic and antagonistic language to describe Thekla's battles against the existing pagan cults that had a significant pull on the city's residents.[16] The pagan past is therefore very much present in the text, and the memory of pagan cults clearly remained strong into the fifth century. There are several problems concerning the historicity of hagiographic texts of this nature,[17] and it is best to understand the *Life and Miracles of Thekla* as literary constructions of the landscape around Meriamlik, whose meaning and layout have been carefully shaped and manipulated by the author who worked on behalf of Thekla's monastic community and built on a rich hoard of oral traditions within it. Dagron's suggestion that the *Miracles* were revised during the careers of four different bishops of Seleukeia is particularly important to emphasize in this

13. For a recent study of this issue that provides important background and bibliography, refer to Yasin, *Saints and Church Spaces*.

14. Memory is now a flourishing field with a vast body of literature, see for example the papers in Beate Dignas and R. R. R. Smith, eds. *Historical and Religious Memory in the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

15. A note on terminology is necessary here. The oracle is usually referred to that of Sarpedon, but the Thekla literature is consistent in referring to it as that of Sarpedonios and occasionally Apollo. However, the shorthand Sarpedon will be used here. For criticism of the "Christianization" paradigm, see Jitse H. F. Dijkstra, *Philae and the End of Ancient Egyptian Religion: A Regional Study of Religious Transformation (298–642 CE),* Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 173 (Leuven: Peeters, 2008), 16–18.

16. As also pointed out by Johnson, *Life and Miracles,* 126–127. More generally on the use of the past in the text, see Johnson, *Life and Miracles*, 15–18.

17. Dagron, *Vie et Miracles*, 80–94; and Helen Saradi, "The Christianization of Pagan Temples in the Greek Hagiographical Texts," in *From Temple to Church: Destruction and Renewal of Local Cultic Topography in Late Antiquity,* ed. Johannes Hahn, Stephen Emmel, and Ulrich Gotter, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 163 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 113–34, esp. 123–25. Most importantly, the author works with a very particular notion of time that allowed Thekla to be active in past, present and future, which is hardly compatible with the kind of questions that scholars today are asking. Richard Bayliss's suggestion that Thekla's attacks on the pagan cults "all appear to date from the first half of the 5th century" (*Provincial Cilicia and the Archaeology of Temple Conversion* [Oxford: Archaeopress, 2004], 73) is thus entirely incompatible with the ancient author's notion of time.

context,[18] and would suggest a very close connection between city and sanctuary in the production of martyr literature.

Throughout the *Miracles*, Thekla is time and again tied to specific places in the region of Seleukeia. This emphasized the fact that the author was an insider in the monastic community at Meriamlik and underpinned the quasi-eyewitness character of his account of Thekla's miracles, but it also has more general implications. The work's emphasis on specific places and their cultic significance is testimony to a tradition of spatially embedding cults and divinities within specific locales and landscapes that, of course, had a very long history in the ancient world. The author was fully aware of such traditions and exploited them to maximum effect in order to provide Seleukeia with an effective foundation story.[19] Already in the preface, which is full of literary and historical allusions, a series of pagan priesthoods of international fame are mentioned, all of which are directly tied to a particular sanctuary: Zeus to Dodona in Epirus, Pythian Apollo to Delphi, and Asklepios to no less than three locations, one in Greece (Epidauros) and two in Asia Minor (Pergamon and Cilician Aigai).[20] The emphasis on Asklepios may be explained by the fact that similar to Thekla, his sanctuaries too offered healing services.[21] No sanctuary of Asklepios has been located in or near Seleukeia, but a statue and a figurine of the healing god are today in the Silifke Museum, providing evidence of his presence in the region.[22] Other archaeological evidence from Seleukeia demonstrates how particular features in the landscape were personified in cultic practices, as the example of an altar to the river Kalykadnos that was dedicated by a certain Theodoros in fulfillment of a vow and dated to the second or third century.[23] As elsewhere in the ancient world, notable features in the landscape could be personified and associated with divinities through stories and myths that circulated in many different versions and had very potent local significance, such as in this case of the region's local river. This fundamental aspect of understanding the landscape as personified and filled

18. Dagron, *Vie et Miracles*, 18; Johnson, *Life and Miracles*, 5–6n18.

19. Johnson, *Life and Miracles*, 62–66.

20. *Mir*., preface, 2.

21. Previous scholarship indeed has been particularly interested in the text's healing accounts and Thekla's appropriation of the cult of Asklepios (cf. Johnson, *Life and Miracles*, 8).

22. Ayşe Çalık, "Roman Imperial Sculpture from Cilicia" (PhD diss, King's College London, 1996), 157–58, cat. no. 59 (figurine), 162–63, cat. no. 64 (statue).

23. M. Hamdi Sayar, "Weihung an den Flussgott Kalykadnos," in *Arkeoloji Dergisi II: Presented to M. U. Anabolu,* ed. H. Malay (Izmir: Ege University, 1994), 121–22. The altar was discovered in 1990 and is now in the Silifke Museum.

with active, divine presence is central to explaining how the author of the *Miracles* describes Thekla's appropriation of the region around Seleukeia.

It is in this context of constructing a sacred landscape by reference to its embedded divine nature that we should understand the first four miracles that are all concerned with how Thekla established her religious superiority by fighting off demons. The first miracle begins with an attack on the oracle of Sarpedon's foundation story, how he had achieved oracular powers and became a false prophet, which the author tells us was universally known "from histories and books," but which he nonetheless proceeds to summarize using characteristically patronizing language.[24] The foundation story is ultimately exposed as fiction: "For the passage of time produces many such tales, which people receive uncritically and then create gods through myths."[25] In contrast, Thekla's miracles, we are told, "no one would venture to dispute anymore," and she demonstrates her power by silencing and chastising Sarpedon.

The precise location of Sarpedon's oracle is disputed, and no archaeological remains of the sanctuary have ever been found. As an extra-urban sanctuary originally belonging to the *polis* of Holmoi, nine kilometers southwest of Seleukeia,[26] it has been associated with two different locations, one just west of Holmoi in a cave, or alternatively somewhere on the shore out towards Cape Sarpedon (modern Incekum Burun).[27] As the nearest major harbor to Seleukeia, Holmoi was the landing point for pilgrims who traveled by boat to visit Thekla. Sarpedon's international fame meant that it was the most prestigious cult in the region, and it had attracted a considerable number of pilgrims already in pagan times. As indications of the sanctuary's international appeal, we are told that the Seleukid ruler Alexander Balas consulted the oracle in the mid-second century B.C.E., and late in the third century C.E., a group of Palmyrenes had visited.[28] Winning over this international clientele from the pagan cult would have been instrumental to the success of Meriamlik. Thekla's and Sarpedon's sanctuaries furthermore shared a number of other fundamental

24. *Mir*. 1. On the oracle cult, see Theodora S. MacKay, "The Major Sanctuaries of Pamphylia and Cilicia," *ANRW* 2.18.3 (1990): 2045–129, esp. 2110–13. Sarpedon in fact provides a link between the closing of the *Life* and the opening of *Miracles*, as Sarpedon is mentioned as a demon in *Life* 27.54 and is then silenced in *Mir.* 1.

25. *Mir.* 1.1 (Johnson, 13).

26. On Holmoi, see Hild and Hellenkemper, *Tabula,* 272.

27. H. Hellenkemper and F. Hild, *Neue Forschungen in Kilikien* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1986), 44–47.

28. Alexander Balas: Diodoros 32.10.2, and see MacKay, "The Major Sanctuaries," 2110–11.

features, both being healing cults and located in the place of the founder's tomb (or in the case of Thekla, place of physical disappearance, a point that I shall return to below).[29] The prominence of Sarpedon in the *Miracles* can as such be explained by the fact that it constituted Thekla's main competition among the local pagan cults and that it enjoyed international prestige as a destination of pilgrimage.[30]

As mentioned, the account of Sarpedon's demise has been repeatedly discussed in scholarship as a classic case of the "Christianization" of the rural landscape,[31] but the text does not actually tell us that the sanctuary was closed or that Thekla (or her followers) destroyed the cult buildings. What is at stake in this passage (and the *Miracles* more generally) is rather the question of divine presence (or indeed absence) in a particular landscape. The author literally tells us that Thekla silenced the oracle and that Sarpedon departed from his sanctuary, rendering it devoid of divine presence and thus putting an end to the sanctuary's claim to oracular powers. If the author had wanted to tell us that the pagan sanctuary had been completely shut down or even destroyed, he surely would not have contradicted himself later on in the *Miracles* when we hear of several instances where people seek the assistance of Sarpedon against illnesses. These later references to Sarpedon are used to demonstrate the author's earlier point concerning the powerlessness of the demonic cult, as people come to Thekla after the oracle had failed them.[32] The overall message appears to be that the oracle was open for business but could not satisfy its customers who instead crowded to see Thekla.[33]

The Sarpedon miracle furthermore demonstrates how the memory of place was exploited as part of not only a process of "Christianization," but also the construction of a new sacred landscape in the region of

29. Scholars have also pointed out that incubation featured in both cults. However, while there is evidence for incubation at Meriamlik in the *Miracles*, this is less clear in the case of Sarpedon. On the role of incubation at Meriamlik, see Hedvig von Ehrenheim, "Identifying Incubation Areas in Pagan and Early Christian Times," *Proceedings of the Danish Institute at Athens* 6 (2009): 237–76, esp. 254–58. For a more general study on incubation at Christian saints' shrines, see Dal Santo, *Debating the Saints' Cult*, 237–320.

30. Johnson, *Life and Miracles*, 123.

31. As Helen Saradi notes: "The *Life* and *Miracles* of St. Thekla offer one of the best known accounts of transformation of pagan temples into churches" ("Christianization of Pagan Temples," 123).

32. *Mir.* 18.2, 40.

33. The reference to the destruction of the oracle sanctuary in the Coptic Life of Athanasios of Alexandria is intriguing but cannot be used as dating evidence.

Seleukeia.[34] It is thus mentioned how, after Sarpedon's departure, Thekla left the sanctuary "to poor and simple men, who devote themselves to prayers and supplications, to be hereafter a dwelling place for God."[35] Perhaps significantly, Thekla does not give this new Christian community a name. However, the general reference to a Christian community in this location could be seen as alluding to an element of intra-Christian competition between cults. Certainly, in presenting the pagan sanctuary to this Christian community, Thekla in effect took on the role as its founder, and her appropriation of the oracle sanctuary thus emphasized her superiority over other Christian cult places in the vicinity of Meriamlik. Seen in this light, the episode reflects the emergence of a new hierarchy in the region's Christian topography, as much as the eclipse of the pagan sacred landscape.[36]

Mir. 2 turns from the coast to the mountains and presents a short account of how Thekla dislodged Athena from a place once called Mount Kokysion, referred to as a "nearby peak" and thus taken by some scholars to mean the acropolis of Seleukeia. The acropolis remains unexcavated, and there is no evidence to suggest that it housed a temple of Athena, although it is of course possible that it did. The miracle mentions two further epithets of Athena, the local *kanétis* and the more widespread *polias*, and thus seems to conflate into one several different cults of Athena that all may have been present in and around Seleukeia. Athena had featured prominently on the city's coins since the Hellenistic period and held considerable local significance.[37] Inscriptions and reliefs from the mountains north of the city

34. On "memory of place" in the early Christian world, see Yasin, *Saints and Church Spaces*, 15–26, 240–50.

35. *Mir.* 1.2 (Johnson, 13).

36. Although no remains of the Sarpedon sanctuary have been located, it is sometimes associated with the site of a church and monastery dedicated to St. Theodoros, see Hellenkemper and Hild, *Neue Forschungen,* 44–47; Hild and Hellenkemper, *Tabula*, 399 (Sarpedonia akra); 444 (Hagios Theodoros). Travelers describe considerable archaeological remains that were visible at this location until the nineteenth century, but Hild and Hellenkemper report that nothing survived on their visit in 1985. The complex appears to have been surrounded by a wall, similar to the layout at Meriamlik. Guntram Koch, "Das Heiligtum des Hg. Theodoros bei Holmoi (Isauria) Wiedergefunden!," *Adalya* 10 (2007): 259–70, reports on what he believes to be the rediscovery of the site, including significant architectural remains that are under severe threat from continuing extension of the coastal road. In texts, the cult of Theodoros can at present only to be traced back to the fifteenth century.

37. Claudia Tempesta, "Central and Local Powers in Hellenistic Rough Cilicia," in Hoff and Townsend, *Rough Cilicia*, 27–42.

provide evidence of the worship of Athena in caves and natural settings under the local name of Athena Krisoa Oreia ("mountain dweller").[38] A relief of Athena in a votive niche outside Sömek even shows her with a lance in one hand, thus fitting the *Life*'s description in her as "warlike" (*Mir.* 27) (Fig. 3). In other respects, Thekla absorbed elements of Athena into her cult (hence Gregory and the *Life and Miracles*' reference to her as a virgin),[39] and it may well be that the miracle alludes to Thekla's appropriation of such mountain cults that existed in the hinterland of Seleukeia. *Mir.* 2 furthermore makes reference to Christian appropriation of an earlier pagan cult, as we are told that the mountain is now "occupied by martyrs . . . and holy men,"[40] giving us further testimony to Thekla's superior powers and once again defining her new role as the patroness of other Christian communities in the region of Seleukeia.

The following two miracles move from countryside to city but are very short and devoid of geographic or narrative detail, making them less interesting in the present context. In *Mir.* 3, Aphrodite is chased out of Seleukeia, but we are not given any details of the location of her worship. *Mir.* 4 concludes Thekla's fight against demons but quickly moves on to other aspects of her miracles. From it, we learn that a temple of Zeus in Seleukeia had been transformed into a church of St. Paul.[41] This temple is possibly to be identified as one excavated in the eastern part of Seleukeia that was converted to a church in the mid-fifth century, although it cannot be conclusively proven on the basis of the presently available evidence.[42] Wherever this church of St. Paul may have been located, the miracle made it subject to Thekla's sanctuary at Meriamlik by integrating it into the region's new sacred topography by way of the miracle story of its foundation.

38. Johannes Keil and Adolf Wilhelm, *Denkmäler aus dem Rauhen Kilikien,* Monumenta Asiae Minoris Antiqua 3 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1931), 18–19, located at the entrance to a cave; Serra Durugönül, "Athena Krisoa Oreia," *Epigraphica Anatolica* 10 (1987): 115–6 and Durugönül, *Die Felsreliefs im Rauhen Kilikien*, BAR International Series 511 (Oxford: British Archaelogical Reports, 1989), 50–51, publishing a relief and inscription from the village of Sömek thirty-seven kilometers north of Silifke. On this cult, see Emanuela Borgia, "Il culto di Athena *Oreia* in Cilicia," in *La campagne antique: espace sauvage, terre domestiguée* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005), 73–89.

39. Feld, *Barbarische Bürger*, 44–45.

40. *Mir.* 2 (Johnson, 15).

41. On the significance of Zeus in Rough Cilicia, see MacKay, "The Major Sanctuaries," 2047.

42. Bayliss, *Provincial Cilicia,* 74–76.

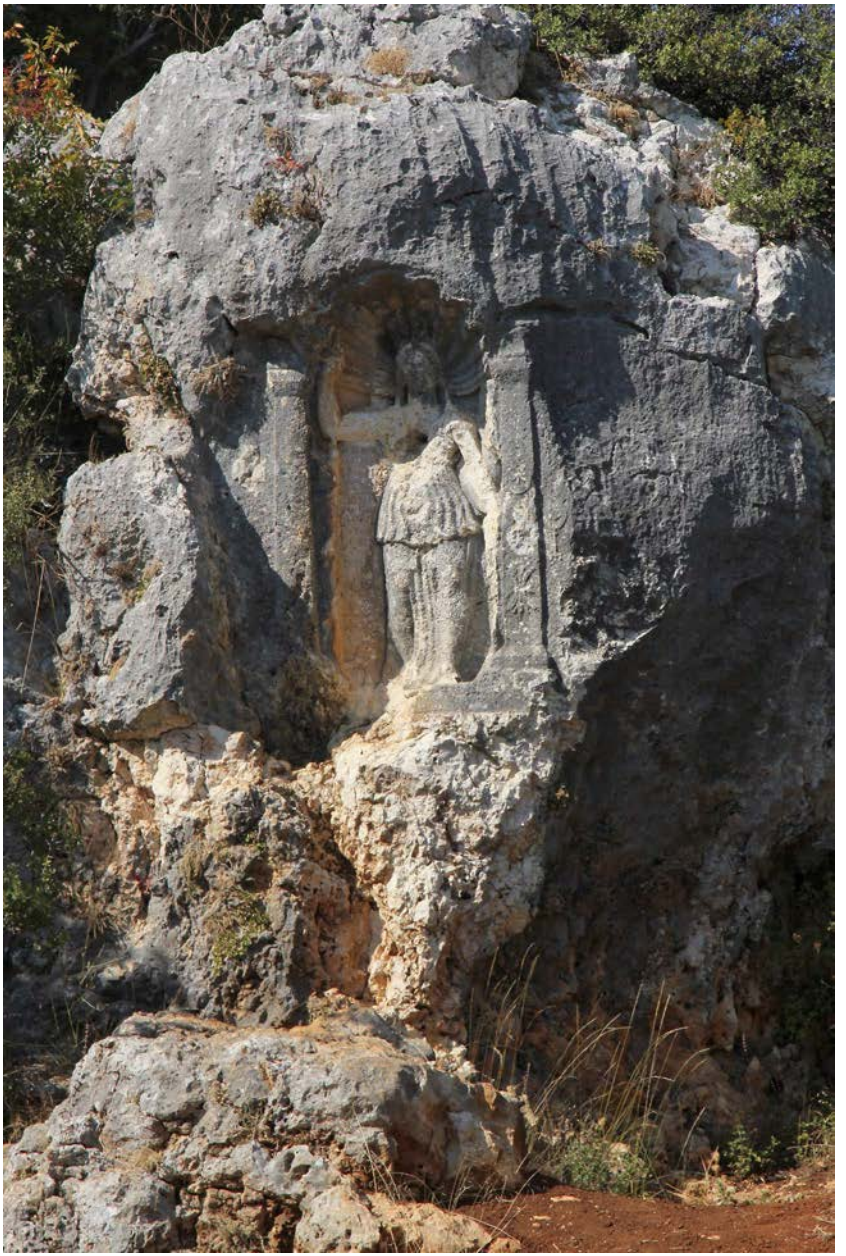

Fig. 3. The Sömek Athena. Photo: Klaus-Peter Simon/WikiMedia Commons.

This brief summary has demonstrated that Thekla's appropriation of both the natural and urban landscape is a notable feature of the *Miracles*. Scholarly discussions of the passages discussed above have focused on the literary perspective and how the author carefully constructed Thekla's authority across the landscape. By personally taking on the pagan antagonists, Thekla's presence was expanded in all four directions from Meriamlik. Scholars have often approached the text as if it could provide historical evidence for the "Christianization" of the region around Seleukeia. But it is equally fruitful to understand this literary account of Thekla's appropriation of pagan cults as alluding to a set of foundation stories for various Christian communities that were given a connection to the saint and in this way subordinated to Meriamlik and thus the authority of the bishop of Seleukeia. The *Miracles* in this way reflect a desire to work with existing memories of place (i.e., the pagan topography of the Seleukeia region) but also to rework them and order them within a new Christian topography. As the author is keen to point out, they provide evidence of Thekla's presence everywhere in the landscape, in both city and countryside, as well as by the sea and in the mountains.

Meriamlik's location in the landscape had already been evoked in the *Life*, where it is stated that Thekla settled on a hill, similar to how Elijah was believed to have lived in a grotto on Mt. Carmel (in fact, this analogy is explicitly evoked by the text).[43] The reference to Elijah gave her choice of location a wider genealogical significance and long-term topological resonance. It pointed to Elijah's battle against the prophets of Baal that took place on the mountain and foreshadowed Thekla's confrontation with Sarpedon (and other pagan divinities). Throughout the *Miracles*, Meriamlik is similarly referred to as κορυφή, usually translated as "mountain peak."[44] In the case of Meriamlik, however, mountain is not strictly speaking a very apt description of its physical characteristics, as the sanctuary is quite unlike the dramatic acropolis of Seleukeia but rather situated on sloping ground that runs alongside a *wadi*. This points to a literary reshaping of the physical landscape that served to emphasize Thekla's place in Christian topography (by pointing to the ancient prophet, but also more generally by allusion to gospel traditions' use of the mountains as a place of solitude, prayer, and revelation),[45] and added additional literary layers to the construction of the sacred landscape of the sanctuary.

43. *Life* 27.52.
44. *Mir.* 1; 2; 4; 26; 27.
45. E.g., Matt 5–7.

The physical landscape around Meriamlik plays an altogether important, yet understudied role in the process of appropriation and adds to the literary perspectives of the *Life* and *Miracles*.[46] This is to some extent understandable in light of the previously noted scarcity of archaeological fieldwork as well as the considerable changes to the landscape around Meriamlik that have taken place since late antiquity, not least in recent years as a result of Silifke's urban expansion. Yet it is still apparent that Thekla's sanctuary was carefully placed in the landscape in order to take advantage of views towards both the town of Seleukeia and the sea, in turn also making it visible from afar (Fig. 4). The northern part of the sanctuary is on the highest ground, and from here the city of Seleukeia is clearly visible, including its impressive acropolis, now the site of a medieval castle. This view connects city and sanctuary by emphasizing the close relationship that existed between the two, not only in spatial terms but also economically and politically (both points that will be explored in more detail below). In late antiquity, it is likely that this view would have been even more evocative, since areas that are now taken up by modern housing were noted in earlier publications as open areas covered with ancient tombs (see also Fig. 6).[47] Its location thus echoed a long tradition in the ancient world in which sanctuaries were often located in an elevated position in the landscapes that offered dramatic views.[48]

Towards the south, Meriamlik to this day provides panoramic views of the Mediterranean and the Kalykadnos delta. Fig. 5 shows the view from the sanctuary towards the sea and the so-called cape of Sarpedon. In a literal sense, Meriamlik was thus elevated over not only Holmoi, to where many pilgrims would have arrived, but also other cults in the landscape (including the oracle of Sarpedon, located somewhere on the coast), and it would have functioned as a waymark in the landscape for all travelers in the region.

Natural features and the physical layout of the landscape were used as part of a conscious effort to construct a sacred landscape around Thekla's sanctuary. The 'real' landscape of the sanctuary connected visually with other foci in the landscape which then had a similar function to

46. Only Dagron, *Vie et Miracles*, 65, briefly notes Meriamlik's location in the landscape. See also the remarks in Troels M. Kristensen, "The Material Culture of Roman and Early Christian Pilgrimage: An Introduction," *HEROM – Journal on Hellenistic and Roman Material Culture* 1 (2012): 69–73.

47. Keil and Wilhelm, *Denkmäler aus dem Rauhen Kilikien,* 3–19, Taf. 3, 4, and 8.

48. Cf. Vincent Scully, *The Earth, the Temple, and the Gods: Greek Sacred Architecture* (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 1962), 1–8.

Fig. 4. View from Meriamlik towards the city and acropolis of Seleukeia. Photo: Author.

Fig. 5. View of sea and cape from Meriamlik. Photo: Author.

the 'imagined' topography of the *Miracles*. The use of lines of sight thus helped to claim ownership of the surrounding region for Thekla.[49] In this way, Thekla effectively silenced Sarpedon both by means of her miraculous deeds *and* the prominent placement of her sanctuary in the landscape that offered views of sea and city, as well as the sacred topography of the region. Through the different modes of framing and staging the sanctuary in both text and landscape, Meriamlik was now placed at the top of a spatial hierarchy that incorporated the region's emerging Christian topography of monasteries and other shrines. The landscape was as such actively used to promote the sacrality of Thekla's sanctuary at Meriamlik and her presence was weaved into the physical fabric of all corners of the region.

SELEUKEIA AND MERIAMLIK: THE SPATIAL POLITICS OF CITY AND SAINT

Whereas the previous section emphasized the importance of the broader landscape in Thekla's cult, this section will focus more closely on the relationship between Thekla's sanctuary at Meriamlik and the neighboring urban center of Seleukeia that is of crucial importance to understanding the cult's success and development over time.[50] It was shown that the two were linked visually, but the interconnections between them are also apparent in other aspects of the cult that allow us to shed light on the dynamics of the changing relationship between city and saint, not least in light of much earlier traditions.

Seleukeia was founded by Seleukos Nikator sometime after 295 B.C.E. following his conquest of Cilicia.[51] The city's inhabitants had been relocated from Holmoi and other settlements. Located at the crossroads between east and west, Seleukeia grew into an urban center of regional importance and played a particularly important role in negotiating the Seleukid dynasty's relationship with the important priest-kingdom of Olba, twenty

49. On sightlines in early Christian *martyria*, see Ann Marie Yasin, "Sight Lines of Sanctity at Late Antique Martyria," in *Architecture of the Sacred: Space, Ritual, and Experience from Classical Greece to Byzantium*, ed. Bonna D. Wescoat and Robert G. Ousterhout (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 248–80.

50. On the archaeology of Seleukeia, see Hild and Hellenkemper, *Tabula*, 402–6. For discussion of its rural hinterland, see Günder Varinlioğlu, "Living in a Marginal Environment: Rural Habitat and Landscape in Southeastern Isauria," *DOP* 61 (2007): 287–317.

51. Getzel M. Cohen, *The Hellenistic Settlements in Europe, the Islands, and Asia Minor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 369–71.

kilometers north of the city.[52] Although the city was not located directly on the coast, the Kalykadnos (modern Göksu) was navigable all the way up to Seleukeia, which made it an important trans-shipment point for goods going north through the Taurus mountains to central Anatolia.[53] During the reign of Diocletian, it became the metropolis of the province of Isauria. Besides the acropolis already discussed, Seleukeia consisted of a lower city where the remains of a theatre, a stadium, a very large cistern, and the so-called Temple of Zeus (converted into a church in late antiquity) have been located. Although nothing remains today, a city wall with towers documented in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries protected the city.[54] In the third century C.E., the city's territory seems to have stretched some twenty-three kilometers north of the city into the mountains.[55] Excavations in 1982–1985 immediately west of the so-called Temple of Zeus uncovered impressive late antique remains of a monumental building with *opus sectile* floors and several statue bases.[56] From as early as 325, Seleukeia is attested to have had a bishop.[57] Several other bishoprics, including those of Olba, Anemurium, and Diocaesarea were dependents of the bishop of Seleukeia, who was likely to have worked actively to strengthen the city's connection to Thekla and to give the city the important role in Christian topography that it had hitherto lacked in order to solidify his own position.

Meriamlik's location, two kilometers outside the urban center of Seleukeia, meant that city and sanctuary were never physically or visually far apart. As such, the relationship between the two mirrored that between the city of Ephesus and the Basilica of St. John at Ayasoluk.[58] Yet in spite

52. Laurent Capdetrey, *Le pouvoir séleucide: Territoire, administration; finances d'un royaume héllenistique (312–129 av. J.-C.)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2007), 168.

53. Strabo 14.5.4; and see J. B. Campbell, *Rivers and the Power of Ancient Rome* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 321.

54. Keil and Wilhelm, *Denkmäler aus dem Rauhen Kilikien,* 4.

55. Hamdi Şahin, "Eine neue Grabinschrift aus Seleukeia ad Calycadnum," *Epigraphica Anatolica* 39 (2006): 117–20.

56. Sencer Şahin, "Inschriften aus Seleukeia am Kalykadnos (Silifke)," *Epigraphica Anatolica* 17 (1991): 139–66, esp. 139–42, 155–63.

57. For recent overviews of the Christian history of Seleukeia, see Roderic L. Mullen, *The Expansion of Christianity: A Gazetteer of Its First Three Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 81, and Sevim Canevello and Murat Özıldırım, "Seleucia Under One God: Christianity in Seleucia in the Early Christian Era," in Hoff and Townsend, *Rough Cilicia*, 247–51.

58. Andreas M. Pülz, "Archaeological Evidence of Christian Pilgrimage in Ephesus," *HEROM—Journal on Hellenistic and Roman Material Culture* 1 (2012): 225–60, esp. 230–44.

of their physical proximity, the rural nature of Meriamlik is emphasized when the author of the *Life* told his readers of Thekla's arrival at Seleukeia. Her decision to live there "like John in the desert" (*Life* 27) points to the secluded nature of the site, and that it was located away from the urban, settled life of Seleukeia.[59] This point was also emphasized in Egeria's reference to the presence of apotactites at Meriamlik who had renounced the material world and devoted themselves to Thekla. However, urban life was in reality never far away.

From a more general perspective in the context of the ancient world, the location of Thekla's sanctuary can be classified as extra-urban, a type of sanctuary that has been extensively investigated in both historical and archaeological scholarship.[60] Greek sanctuaries that were located outside the city walls were anchored to the city that controlled them, for example by means of processional ways that bound urban centers and suburban or rural temples together through regular ritual performances and integrated the landscape into the wider religious mindset of the cities.[61] Extra-urban sanctuaries have thus been interpreted as way-markers in the landscape that signaled the city's control over rural borderlands and thus functioned as claims to territory.[62] Meriamlik's extra-urban location raises similar questions about the sanctuary's relationship to Seleukeia, as both independent and dependent of the urban center. The relationship between Meriamlik and Seleukeia can be demonstrated to be highly complex, and it certainly also changed over time, as evident from the existence of several different Thekla traditions that defined her relations with the city in

59. *Life* 27 (Johnson, 64). On the motif of the desert in the Christian imagination, see also James E. Goehring, "The Dark Side of Landscape: Ideology and Power in the Christian Myth of the Desert," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33 (2003): 437–51.

60. For a recent overview of this type of sanctuary in the Greek context, see John Pedley, *Sanctuaries and the Sacred in the Ancient Greek World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 46–50, and note the important work of François de Polignac, *Cults, Territory, and the Origins of the Greek City-State,* trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), as well as Susan E. Alcock and Robin Osborne, eds., *Placing the Gods: Sanctuaries and Sacred Space in Ancient Greece* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

61. Fritz Graf, "*Pompai* in Greece: Some Considerations about Space and Ritual in the Greek *Polis*," in *The Role of Religion in the Early Greek Polis: Proceedings of the Third International Seminar on Ancient Greek Cult, organized by the Swedish Institute at Athens, 16–18 October 1992*, ed. Robin Hägg (Stockholm: Paul Åströms Förlag, 1996), 55–65.

62. De Polignac, *Greek City-State*; and De Polignac, "Mediation, Competition, and Sovereignty: The Evolution of Rural Sanctuaries in Geometric Greece," in Alcock and Osborne, *Placing the Gods,* 3–18.

starkly different ways. In other ways, the spatial politics of city and saint mirrored Seleukeia's earlier relationship with Olba, home to the region's very important temple of Zeus Olbios.

In its early history, it is likely that visitors to Thekla's sanctuary would have been highly dependent on facilities provided in Seleukeia. This close connection between city and sanctuary is evident from Egeria's description of her visit in May 384. Traveling from the east, her route to Meriamlik took her on the main road from Antioch to Seleukeia via Tarsus, which in itself is unremarkable; more interesting are her activities when she arrived at Seleukeia. Here she met the town's bishop, who is described as a "very godly man," and then saw what she refers to as a beautiful church before going to Thekla's sanctuary to stay for the night. At least a courtesy visit to the city's bishop seems to have been required before making the trip out to Meriamlik, where she in fact had a personal connection to the deaconess Marthana. A visit with the bishop was typical for Egeria's arrival in a new place, and similar to her earlier visit to Edessa, we can assume that such meetings resulted in an invitation to see (and learn more about) the region's Christian monuments.[63] In the case of Egeria, the city of Seleukeia functioned as a gateway into the sacred presence of Thekla, even if her cursory description and rather singular perspective make it difficult to generalize about the level of control that the bishop of Seleukeia possessed over the sanctuary in the late fourth century.[64]

At a more symbolic level, the relationship between city and sanctuary was worked out in both the *Life* and especially the *Miracles*. Thus, towards the end of the *Life*, both the city of Seleukeia (27.26–29) and the river of Kalykadnos are praised (27.29–37): "The city is situated at the beginning of the boundaries of the East, a first rank place and above every city of Isauria," and it proceeds to describe the city's beauty, climate, and the eloquence of its rhetoricians, amongst other things in the ancient rhetorical mode of civic praise.[65] Seleukeia is then compared with Tarsus, Paul's home city, a comparison that emphasizes the close connection between apostle and martyr by integrating Thekla's sanctuary into a broader sacred geography.[66] In the *Miracles*, Thekla's role and relationship to Seleukeia

63. Egeria, 19.5.

64. Given her noble background and considerable economic wealth, it is arguably difficult to generalize from the case of Egeria to reconstruct the broader experience of late-fourth-century pilgrimage.

65. *Life* 27.27–29 (Johnson, 64).

66. Johnson, *Life and Miracles,* 63–66.

is further addressed. Thus, in *Mir.* 5, the city is saved by Thekla when a group of bandits stage a surprise attack by night.[67] Consequently, in *Mir.* 6, she is described as Seleukeia's "defender (πρόμαχος), protector (πολιοῦχος), mother (μήτηρ), and teacher (διδάσκαλος),"[68] strongly pointing to the all-evading influence of Thekla on a whole series of aspects of civic identity. The author furthermore identifies Seleukeia as "our town" (*Mir.* 15.3).[69]

In both the *Life* and especially in the *Miracles*, we can thus observe considerable investment in mapping out the relationship between city and sanctuary in a variety of ways. Seleukeia and Meriamlik are depicted as inseparable entities, and the presence of Thekla adds to the glory of an already magnificent city. There are two issues at stake in these passages, both of which have long histories in the ancient world: the first concerns civic rivalry between neighboring cities, in which pagan cults played a key part, and this competition was now reinvigorated with Christian protagonists (the healthy rivalry between Tarsus and Seleukeia is thus explicitly acknowledged in *Mir.* 4.1); the second concerns the poetic praise of cities that frequently emphasized the splendor and blessings of the natural landscape, such as in Aelius Aristides's *Panathenaicus* that glorifies the city of Athens.[70] The Hellenistic Salmakis inscription from Halikarnassos (modern Bodrum) offers another interesting parallel that works around similar themes.[71] Similar to the *Life and Miracles*, this poem claims divine descent on behalf of a civic community as it tells us that Zeus was born in Halikarnassos and that the citizens sheltered the newborn from Kronos (which certainly is not in line with the 'canonic' version of the story). This is presented as clear evidence that the city was beloved by the gods. There is thus a reciprocal relationship between city and divinity; the civic community provides lodging and shelter, and is in return rewarded by the divinity for its good deeds. The author of the *Life and Miracles* certainly had similar expectations in the case of Thekla and the blessings that she

67. *Mir.* 28 revisits this theme. Thekla's role as city protector is also extended to Ikonion in *Mir.* 6 and Selinous in *Mir.* 27. This aspect of her miracles generally points to her appropriation of Athena, also alluded to in the description of Thekla as πρόμαχος.

68. *Mir.* 6.1 (Johnson, 23).

69. *Mir.* 15.3 (Johnson, 69).

70. Cf. Jason König, *Greek Literature in the Roman Empire* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009), 47.

71. Signe Isager, "The Pride of Halikarnassos: Editio princeps of an inscriptions from Salmakis," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 123 (1998): 1–23, and Isager, "The Salmakis Inscription: Some Reactions to the Editio Princeps," in *The Salmakis Inscription and Hellenistic Halikarnassos,* ed. Signe Isager and Poul Pedersen (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2004), 9–13.

would bring not only to the community at Meriamlik, but also to the urban center of Seleukeia.

Other sources suggest that there were alternative discourses at play between city and saint than those that have been identified in the above discussion of the *Miracles*. The fifth- or sixth-century variant and extension of *ATh* puts much greater emphasis on confrontation in its description of Thekla's arrival at Seleukeia: "And having come into Seleukeia she went outside the city one stade. And she was afraid of them for they worshipped idols" (LB 1.271).[72] Seleukeia is in this version presented as a city of idol-worshippers who do not welcome Thekla, and there is no sense of the friendly neighborliness that the author of the *Miracles* presents. In this account, Thekla thus settles on the hill outside the city where she lives as a hermit in a cave, and she is tested by the devil.[73] This text furthermore extends Thekla's time at Seleukeia considerably, noting that she lived there for no less than twenty-two years (LB 272). Further on in the same text, we hear of pagan doctors in Seleukeia who decided to take on the competition and confronted Thekla in her cave.[74] This "female hermit" version of Thecla seems to have been won over by the "civic patroness" version that is evoked by the *Miracles*. However, Egeria's testimony to the presence of numerous ascetic monks at Meriamlik may suggest that this alternative tradition did have a considerable following, and that the relationship with Seleukeia followed several different trajectories, not least due to the diversity of the monastic community.

Turning now to the relationship between city and sanctuary as it can be traced on the ground, we will consider the spatial relationship between the two in more detail. As already noted, the state of preservation and the changing urban landscape of modern Silifke complicate this issue, but enough remains to identify the general picture, not least when taking into account the documentation from the early twentieth-century investigations that were undertaken when the city was less urbanized than it is today. Meriamlik and Seleukeia were linked by a road that Dagron has imaginatively described as an umbilical cord (Fig. 6).[75] All visitors to the sanctuary that arrived from Tarsus and the east (as Egeria did) would have passed through Seleukeia on their approach as this was where a bridge crossed the Kalykadnos river. A now lost building inscription found in the 1870s is testimony to a Roman predecessor of the modern bridge that

72. Cited from Johnson, *Life and Miracles,* 227.
73. Johnson, *Life and Miracles,* 227–30.
74. *ATh* 10; and see Johnson, *Life and Miracles,* 197.
75. Dagron, *Vie et Miracles*, 64.

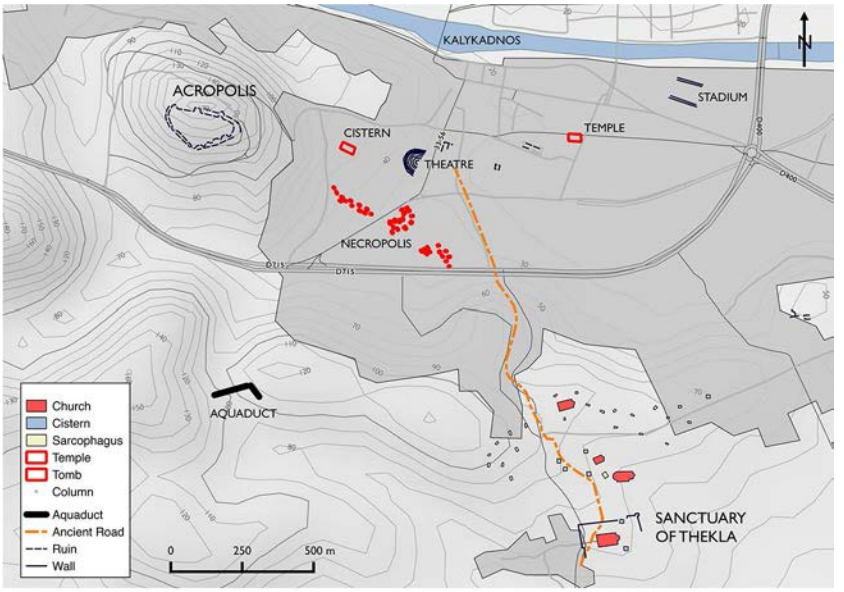

Fig. 6. Map of Seleukeia and the road to Meriamlik (after Keil and Wilhelm, *Denkmäler aus dem Rauhen Kilikien,* Taf. 3, redrawn by Stuart Eve).

re-uses earlier foundations.[76] The inscription gives the name of L. Octavius Memor, who was governor of Cilicia in 77 C.E. From the bridge, the road presumably made its way to the urban center of Seleukeia, today largely hidden under the modern city. Work by early topographers shows that the road picked up near the city's theater from where it made its way by a gentle ascent up to Meriamlik, and where parts of the road continue to be visible in the landscape today.[77]

During the annual festival of Thekla that lasted for several days, the road became a stage for a procession that linked Seleukeia and Meriamlik, although our only sources for this are the scant references in the *Miracles*.[78] Yet comparable evidence for similar processions celebrating saints and involving the larger civic community survives from sixth-century Egypt and North Africa.[79] The glimpses of Thekla's procession in the *Miracles* suggest that large crowds of people from near and far walked together to

76. Keil and Wilhelm, *Denkmäler aus dem Rauhen Kilikien,* 6; Hild and Hellenkemper *Tabula*, 284–85.
77. Keil and Wilhelm, *Denkmäler aus dem Rauhen Kilikien,* Taf. 3.
78. *Mir.* 15; 25.2; 33.
79. Yasin, *Saints and Church Spaces*, 253–54.

Meriamlik. Participation in the procession worked out the relationship between city and sanctuary on a performative level, similar to how earlier Greek and Roman processions had linked civic centers with sanctuaries located outside the city boundaries, such as the Eleusinia that connected Athens with Eleusis, and the Sacred Way between Didyma and Miletus.[80] Sanctuary and city were as such fundamentally bound together by the movement of the pilgrims.

In addition, the journey that this route followed through the landscape was carefully staged in order to heighten the experience and expectations of incoming visitors. Entry to the site from Seleukeia was (and in fact still is) through a passage of approximately 150 meter length that was cut through the rock (Fig. 7). When arriving from the city-side on the open road, this passage in effect walled people in and obstructed any view of the central part of the sanctuary before reaching the other end. The considerable effort that was invested in cutting this passage through the rock demonstrates a desire to visually optimize the pilgrims' experience of arrival and revelation. The experience of walking through it emphasized the sense of tension before pilgrims reached their final destination. The rock-cut passage can be seen as one aspect of how the experience of the sacred was staged similar to how the literary narrative of the *Miracles* was intended to awe and inspire readers and listeners with its accounts of the miraculous power of Thekla.[81]

The importance of this northern part of the sanctuary as a connection between city and saint was emphasized by the construction of a church here in the late fifth century, usually referred to simply as the North Church. Unfortunately, this structure has never been excavated and is today in a very poor state of preservation, but its considerable size (c. 60 m x 30 m) suggests that it held some prominence in the overall conception of the sanctuary's layout.[82] Its capitals and other elements of the decoration date it as contemporary with the two other large churches constructed at Meriamlik, and it was thus part of the larger aggrandizement of the sanctuary during the late fifth and early sixth centuries. Its size as well as its location in this elevated place turned it into an important focal point

80. On the epigraphic evidence for the procession between Miletus and Didyma (also partially traceable in the landscape today), see Alexander Herda, *Der Apollon-Delphinios-Kult in Milet und die Neujahrsprozession nach Didyma: Ein neuer Kommentar der sog, Molpoi-Satzung* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2006).

81. Johnson, *Life and Miracles,* 172–220.

82. Herzfeld and Guyer, *Meriamlik und Korykos*, 74–77; Hill, *Early Byzantine Churches,* 234.

Fig. 7. The rock-cut passage to Meriamlik, as seen from the city side. Photo: Author.

that connected city and sanctuary by visual means, even if it is difficult to reconstruct its original appearance on the basis of the currently available archaeological evidence.

We know less about the southern approach to the sanctuary. Yet given that this was where the other major access road from the Mediterranean harbor at Holmoi ended, this part of the journey may have been marked in a similar way to the northern approach.[83] This route would theoretically have allowed pilgrims to bypass Seleukeia altogether, making them less dependent on the city's facilities (and, perhaps, the goodwill of the local bishop). It led to the *temenos*, to which it is unclear whether there would have been more than one entrance, since only the northern gate is currently identified through the archaeological remains.[84] From this southern approach, there would not have been a direct visible connection to the city of Seleukeia on the approach to Meriamlik. The *temenos* itself is mentioned by Egeria (23.4) and must therefore date to before the late fourth century. Similar to the rock-cut passage, it constituted an important element in the

83. A similar approach to Qalat Seman was marked by a 'triumphal' arch.
84. Bayliss, *Provincial Cilicia,* 89.

way that movement through the sanctuary was structured. A number of medieval pilgrimage shrines had competing pilgrimage routes that incorporated different elements of the physical landscape, most famously in the case of the Camino in northern Spain that have developed over time in order to accommodate new sacred locales.[85] However, at present we can only speculate on the similarities and differences between the northern (city-side) and southern (Mediterranean) approach to Meriamlik, and whether the different routes defined the sanctuary's (and the pilgrims') relationship to Seleukeia in different ways.

Over time, Meriamlik clearly developed into a "town" of its own, covering some twenty hectares and with its own water supply (cf. the aqueduct on Fig. 6) and accommodation, which is likely to have added to the sanctuary's sense of independence from Seleukeia, even if it may have remained under the authority of the city's bishop throughout its history.[86] In several *Miracles*, we furthermore hear of people that made their way straight to Meriamlik, rather than visiting Seleukeia first.[87] Given our lack of knowledge about the archaeology of late antique Seleukeia, it is not possible to assess how this growing independence would have impacted the city.

THEKLA'S PRESENCE AT MERIAMLIK: THE SPATIAL EMBEDDING OF A SAINT

We have now established the topographical significance of Meriamlik's location within the region at large and the dynamics of its relationship with the urban center of Seleukeia. But how was Thekla's divine presence spatially embedded within her sanctuary proper? Investigation of this issue confronts us directly with the central paradox in the cult of the saints, namely the ambiguous nature of their presence as both bound and unbound in space and time. This was particularly pertinent in the case of Meriamlik, which does not appear to have possessed any relics of Thekla and thus could not point to a tomb as evidence of her physical presence at the site, an otherwise central tenet in the common models of *martyria* that emphasize the central location of the saint's tomb in the architectural

85. Julie Candy, *The Archaeology of Pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago de Compostela: A Landscape Perspective*, BAR International Series 1948 (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 2009), 22.

86. An aqueduct thus led directly to Meriamlik, see Keil and Wilhelm, *Denkmäler aus dem Rauhen Kilikien,* Abb. 30, Taf. 11.

87. E.g., *Mir.* 15.

layout and development of shrines.[88] What were the implications of this seeming lack of relics for the way that Thekla's presence was made manifest at Meriamlik? And what does the sanctuary's architecture tell us about the way that Thekla's divine presence was evoked in order to attract pilgrims?

Before trying to answer these questions, it is important to note that Seleukeia's claim to Thekla was not altogether straightforward. The uneasy place of Meriamlik in the Thekla narrative is indeed apparent by the relative lack of coverage that it receives, not least in the *ATh* where mention of Seleukeia comes abruptly at the very end (reading almost like an interpolation), but also in the *Life* where only two of twenty-nine chapters have anything to do with Seleukeia, whereas Ikonion and Antioch receive much more attention. An alternate version of the *Acts* furthermore places her tomb in Rome, in the vicinity of Paul's.[89] Similarly Seleukeia plays no role in scripture, and its claim to Thekla thus rested entirely on popular tradition and oral culture.[90] As such there was an important need for Meriamlik to secure a place for its cult of Thekla that could outmatch other cities' claim to her. The addition of the *Life and Miracles* addressed this caveat and carefully mapped the mythology of Thekla onto the landscape of Meriamlik, as we have seen above.

In *ATh*, Seleukeia is identified as Thekla's final resting place, but here the *Life and Miracles* make an important diversion in claiming that she in fact did not die, but disappeared into the earth while still alive.[91] This has been interpreted by Scott Johnson as a literary scheme that made Thekla present in the community of Seleukeia who could then claim her as their own; as such, the *Life and Miracles* became a foundation story for the

88. For a critique of such models, see Ann Marie Yasin, "Reassessing Salona's Churches: *Martyrium* Development in Question," *JECS* 20 (2012): 59–112. Variant versions of the *Life* may suggest that some relics were on display at Meriamlik; some of the possibilities and implications of this are explored in Troels M. Kristensen, "Excavating Meriamlik: Sacred Space and Economy in Late Antique Pilgrimage," in *Excavating Pilgrimage: Archaeological Approaches to Sacred Travel and Movement in the Ancient Mediterranean and Near East,* ed. Wiebke Friese and Troels M. Kristensen (Aldershot: Ashgate, forthcoming).

89. Cooper, "A saint in exile," 13–14.

90. Johnson, *Life and Miracles,* 10n27.

91. On the issue of Thekla's death, see also Dagron, *Vie et Miracles*, 47–54 (who hypothesized that local cults were incorporated into the legend of Thekla), and Johnson, *Life and Miracles,* 7, 10, and Johnson, "Apostolic Geography: The Origins and Continuity of a Hagiographic Habit," *DOP* 64 (2010): 5–25. *ATh* 4.18 simply concludes: "She departed into Seleucia, and having brought to light many by the Word of God she lay down with a good sleep" (Barrier, 186). The direct speech used in *Life* (28) may reflect a particular oral tradition.

city itself, and constituted a very powerful claim on behalf of the city's Christian community to their place within Christian topography, similar to how Tarsus could claim Paul.[92] Similarly in the *Life*, Thekla exists as ever-present and out-of-time, as she is described as present in the time of Jesus.[93] This is an important point, but the story of her physical disappearance has also been linked to the lack of relics at Meriamlik.[94] Without relics, Thekla's sanctuary may indeed have found itself open to criticism that it was a false *memoria*.[95] In the *Life* (28.8–11), this issue is addressed indirectly when we learn that the church's altar marked the place where Thekla had disappeared into the ground that God had opened for her. The altar is exactly where you would expect relics to be in a *martyrium* church, and the passage takes great care to link architecture with the sacred topography of the Thekla story, in spite of the lack of relics. The altar then in essence became a sort of substitute body, and the story has essentially been interpreted as a cover-up to account for the missing relics.

However, it is worthwhile to reassess this interpretation. Although previous scholars have pointed to literary precedents of Thekla's miraculous disappearance into the ground, such as the second-century *Protevangelium of James*, where a mountain saves Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, from the cruelty of Herod by opening a cleft, it must be noted that the episode has particular resonances within local sacred topography.[96] Rough Cilicia is famous for its spectacular pagan sanctuaries and sacred places that were situated in caves and sinkholes, such as the Corycian Cave (Cennet ve Cehennem, some twenty kilometers northeast of Meriamlik), Kanytelis (Kanlıdivane, Fig. 8), and, of course, the oracle of Sarpedon that was situated in a cave, according to some sources. Even if these places were not active pagan sanctuaries at the time that the *Life and Miracles* were written (and this is debatable), the memory of them must have been strong and their impressive natural settings remained highly visible in the local landscape. In Greek mythology (that built on even older local traditions, possibly going back to the Hittites), the Corycian Cave had been

92. Johnson, *Life and Miracles,* 8. *Mir.* 4 elaborates on the relationship between Thekla and Paul, and thus by implication Seleukeia and Tarsos.

93. *Life* 1; Johnson, *Life and Miracles,* 21. In the introduction to the *Mir.*, Thekla is also called always present (ἀεὶ παροῦσα).

94. Cooper, "A Saint in Exile," 4–5. Although it is, of course, also an interesting question why such relics were never acquired or invented.

95. Indeed, criticism of the cult of Thekla is found in Tertullian, *On Baptism,* 17, see Johnson, *Life and Miracles*, 3. On false *memoria*, see Yasin, *Saints and Church Spaces*, 153.

96. Cooper, "A Saint in Exile," 7–8.

Fig. 8. Kanytelis (Kanlıdivane). Photo: Author.

the lair of Python, indicative of the enormous powers that such sacred, natural places were capable of containing.[97] Pomponius Mela thus wrote of it that it was an awe-inspiring place worthy of a divine habitat (1.13). In late antiquity, the temple that had stood immediately above the cave was converted into a church, indicating Christian appropriation of the sacred power that dwelt below.[98] At Kanytelis, no less than five churches circled the impressive sinkhole, some 200 meters long, 170 meters wide, and 60 meters deep, and provide further evidence of an intense Christian engagement with the memory of this particular place that certainly had been the focus of pagan ritual, even if the specificities are anything but clear.[99] The intense, underground encounters with the sacred that these sanctuaries close to Meriamlik provided are likely to have influenced the way in which the cult of Thekla developed, and they may have had a profound impact on the way that local foundation stories and mythological narratives emerged. Thekla's disappearance into the ground thus may not

97. MacKay, "The Major Sanctuaries," 2103–10.

98. Otto Feld and Hans Weber, "Tempel und Kirche über der Korykischen Grotte (Cennet Cehennem) in Kilikien," *Istanbuler Mitteilungen* 17 (1967): 254–78; and Bayliss, *Provincial Cilicia,* 80–84.

99. Bayliss, *Provincial Cilicia,* 86–87.

be a tall tale invented to account for or somehow sideline the lack of relics (which surely could have been miraculously discovered, if they were thought to have been essential for the cult's survival), but rather reflect more local religious traditions and expectations of divine presence within the landscape. In this interpretation that points to the nature of Thekla's cult as deeply grounded in local tradition, it is not surprising to learn in *Mir*. 18 that filth scraped from the floor of "Thekla's chamber" provided a useful cure against various diseases.

The significance of a location underground was emphasized at Meriamlik itself where below the late fifth-century main basilica, a small cave church had been continuously elaborated since at least the fourth century (Fig. 9). This church, which was constructed inside a natural limestone cave, is indeed the only monument that at present provides us with any archaeological indication of how Thekla's presence was evoked at Meriamlik. Following Stephen Hill's untangling of the issue, I would argue that the cave was believed to be the place where Thekla had lived, and that it was around this location that her cult subsequently developed.[100] The architectural embellishment of this space can be traced back to the fourth century, and the cave underwent considerable changes in preparation for the construction of the basilica above in the fifth century. At this time, the cave church seems to have been reduced in size but became more elegantly decorated with wall mosaics in gold.[101] This created a compact space that stood in stark contrast to the enormous cavern of the basilica above, and offered to visitors an evocative experience that alternated between the darkness of the enclosed space and the light provided by the gilding on the walls. The same phase of construction created an intriguing arrangement that blocked the northern part of the cave by the construction of an apse, and placed two windows into a wall that offered views into the innermost part of the cave (Fig. 10). This is believed to have been the most revered part of the sanctuary, the cave where Thekla had lived. While giving visitors peeks into this part of the cave, the windows simultaneously restricted physical access to it.[102] This is evidence of a careful staging of access to Thekla's divine presence where pilgrims were kept at a distance to the most sacred part of the sanctuary.

100. Dagron, *Vie et Miracles*, 47–54; Hill, *Early Byzantine Churches*, 211–12, following J. Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Aris & Phillips, 1981), 288–92.

101. Hill, *Early Byzantine Churches*, 214–17.

102. Heavy wear-marks suggest that, at a later stage, pilgrims would have crawled through to enter the inner cave. I thank Anna Collar for this observation.

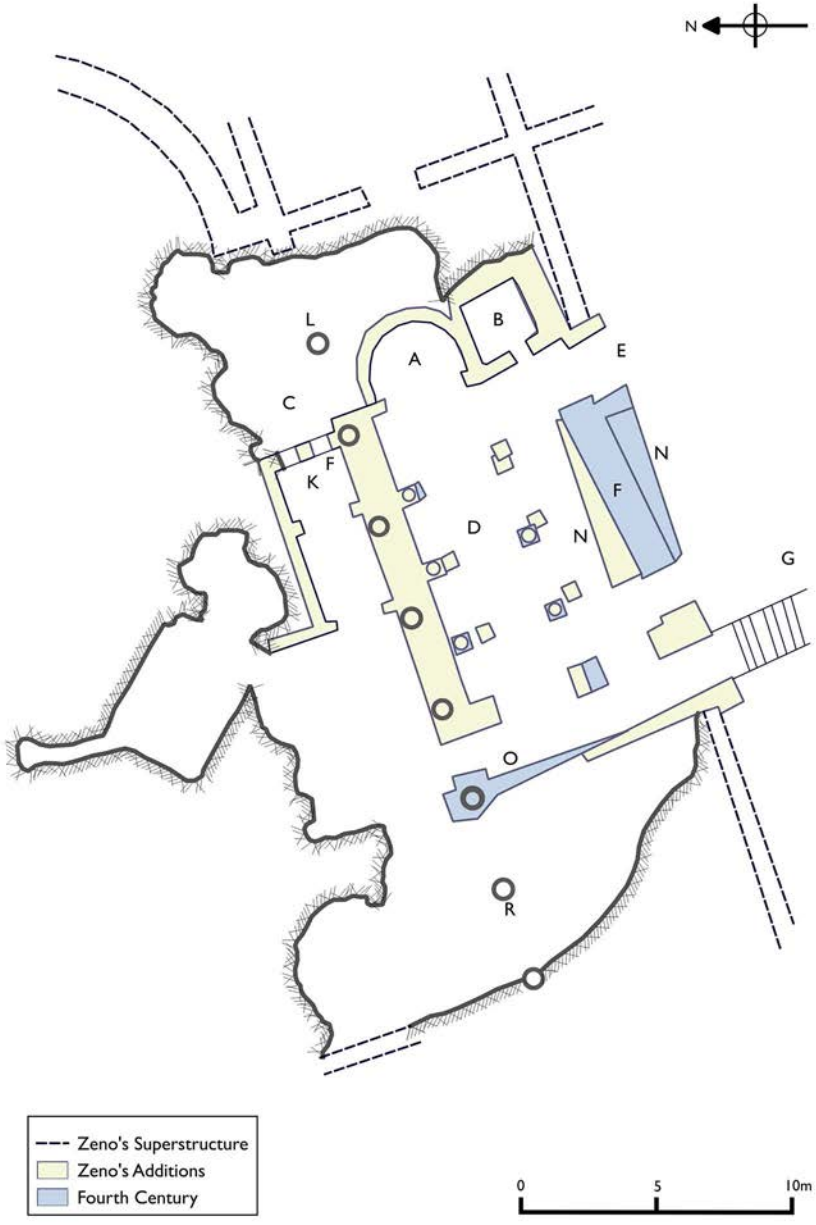

Fig. 9. Map of cave church, fifth-century state (after Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels*, 290–91, redrawn by Stuart Eve).

Fig. 10. Cave church, Meriamlik, windows into area north of apse (marked K on Fig. 9). The mosaic floor of the fourth-century church is visible in the pit to the right. Photo: Author.

Given the current state of our knowledge, archaeology provides few other pointers to the significance of Meriamlik in its earliest phases or how Thekla's presence was spatially embedded within the sanctuary. Many scholars have suggested that the sanctuary was constructed on the site of a pagan temple, but given the very limited scope of archaeological fieldwork at the site this is at present very unclear and will only be answered by more systematic excavation (although the fact that the *Life and Miracles* does not point to such an instance of appropriation may be significant). However, the sanctuary was built immediately next to a large necropolis which may hold some clues to the early significance of the site.[103] The use of the necropolis stretches back to the Roman period and formed part of the suburban fabric of the city of Seleukeia; although there is no evidence of a tomb or any other feature with a special connection to later developments at the site, it certainly underlined Meriamlik's significance as a sanctuary on the periphery of the city, an area usually reserved for burial of the dead, which in Rome attracted some of the earliest *martyria*. Egeria's testimony that numerous cells existed in the area around the sanctuary's main church may point to several different *foci* of the saint's presence during the early period, which may also have been the case in later periods. For example, *Mir.* 23 informs readers that the location where Thekla spent most of her time at Seleukeia was a small grove called the Myrsineion, which was located at a short distance from her main church and the site of a spring. Although the precise location of the grove is at present unidentified, it would have provided pilgrims with another space to come into the presence of Thekla, similar to the experience provided in the cave church.[104] As meager as the evidence is, it points to multiple *foci* of sanctity and presence within the sanctuary, which in turn fits the textual descriptions of the saint as potentially present everywhere.

Our inability to identify specific areas of ritual activity evoking Thekla's divine presence at Meriamlik may have some broader implications for the way that we interpret the spatial embedding of saints in early Christian sanctuaries. It would seem to support Ann Marie Yasin's recent study of how the presence of the saints could be mediated through a variety of

103. On the inscriptions from the necropolis, see Keil and Wilhelm, *Denkmäler aus dem Rauhen Kilikien,* 19–22; Stefan Hagel and Kurt Tomaschitz, *Repertorium der westkilikischen Inschriften* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1998), 316–21.

104. Sacred groves were a typical feature of Greek Asklepieia, such as Epidauros (Paus., 2.27.1), and see Johannis Mylonopoulos, "The Dynamics of Ritual Space in the Hellenistic and Roman East," *Kernos* 21 (2008): 49–79, esp. 63.

means and that such sanctuaries in many cases had multiple focal points that structured the experience of visitors in different ways.[105] At the same time, Meriamlik catered to the expectations of all types of pilgrims, offering both the intimate experience in the cave church that evoked the direct physical presence of the saint (and possibly in a similar setting in the Myrsineion) and a broader concept of divine presence that allowed Thekla to miraculously intervene anywhere in the world (and thus to attract patronage from the emperor in Constantinople). In the *Miracles*, Thekla's presence is indeed remarkably mobile, and we are told how her cult could be transferred to other places, such as in the case of Dalisandos (*Mir*. 26). In this miracle, we learn that this formerly obscure town now housed the second-most important shrine dedicated to Thekla and that she visited annually during her festival. This did not detract from her presence at Meriamlik, however, "for the eyes of the saints are unhindered; they can visit everywhere, as often and whenever they wish," as we are told in the miracle story.[106]

CONCLUSION

This paper has followed a number of different paths to shed light on the role of landscape, space, and divine presence in Thekla's cult at Meriamlik, supplementing the literary perspectives with the archaeological remains at the site and the physical landscape around it. The landscape around Meriamlik is currently undergoing a rapid process of urbanization but it is still possible to observe how it contributed to the pilgrims' experience at Meriamlik and how the presence of Thekla was spatially embedded within her sanctuary through the elaborate staging of the cave church. The landscape perspective is important for understanding how Meriamlik succeeded in attracting visitors from different parts of the Mediterranean, and the careful planning of routes through the landscape and the heightened sense of expectation that features such as the rock-cut passage provided suggest that the sanctuary's architects carefully thought about these aspects and elaborated them in their development of the site. This should not surprise us given the spectacular layout and decoration of the site's churches, and is in line with other recent studies of later Christian pilgrimage that have emphasized the importance of the landscapes that pilgrims traveled

105. Yasin, *Saints and Church Spaces*, 157–71.
106. *Mir.* 26.4 (Johnson, 107).

through on their journeys as integral parts of the religious experience.[107] We have furthermore seen how features of the landscape, including earlier cults, were appropriated in order to carefully embed Thekla's cult within the territory of Seleukeia. Meriamlik is a suitable case to explore how the presence of a saint could be mediated at a site that seemingly did not possess any bodily relics. As such, it marks an interesting contrast to other important late antique pilgrimage sites in Asia Minor, such as Hierapolis, where recent Italian fieldwork has discovered a re-used Roman tomb that served as a central feature in the cult of St. Philip that is located on a hill immediately east of the city. Caves and other natural features in the immediate vicinity of Meriamlik may furthermore have had a very direct influence on the way that the Thekla narrative developed, and this deeply local sense of memory and perception of divine presence, shown to be evident also in the *Life and Miracles*, is crucial to understand the nature of her cult.

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107. See Simon Coleman and John Elsner, *Pilgrimage Past and Present: Sacred Travel and Sacred Space in the World Religions* (London: British Museum Press, 1995), 6–9; on the Camino, see Candy, *Archaeology of Pilgrimage*, and contributions in *On the Road to Being There: Studies in Pilgrimage and Tourism in Late Modernity,* ed. William H. Swatos, Jr. (Leiden: Brill, 2006).