



Pausanias at Sounion: why no mention of Poseidon?

Citation

Nagy, Gregory. 2020.06.12. "Pausanias at Sounion: why no mention of Poseidon?" Classical Inquiries. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries.

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Pausanias at Sounion: why no mention of Poseidon?

June 12, 2020 Posted By [Gregory Nagy](#) listed under [By Gregory Nagy](#)

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2020.06.12 | By [Gregory Nagy](#)

§0. At the very beginning of the Description of Greece as narrated by Pausanias (1.1.1), when the ship carrying our traveler approaches the east side of the *akrā* or 'headland' of Sounion, he must have been struck by the view of a magnificent temple situated at the highest point of the headland—a temple that archaeologists have identified as sacred to the god Poseidon, lord of the seas. The visual power of this view is evident from the photograph I show, where we see the temple of Poseidon as viewed from the east side of the headland. But why does Pausanias make no mention of Poseidon? My answer, in what follows, will require a shift in emphasis. What I really need to ask is this: why does Pausanias make no mention of Poseidon as a god who presides over the headland of Sounion? And the answer, I will argue, is that the god Poseidon is at least for the moment eclipsed, in the mind of Pausanias, by the goddess Athena.



Cape Sounion from the east. [Image](#) via Flickr, under a [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#) license. This image has been cropped from the original photo.

§1. But what is this moment? It happens, as I picture it, when the ship bringing our traveler has rounded the *akrā* or 'headland' of Sounion and is now making its way toward the nearby harbor, located on the west side of the headland. At this moment my mind's eye, as if it were a camera, zooms out, moving backward, backing away—far back enough to take in a full view, looking east, of the west side of this massive headland of Sounion, with its rugged profile defiantly jutting out into the turbulent seas that rage against it. What I imagine can be seen in this photograph of the west profile:

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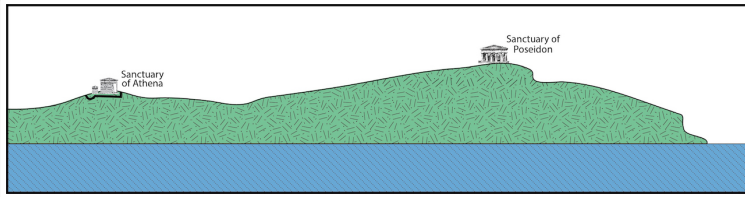
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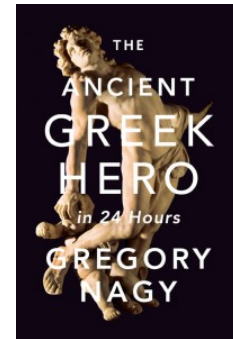
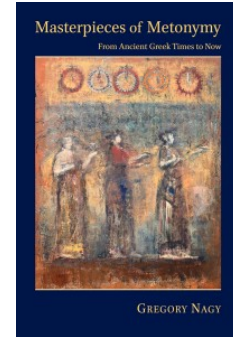
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Cape Sounion in profile. [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.



Drawing, by Jill Curry Robbins, of the profile of Cape Sounion.



§2. In this photograph of the west profile of Sounion, matched by the drawing underneath it, we can see at the right, which is south, the highest point of the headland, and, sitting on top of this point, this elevation, is the temple of Poseidon—or, to put it more broadly, the sanctuary of the god. Then there is a lower point, further to the left, that is, further to the north (more precisely, north-east), and, sitting on top of this lower point—but this point too is an elevation—is the sanctuary of Athena *Souniás*, as Pausanias refers to her. So, the goddess is, for Pausanias, ‘Our Lady of Sounion’. I have already commented, in [Nagy 2017.10.10](#), about the connections of Athena with the headland of Sounion in the thinking of Pausanias.

§3. But what about Poseidon? Why does Pausanias not refer to ‘Our Lord of Sounion’, as it were? The absence of any mention of the god in the description given by our traveler had led to the common assumption, shared even by James Frazer in his commentary on Pausanias (1913 2:2), that the temple of Poseidon, far better preserved than the temple of Athena *Souniás*, was really the temple of the goddess. As is evident, however, from the text of an inscription dating from around 460–450 BCE (*Inscriptiones Graecae* I³ 8), the temple that we still see today at the highest point of the headland has been identified, in the words of the archaeologist Barbara Barletta (2017:10) as “belonging not to Athena, as earlier believed, but to Poseidon.”

§4. It does not necessarily follow, however, that Pausanias made a mistake and wrongly identified the structure situated at the higher elevation, further south, with the real sanctuary of Athena, which was situated at the lower elevation, further north. There exist explanations that absolve Pausanias from having made such a mistake, and I recommend the relevant discussion of Barletta (2017:9–10), who surveys a wide variety of such explanations, with bibliography.

§5. I can agree with none of the explanations published so far. But I disagree only in one detail with the formulation of an archaeologist I knew in the early 1970s, John Young (1961), who has this to say in a terse abstract he published about the relevant testimony of Pausanias (1.1.1): “although the author did neglect to mention the temple of Poseidon, his location of the other points [that he did mention] is correct.” And the first two of the points highlighted by Young are the harbor at the west bay and the temple of Athena *Souniás*, sitting on the elevation overlooking the harbor. I do agree with Young that Pausanias was “correct” in saying as much as he said in his description. I show here a photograph of the west bay, as viewed from the elevation overlooking the harbor. It is on top of this elevation that the remains of the temple of Athena are still visible.

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The bay west of Cape Sounion. [Image](#) via Flickr, under a [CC BY-SA 2.0](#) license.

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§6. My one point of disagreement with the formulation of Young (1961) centers on his idea that Pausanias “neglected” Poseidon. Instead, as I already indicated at the beginning of my relevant comments here, I argue that the god Poseidon is at least for the moment eclipsed, in the mind of Pausanias, by the goddess Athena. It is not a matter of neglect. Rather, Pausanias prioritizes Athena in the context of her rivalry with Poseidon, a rivalry that can be viewed on the level of ritual, not only on the level of myth. There is a similar eclipse I see happening when Pausanias visits the Acropolis of Athens: at 1.26.5–6, his treatment of the old sanctuary of Athena *Poliás* eclipses his treatment of the adjacent sanctuary of Poseidon.

§7. For Poseidon to be eclipsed by Athena is not a matter of neglect on the part of the ancients who worshipped both these divinities. Rather, it is a matter of their recognizing, in ritual as well as in myth, the dominance of one divinity over another. It is a matter of picturing a sacred space that is shared by two such divinities, one of whom is dominant while the other is, by comparison, recessive. I will have more to say in later comments about such a pattern of sharing, such a condominium of sacred space.

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