

Ritual Consumption and Trash: A Beginners' Guide to Keeping a Sanctuary Tidy

The Panhellenic Sanctuary of Nemea continually needed up-keep and cleaning in preparation for the festival and games held every two years. This resulted in an archaeological deposition different than the consistent accumulation of layers of construction, destruction, or habitation seen at other types of sites. The sanctuary's activities contributed to constant changes to the site, which could scatter, obscure, or confuse the origin of deposits. Therefore, reconstructing activities at a sanctuary can be challenging. But at Nemea, a group of ten wells were built throughout the site that were not as easily cleaned. These wells, while providing water for a variety of functions, are also a set of relatively closed archaeological contexts that provide evidence for ritual consumption and a convenient location for the deposition of sanctuary trash.

While a similar approach to wells was recently used to explore the depositional process of votives at Olympia (Frielinghaus, 2016), the Nemean wells are unique as they can be studied as a set group to trace patterns and differences among them. Each well has its own narrative of construction and use shaped by its location within the sanctuary. They provide a different way to understand the sanctuary and the activities which took place there. For example, the well closest to the temple preserves evidence for the practice of recycling votives (Lindenlauf, 2003), while the wells in the middle of the sanctuary are characterized by evidence for sanctuary clean up. Not only do the artifacts from the wells offer different histories of the site, but the amount and type of faunal remains differ between the wells, usually corresponding to the closest building. While faunal remains have been studied at Nemea, the wells provided a context for the discussion of animal use beyond sacrifice (MacKinnon, 2013). The diversity of the wells at Nemea, both topographically and chronologically, provides the best evidence to reconstruct ritual and festival activities and routine sanctuary acts, like the maintenance of dedications and site cleaning.

This paper, which draws upon my dissertation conclusions, presents a close examination of the artifacts deposited in the wells that reveal changes in ritual consumption at Nemea from the Archaic/Classical to the Late Classical and Early Hellenistic periods. The preponderance of regionally-sourced drinking vessels is an Archaic period trend, while a resurgence of activity in the later 4th century BCE corresponds with more diverse sources of the commodities used at the site. The well assemblages also preserve decisions made by custodians regarding sanctuary cleanliness, essentially mapping different locations of trash receptacles. These wells are important loci for different activities that correspond with the surrounding architecture and provide a different way to trace ritual consumption, and they help to reconstruct the decisions made when keeping a sanctuary clean.

Bibliography

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