

A CITY ON A HILL CANNOT BE HIDDEN
FUNCTION AND SYMBOLISM OF ANCIENT GREEK *AKROPOLEIS*

Robin Rönnlund
Department of Historical Studies
Faculty of Arts
Gothenburg University



UNIVERSITY OF
GOTHENBURG

Academic dissertation in Classical Archaeology and Ancient History, to be publicly defended, by due permission of the dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Gothenburg, on December 17 2018, at 13:00, at the Department of Historical Studies, room 2150, Eklandagatan 86 , Gothenburg.

ABSTRACT

Title: *A city on a hill cannot be hidden: Function and symbolism of ancient Greek akropoleis*

Author: Robin Rönnlund

Language: English, with summaries in Swedish, Greek and Esperanto

Department: Department of Historical Studies, University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Akropoleis (sing. *akropolis*), fortified hilltops towering above the cities of Ancient Greece, are some of the most well-known features of Antiquity, but have never been studied systematically. The focus on the Athenian Akropolis and its architectural history has brought a scholarly understanding of these features that has little general relevance to the archaeology of the wider Greek world.

In this dissertation, I address the phenomenon of ancient Greek *akropoleis* by studying their function and symbolism from a diachronic perspective. I argue that 20th century uncritical readings of ancient sources produced now outdated historical models by which these features are still interpreted. This was done as scholars strived to harmonise the often-conflicting information in ancient literature into a comprehensible narrative.

By regarding *akropoleis* as diachronic monuments in the ancient landscape, I investigate how changes in the function of these features lead to changes in their symbolic meaning. I argue that by doing so, one can resolve the seemingly conflicting denotations and connotations of the word found in ancient literature and, at the same time, reconcile textual sources with archaeological evidence. Moving away from the question of “what is an *akropolis*?”, I instead establish what

reasonably might be identified as an *akropolis*. This is done through an analysis of the occurrence of the word ‘*akropolis*’ in ancient Greek textual sources from the Archaic period to the 2nd century CE. The result is a set of ‘essentials’, which assist in identifying sites in the archaeological record. The historical regions of Thessaly and Boeotia are my case areas, wherein I identify 39 *akropolis* sites.

The review of the ancient use of the word ‘*akropolis*’ shows that it was used both literally and figuratively in order to describe physical features and abstract phenomena. In contrast to common scholarly thought, *akropoleis* were seemingly not used as places of refuge in the Classical and Hellenistic periods. Instead, they appear from the late Classical period and onwards to mainly have housed foreign garrisons aiming at controlling the general population. Cultic functions of some *akropoleis* are evident, but this can only be ascertained from a surprisingly small number of sources. The review further shows that it was relatively common to use the word ‘*akropolis*’ to refer to qualities in things and persons, and that these qualities over time changed from being positive to overwhelmingly negative in nature.

The survey of the published archaeological material from Thessaly and Boeotia confirm and add to the picture in ancient sources. *Akropoleis* in these two regions are generally small and unsuitable as refuges for larger groups of people, but could function well as a base for an occupying force. Very little suggests any habitation at the locations, with the majority of remains being of a defensive nature. The fortifications are often of a conspicuous nature, indicating a secondary function of display.

The overall results of the study indicate that *akropoleis* originated in the formation of the early *polis* state and that they went from refuge sites for a non-urban population to being bases for the garrisons of expansionist leagues and kingdoms of the Hellenistic period. Throughout the period, it is evident that the initiators of the fortifications aimed at maximising their visibility in the landscape, often resorting to the construction of monumental walls. The change in function from protection to suppression, together with the ideological message signalled through monumental display, ultimately lead to the shift in connotations relating to *akropoleis*. On a wider scale, the results challenge many of the existing notions of early *polis* states and highlight the complex development of urbanism in Ancient Greece.

KEYWORDS: *akropolis*, citadel, hillfort, fortifications, *polis*, city state, Ancient Greece, archaeology, monumentality, Thessaly, Boeotia