

SOUNION REVISITED:
THE SANCTUARIES OF
POSEIDON AND ATHENA
AT SOUNION IN ATTICA

Zetta Theodoropoulou-Polychroniadis

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Cover illustration: lead miniature kouros, recovered from the artificial fill in the sanctuary of Athena Sounias;
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Table of Contents

Prologue	vii
Notes	ix
Acknowledgements	x
Introduction	1
Chapter 1	
Problems Arising from the Excavations of 1897–1915	3
Valerios Stais at Sounion	3
The bothroi deposits	4
Finds from the bothroi and landfills whose provenance can be ascertained from the reports	
of Stais	6
The sanctuary of Poseidon	6
The sanctuary of Athena	6
Chapter 2	
The History of Sounion and the Sanctuaries of Poseidon and Athena: Sources and Early Research	8
Literary and epigraphic evidence	8
Settlement and sanctuaries	10
The Latin testimonia	15
Early travellers and excavations before 1897	16
The excavations of Valerios Stais	17
The sanctuary of Poseidon	17
The sanctuary of Athena	21
The large temple	22
The small temple	22
The bothroi, landfills and their contents	23
The finds from the Poseidon bothros	24
The finds from the artificial fill and bothros in the Athena sanctuary	25
Chapter 3	
The Finds: Analysis and Discussion	29
Terracotta figurines (1–126)	29
Female figurines (1–45, 47–61, 63–73, 75)	29
Standing female figurines (42–45, 47–61, 63–66, 68–71)	29
Seated female figurines (67, 72–73)	33
Protomai (1–41, 75)	36
Male figurines (46, 62, 74, 76–81)	42
Standing male figurines (46, 62, 74–77)	42
Seated male figurines (78–80)	44
Other male figurines (81)	45
Heads and miscellaneous body parts (82–87)	45
Animals (88–126, 129)	46
Horses (92, 94–102, 104–113, 117–119, 124, 126)	47
Horses with riders (90–91, 93, 103)	50
Chariot groups (88–89)	51
Other animals (114–116, 120–125, 129)	52
Plastic vases (127, 128, 130–135)	53
Human figures (127, 134)	54
Animals (128, 130–133, 135)	56
Terracotta plaques (136–172)	58
Relief plaques (136–146)	58
Human figures (137, 139–144, 146)	58
Winged creatures (136, 138, 145)	63
Painted terracotta plaques (147–172)	64

Faience and imitations (173–181)	74
Human figures (173–178)	75
Animals (179–181)	77
Stone sculpture (182–215)	78
Human figures (182–195, 204–206)	79
Male and female body parts (183–194)	79
Child's hand (195)	81
Head of a female statuette (182)	82
Votive relief (206)	83
Folds of drapery (204–205)	83
Animals (196–197, 199–203)	84
Snakes (199a, b–203a, b)	84
Other animals (196–197)	85
Miscellaneous (198, 207–215)	85
Marble fragment of an inscribed moulding (207)	85
Fragments of branches/staffs (209–212)	86
Branch with coiled snake (198)	86
Weights (213–215)	87
Metalwork and jewellery (216–261)	87
Human subjects (216–218)	88
Animals (219–222)	90
Jewellery (223–241, 261)	92
Silver finger-rings (223, 225–228)	92
Lead finger-ring (224)	93
Bronze finger-rings (229–237)	93
Plain rings (231–237)	93
Spiral rings (229–230)	94
Earrings (238–240)	95
Bronze pin (241)	95
Cylindrical bead (261)	96
Weapons, utensils, <i>ex-votos</i> (242–260)	96
Swords (242–243)	96
Arrowheads (244–249)	98
Ex-voto spearheads (250–251)	99
Ex-voto double axes (252–253)	99
Punch (254)	100
Ex-voto shields (255–256)	101
Ex-voto phiale (257)	101
Ex-voto tripods (258, 259, 260a, 260b)	102
Chapter 4	
Cults and Cult-practices at Sounion	104
Attica, the Laureotike and Cape Sounion: the beginnings of cult activity	104
The earliest evidence for cult activity	105
Phrontis and hero cults	107
A rural shrine at Sounion	108
Reviewing the sanctuary of Athena	109
Discussing the finds from the sanctuary of Athena	112
Reviewing the sanctuary of Poseidon	118
Herakles and the Salaminioi	120
Discussing the finds from the sanctuary of Poseidon	122
A comparative discussion of cults and dedications at sanctuaries of Poseidon and Athena	127
Sanctuaries of Poseidon	129
Sanctuaries of Athena	132
Other attic sanctuaries	134
Remarks, conclusions and prospects	136
Catalogue of Objects (1–261)	145
Appendix A	
Greek and Latin Testimonia	242

Greek sources.....	242
Latin sources.....	255
Appendix B	
Pottery from the Bothroi and Artificial Fills	258
Corinthian pottery	260
Imitations of Corinthian pottery.....	263
Attic pottery.....	265
Laconian pottery	267
Selected illustrations	268
Appendix C	
Scarabs, Seals and Beads from the Sanctuaries	273
Selected illustrations	280
Bibliography of Works Cited and Consulted	281
Abbreviations	281
Ancient Greek and Latin authors	285
Greek authors	285
Latin authors	286
Modern references	286
Figures	304

List of Figures

Figure 1. Map of Attica (drawing P. Arvanitakis, 2012).....	304
Figure 2. The Laureotike and Cape Sounion (drawing P. Arvanitakis, 2012).	304
Figure 3. Promontory of Sounion: temple of Poseidon, view from the west (photo: author, September 2012).	305
Figure 4. Cape Sounion, plan of the two sanctuaries and the two harbours (drawing P. Arvanitakis, 2012).....	305
Figure 5. View of the temple of Poseidon at Sounion from the north-west. Albumenised salt-print from wet collodion glass plate negative by James Robertson, signed on the right, 1853–1854. 24.8x29.2 cm. Benaki Museum Photographic Archive, Athens (Constantinou and Tsigakou 1998, 128–29).	306
Figure 6. View of the temple of Poseidon at Sounion from the north-east. Albumenised salt-print from wet collodion glass plate negative by James Robertson, unsigned, 1853– 1854. 25.0x28.5 cm. Benaki Museum Photographic Archive, Athens (Constantinou and Tsigakou 1998, 130–31).....	306
Figure 7. Sanctuary of Poseidon. View of the Classical temple from south-west (photo: author, January 2015).	307
Figure 8. Sanctuary of Poseidon, plan of the monumental entrance (N.D. Ioannitis 1898, <i>AE</i> 1900, pl. 7).	307
Figure 9. North fortification wall of the sanctuary of Poseidon (photo: author, September 2012).....	308
Figure 10. Sanctuary of Poseidon. North fortification walls, tower and outer fortification walls (photo: author, January 2015).....	308
Figure 11. North wall of bastion on the eastern fortification wall at the sanctuary of Poseidon (photo: author, August 2008).....	309
Figure 12. Stoa and Propylaia of the sanctuary of Poseidon looking west (photo: author, August 2008).	309
Figure 13. South-east corner of Classical temple of Poseidon, Archaic remains and find spot of kouroi (photo: author, August 2008).	310
Figure 14. The bothros at the south-east corner of the sanctuary of Poseidon (photo: author, January 2009).....	310
Figure 15. Sanctuary of Poseidon. South colonnade of Classical temple, foundations of Archaic temple and east anta (photo: author, January 2015).	311
Figure 16. Plan of the Classical temple of Poseidon (drawing P. Arvanitakis, 2012).....	311
Figure 17. Plan of the sanctuary of Athena (A. Orlandos, <i>AE</i> 1917, 178).....	312
Figure 18a. Sanctuary of Athena looking north-east (photo: author, August 2008).	313
Figure 18b. Sanctuary of Athena looking north-east (photo: author, January 2015).	313
Figure 19. Remains of the oval enclosure at the sanctuary of Athena looking north-west (photo: author, January 2014).	314
Figure 20. Entranceway to the sanctuary of Athena looking west (photo: author, January 2014).....	314
Figure 21. Sanctuary of Athena: large temple looking west with base of cult statue in the background (photo: author, January 2014).....	315
Figure 22. Plan of the large temple at the sanctuary of Athena (A. Orlandos, <i>AE</i> 1917, 182).....	315
Figure 23. Sanctuary of Athena. South peristyle and cella wall of the large temple looking east (photo: author, January 2015).....	316
Figure 24. Reconstruction of the east elevation of the large temple of Athena (A.Orlandos, Stais 1920, pl.Δ).....	316
Figure 25. Plan of the small temple in the sanctuary of Athena (A. Orlandos, <i>AE</i> 1917, 180).....	317
Figure 26. View of the small temple, the large temple of Athena and the temple of Poseidon in the background (photo: author, January 2015).	317
Figure 27. Stone base of the cult statue in the small temple at the sanctuary of Athena (photo: author, August 2008).	318

Figure 28. Conjectural reconstruction of the east elevation façade of the small temple in the sanctuary of Athena (drawing P. Arvanitakis, 2012).	318
Figure 29. Sanctuary of Athena. Small temple and oval enclosure looking north west. (photo: author, January 2014).	319
Figure 30. (left) Base of the south Doric column of the small temple at the sanctuary of Athena (photo: author, August 2008).	319
Figure 31. (right) Base of the north Doric column of the small temple at the sanctuary of Athena (photo: author, August 2008).	319
Figure 32. (left) Doric capital from column of the small temple at the sanctuary of Athena (photo: author, August 2008).	319
Figure 33. The bothros, the eastern peribolos wall and the artificial fill looking north at the sanctuary of Athena (photo: author, January 2014).	320
Figure 34. The bothros with the rock hewn steps at the sanctuary of Athena (photo: author, August 2008).	320
Figure 35. Traces of the oval enclosure looking north-west (photo: author, January 2014).	321
Figure 36. Sanctuary of Athena. Small temple, large temple and oval enclosure in the background, looking south-west (photo: author, August 2008).	321
Figure 37. Sanctuary of Athena. Detail of the foundations at the south-east corner of the small temple (photo: author, January 2014).	322
Figure 38. Sanctuary of Athena. Detail of the marble threshold of the small temple (photo: author, August 2008).	322
Figure 39. Sanctuary of Athena. Foundations of altar in front of the small temple looking west (photo: author, January 2009).	323
Figure 40. Carbonised piece of wood, carbonized figs and three sherds including one Late Geometric, from Sounion. NMA 22552 (photo: author, November 2008).	323
Figure 41. Sanctuary of Athena. Bothros, east peribolos wall and propylon with east harbour in the background (photo: author, January 2015).	324
Figure 42. Sanctuary of Athena. Traces of a rectangular structure within the oval enclosure, looking east (photo: author, August 2008).	324
Figure 43. Sanctuary of Athena. East peristyle of large temple in foreground; possible altar and ‘hestiatorion’ in near background; temple of Poseidon in distance, looking south (photo: author, January 2009).	325
Figure 44. Sanctuary of Athena. Possible altar near large temple; looking east (photo: author, January 2009).	325
Figures 45 and 46. Sanctuary of Athena. Bases for awning posts on the levelled area west of the large temple (photo: author, January 2009).	326
Figure 47. (left) Sanctuary of Athena. Two bases <i>in situ</i> , possibly supporting an offering table; seen from the east (photo: author, January 2009).	326
Figure 48. (right) Sanctuary of Athena. Fragment of a base, possibly for an offering table (photo: author, January 2009).	326
Figure 49. (left) Sanctuary of Athena. Two bases, possibly supporting an offering table, and fragment of a third base; remnants of a wall from a structure; seen from the north-west (photo: author, September 2012).	327
Figure 50. Sanctuary of Poseidon. Classical temple and terrace wall of sanctuary, seen from the north-west (photo: author, January 2015).	327
Figure 51. Sanctuary of Poseidon. LM I lentoid seal (NMA 10297), found in the bothros (drawing P. Arvanitakis, 2012).	328
Figure 52. The fortified settlement on the promontory. Main east-west road and dwellings, looking west (photo: author, January 2015).	328
Figure 53. Sanctuary of Athena. Classical temple, hestiatorion and western harbour, looking north (photo: author, January 2014).	329
Figure 54. Sanctuary of Athena. Conjectural reconstruction. Phase 1: oval enclosure (isometric drawing P. Arvanitakis, 2012).	329
Figure 55. Sanctuary of Athena. Conjectural reconstruction. Phase 2: early shrine (isometric drawing P. Arvanitakis, 2012).	330

Figure 56. Sanctuary of Athena. Conjectural reconstruction. Phase 3: Archaic Doric temple and kouroi (isometric drawing P. Arvanitakis, 2012).....	330
Figure 57. Sanctuary of Athena. Conjectural reconstruction. Phase 4a: Archaic and Classical temples coexisting (isometric drawing P. Arvanitakis, 2012).....	331
Figure 58. Sanctuary of Athena. Conjectural reconstruction. Phase 4b: Classical temple (isometric drawing P. Arvanitakis, 2012).	331
Figure 59. Plan of the sanctuary of Poseidon (N.D. Ioannitis 1898, <i>AE</i> 1900, pl. 6).`	332
Figure 60. Sanctuary of Athena. Ridge cover tile LM 658 and fragment of a Doric capital echinus LM 1124, from the small temple (drawing P. Arvanitakis, 2012).	332
Figure 61. Sanctuary of Athena. Architectural details from the Classical temple (N.D. Ioannitis 1898, <i>AE</i> 1900, pl. 9).	333
Figure 62. Sanctuary of Athena. Western peribolos wall of oval enclosure. (photo: author, January 2014).	333

Note: All black and white photographs in Chapter 3 are by Vassilis Stamatopoulos, with the exception of **183–215**, which were photographed by Dr K.-V. von Eickstedt. Photographs of objects **62, 73, 133, 136, 138, 139, 140, 142–150, 154, 156, 158, 161, 162, 172-180, 182, 187, 192, 193, 206, 216, 218, 223-228, 254** and **22432**, are by Elias Eliades. All ultraviolet (UV) and raking light photographs are by Erietta Attali (1999). Additionally, plaques **146, 155, 156, 164, 165, 166, 163, 168**, were photographed with ultraviolet (UV) and raking light by Elias Eliades, who also digitally enhanced all the images published in this book. All photographs in the List of Figures are by the author, unless otherwise stated.

Prologue

This book presents unpublished small finds of different categories and materials discovered in the bothroi (pit-deposits) and the landfills in the sanctuaries of Poseidon and Athena at Sounion, excavated by Valerios Stais in the years 1897–1915. It re-examines the two sanctuaries and the structures within them in order to provide context for the material presented. The work offers a catalogue of small finds and then interprets and assesses them in terms of their contribution to the understanding of early cults at the two Sounion sanctuaries. The overall organisation and content of this book are those of my PhD thesis, awarded in 2010 by King’s College London, and now suitably recast and updated.

Within the two sanctuaries Stais discovered a large quantity of material of great importance, notably impressive Archaic and Classical sculptures (such as a number of Archaic kouroi and korai) and architectural elements. Indeed the wealth of material from surveys and excavations undertaken in the sanctuaries of Poseidon and Athena at Sounion during the 19th and 20th centuries has led scholars such as C. Rhomaios, G. Richter, I. Sakellarakis, G. Hanfmann, Sir John Boardman and P. Calligas, among others, to extract for publication either single important finds or a homogeneous group of objects — the publication of the Archaic kouroi by G. Papathanassopoulos is a case in point. The monumental Archaic sculpture, the reliefs and the architectural spolia are not discussed here in detail. They have received considerable scholarly attention, and have been thoroughly studied and published already. Reference to as many as possible of these publications will be given in this book where appropriate. Naturally these major objects have tended to overshadow the plentiful small finds: as yet no publication has drawn together the small artefacts of various materials found in reasonably definable contexts, nor have they been previously studied in depth.

Permission to study and publish the material from the bothroi and the landfills from both sanctuaries presented by Stais in AE 1917, was granted to me in 1990 by the National Archaeological Museum, Athens, and with the consent of the Archaeological Society at Athens, after Charikleia Lanara, who in 1984 had started postgraduate work on this material under Professor V. Lambrinoudakis, joined the Archaeological Service. At that time, I was generously provided with photographs of some of the finds. Their effective use was, however, curtailed by the difficulty of securely reconciling the old numbering system of the objects with the NMA’s new index. Moreover the photographs were of groups rather than individual objects, and without a scale. In the following years I was able to study and record a substantial number of objects, some of which had never before been catalogued. In 1999, the late Eos Zervoudaki, the then Director of the NMA, drew my attention to a tray recovered during the re-arrangement of the Museum’s store rooms, which held 28 terracotta plaques, mostly fragmentary, of which 24 were painted and four in low relief. The importance of these significant uncatalogued finds and their poor state made it imperative to arrange for their recording by UV and raking light photography, in order to unravel their depictions, some invisible to the naked eye. A resumed study of this important group of finds with more advanced equipment, aiming to reveal more information, is currently in process. The Athens earthquake of September 1999 caused serious structural damage to the Museum, resulting in its immediate closure. The Vase Collection re-opened only in 2005. The stores were finally re-arranged and access was first allowed to researchers late in 2008, but with severe limitations, which have constrained certain aspects of the way in which objects have been recorded here.

In view of the quantity and diversity of the material, which could not be treated in its entirety within the confines of a single monograph, its occasionally repetitive nature, the lack of information from the excavator in his brief reports regarding the exact provenance of many objects, as well as the complete omission from these reports of nearly half the material, I have elected to present here a selected but representative group of finds. Consequently, the Catalogue and discussion focus on 274 small finds of various materials from the two bothroi and the artificial fills, which are presented in 261 catalogue entries. Three groups of circa 560 small finds are not fully discussed in this publication. One is the pottery, the provenance of which is not securely documented. However, a selection of representative groups of vases is listed in Appendix B. The second group comprises the seals, scarabs and beads. Information on this material was briefly given by Stais, as discussed in Chapter 2, and 16 stone seals

were published by Sir John Boardman in 1963. Consequently these seals are not discussed further. Some scarabs are exhibited, but most are kept in the NMA safe to which I had no access until recently: a thorough study at this late stage was not feasible. As a result, only a selection of representative material (scarabs, scaraboids and beads) can therefore be listed in Appendix C. Appendices B and C do nonetheless help give a somewhat fuller picture of the excavated material.

Finally, the third group consists of several boxes in the NMA stores, which had not been opened, catalogued or conserved since Stais had them transferred there. I have recently been given access to them: they contain unrecorded bronze and mainly iron finds from the two sanctuaries.

A systematic study of the 100 or so metal artefacts mentioned above, as well as the nearly 460 items of pottery, scarabs, seals and beads, some of which are only summarised in the appendices here, is underway and the material will be published in the very near future.

My decision to use throughout the text, the term ‘bothros’, as defined by Ekroth, is justified, especially in the case of the Athena sanctuary, by the ‘undamaged offerings’ and the structure in which they were stored, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 4. The fact that the natural triangular fissure in the rock at the Poseidon sanctuary stored the kouros fragments might reflect the impact of Persian vandalism of sacred images. A second ‘bothros’ outside the old polygonal wall at the sanctuary of Poseidon, as mentioned in Chapter 2, filled with offerings of the late 8th to the early 5th centuries BC, may allude to an early cult as discussed in Chapter 4.

This book, then, comprises four chapters, a detailed catalogue of objects and three appendices. Their organisation is as follows:

Chapter 1 deals with Stais’ excavations, their aims and extent, with particular reference concerning the limitation of site recording. In Chapter 2, the historical information on Sounion is presented together with the sanctuaries. It is derived mainly from literary evidence and inscriptions, discussion of the excavations prior to 1897, and an interpretation of Stais’ reports on the excavated sites of both sanctuaries and their finds. These discussions refer in detail to the source of the material, the two bothroi, the fills and their finds. Chapter 3 includes stylistic analysis of the material and discussion according to subject matter or category. In Chapter 4, a synthesis of the material dealt with in this book leads to conclusions on the establishment and development of the two sanctuaries and the factors that made Sounion a vital part of Athenian territory, while comparisons are made with other relevant sanctuaries in Attica and elsewhere. A review of the physical remains, as well as of the dating, provenance and interpretation of the finds sets early cults into context, while an attempt to link these cults with specific documented and undocumented finds reveals the identity of deities worshipped in both sanctuaries. Patterns of socio-economic growth and the identity of the dedicators at both sanctuaries are presented.

A Catalogue of Objects precedes Appendix A which lists virtually all the Greek and Latin testimonia on Sounion with translations; the content of Appendices B and C has already been mentioned above.

Serious questions about the topography and especially the early cults on the promontory of Sounion have repeatedly been raised. Therefore, it has been essential to examine the primary records of the sole main excavations undertaken by Stais, where they survive, in an attempt to provide answers. It is, however, important to emphasise that many questions continue to remain unanswered: the need for further fieldwork at both sanctuary sites is self-evident.

Notes

Numbers in **bold** within the text correspond to the numbering of the finds in the Catalogue of Objects.

Numbers in ***bold and italics*** within the text correspond to the numbering of Greek and Latin testimonia cited in Appendix A.

Surface A refers to the surface of a painted plaque on which the assumed main theme is depicted.

Surface B refers to the surface of a painted plaque on which the assumed secondary theme is depicted, if any.

Under ‘Metalwork and Jewellery’ in Chapter 3, as well as in the Catalogue of Objects, the term bronze is generally used for various metal objects which are copper-based alloys. The results of XRF spectrometry, and thus their actual composition, will be presented in a second volume to be published in the near future.

Dimensions are given in metres, centimetres or millimetres as appropriate.

H = Height, L= Length, D = Depth or thickness, W=Width.

NMA: National Archaeological Museum, Athens.

PAE: *Πρακτικά της εν Αθήναις Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας.*

AE: *Αρχαιολογική Εφημερίς.*

AD: *Αρχαιολογικόν Δελτίον.*

Some facts and details, which the present author considers to be of relevance to the development of the subject, are unavoidably repeated in various sections of the book.

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Introduction

Valerios Stais was the first excavator to systematically reveal the two sanctuaries at Sounion, those of Poseidon and of Athena. Stais also discovered a large number of finds of great importance, such as the Archaic kouros, as well as numerous small finds in two bothroi, one in each sanctuary, in an artificial fill from the Athena sanctuary and in an extensive landfill inside the temenos of Poseidon, which he investigated thoroughly in the hope of finding more architectural parts.¹ These small finds were not studied in depth, as their importance was overshadowed by the discovery both of impressive Archaic sculpture and of the sanctuary of Athena, which, until Stais' excavations, had been wrongly located at the site of the sanctuary of Poseidon.

Stais reported² that he had started excavations at the promontory to recover whatever could be salvaged from the temple of 'Athena'. He and his predecessors had based their assumptions about the god to whom the once great temple on the promontory had been dedicated on the testimony of Pausanias (51, 52; see Appendix A). Indeed he added that had he paid more attention to Scylax (21), he would not have made this error. Stais' discovery³ in 1898 on the promontory of a military decree of the early 3rd century BC, praising the *strategos* Kephisodotos of the Acharneans for his services and indicating that it was to be placed in the sanctuary of Poseidon, confirmed that the Classical temple on the promontory had been dedicated to Poseidon and not to Athena. Having excavated in 1900 the site on a low hill to the north-east and very close to the sanctuary of Poseidon, Stais was left in no doubt that here was indeed the sanctuary of Athena. He noted that an 'obscure and somewhat inaccurate passage' in Vitruvius (71) refers to the larger of the two temples, which he found at that sanctuary, as that of Athena.

Stais' work in both sanctuaries was considered one of the major excavations of the time and was largely funded by the Archaeological Society at Athens. The material was finally stored in the National Archaeological Museum, Athens (NMA). A certain number of finds are presently displayed in the Vase Collection of the Museum. A substantial number of the items that I have catalogued and studied are in the Museum storerooms, and yet others had been transferred to the Museum safe during a previous re-arrangement of the Vase Collection. A small representative group of these objects, consisting of votive weapons, *protomai* and various clay figurines, seals and scarabs, clay plaques etc., had been exhibited in case 45 following the re-arrangement of the displays in 1991. The closure of the NMA in 1999 for structural repairs and a further re-arrangement of the exhibits have again affected the display of the material from Sounion, which is now in room 52 (case 55). Fortunately, there has been no change in the numbering of individual objects. It is worth noting that the majority of small offerings had been catalogued in groups according to material. Thus groups of objects, such as clay plaques or animal figurines, were given single numbers in the NMA inventory.

The purpose here is to analyse stylistically selected material from the two bothroi and the artificial fills, date it and evaluate it in terms of its find context, and to consider the cults practised at the two sanctuaries. To effect a secure dating of many objects requires good evidence of their provenance. Unfortunately, the excavator provides very little information on this subject. The exact find spot can be ascertained for only 120 objects out of the 261 catalogue entries (though certain entries encompass two or more items). A lack of contextual information from the excavations conducted in the 19th and early 20th centuries is a familiar phenomenon, as is emphasised in publications of sites such as the sanctuary of Artemis Mounychia in Piraeus,⁴ the early pyres from the *telesterion* at Eleusis,⁵ to name but a few. The diversity of the material from both bothroi and the artificial fills, the quantity of objects excavated, but most importantly the lack of site notebooks makes it impossible to ascertain the exact provenance of a large number of objects. It must be stressed here that the lack or possibly loss of the excavator's site notebooks has been confirmed by members of his family.

¹ Stais 1917, 188.

² Stais 1900a, 133–134.

³ *IG II² 1270*, a stele of Pentelic marble, first published by the excavator: Stais 1900a, 132–134.

⁴ Palaiokrassa 1991, 42–43.

⁵ Kokkou-Viridi 1999, 50.

The original context of use and/or deposition of these objects is equally hard to reconstruct, especially in the case of the Athena Sounias sanctuary, as they were found in secondary deposition in the artificially levelled area, east of the Classical temple of Athena and in the layer above the bothros near the temple's south-east corner. It is therefore impossible to present the material by context, so instead it has been divided by material and type, noting that the majority of objects can be dated within the 7th and 6th centuries BC.

Nevertheless, important questions of context remain. In particular, the original purpose of the bothros in the Athena sanctuary has been open to question because of its 'unusually careful' construction and the deposition of the objects discovered in the years 1907, 1909, 1911 and 1912. Close study is therefore required, with emphasis upon the individual objects, to cast light on the circumstances that caused them to be carefully 'stored' in the bothros. Additionally, comparisons to similar assemblages deriving from sanctuaries whose deities have been securely identified and which provide better dated contexts, are offered in Chapter 4.