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The Climb to the Top

Joey Szczebak, Marine Biology '09

Today, the aura of the divine rests in the skies for many prominent religions and cultures. Such a notion radiated from an ancient sensation associating the locale of the gods and spirits within the unreachable blue abyss above our heads. Such a theory is unmistakable in the ancient art and sculpture worldwide depicting gods as aerial beings, such as Egypt's Horus, the falcon king of the earth (Stokstad 56), and Greece's Nike of Samothrace (c. 190 BCE) depicting Athena with beautifully robust and outstretched wings (Stokstad 175). More impressive than the nearly universal location of the ultimate reigning authority is the physical human attempt to reach this destination. Across the spectrum of ancient worldly cultures, art and architecture divulge the mortal effort of man to increase his proximity to the gods above.

One prominent technique in the divine climb was the construction of temples and tombs designed to access the skies, serving as physical and spiritual representations of a closer bond between mortality and divinity. The Sumerian culture of the ancient Near East amassed profound stepped pyramid structures adorned with shrines for ceremonies and offerings. Near Eastern ziggurats functioned not only as a physical step closer to the divine, but also as a metaphorical bridge connecting humans and the heavens (Stokstad 30). Ur's Nanna Ziggurat (c. 2,100-2,050 BCE), dedicated to the moon god Nanna, resembles a manmade mountain chain reaching for the skies with either end converging towards the center forming an alpha peak embracing the remains of an elaborate shine (Stokstad 32). Finally, in Egypt, underground funerary structures were crowned with geometrically brilliant granite and limestone pyramids piercing the skies above. The Great Pyramids at Giza (c. 2,601-2,515 BCE) form three mountainous memorials penetrating up to 450 feet in the air, leaving no questions about the desire to remember their kings' link to divinity (Stokstad 63).

The "bridge" from man to god was not restricted to architecture alone; this connection was also employed in non-inhabitable structures and sculptures throughout history. Rome's Column of Trajan (c. ~117 CE), standing 98 feet high and depicting a winding 625 feet of relief, imparts a proud narrative of the Dacian military operation under Trajan (Stokstad 228). Interestingly, the sequential illustrative account coils upward into the sky almost as if reaching toward the gods in acknowledgement of their indispensable contributions to success. Lastly, as the narrative progresses, Trajan compiles uncontestable victories, physically bringing him closer to his gods.

Other cultures preferred using their precipitous landscape to their advantage. The hills and mountains of Greece provided for prestigious and fortified temples and shrines for the Greek cultures and their Aegean predecessors. The Aegean citadel of Mycenae (c. 1,600-1,200 BCE), situated atop a voluptuous Greek hillside, is speckled with beehive burial tombs, conical shaped corbel vaults of volcanic ashlar (Stokstad 105-107). Such structures seem to serve as outstretched fingers protruding from the hillside-hand, bringing the dead closer to their gods. Borrowing from Aegean customs, ancient Greek cultures extended the application of mountain heights to their honorary architecture by

constructing monumental temples devoted to their dramatic and emotional gods. The Tholos Sanctuary of Athena Pronaia in Delphi (c. 400 BCE) is one of the highest affixed mountainside structures in Greece (Stokstad 159). While the function of this sanctuary is unknown, its high altitude location suggests a towering dominance and a desire for more personal communication with Athena.

Not all ancient cultures left behind relics affirming a desired assent. The prehistoric European clans and tribes provided little convincing evidence of a strong allegiance to the divine. While some sculpted figurines of fleshy women or man-animal hybrids may suggest a fertility goddess or a worshiped higher being, nothing seems to point to the sky. This situation may be the result of a more natural and earth-based worship, as one could conclude from the cave paintings of Lascaux and countless animal themed artwork.

Religion has been woven into the fabric of societies past and present, and the human desire to reach out to the divine is a very important component of society. The preserved art and architecture from around the world bestows a comprehensive conceptual understanding of the human yearning to connect to the sky with religious intent. Furthermore, this comprehension reinforces the facility for cross-cultural and historical connections involving man's climb to the top.

Work Cited

- Stokstad, Marilyn. *Art History*. Vol. 1. Rev. 2nd ed.New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc., 2005.