

CHRISTIAN
NORBERG-SCHULZ

GENIUS LOCI

TOWARDS A
PHENOMENOLOGY OF
ARCHITECTURE

RIZZOLI
NEW YORK

processes of settling; and dwelling, in the existential sense of the word, depends on these functions. Heidegger illustrates the problem by means of the bridge; a "building" which visualizes, symbolizes and gathers, and makes the environment become a unified whole. Thus he says: "The bridge swings over the stream with ease and power. It does not just connect banks that are already there, the banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. The bridge designedly causes them to lie across from each other. One side is set off against the other by the bridge. Nor do the banks stretch along the stream as indifferent border strips of the dry land. With the banks, the bridge brings to the stream the one and the other expanse of the landscape lying behind them. It brings stream and bank and land into each other's neighborhood. The bridge gathers the earth as landscape around the stream"³⁴. Heidegger also describes what the bridge gathers and thereby uncovers its value as a symbol. We cannot here enter into these details, but want to emphasize that the landscape as such gets its value through the bridge. Before, the meaning of the landscape was "hidden", and the building of the bridge brings it out into the open. "The bridge gathers Being into a certain "location" that we may call a "place". This "place", however, did not exist as an entity before the bridge (although there were always many "sites" along the river-bank where it could arise), but comes-to-presence with and as the bridge"³⁵. The existential purpose of building (architecture) is therefore to make a site become a place, that is, to uncover the meanings potentially present in the given environment.

The structure of a place is not a fixed, eternal state. As a rule places change, sometimes rapidly. This does not mean, however, that the *genius loci* necessarily

changes or gets lost. Later we shall show that *taking place* presupposes that the places conserve their identity during a certain stretch of time. *Stabilitas loci* is a necessary condition for human life. How then is this stability compatible with the dynamics of change? First of all we may point out that any place ought to have the "capacity" of receiving different "contents", naturally within certain limits³⁶. A place which is only fitted for one particular purpose would soon become useless. Secondly it is evident that a place may be "interpreted" in different ways. To protect and conserve the *genius loci* in fact means to concretize its essence in ever new historical contexts. We might also say that the history of a place ought to be its "self-realization". What was there as possibilities at the outset, is uncovered through human action, illuminated and "kept" in works of architecture which are simultaneously "old and new"³⁷. A place therefore comprises properties having a varying degree of invariance. In general we may conclude that *place* is the point of departure as well as the goal of our structural investigation; at the outset place is presented as a given, spontaneously experienced totality, at the end it appears as a structured world, illuminated by the analysis of the aspects of space and character.

3. The Spirit of Place

Genius loci is a Roman concept. According to ancient Roman belief every "independent" being has its *genius*, its guardian spirit. This spirit gives life to people and places, accompanies them from birth to death, and determines their character or essence. Even the gods had their *genius*, a fact which illustrates the fundamental nature of the concept³⁸. The *genius* thus denotes what a thing is, or what it "wants to be", to use a word

of Louis Kahn. It is not necessary in our context to go into the history of the concept of *genius* and its relationship to the *daimon* of the Greeks. It suffices to point out that ancient man experienced his environment as consisting of definite characters. In particular he recognized that it is of great existential importance to come to terms with the *genius* of the locality where his life takes place. In the past survival depended on a "good" relationship to the place in a physical as well as a psychic sense. In ancient Egypt, for instance, the country was not only cultivated in accordance with the Nile floods, but the very structure of the landscape served as a model for the lay-out of the "public" buildings which should give man a sense of security by symbolizing an eternal environmental order³⁹.

During the course of history the *genius loci* has remained a living reality, although it may not have been expressively named as such. Artists and writers have found inspiration in local character and have "explained" the phenomena of everyday life as well as art, referring to landscapes and urban milieus. Thus Goethe says: "It is evident, that the eye is educated by the things it sees from childhood on, and therefore Venetian painters must see everything clearer and with more joy than other people"⁴⁰.

Still in 1960 Lawrence Durrell wrote: "As you get to know Europe slowly, tasting the wines, cheeses and characters of the different countries you begin to realize that the important determinant of any culture is after all the spirit of place"⁴¹.

Modern tourism proves that the experience of different places is a major human interest, although also this value today tends to get lost. In fact modern man for a long time believed that science and technology had freed him from a direct dependence on places⁴².



This belief has proved an illusion; pollution and environmental chaos have suddenly appeared as a frightening nemesis, and as a result the problem of place has regained its true importance.

We have used the word "dwelling" to indicate the total man-place relationship. To understand more fully what this word implies, it is useful to return to the distinction between "space" and "character". When man dwells, he is simultaneously located in space and exposed to a certain environmental character. The two psychological functions involved, may be called "orientation" and "identification"⁴³. To gain an existential foothold man has to be able to orientate himself; he has to know *where* he is. But he also has to identify himself with the environment, that is, he has to know *how* he is in a certain place.

The problem of orientation has been given a considerable attention in recent theoretical literature on planning and architecture. Again we may refer to the work of Kevin Lynch, whose concepts of "node", "path" and "district" denote the basic spatial structures which are the object of man's orientation. The perceived interrelationship of these elements constitute an "environmental image", and Lynch asserts: "A good environmental image gives its possessor an important sense of emotional security"⁴⁴. Accordingly all cultures have developed "systems of orientation", that is, "spatial structures which facilitate the development of a good environmental image". "The world may be organized around a set of focal points, or be broken into named regions, or be linked by remembered routes"⁴⁵. Often these systems of orientation are based on or derived from a given natural structure. Where the system is weak, the image-making becomes difficult, and man feels "lost". "The terror of being lost comes from the necessity that a mobile or-

means that the everyday life-world has become "gewohnt" or "habitual". But gathering is a concrete phenomenon, and thus leads us to the final connotation of "dwelling". Again it is Heidegger who has uncovered a fundamental relationship. Thus he points out that the Old English and High German word for "building", *buan*, meant to dwell, and that it is intimately related to the verb *to be*. "What then does *ich bin* mean? The old word *bauen*, to which the *bin* belongs, answers: *ich bin, du bist*, mean: I dwell, you dwell. The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on earth, is *buan*, dwelling"⁵⁵. We may conclude that dwelling means to gather the world as a concrete building or "thing", and that the archetypal act of building is the *Umfriedung* or enclosure. Trakl's poetic intuition of the inside-outside relationship thus gets its confirmation, and we understand that our concept of *concretization* denotes the essence of dwelling⁵⁶.

Man dwells when he is able to concretize the world in buildings and things. As we have mentioned above, "concretization" is the function of the work of art, as opposed to the "abstraction" of science⁵⁷. Works of art concretize what remains "between" the pure objects of science. Our everyday life-world *consists of* such "intermediary" objects, and we understand that the fundamental function of art is to gather the contradictions and complexities of the life-world. Being an *imago mundi*, the work of art helps man to dwell. Hölderlin was right when he said: "Full of merit, yet poetically, man dwells on this earth".

This means: man's merits do not count much if he is unable to dwell *poetically*, that is, to dwell in the true sense of the word. Thus Heidegger says: "Poetry

does not fly above and surmount the earth in order to escape it and hover over it. Poetry is what first brings man into the earth, making him belong to it, and thus brings him into dwelling"⁵⁸. Only poetry in all its forms (also as the "art of living") makes human existence meaningful, and *meaning* is the fundamental human need.

Architecture belongs to poetry, and its purpose is to help man to dwell. But architecture is a difficult art. To make practical towns and buildings is not enough. Architecture comes into being when a "total environment is made visible", to quote the definition of Susanne Langer⁵⁹. In general, this means to concretize the *genius loci*. We have seen that this is done by means of buildings which gather the properties of the place and bring them close to man. The basic act of architecture is therefore to understand the "vocation" of the place. In this way we protect the earth and become ourselves part of a comprehensive totality. What is here advocated is not some kind of "environmental determinism". We only recognize the fact that man *is* an integral part of the environment, and that it can only lead to human alienation and environmental disruption if he forgets that. To belong to a place means to have an existential foothold, in a concrete everyday sense. When God said to Adam: "You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the Earth"⁶⁰; he put man in front of his most basic problem: to cross the threshold and regain the lost place.

1. The Phenomena of Natural Place

To be able to dwell between heaven and earth, man has to "understand" these two elements, as well as their interaction. The word "understand" here does not mean scientific knowledge; it is rather an existential concept which denotes the experience of *meanings*. When the environment is meaningful man feels "at home". The places where we have grown up are such "homes"; we know exactly how it feels to walk on that particular ground, to be under that particular sky, or between those particular trees; we know the warm all-embracing sunshine of the South or the mysterious summer nights of the North. In general we know "realities" which carry our existence. But "understanding" goes beyond such immediate sensations. From the beginning of time man has recognized that nature consists of interrelated elements which express fundamental aspects of being. The landscape where he lives is not a mere flux of phenomena, it has structure and embodies meanings. These structures and meanings have given rise to mythologies (cosmogonies and cosmologies) which have formed the basis of dwelling¹. A phenomenology of natural place ought to take these mythologies as its point of departure. In doing this, we do not have to re-tell the tales, rather we should ask which concrete categories of understanding they represent.

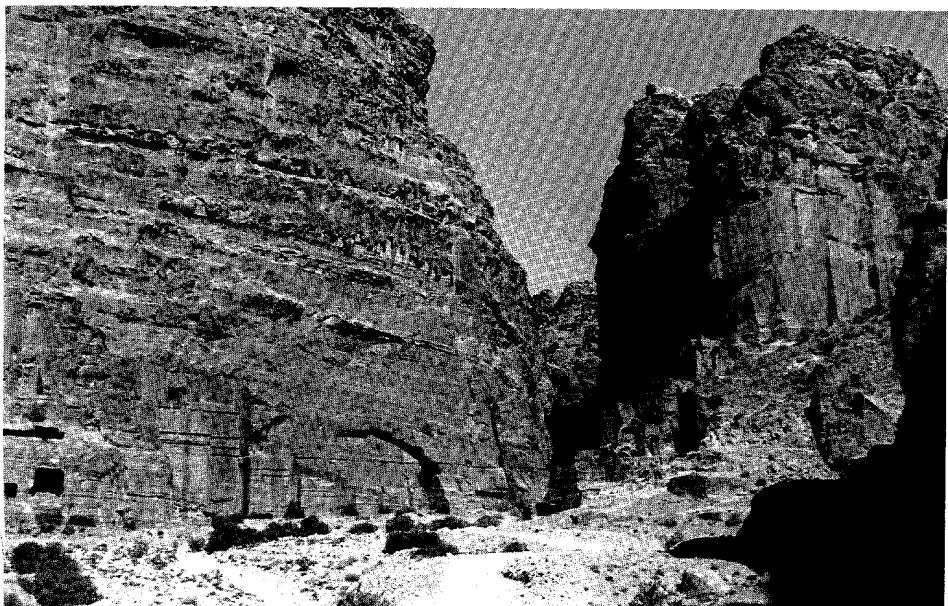
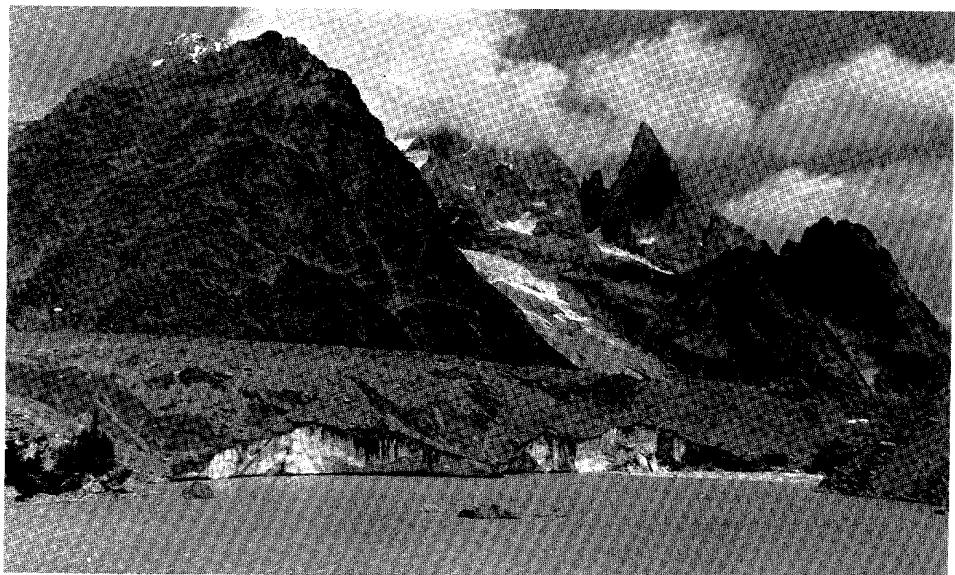
In general any understanding of the natural environment grows out of a primeval experience of nature as a multitude of living "forces". The world is experienced as a "Thou" rather than an "it"². Man was thus imbedded in nature and dependent upon the natural forces. The growth of man's mental faculties proceeds from the grasping of such diffuse qualities, into more articulate experiences where the parts and the interrelationships within the totality

26. Monte Bianco.
 27. Vesuvio.
 28. Rocks at Petra, Jordan.

are understood. This process may happen in different ways according to the local environment, and it does not mean that the world loses its concrete, live character. Such a loss implies pure *quantification*, and is thus linked with the modern scientific attitude³. We may distinguish between five basic modes of mythical understanding, which have different weight in different cultures.

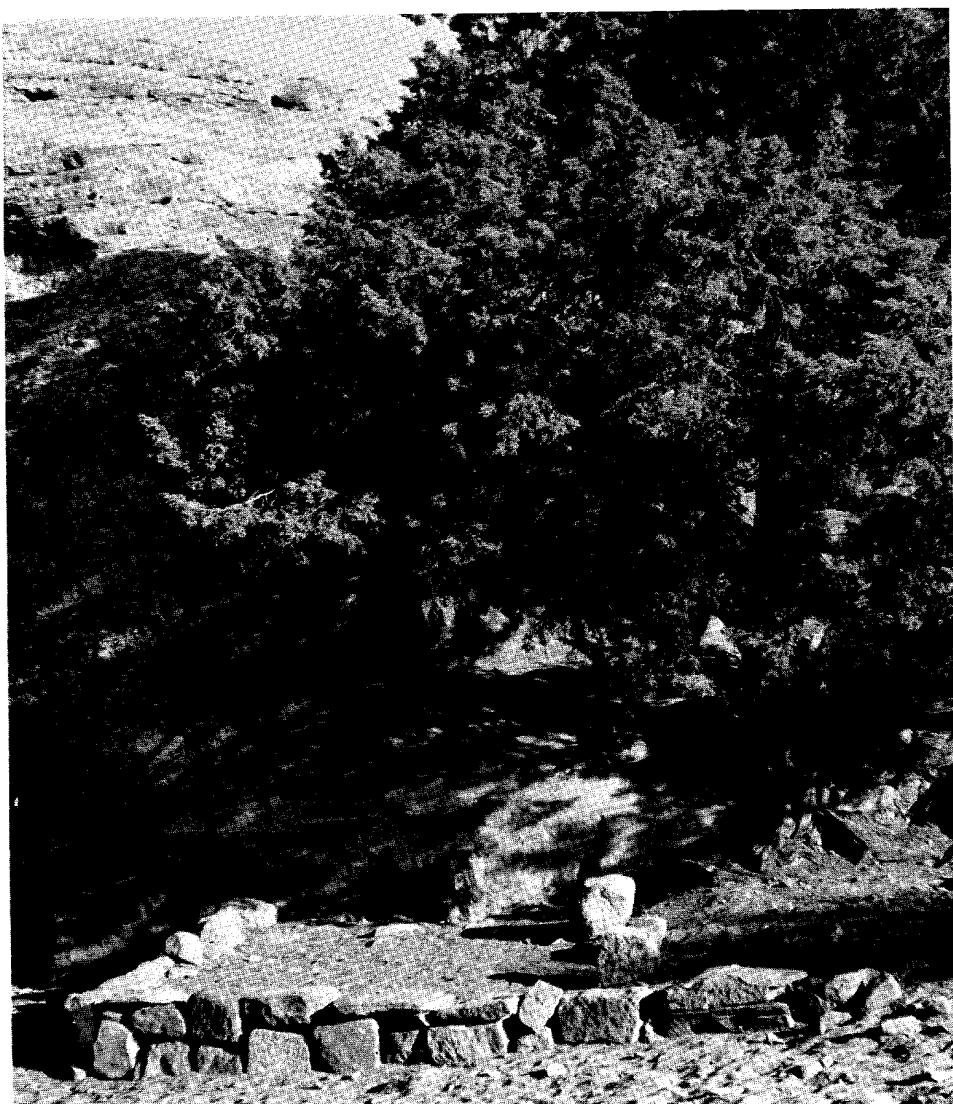
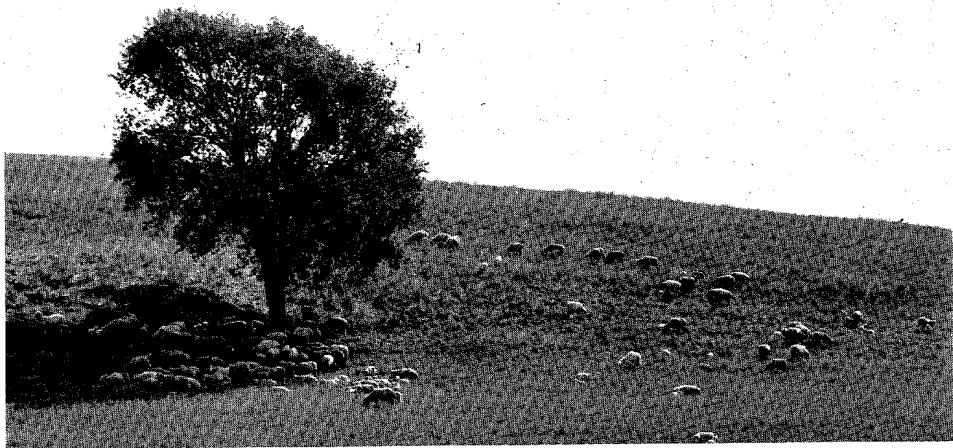
The first mode of natural understanding takes the forces as its point of departure and relates them to concrete natural elements or "things"⁴. Most ancient cosmogonies concentrate on this aspect and explain how "everything" has come into being. Usually creation is understood as a "marriage" of *heaven* and *earth*. Thus Hesiod says: "Earth (Gaia) first of all gave birth to a being equal to herself, who could overspread her completely, the starry heaven (Ouranos)...".⁵ This primeval couple generated the gods and the other mythical creatures, that is, all those "forces" which make up the "multifarious in-between". A similar image is found in Egypt where the world was represented as a "space" between heaven (Nut) and earth (Geb); the only difference being that the sexes of the two elements are here exchanged. The earth is the "servant bearer" from which life emerges, the very foundation of existence (*tellus mater*). The sky, instead, is something "high" and inaccessible. Its shape is described by "the vaulting path of the sun", and its properties in general are experienced as transcendence, order and creative power (rain). The sky primarily has "cosmic" implications, whereas the earth may satisfy man's need for protection and intimacy. At the same time, however, the earth constitutes the extended ground on which his actions take place.

The marriage between heaven and earth forms the point of departure for the



29. *The Roman campagna.*

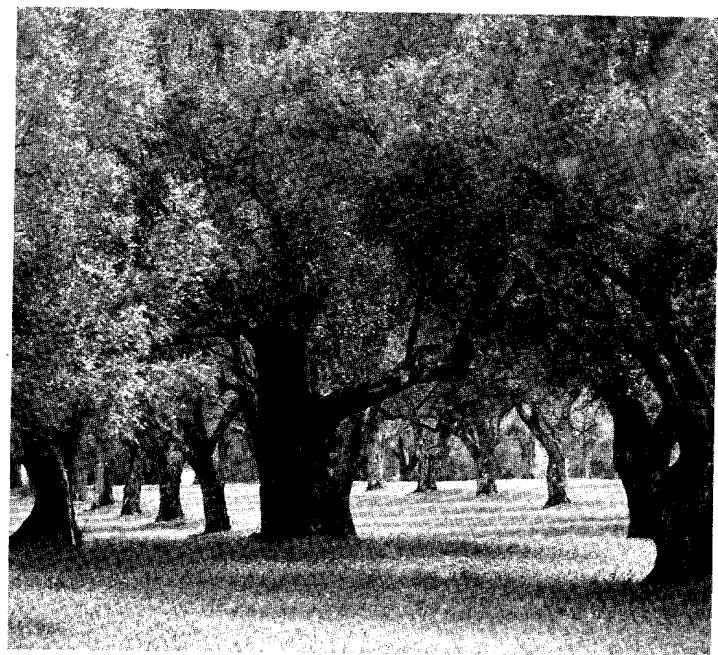
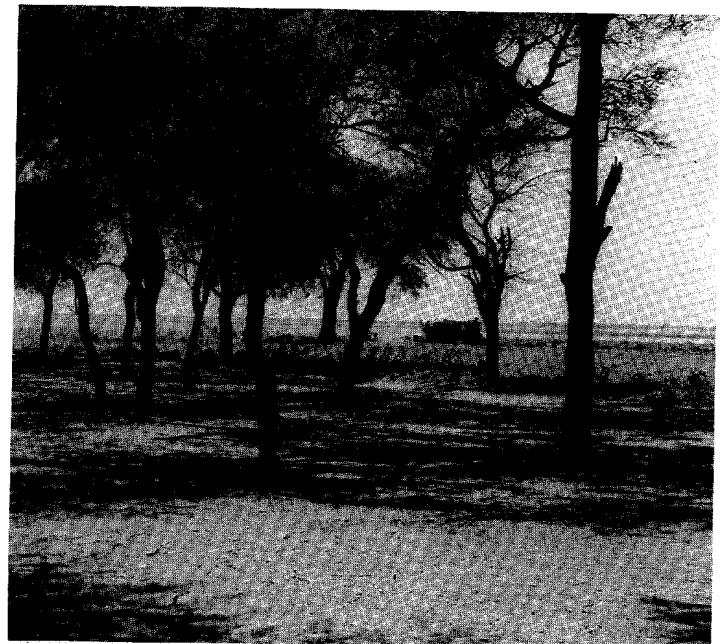
30. *Place in the shadow under a tree. Petra, Jordan.*



further differentiation of "things". The *mountain*, thus, belongs to the earth, but it rises towards the sky. It is "high", it is close to heaven, it is a meeting place where the two basic elements come together. Mountains were therefore considered "centres" through which the *axis mundi* goes, ...a spot where one can pass from one cosmic zone to another"⁶. In other words, mountains are *places* within the comprehensive landscape, places which make the structure of Being manifest. As such they "gather" various properties. To the general ones already mentioned, we must add the hardness and permanence of *stone* as a material. Rocks and stones have been given primary importance by many cultures because of their imperishability. In general, however, mountains remain "distant" and somewhat frightening, and do not constitute "insides" where man can dwell. In Medieval painting, thus, rocks and mountains were symbols of "wilderness"; a meaning which was still alive in the landscape painting of Romanticism⁷. But there are other kinds of natural "things" which reveal meanings. In the *tree* heaven and earth are also united, not only in a spatial sense because the tree rises up from the ground, but because it grows and is "alive". Every year the tree re-enacts the very process of creation, and "to a primitive religious mind, the tree *is* the universe, and it is so because it reproduces it and sums it up..."⁸. In general *vegetation* is the manifestation of living reality. But vegetation has also forms which are less friendly or even frightening. The *forest*, thus, is primarily a "wilderness" full of strange and menacing forces. Bachelard writes: "We do not have to be long in the woods to experience the rather anxious impression of "going deeper and deeper" into a limitless world. Soon, if we do not know where we are going,

31. Wood ad Ariccia, Alban hills.
32. Norwegian Forest.

33. Grove at Khartoum, Sudan.
34. Olive grove. S. Gregorio, Catanzaro.

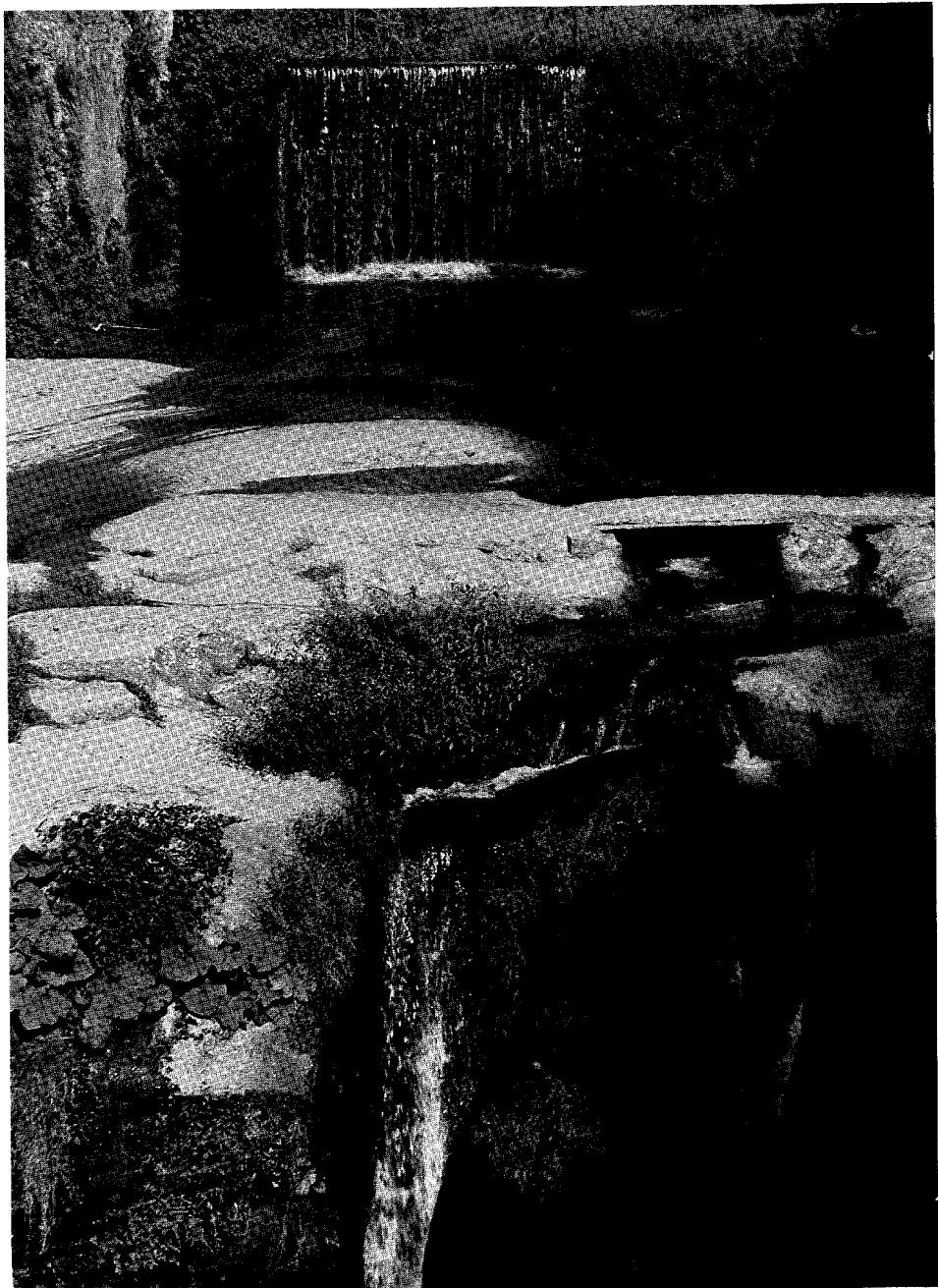


35. Brook at Veio, Lazio.

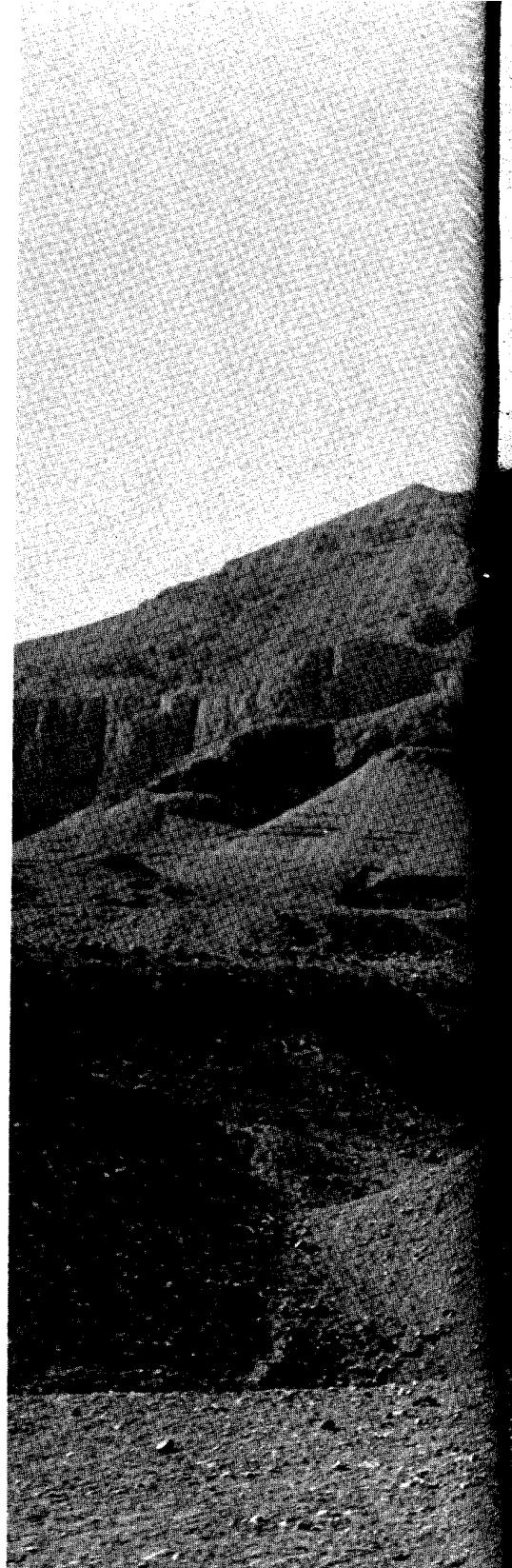
we no longer know where we are". Only when the wood is of limited extension and becomes a *grove*, it remains intelligible and positively meaningful. The Paradise has in fact been imagined as a delimited or enclosed grove or garden.

In the images of Paradise we encounter another basic element of ancient cosmogonies: *water*. The very particular nature of water has always been recognized. In the *Genesis*, God separates the dry land from the water after the creation of heaven and earth, light and darkness, and in other cosmogonies water is the primeval substance from which all forms come¹⁰. The presence of water, thus, gives identity to the land, and the legend of the Deluge presents the "loss of place" as a great flood. Although it is the opposite of place, water belongs intimately to living reality. As a fertilizer it even became a symbol of life, and in the images of Paradise four rivers flow from a spring in the very centre. The history of landscape painting illustrates the importance of water as a life-spending element. The "ideal" landscapes of the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries usually contain a centrally placed river or lake along which man's settlements are located, and from which the cultivated land extends. Later, water is justly understood and depicted as a local element of primary characterizing importance, and in Romantic landscapes, it reappears as a dynamic chthonic force.

Being the primary natural "things", rocks, vegetation and water make a place meaningful or "sacred", to use the term of Mircea Eliade. He writes: "The most primitive of the "sacred places" we know of constituted a microcosm: a landscape of stones, water and trees"¹¹. Moreover he points out that "such places are never chosen by man, they



36. Deyr-el-Bahry, temple of Hasepsoue in the landscape.



are merely discovered by him; in other words the sacred place in some way or another reveals itself to him"¹². In the environment the sacred places function as "centres"; they serve as objects of man's orientation and identification, and constitute a spatial structure. In man's understanding of nature we thus recognize the origin of the concept of space as a system of places. Only a system of meaningful places makes a truly human life possible.

The second mode of natural understanding consists in abstracting a systematic *cosmic order* from the flux of occurrences. Such an order is usually based on the course of the sun, as the most invariant and grandiose natural phenomenon, and the cardinal points. In some places it may also be related to the local geographical structure, as in Egypt, where the south-north direction of the Nile constitutes a primary element of man's orientation¹³. An order of this kind implies that the world is understood as a structured "space", where the main directions represent different "qualities" or meanings. In ancient Egypt, thus, the east, the direction of the sun's rising, was the domain of birth and life, whereas the west was the domain of death. "When thou settest on the western horizon, the land is in darkness in the manner of death... (but) when the day breaks, as thou rises on the horizon... they awake and stand upon their feet... they live because thou has arisen for them"¹⁴. The belief in a cosmic order is usually connected with a concrete image of some kind. In Egypt the world was imagined as "a flat platter with a corrugated rim. The inside bottom of this platter was the flat alluvial plain of Egypt, and the corrugated rim was the rim of mountain countries... This platter floated in water... Above the earth was the inverted pan of the sky, setting the outer

limit to the universe". Heaven was imagined to rest on four posts at the corners¹⁵. In the Nordic countries where the sun loses much of its importance, an abstract "heavenly axis" running north-south was imagined, around which the world turns. This axis ends in the Polar Star, where it is carried by a column, an *Irminsul*¹⁶. A similar *axis mundi* was imagined by the Romans, whose heavenly *cardo* runs south from the Polar Star, crossing at a right angle the *decumanus*, which represents the course of the sun from the east to the west¹⁷. In Rome, thus, primary elements of Southern and Nordic cosmologies were unified.

The third mode of natural understanding consists in the definition of the *character* of natural places, relating them to basic human traits.

The abstraction of characters was the achievement of the Greeks, and was evidently made possible by the very structure of the Greek landscape. Topographically Greece consists of numerous distinct but varied sites. Each landscape is a clearly delimited, easily imageable "personality"¹⁸. Intense sunlight and clear air give the forms an unusual presence. "Because of the ordered variety, clarity and scale in the landscape, the human being is neither engulfed nor adrift in Greece. He can come close to the earth to experience either its comfort or its threat"¹⁹. The basic property of the Greek environment, therefore, is the individual and intelligible character of places. In some places the surroundings appear to offer protection, in others they menace, and in others again we feel at the centre of a well-defined *cosmos*. In some places there are natural elements of a very particular shape or function, such as horned rocks, caves or wells. In "understanding" these characteristics, the Greeks *personified* them as anthropomorphic gods, and every place with pronounced properties became a

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36. Deyr-el-Bahry, temple of Hasepsoue in the landscape.

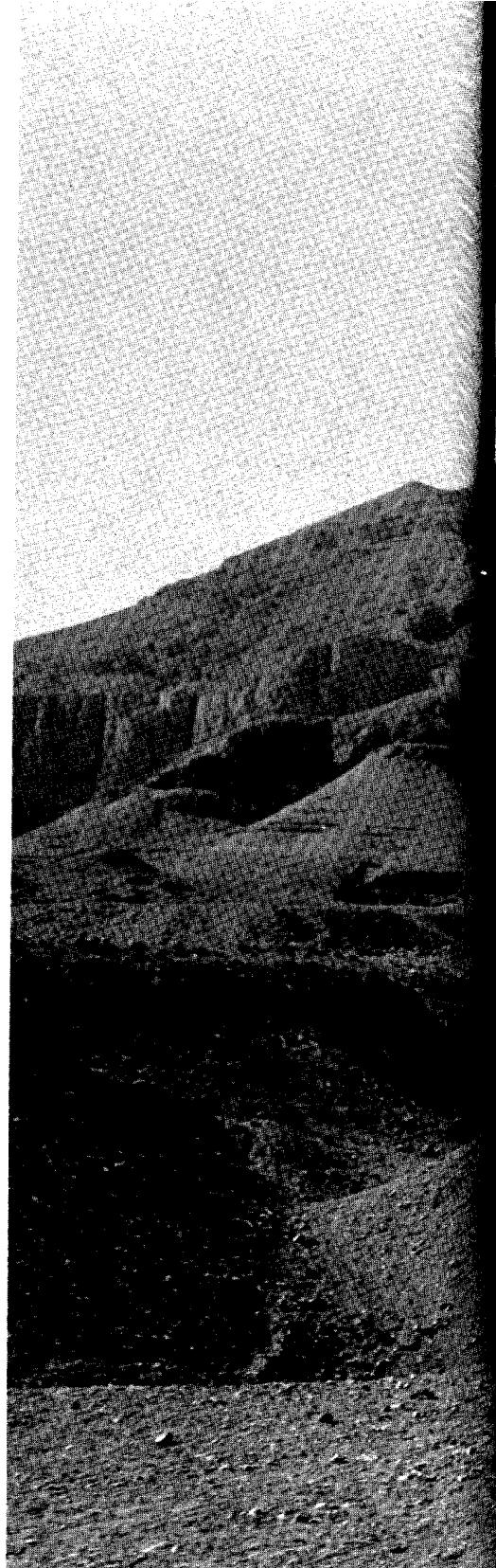
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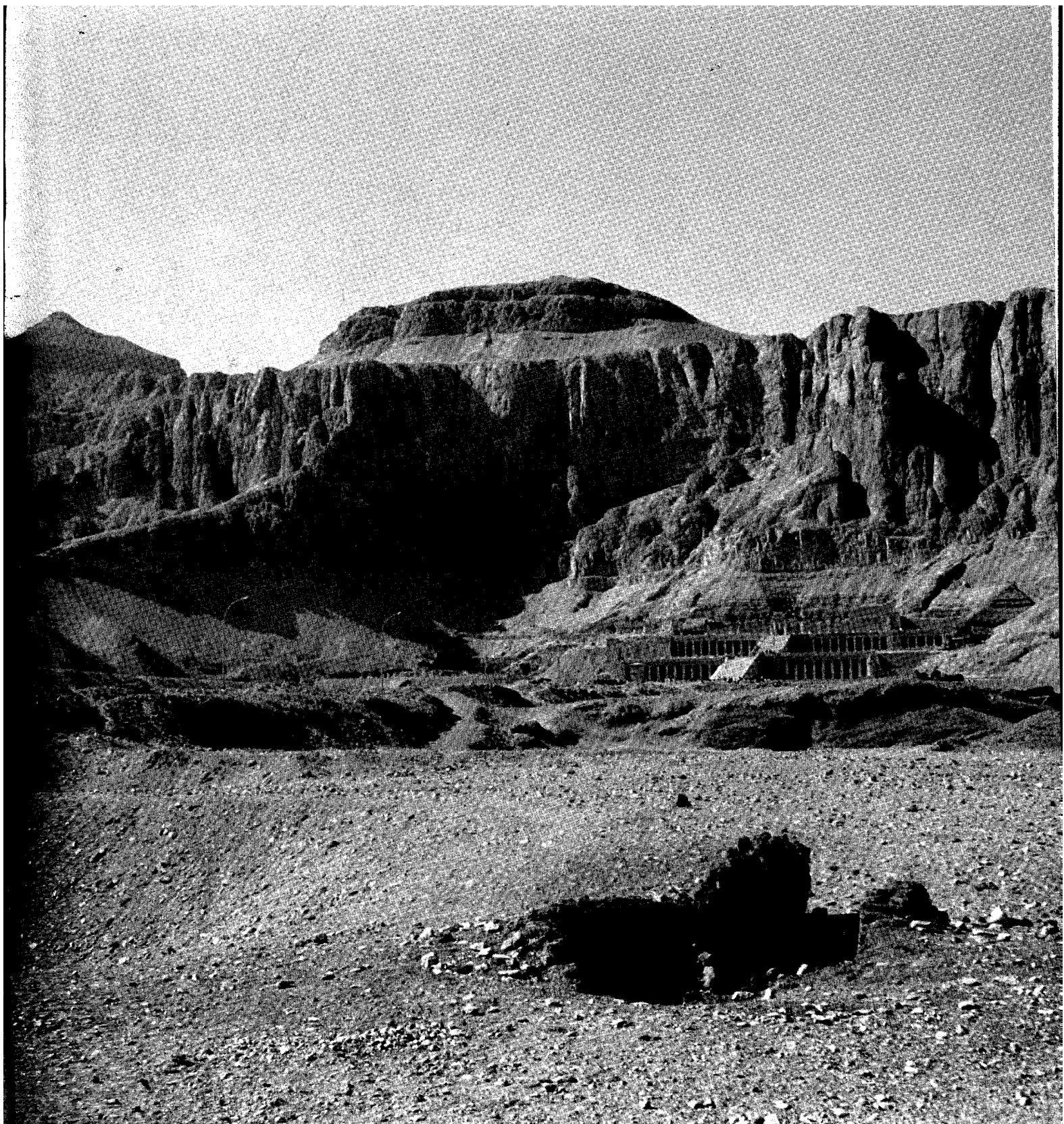
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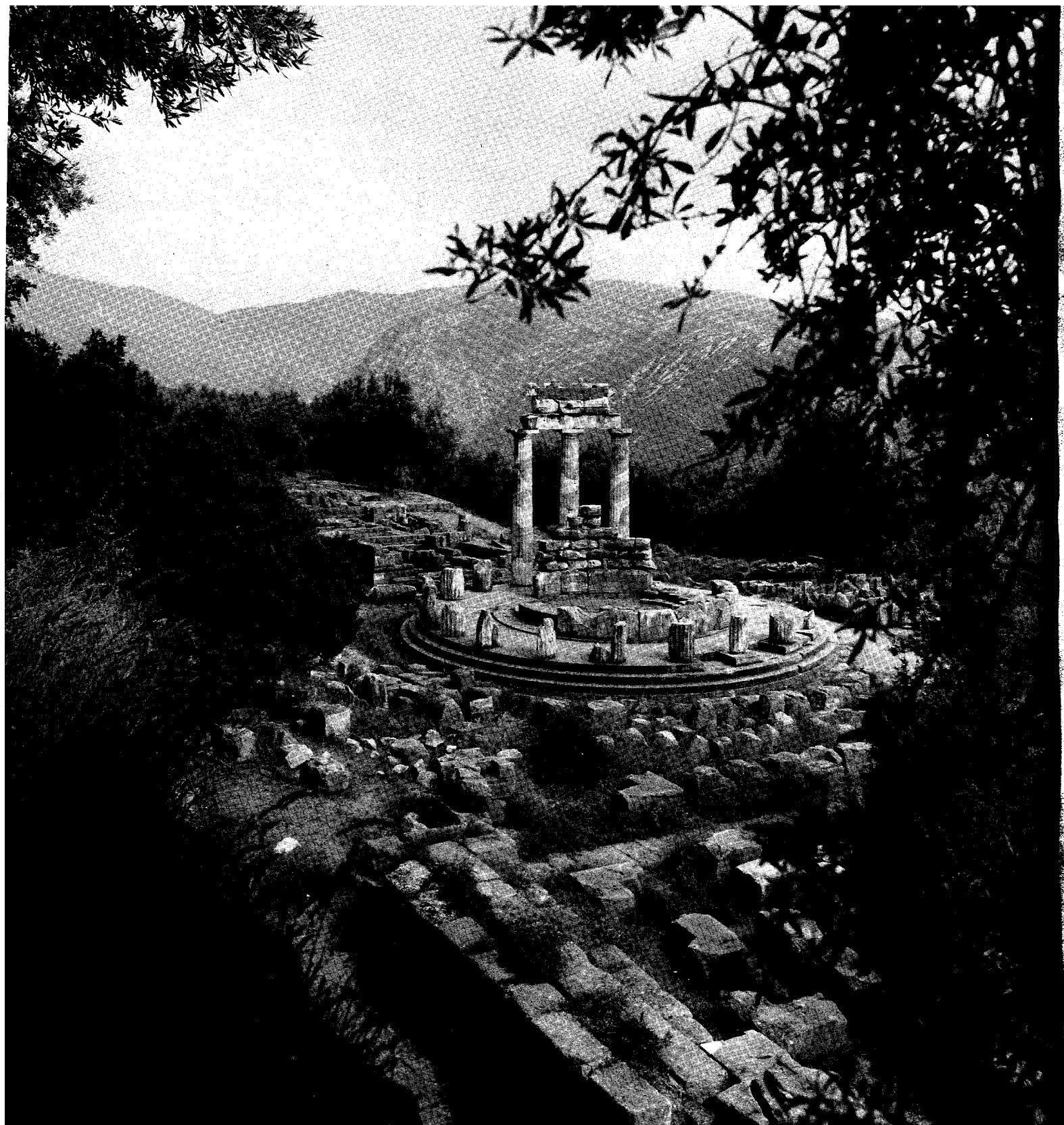
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37. Delphi, tholos of Athena.
38. Delphi, theatre and temple of Apollo.
39. Trees and light. Sacro Speco, Subiaco.



manifestation of a particular god. Places where the fertile earth feels close were dedicated to the old chthonic deities Demeter and Hera, and places where man's intellect and discipline complement and oppose the chthonic forces were dedicated to Apollo. There are places where the environment is experienced as an ordered whole, such as mountains with an all-round view, dedicated to Zeus, and groves close to water or swampy land dedicated to Artemis. Before any temple was built, open-air altars were erected "in the ideal position from which the whole sacred landscape could be grasped"²⁰. We understand thus how Greek architecture took the meaningful place as its points of departure. By relating natural and human characters, the Greeks achieved a "reconciliation" of man and nature which is particularly well concretized at Delphi. Here the old symbols of the earth, the *omphalos* or "navel of the world" and *bothros* or offering cave of the Great Goddess of the earth, were enclosed within Apollo's temple. Thus they were taken over by the "new" god and made part of a total vision of nature and man.

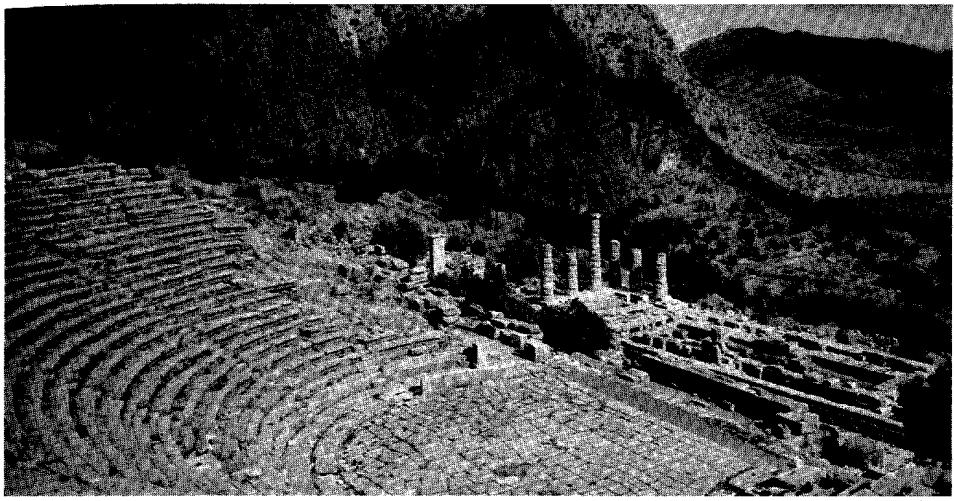
But nature also comprises a fourth category of phenomena which are less palpable. *Light* has of course always been experienced as a basic part of reality, but ancient man concentrated his attention on the sun as a "thing", rather than the more general concept of "light". In Greek civilization, however, light was understood as a symbol of knowledge, artistic as well as intellectual, and was connected with Apollo, who absorbed the old sun-god Helios. In Christianity light became an "element" of prime importance, a symbol of conjunction and unity which was connected with the concept of *love*. God was considered *pater luminis*, and "Divine Light" a manifestation of the

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spirit. In Byzantine painting Divine Light was concretized as a golden ground which "surrounds the main figures as with a halo of sanctity"²¹, stressing the iconographic foci. A sacred place, thus, was distinguished by the presence of light, and accordingly Dante wrote: "The Divine Light penetrates the universe according to its dignity"²². The Renaissance, instead, understood the world as a *microtheos* which God is manifest in every thing. As a result, the landscape painters depicted the environment as a totality of "facts", where everything down to the smallest detail seems fully understood and loved. "Facts become art through love, which unifies them and lifts them to a higher plan of reality; and, in landscape, this all embracing love is expressed by light"²³. Light is not only the most general natural phenomenon, but also the less constant. Light conditions change from morning to evening, and during the night darkness fills the world, as light does during the day. Light, thus, is intimately connected with the *temporal rhythms* of nature which form a fifth dimension of understanding. The phenomena which distinguish a natural place cannot be separated from these rhythms²⁴. The seasons, thus, change the appearance of places; in some regions more, in others less. In the northern countries green summers and white winters alternate, and both seasons are characterized by very different conditions of light. The temporal rhythms obviously do not change the basic elements which constitute a natural place, but in many cases they contribute decisively to its character and are therefore often reflected in local myths and fairytales. In landscape painting, the local importance of temporal rhythms and light conditions were studied from the eighteenth century on, a development which culminated with

impressionism²⁵.

In mythopoetic thought time is just as qualitative and concrete as other natural phenomena, and is experienced in the periodicity and rhythm of man's own life as well as in the life of nature. Man's participation in the natural totality is concretized in *rituals*, in which "cosmic events", such as creation, death and resurrection are re-enacted. As such, rituals do not however belong to the natural environment, and will be discussed in the next chapter, together with the general problem of representing time.

Thing, order, character, light and time are the basic categories of concrete natural understanding. Whereas thing and order, are spatial (in a concrete qualitative sense), character and light refer to the general atmosphere of a place²⁶. We may also point out that "thing" and "character" (in the sense here used) are dimensions of the earth, whereas "order" and "light" are determined by the sky. Time, finally, is the dimension of constancy and change, and makes space and character parts of a living reality, which at any moment is given as a particular place, as a *genius loci*. In general the categories designate the *meanings* man has abstracted from the flux of phenomena ("forces"). In his classical work on the relationship between nature and the "human soul", Willy Hellpach calls such meanings "existential contents", and says: "Existential contents have their source in the landscape"²⁷.

2. The Structure of Natural place

The term "natural place" denotes a series of environmental levels, from continents and countries down to the shaded area under an individual tree. All these "places" are determined by the concrete properties of earth and sky. The ground is obviously the most stable

element, although some of its properties change with the seasons, but the more variable and less concrete sky also plays a "characterizing" role of decisive importance. It is natural to take the more stable properties as the point of departure for our discussion, in relation to the environmental level which serves as the comprehensive stage for everyday life, that is: *landscape*.

The distinctive quality of any landscape is *extension*, and its particular character and spatial properties are determined by *how* it extends. Extension, thus, may be more or less continuous, sub-places within the all-embracing landscape may be formed and its capacity of receiving man-made elements varies accordingly. The "how" of extension primarily depends on the nature of the ground, that is, on the topographical conditions. "Topography" simply means "place-description", but it is generally used to denote the physical configuration of a place. In our context "topography" primarily means what geographers call the *surface relief*. On a flat plain, extension is general and infinite, but usually variations in the surface relief create directions and defined spaces.

It is important to distinguish between the structure and the scale of the relief. The structure may be described in terms of nodes, paths and domains, that is, elements which "centralize" space such as isolated hills and mountains or circumscribed basins, elements which direct space such as valleys, rivers and *wadis*, and elements which define an extended spatial pattern, such as a relatively uniform cluster of fields or hills. Evidently the effect of such elements is very different according to their dimensions. For our purpose it is practical to distinguish between three levels: micro, medium and macro. The micro elements define spaces which are too small to serve human purposes, while