Goddess at the Margins: Greek Religion between Cultures, across Boundaries

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Summary
For this project, I look at seaside cult featuring, though by no means confined to, Aphrodite, cult representing, I suggest, a kind of liminal space between peoples and cultures. Noticing, among other things, the recurrence of “foreign” offerings to Aphrodite and other goddesses at harbor sites, spaces where local and foreign came into contact, I locate such cult within a broader Mediterranean context. These cults have not received the attention they deserve. My approach promises to bring the study of Greek religion into dialogue with newer, interdisciplinary approaches to encounter and exchange across geographic, cultural, and psychological divides.

Introduction
Why would sailors pray to Aphrodite, goddess of sex, to prosper their voyages? For good reason, some might say. Born of the waves, she felt a special connection to the element from which she emerged. Add to that the soothing effects of sex itself, and we have a deity uniquely equipped to calm the seas and safeguard ships against its fury. Hence Aphrodite’s seaside shrines, not to mention cult titles hailing her as goddess “Of Fair Voyage” (Euploia), of harbors (Limēneia), of the sea itself (Pontia, Pelagia).

So far as it goes, that account seems to get it right. But does it go far enough? For not just Aphrodite, but other goddesses, including Hera, Eileithyia, and the famously chaste Artemis, also received cult from sailors, and in circumstances not unlike those obtaining at Aphrodite’s seaside shrines. Nor will sexuality tell us all we would like to know about the goddess of sex in her maritime aspect. Thus in one story, Aphrodite saves a ship not so much by calming the waves as by curing the crew of nausea. Luckily for that crew, its captain hails from Naukratis, the ship’s destination and a place the goddess holds dear (Athenaeus 675f–676c). We know that cult to Aphrodite at Naukratis was popular with seafarers (Scholtz 2002/3). But it matters, too, that this trading post on Egyptian soil was,
by most accounts, what Polanyi termed a port-of-call, a place of exchange crossing eco-
nomic and cultural divides (Möller 2000).

Could, then, Greeks have viewed various goddesses, not just Aphrodite, but others
as well, not simply as countermeasures to the sea’s fury, but as powers mediating the
crossing of barriers, whether physical or psychological? If so, how did that come about?
Locating such cult within its Mediterranean context, I argue that these “goddesses at the
margins” helped bridge cultural divides. Highlighting a less confrontational side to Greek
contact with the foreign “Other,” they draw such contacts into the broader scholarly dis-
course of cross-cultural exchange.

Scholarly Context, Approach
Aphrodite, ever a favorite of scholars, has received relatively little notice as to her mari-
time associations (though note Scholtz 2002/3; Giuffrida 1996; Pirenne-Delforge 1994,
434–37; Miranda 1989). There is, though, one point of convergence in the available
scholarship: the connection between Aphrodite’s soothing qualities and her sponsorship
of navigation. To quote Robert Parker, “Aphrodite’s power over the sea is simply a par-
ticular application of her general power to calm and assuage” (Parker 2002, 151, citing
Pirenne-Delforge). This power we know best from Iliad book 14, where Hera procures
from Aphrodite various love charms to tranquillize a bellicose Zeus (153–351). There and
elsewhere, Aphrodite’s calming powers need to be understood in relation to her sexuality
(cf. Hymn to Aphrodite 170–171; magic sleep in Sappho 2.7–8). But Aphrodite’s sexual-
ity does not simply calm. Fully revealed in its divine aspect, it can threaten emasculation
and inspire terror (Hymn to Aphrodite 181–190).

A more rounded consideration of Aphrodite’s sexuality thus complicates the con-
ventional view of her maritime persona. Further complicating it is what Parker describes
as a plethora of deities, more than would seem necessary, to deal with the needs of sea-
farers (Parker 2002, 151–52). How, then, to make sense of that “plethora,” at least on the
female side of the nautical pantheon? For answers, I try to keep in view the larger context, a setting whose “shape” will have shaped the phenomena I wish to investigate. Writing in *The Corrupting Sea*, Horden and Purcell view the Mediterranean as “a peninsula in reverse,” a “geography” of seaways connecting far-flung locales, yet stretching out before the would-be traveler like some vast, impassable plain (24). Briefly addressing maritime goddess cult in Greco-Roman antiquity (“The Mysteries of Euploia,” 438–45), Horden and Purcell seek to understand how Mediterranean religion reflects “a fragmented topography and the geography of the means by which that fragmentation is overcome” (404). And it is that fragmentation/integration paradox that I wish to explore.

Crucial here is the work of Nannó Marinatos. Writing on Crete’s seaside shrines to goddesses of fertility and childbearing, she suggests that visiting sailors, not just local women, must have worshipped at these “meeting-places of two different worlds, interfaces between local and cosmopolitan cults” (Marinatos 1996, 137–38). Building on that and other work (e.g., Marinatos 2000), I intend to show how various “goddesses at the margins” helped negotiate passage across dangerous barriers, whether the sea itself or the “otherness” of foreign cultures and peoples.

One additional point on scholarly context and approach. The past two decades have seen a heightened emphasis on the context of Greek religion, in particular, the role of political structures — the *polis* — in mediating cult of all sorts (e.g., Sourvinou-Inwood 2000). While I do not wish to contest those findings, I suggest that politics can only tell us so much about the cults I wish to explore. For if we approach them as a kind of liminal space, then we shall need to consider not just their political but their social dimension, how, in other words, they could reframe the “Us/Other” divide.

Religion as social informs the thought of no less a figure than Emile Durkheim, whose breakthrough insight was that *society as viewed from within society can be understood as the very thing that the divine (god, etc.) is all about*. To which I would add that symbolic projections of this socially constructed divine can happen as a kind of discourse
along a social plane, a way to construct identity and, in the process, negotiate one’s relationships with others. Hence my contention that nautical cult to various “liminal” goddesses allowed Greeks to imagine their contacts with otherness as a kind of conversation, a point of commonality between cultures.

My approach thus promises to bring the study of Greek religion into dialogue with newer, interdisciplinary approaches to encounter and exchange across geographic, cultural, and in particular, psychological boundaries (e.g., Marino 2002; Horden and Purcell 2000). It will, in other words, contribute to our understanding of the longue durée within the broader geographical frame, and will permit insights from other fields to inform and advance the study of ancient Greek religion.

**Structure of Study, Applicant’s Past Work**

For this study, I envision a three-part layout. Thus in part one, I shall consider the pan-Mediterranean resonances of deities like Egyptian Hathor-Heret, the “Distant Goddess” who, in her native Egypt, figured both as a fearsome denizen of far-away deserts and as a bringer of joy to Egypt itself (Desroches-Noblecourt 1995). With that duality resonate ideologies operating at various mining sites along the margins of ancient Egypt, unforgiving places where, it has been argued, Hathor mediated between local elements and Egyptian outsiders involved in extracting and transporting minerals (Bloxham 2006). But Hathor-Heret appears to have appealed, arguably for similar reasons, to Phoenicians sailing to Spain and beyond in quest of metals (Aubet 2001, 347–55; Aufrère 1998). We seem, then, to be dealing with a pan-Mediterranean phenomenon, one that could have influenced Greeks largely by way of contact with the Semitic east.

In part two, I shall focus on the Greek evidence for seaside cult to “liminal” goddesses: its international flavor combined at times with an initiatory character. For an early example, we have the so-called tripillar shrine at Kommos. This sanctuary, one used both by locals and by Syro-Palestinian visitors, seems to reflect in its layout and appurtenances
Crete’s resumption of Near Eastern contacts in the early first millennium BCE (Shaw 1989). Within were discovered a pair of statuettes, those of Sekhmet and Nefertum, alluding, so it would seem, to the triad worshipped at Memphis on the lower Nile; note, too, Sekhmet’s connection to myths and rites associated with Egypt’s “Distant Goddess.”

Turning to the Aegean island of Chios, we find similar patterns associated with the harbor shrine at Emporio. That temple, one sacred to Apollo, Artemis, and the very obscure Rhetia, has yielded a number of Egyptian/Egyptianizing objects unlike those found in Athena’s temple within the nearby municipal center (Boardman 1967); similar can said of Aphrodite’s extra-urban shrine at Miletus, the ship-landing temple of Aphrodite at Naukratis, that of Hera Limenia (“Hera of the Harbor”) at Perachora, and the list goes on. Now, I do not suggest that the Egyptianizing finds — imported scarabs, amulets, and the like — illustrate the diffusion of Egyptian belief unfiltered and unchanged. Nor can we pinpoint how well informed end-users were about the original meanings carried by such objects (Shaw and Shaw 2000, 166–70). Still, what Greeks may have lacked in erudition they would have made up for in awe and wonderment. Thus it was the aura of the exotic, the sense these objects carried of having come from somewhere else, that will have lent them a special kind of power in Greek eyes (Shaw 2006, 139). And that can tell us things about the role these “marginal” goddesses played at their seaside shrines.

But I do not wish simply to analyze material remains. Thus in part three, I intend to explore political offshoots — cult like that to Aphrodite Pandemos-Pontia on Cos — and mythological-literary reflections. I should say that my desire to undertake this project grows out a long fascination with Aphrodite’s liminality, interests reflected in part in my own work on the goddess (Scholtz 2002/3; article project on Aphrodite Pandemos at Athens). But it also arises from my studies of the social aspects of language, soon to appear in book form (Scholtz 2007). My past and current work has, then, provided me with the tools to study how Greek cult could function as symbolic gesture with social resonance.
Bibliography


