Seagoing Heroes or Travelling Gods: The Dioskouroi and Anakes of Athens and the Aegean

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Athens of the Classical period and beyond was home to an array of cults for both heroes and gods. Included among these was the cult to the Dioskouroi, venerated in the temple of the Anakeion as protectors and caretakers of seafarers. Their presentation in the realm of Attic tragedy by Euripides shows a choice to depict them as divine, heavenly spirits throughout the story of Helen. Yet even though their descent from above is central to the successful resolution of the plot, it is undermined by the references made by the playwright to the twins’ own ambiguous claim to divinity: that while they might be gods, they are weak and incapable of defying Fate.

This odd limitation on their divinity might not, at first glance, appear to have an overwhelming impact on their worship, said by Cicero to be so popular that it might outstrip even the Olympians. Described as demigods by Parker and possessing broad appeal in day to day life, the Dioskouroi were the subject of both literature and art, providing a large corpus of material with which to approach their cult. With the archetypical nature of eastern, seagoing gods, soteres, the twin heroes Castor and Polydeuces by all appearances serve as near-essential protectors for sailors both in and beyond Athens, reaching throughout the Aegean in a cult network typified by presences in trade ports and harbours. References to these cults exist beyond the Dioskouroi in drama and tragedy, with their close tie to ships and the sea reflected by their Athenian cult networks. On Delphic metopes, the Dioskouroi stand sentinel alongside the Argo and her crew as horse-riding saviours who guard the first ship. On Attic vases, they gallop relentlessly across the scene, dolphins beneath them in a clear rendition of travel over the sea. In their Homeric Hymn, they are astral presences who descend into the midst of a storm in response to rituals honouring them, granting ships a measure of their protective might.

Their cult identity, based on iconography and ritual practice, should be clear: maritime saviours providing safety and succor. Yet despite this, their cult lacks a Dioskourion in Athens, such as they possessed in places like Cyrene or Delos, and their worship in Attica is provided to the cult of the Athenian Anakes. Furthermore, elements associated with their Spartan representation seem almost wholly absent, resulting in the subsequent spread in the Classical period of a Dioskouroi cult lacking much of the typical iconography of their homeland. It encourages questions regarding the seemingly paradoxical nature of their divinity, dual heroes referred to as both mortal heroes and ascended gods. Ambiguous divinities, they are enwrapped within the contradicting “gods but not.”

Investigating the connections between Laconian hero-twins and Attic divine saviours, my paper seeks to examine the nature of this ambiguous divinity attributed to the Dioskouroi, and its influence on them and their role as maritime gods in Attica and their wider network in the Mediterranean. Drawing on epigraphic, iconographic, and literary sources for their character and cult, it then aims to form a framework for assessing their paradoxical godhood. Analysing cult to the twins through their celebrations, festivals, and established rituals, it studies both the benefits and limitations – if any – in the appeal of these ocean-travelling divine protectors.