Potnia and Pontia: Exploring the Bronze Age Background of Mediterranean Maritime Goddesses

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Maritime activities connected cultural groups into complex and overlapping networks of exchange and development over the long history of the Mediterranean and Near East. Consequently, an understanding of maritime religion requires cross-cultural, interdisciplinary, and long-term perspectives to articulate its nature and functioning in these regions. With the surge in interest in the role of networks across the Mediterranean Sea in recent decades, interest in specific expressions of maritime cult linking communities engaged in migration and trade over long distances through the social affordances offered by religion has emerged (e.g., Kowalzig 2018). This interest, alongside the more general disciplinary turn towards paradigms of mobility and connectivity, has coincided with renewed understandings of specific deities and their maritime roles, such as Aphrodite (Demetriou 2010; Eckert 2016; Brown and Smith 2019; but see also Pirenne-Delforge 1994). Aphrodite, beginning from the famous passage in Hesiod (Theog.188-206), was a maritime deity invoked from the Archaic to Hellenistic periods in poems for safe passage over the sea. Her ability to guide navigators safely is reflected in her persona as a goddess of sex and love, who safely guided worshippers to their beloved (Demetriou 2010; also Sholtz 2003), as well as in her persona as a goddess who ensured the cohesion of the political community (Pirenne- Delforge 2010: 16) and military success (Pironti 2010: 128).

These works have contributed greatly to our understanding of how the maritime roles of deities, interwoven with much more complex and seemingly contradictory personas, articulated a world of vibrant exchange and mobility. In this paper, however, I argue that a diachronic analysis can further illuminate the maritime personas of goddesses like Aphrodite. My analysis centres on several Bronze Age goddesses who were associated with power over the sea. These deities include the Sumerian Nanshe, known from several Mesopotamian hymns; Astarte and Athirat in the Ugaritic and Egyptian texts; and Hathor in Egyptian tradition. The associations between several of these goddesses and seafaring has been elaborated elsewhere (Brody 1998; 2008; Christian 2013). Here I focus on the political contexts of these myths to suggest that maritime associations of various deities in the Bronze Age was linked in part to territorial expansion and hegemony – e.g., Nanshe as the patron goddess of Gudea, ruler of Lagash in the late third millennium, or Hathor as a goddess of borders and foreign lands as well as kingship in the Egyptian Old and Middle Kingdoms.

I argue that these earlier mythical manifestations of goddesses with sovereignty over the sea, emerging within contexts of imperial power over maritime spheres and distant lands, can explain later first-millennium tropes of goddesses like Aphrodite and Hera, whose myths and cults often contained maritime elements – such as protection of seafarers – intermixed with their roles as divine queens. This is not to chase quixotically after some distant “origin” of these later goddesses. Rather, in line with the goals of the conference, I aim to de-essentialize maritime ritual through tying its expressions into much longer-term currents of political expansion and imperialism going back to the Bronze Age, and which found new types of expression in the Iron
Age and Archaic period (Daniels 2018). This paper accordingly also contributes to explorations of the opportunities and limitations of myths for informing our understanding of the nature of maritime religion. I end by considering one other major sphere that some of these goddesses partook in as protective deities – that of the voyage to the afterlife – and consider how the funerary spheres might further inform us on the relationships between maritime activities and political power.

Bibliography


