Sailing ‘to, by, and with’ the gods:
Aiginetan divine companions across the Middle Sea

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This paper addresses the methodological issue of conceptualising patron deities of maritime life in the context of a local Greek religious system. Should we expect that all members of an island community shared in the worship of the same maritime patrons? We may wish to distinguish those locals who rarely travel by sea from those who engage with the sea on a daily basis close to home (fishermen) and further from those who engage with the sea periodically but on long-distance journeys (merchants). I argue that a variety of deities are likely to emerge as relevant to local worshippers in different contexts of their engagement with the sea, and that we may expect to find various locals of the same community sailing ‘with’ different gods.

My case study is that of the famed islanders of the Saronic Gulf – Aiginetans – successful sailors, merchants, and prospectors, thalassocrats of the Late Archaic period, their maritime activity registered across the Mediterranean: from the Saronic Gulf to Egypt, from Tuscany to the Black Sea. In this paper, I investigate the religious expression of Aiginetans as they engage with the sea, sailing ‘with,’ ‘to’, and ‘by’ the gods, starting with an observation that no obvious patrons of maritime activity emerge in the Aiginetan pantheon. Several candidates (Apollo, Aphaia, Aphrodite Epilimenia, Poseidon Kalaureios) have connections to the sea, but in each cult, evidence for other functional aspects predominates.

A range of scenarios for ‘sailing with the gods’ is attested for Aiginetans of the Archaic and Classical periods. Literary evidence presents cases of bringing images of gods and heroes on board ship, as Aiginetans did in the Battle of Salamis (Hdt. 8.64), and in the “heraldless” war against Athens (Hdt. 5.83). These cases of sailing ‘with’ the gods did not, however, involve deities with maritime characteristics, showing that Aiginetans could sail ‘with’ one set of epichoric deities, while expecting protection for sailing from another. Epigraphic evidence allows us to consider a different sense of sailing ‘with’ the gods involved in long-distance trade. Votive objects dedicated to Apollo of Aigina have been found at the opposite ends of the Mediterranean, in Northern Adriatic and Northern Black Sea. These objects suggest that Aiginetans sailed ‘with’ their epichoric Apollo in mind, taking their devotion to the further most ends of their journeys, and yet, given the option to build a temple at Naukratis, Aiginetans chose to dedicate it to Zeus, not Apollo. Does it mean that going to Naukratis, Aiginetans did not sail ‘with’ Apollo in mind?

One other religious concern for maritime travel was not the choice of which deities to propitiate at the points of departure and arrival, but en route, as Aiginetans sailed ‘by’ islands and coasts inhabited by foreign deities. Sailing ‘by’ such sacred places may have required or presented an opportunity for a gesture of acknowledgement. Among such locations, two islands must have stood out for Aiginetans: Palagruža in the Adriatic, and Leuke in the Black Sea. Each was located on a maritime route from Greece. The former was sacred to Diomedes,
the latter to Achilles. Both heroes were connected to seafaring, and more importantly, both heroes were connected to Aigina in mythological and/or cultic record. Epigraphic evidence suggests that Aiginetans stopped by at these sites. I consider the possible impact on Aiginetans of sailing through the waters protected by the heroes to whose favour as kin they may have felt a sense of entitlement.

Analysing the scenarios of Aiginetan sailing ‘to, by, and with’ the gods, I question the criteria for identifying ‘maritime’ deities of a local Greek religious world.