Any Port in the Storm: Punic Worship at the Heraion of Perachora

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Despite the publication of the Archaic Greek sanctuary of Perachora in 1940, our understanding of the site’s role in maritime religion remains opaque. The small harbor sanctuary sits on the northern side of the Corinthian Gulf and ostensibly was dedicated to the goddess Hera. It produced two diverse sets of offerings, wealthy dedications from the Near East not found at other sanctuaries in the Corinthia and locally produced Corinthian items, primarily ceramic vessels and figurines.

The sanctuary’s eastern offerings have been compared to those at the Heraion of Samos. However, Samos’ sanctuary is on the eastern side of Greece in the Aegean Sea, while Perachora faces west to Sicily and South Italy. Ingrid Strøm has argued previously that the foreign and unusually wealthy dedications at Perachora could be explained because some religious maritime networks existed independently of commercial and geographically defined networks. However, the eastern offerings at the Heraion of Perachora can be better contextualized by integrating and acknowledging the significance of its location in relationship to the major commercial harbor at Lechaion across the gulf. The sanctuary sits just eight kilometers away by sea from the larger harbor of Lechaion, and Perachora was likely a stopping point for commercial ships moving in and out of the gulf.

Phoenician sailors are known to have worshipped the goddess Tannit for successful maritime ventures, often at promontories with cave-like spaces. The commercial harbor of Lechaion provides a logical explanation for why Phoenician, or more likely Carthaginian, sailors were already in the area. I argue in this paper that the sanctuary to Hera at Perachora provided both a relief point for these cabotage sailors as it would be the first or last point of land contact form them coming out or in of the Corinthian gulf and it offered a site that was adequate in physical perspective and deity for the maritime-minded seeking to make an offering to Tannit. The features of the sanctuary that suggest this was the case include: a) its location just across the Corinthian gulf from the major commercial harbor of Lechaion and references to Phoneician/Corinthian maritime relations in this period, b) the enclosed and tight harbor with high cliff faces around the sanctuary at Perachora which provided a proxy for a grotto-like space, and the c) the worship not only of Hera but also Medea in her ‘child sacrificing mother’ epithet at the sanctuary which parallels with Tannit and tophet sacrifices. Questions that such a connection should raise and this paper explores are how particular a sailor may have been in finding a place to make offerings for a successful sea venture and if the worship of Tannit was limited to those familiar with Punic ritual?