

**Thin-Coherence and the Chthonic**  
**Macro- and Microcommunities in Early Greek Cult**

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It has long been recognised that to speak of Greek religion as a whole and consistent entity is an erroneous approach. It has, rather, become customary to approach religion with more caution and to attempt an understanding of what makes various religious experiences throughout the Greek world unique from one another. Factors which contribute to the uniqueness of experience revolve mainly around issues of place and space, and of person. That is ritual variation from sanctuary to sanctuary and polis to polis, and difference in experience produced by difference of social class, gender and age.<sup>1</sup> Jan Bremmer opened his study *Greek Religion* by posing the question: 'Was there ever such a thing as Greek Religion,'<sup>2</sup> which Emily Kearns goes some way to answering: 'though we may speak of a Greek religious system, it is a system which is never consciously defined as such (at least until the end of pagan antiquity), and remained extraordinarily flue and inclusive.'<sup>3</sup> The Greeks themselves had no word that encompassed the idea of 'religion' or a 'religious system.' Earlier works on Greek religion did not contemplate whether there was a religious structure in place in the ancient Greek world, and if they did hint towards the erroneous conception of 'Greek religion' it was not as explicit as Bremmer's later query. Walter Burkert's seminal work assumes systematic ritual practice which he does not explain or expand upon, referring simply to 'Greek Religion.'<sup>4</sup> Burkert does acknowledge the potential chaos of a study of the gods, saying:

'The distinctive personality of a god is constituted and mediated by at least four different factors: the established local cult with its ritual programme and unique atmosphere, the divine name, the myths told about the named being, and the iconography, especially the cult image. All the same, this complex is easily dissolved, and this makes it quite impossible to write the history of any single god.'<sup>5</sup>

He follows this, however, with a rather brief and generalising exposition of individual gods which glosses over the nuance of local cultic practices. It is easy to see, from Burkert and elsewhere, that it is not necessarily the acknowledgement of the complex and chaotic nature of the study of 'Greek religion' where one may fall down, rather it is the application of a frame of understanding that ensures we do not resort to the easy habit of generalisation.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a fuller discussion see R. Parker, *On Greek Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 224-264.

<sup>2</sup> J.N. Bremmer, *Greek Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 1.

<sup>3</sup> E. Kearns, *Ancient Greek Religion: A Sourcebook* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 2.

<sup>4</sup> A footnote on the term 'Greek religion' in the introduction points only to a long list of secondary sources which deal with Greek religion at large. W. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. J. Raffan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 343 n. 341.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Julia Kindt describes this tendency, in relation to the application of 'polis religion': 'Unfortunately, in the historiographic practice of works on Greek religion, such concessions have all too frequently remained mere programmatic statements, made in the introduction in order to silence potential disagreement before the writer produces yet another account of polis religion which makes perfect sense in all its aspects.' J. Kindt, 'Polis Religion - a Critical Appreciation', *Kernos*, 22 (2009), 16.

How, then, should we map local beliefs and religious structures without falling into the trap of reducing the local subtleties and variations to unexplained or unimportant points in the schema of general 'beliefs' or 'belief structures' when, in fact, it is the local variation which is not only the most important but the most interesting to study.

Religious communities may exist in a number of overlapping ways and individuals would, necessarily, belong to multiple different religious communities.<sup>7</sup> These communities broadly consist of public and private religious bodies. Most generally the public religious community is bounded by the polis, although smaller public communities exist at phratry and deme level,<sup>8</sup> and a larger community was formed through participating at panhellenic sanctuaries and in festivals such as the Olympic or Pythian games. These public communities were, for the most part, formed through identification with the polis rather than anything else. That is to say, individuals would not normally participate in cultic activity at a panhellenic level without reference to belonging to a certain polis and polis-membership played a large role in participation at panhellenic sanctuaries.<sup>9</sup> Private religious communities could operate at the very smallest level, for instance an individual inscribing a *katadesmos* ('curse-stone') and burying it in a grave, or on a very large scale, such as initiation into a mystery cult.

This is not to say that public and private practices operated in different spheres of religion. Not only would there have been interaction between the two in strictly theological terms,<sup>10</sup> but there would be a necessary intersection at an individual level. An individual undertakes religious practices within the confines of multiple different communities, without considering that there may be any incompatibility between the ideas presented in each of those spheres. The man who buries a *katadesmos* to bind his enemy also marches in the Panathenaic procession to celebrate Athena Polias, undertakes initiation into the mystery cult in Eleusis, and goes as a member of a convoy to the Delphic Oracle. As a matter of course, the religious life of the individual involves participation in multiple overlapping communities, both small and large, public and private.

Each of these communities operates with the same kind of framework and uses similar semiotic vocabulary which enables members of these communities to speak to and with one another and, perhaps more importantly, with the divinities concerned. Communities which have a semiotic logic that is shared must, in some way, be coherent with one another. We don't have to overestimate this coherence. Signs and symbols may have subtle – or even great – differences in meaning without being incoherent though the wider culture; they may have an 'overall' meaning that has differences within smaller cultural components; a community within a community. As W.H. Sewall points out:

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<sup>7</sup> One example of this can be found in a deme decree from c. 420 B.C.E from Plotheia, one of Athens' smallest demes, which dealt with the financing of individuals' participation in various religious communities, IG I<sup>3</sup> 258, cf. R. Parker, *Polytheism and Society at Athens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 62.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the various sub-divisions of the polis, see C. Sourvinou-Inwood, 'What Is *Polis* Religion?', in R. Buxton (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Greek Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000a), particularly 28-31.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>10</sup> J. Kindt, *Rethinking Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 23-24.

'It should be noted, however, that this conception actually implies quite minimal cultural coherence – one might call it a thin-coherence. The fact that members of a semiotic community recognise a given set of symbolic oppositions does not determine what sort of statements or actions they will construct on the basis of their semiotic competence. Nor does it mean that they form a community in any fuller sense. They need not agree in their moral or emotional evaluations of given symbols. The semiotic field they share may be recognised and used by groups and individuals locked in fierce enmity rather than bound by solidarity, or by people who feel relative indifference toward each other. The posited existence of cultural coherence says nothing about whether semiotic fields are big or small, shallow or deep, encompassing or specialised. It simply requires that if meaning is to exist at all, there must be systematic relations among signs and a group of people.'<sup>11</sup>

The model of 'thin-coherence' was applied to ancient Greek culture by Josiah Ober, originally in the postscript to a volume titled *The Cultures Within Greek Culture*,<sup>12</sup> and later published in Ober's own collection of essays.<sup>13</sup> In this essay, Ober stressed that we should view Greek culture as a network of overlapping microcommunities, even though sometimes these communities might contradict one another.<sup>14</sup> It is a highly appropriate way to view the make-up of religious communities in Greece as well. That non-congruent communities might live harmoniously with one another and that an individual might belong to multiple communities with no particular issue is reflected in the makeup of Greek cultic life. The gods themselves appear in contradictory guises with no apparent cognitive inconsistency: Persephone can easily be thought of as a virginal maiden or as wife of Hades with no contradiction because these two ideas of the goddess occur in different microcommunities. Thus, even though the semiotic language that shows 'Persephone' occurs in each microcommunity – indicating a level of coherence – there are subtle differences that create incongruent characteristics unique to each setting. These inconsistent ideas about single divinities can co-exist in society without raising alarm because they are ideas that individuals do not directly consider as incongruous, they belong in different spheres and are called upon in different cultic settings. This can be illustrated in the idea that it is the human agent, rather than any real or imagined divine being, who is responsible for the incongruity. 'It is not the gods who decide where they are from or where they arrive. It is the mortal manipulator, who may even claim the authority to decide who is god and who is not.'<sup>15</sup>

Although the model of polis religion is a useful one to begin the exploration into the formation of Greek cultic practice, it cannot render the whole

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<sup>11</sup> W.H. Sewell, 'The Concept(S) of Culture', in V.E. Bonnell and L. Hunt (eds.), *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 50-51.

<sup>12</sup> C. Dougherty and L. Kurke (eds.), *The Cultures within Greek Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 237-255.

<sup>13</sup> J. Ober, 'Culture, Thin Coherence, and the Persistence of the Polis', *Athenian Legacies: Essays on the Politics of Going on Together* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 69-91.

<sup>14</sup> Kindt, *Rethinking Greek Religion*, 22.

<sup>15</sup> H.S. Versnel, *Coping with the Gods: Wayward Readings in Greek Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 94.

picture satisfactorily.<sup>16</sup> The role of the individual is rather underplayed in traditional models of religious practice in the ancient world, but the individual is the key component both in establishing ideas about the gods and ensuring their longevity. Religious concepts, indeed any cultural concepts, are not created in isolation from one another, and are not sent out into the world fully formed.<sup>17</sup> Instead these concepts are subtly modified by each person who takes them up before they are passed on or discarded. Alongside this we must remember that religious ideas held by individuals within a community do not need to be exactly the same, and mostly likely are not. These ideas are similar but not identical, and these similarities may be shared among various overlapping or even completely unconnected groups.<sup>18</sup> What occurs when the idiosyncrasies of religious practice are downplayed in favour of a more congruent system of religion is that certain ideas and practices become marginalised in the study of the religious culture of the city: 'polis religion offers a useful schema for understanding some aspects of ancient Greek religious activity, it cannot provide a comprehensive account of ritual practice across and within ancient Greek communities.'<sup>19</sup> Although the role of the individual is acknowledged as the 'basic cult unit'<sup>20</sup> the only possible framework for the individual to work within is that of the polis. As we have seen, however, the individual does not just make up the components of a unified whole, rather the individual *is* a unified whole – each with his or her own ideas, experiences and thoughts about religious practices – and together they make up various sized communities which overlap and communicate with one another.

#### Case Study: Persephone in Lokroi

The Persephone cult in Lokroi demonstrates a local mythic persona which brings together two disparate mythic traditions to create a harmonious picture, and so

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<sup>16</sup> The model of polis religion was first presented and explored by Christaine Sourvinou-Inwood in two articles, 'What is Polis Religion?' and 'Further Aspects of *Polis* Religion', later presented together in Richard Buxton's 2000 collection *Oxford Readings in Greek Religion*. The model has been much engaged with: in 2008 a conference was held at the University of Reading, in honour of Sourvinou-Inwood, titled 'Perceptions of Polis-Religion: Inside/Outside.' Several of the papers have since been revised and published in *Kernos*, and these can provide an overview of the current state of discussion surrounding the model: J.N. Bremmer, 'Manteis, Magic, Mysteries and Mythography: Mess Margins of *Polis* Religion', *Kernos*, 23/13-35 (2010); E. Eidinow, 'Networks and Narratives: A Model for Ancient Greek Religion', *Kernos*, 24 (2011); Kindt, 'Polis Religion - a Critical Appreciation'; J.L. Shear, 'Religion and the *Polis*: The Cult of the Tyrannicides at Athens', *Kernos*, 25 (2012).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. P. Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Human Instincts That Fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors* (London: Vintage Books, 2002), 37. Boyer comments that 'lall scenarios that describe people sitting around and inventing religion are dubious. Even the ones that see religion as slowly coming out of confused thoughts have this problem.'

<sup>18</sup> Boyer's explication makes this concept very clear: '...knowing that culture is a similarity between people is helpful because it forces you to remember that two objects are similar only *from a certain point of view*. My blue eyes may make me similar to some people, but then my short-sightedness makes me similar to others.' *Religion Explained*, 41.

<sup>19</sup> Eidinow, 'Networks and Narratives: A Model for Ancient Greek Religion', 11.

<sup>20</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood, 'Further Aspects of *Polis* Religion' 47. Sourvinou-Inwood provides the examples of individual sacrifice being treated in sacred laws as being akin to polis or group sacrifices; categorisation of individuals in a cultic setting by age, gender or profession; individual participating in certain polis-centred festivals; and the incurrence of religious restrictions on the individual for various reasons.

here we find a blending of Persephone's archetypal abducted maiden and her eschatological functions. Here she is indisputably the queen of the underworld, not as Hades' subordinate consort but as a ruler of the dead in her own right.<sup>21</sup> In this way she takes on the semiotic language of other death-related cultic communities; for example in the presence of pomegranate votive offerings.<sup>22</sup> The main offering type consists of small terracotta pinakes, dedicated by young girls on the precipice of marriage. They show images of Persephone being abducted by Hades, images of the bridal couple receiving gifts – including pomegranates and grain stalks<sup>23</sup> – as well as images of young couples imitating the goddess' abduction.

The tradition of girls acting in imitation of Persephone is not unique to Lokroi. Aside from the literary 'Brides of Hades' trope, there was a funerary tradition common in Athens and elsewhere, in which young unmarried girls were buried in wedding attire and grave goods took the form of wedding gifts.<sup>24</sup> Like the girls dedicating pinakes at Lokroi, the families of these young girls were not presenting them as Hades' bride, but rather as 'little Persephones.'<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> For similar arguments, see J.M. Redfield, *The Locrian Maidens: Love and Death in Greek Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 349; C. Sourvinou-Inwood, 'Persephone and Aphrodite at Locri: A Model for Personality Definitions in Greek Religion', *The Journal of Hellenic studies*, 98 (1978), 101, 108.

<sup>22</sup> The pomegranate has a well-established iconographical connection to Persephone, particularly in her role as Hades' bride, including representations of the goddess on grave markers and stele. The pomegranate has a more general connection with death and is not only shown on tombs in Greek but found on tombs in the Near Eastern world as well. Two prominent examples, each of which offers multiple images of pomegranates, are the commonly-named 'Harpy Tomb' from Xanthos in Lykia, and the Chrysapha relief from Lakonia. Persephone is shown in the Lokroian pinakes being offered pomegranates, and she was offered gifts of terracotta pomegranates in Lokroian cult. Pomegranates have a strong connection to the chthonic and with fertility, and there is some evidence that pomegranates were used in love spells. See C.A. Farone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 75-76; Sourvinou-Inwood, 'Persephone and Aphrodite at Locri', 108; C. Sourvinou-Inwood, *Reading' Greek Death: To the End of the Classical Period* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 248-250; O.S. Tonks, 'An Interpretation of the So-Called Harpy Tomb', *American Journal of Archaeology*, 11/3 (1907), 324-327, 329, 332, 335.

<sup>23</sup> The stalk of grain is regularly associated with Persephone as the daughter of Demeter, and should be viewed as agrarian iconography. Agricultural practice, however, also has an implicit death-related component, which is two-fold in nature. First, the process of planting itself involves the burial of seeds into the earth: In the same way that the dead are interred into the ground, farmers bury their seeds in order to create life – both the immediate life of the crop and the life given by the harvest. As much as even pointed out in the Homeric Hymn *To Demeter*, where *μεν σπέρμ' ὑπὸ γῆς κρύπτουσα* ('hide seeds under the earth') (h.Hom. *Dem.* 305-311 cf. 332-333). The harvest provides wealth and is a sign of public fertility. Thus, they form a link between death, or more specifically burial, and agrarian plenty. It may be possible to imagine that representations as divinities of agriculture and marriage – and therefore representations of life/fertility and death/infertility – could be considered as a local characterisation of Persephone. This is one of Lokroian Persephone's principle attributes, and so it cannot be ignored, particularly with the frequent inclusion of her husband Hades, both in the abduction and marriage scenes. Above all she is a dutiful wife who is imitated by young maidens approaching marriage. See C. Sourvinou-Inwood, 'The Young Abductor of the Locrian Pinakes', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, 20 (1973), 18; Sourvinou-Inwood, 'Persephone and Aphrodite at Locri', 108.

<sup>24</sup> R. Garland, *The Greek Way of Death* (London: Duckworth, 1985), 87.

<sup>25</sup> Examples from death-related ritual practice in the real world may reflect a belief that the girls of our mythic examples were also merely acting in imitation of the goddess, rather than displacing her position as Hades' bride. Young women who were buried with bridal objects and iconography were probably not being offered to Hades in marriage by their parents – death as a

Although these two cultic instances of Persephone-imitation occur around similar times, they are clearly part of two very different religious communities: not only disparate in geography but in function as well. The cult at Lokroi is formed through participating in a public macrocommunity – that is, these are dedications being made at a state cult, and although they may be perceived as personal in nature the overriding emphasis of the cult is on the continued propagation of the polis. The practice of altering funerary rites to mimic wedding rights, conversely, is a cultic activity which takes place in a private microcommunity. One could not say that these two acts share similar motivations or desired outcomes, but they share a semiotic language that makes each one 'readable' to the other.

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'substitute' for marriage – but rather as a way of giving these girls the opportunity to undergo an experience that defines the life of a woman. E. Vermeule, *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 55-56.

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