



THE ATHENS GREEK RELIGION SEMINAR, Tuesday, June 6, 2023

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Maritime Promises and Complex Analyses: an adaptive model of the Mysteries of the Great Gods of Samothrace

ABSTRACT

The mystery cult of the Great Gods of Samothrace promised its initiates safety in travel at sea. This benefit was articulated in literary form from Herodotus to Imperial grammarians as well as inscriptions recognizing the gods' interventions in locations from Fasilar to the waters of the Red Sea. The promise casts down the challenge to test the hypothesis that it worked. Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) offer a productive critical framework for the investigation, one which highlights the processes of ongoing adaptation and emergence, the messy vitality that creates the resilience of long-lived systems. Quantitative analyses and network modeling are critical tools in these approaches, as they organize data in ways that reflect human interactions across space and time. Among the most important outcomes of these methodologies is a bottom-up view of ancient history, as the agency of even unnamed actors shapes the global wholes which define movements, eras, and broadly visible cultural trends. The emergence thus traced is not the moment at which a historical trajectory began, but the ongoing processes of adjustment and adaptation as local environments deploy global patterns for their best outcomes.

A CAS approach to Samothrace begins with the epigraphic records of initiation, *theoria* and *proxenia* from Samothrace, and of priesthoods, processions, shrines and *koina* for the Samothracian gods in Greek cities from Asia Minor to the Pontus. These enable the creation of a social network model which may be placed in geospace. Graphs of betweenness centrality and modularity highlight loci of innovation, strong ties, and intercity competition. These dynamics root the rites in ports where the anthropogenic factors of maritime safety could emerge under the aegis of the island's gods. Literary sources offer analogously localized case studies, and yield qualitative insight into the interaction between Samothracian authority and local traditions. This presentation explores one epigraphic and one literary case study as examples of a CAS approach to Samothrace and its maritime promises: a modularity cluster of the Samothracian affiliated cities positioned between Abdera, Kalchedon, and Kolophon, and the literary accounts of the Pompilos or 'Guide' fish, which Aelian and Pankrates of Arkadia declared sacred to Samothrace. The role of inter-polis competition in the deployment of the divine against maritime risk rises to the fore in both cases, an outcome which recommends the potential of CAS for the study of the past.

The seminar takes place **Tuesday June 6, 2023, 17.00 (Athens)** with live presence at the Swedish Institute or online via Zoom.

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