

Salvation in the Mystic Cults¹

In this panel we shall examine evidence of the role of salvation in the ancient cults. Paper 1 (“Beyond Silence: Soteriology, Samothrace, and the concept of secrecy”) will examine the role of salvation and secrecy in the Samothracian Mysteries, arguing that salvation, a blessed afterlife, and a personal relationship with a dying and rising god have become essential elements in the modern definitions of ancient mystery religions. These notions, however, are the products of a scholarly tradition which compared the mysteries with Christianity, and correspond in only a limited way to the ancient mysteries as a whole. The diverse cults which the ancient world categorized as mysteries are united neither by divine type, nor by promised benefits, but by a social practice – the restriction of access to information. Secrecy was not unique to the mystery religions: it figured as well in magic, and the non-ritual world of philosophical instruction. Only for the mysteries, however, was it the definitional concept which embraced rites both public and private, local and international, practiced by wandering specialists or supervised by local clans.

The causes for this disjuncture between ancient and modern concepts will be examined, and an approach to the mysteries which foregrounds the ancient category, with the help of models drawn from anthropological studies of secrecy, will be proposed. The application of this model to the mysteries of the great gods of Samothrace reveals previously imperceptible cogency between the literary and on-site archaeological remains, patterns of change over time, and a more meaningful comparison with the Eleusinian rites. The disjuncture between early literary sources identifying *daimones* as the gods of the rites, and inscriptions naming only “great gods,” suggest an increasing discretion contemporary with the site’s increase in international prestige. Changes in the cult are the context against which ancient comparisons to Eleusis are revealed as a response to the political interests of the cult’s Macedonian patrons rather than a revelation of the rites’ contents or of an affirmation of identity between the two cults. The approach directs attention away from the elusive ritual sequences of the cult and toward the social dynamics which defined the ritual type for its ancient participants.

The Eleusinian cult in the vicinity of Rome is reflected in a recently discovered *megaron* near Rome. Paper 2 (“A Demeter Temple in Latium”) will examine the metaphorical celebration of the *Thesmophoria* that took place there. In this ritual the *thesmophoria* themselves were

¹ On the topology of the mystic cults, see Casadio and Johnston 2009:9

offerings of piglets and cakes made into *phalloi* and other mystic shapes, which were flung into a natural crevice or into a man-made chamber in the rock known as a *megaron*, left to decay, and then retrieved, either the following year or later that same year, by priestesses. The remains were mixed with grain and ploughed into a nearby ritual field, thus securing the region's fertility. By metaphoric extension, the *thesmophoria* became associated with the civilization that accompanied the practice of sedentary agriculture, with the "things laid down" becoming a code of civil laws, and the goddess's title becoming, in Latin, *legifera*, "law-giver." A small temple just outside Rome, built by Herodes Atticus, can now be identified as dedicated to Demeter/Ceres due in part to the recent discovery there of a well-preserved *megaron*. Also compelling in identifying this building is the presence nearby of a ritual field, a spring (none other than the legendary Fountain of Egeria), and a sacred grove. Herodes used the construction of this sanctuary as a gesture at once linking himself to the imperial cult and the history of Rome while demonstrating both his innocence in his wife Regilla's death and his skill as a sophist.

Finally, Paper 3 ("Mater Matuta at Capua and at Rome") will examine aspects of salvation in the cult of Mater Matuta in Italy. Enormous numbers of her statues have been found at Capua at the foot of the hill above which a temple of Diana surveys the landscape; others have been found in the remains of a temple of Mater Matuta at Rome. This temple is apparently the oldest known example of the type built by Etruscans in a Roman setting; it was destroyed by a fire and reconstructed in the 6th c. BC, and the site was dedicated to the goddess, as indicated by the tributes to her found among the decorations in the temple and reported by Livy (5.19.6) and Ovid (*Fasti* 6.473), who describes the location and connects her with Ino, daughter of Cadmus, who had agreed to raise the infant Dionysus, was driven mad by Hera and threw her own son, Melicertes, into a cauldron of boiling water, and then, holding the corpse of her child, leapt into the sea. She was pitied by the gods of the sea and transformed into *Leucothea*, the "white goddess," and her son became Palaemon or, at Rome, Portunus, the god of ports. The characteristic feature of all these statues is a seated woman holding in her arms infants, often a very large number of them. Her connection with another "saving" goddess, Diana/Artemis, will be examined.

Works Cited

G. Casadio and P. A. Johnston, *Mystic Cults in Magna Graecia*, 2009 Austin, Texas