

Ties that Bind: Samian Cult Connections in the *Homeric Hymns*

Some of the poems transmitted in the surviving collection of *Homeric Hymns* seem to have descended from versions adapted for an audience on Samos. Evidence can be found in references to specifically Samian cult practices, especially to the Tonaia festival, made in these *Hymns*.

Scholars have previously argued for Samian origins for individual *Hymns*: Burkert (1979) hypothesized that the long *Hymn to Apollo* was commissioned by the tyrant Polycrates for performance at his Delian and Pythian festival in the 520s, an idea that was further developed by Aloni (1989). Before that, Wilamowitz (1895) suggested that the fragmentary *Homeric Hymn to Dionysus*, which includes the myth of the binding of Hera by Hephaestus, may have arisen on the island, where the cult statue of the goddess was ritually bound every year as part of the Tonaia festival. This idea has since fallen into disfavor, principally because the historian Menodotus describes an *aition* for this ritual unrelated to the myth found in the *Hymn*. That story, transmitted by Athenaeus (15.672), traces the ritual back to an attempted abduction of the statue by Tyrrhenian pirates, an attempt that has to be abandoned when the icon becomes too heavy to move; superstitious Carians, discovering the statue on the beach, then bind it with willow branches to prevent another escape attempt, thus setting the pattern for the future ritual.

Although this myth undermines the idea of a strong Samian connection for the *Hymn to Dionysus*, it is striking how many of its details are echoed in other *Homeric Hymns*. References to abductions at sea can be found in the *Hymns* to Demeter (119-145) and Apollo (388-439), and in a shorter *Hymn to Dionysus*. In the last of these, the pirates are specifically called “Tyrrhenian,” as in Menodotus. Gods are bound (unsuccessfully) in the *Hymns* to Apollo (120-

129), Hermes (409-413), and Dionysus, and in the latter two willow branches are specifically mentioned, another parallel with the Tonaia *aition*. Finally, per Bernabe (2017), the power and dignity of the goddess Hera is expounded at some length in several *Hymns* not dedicated to her: *Apollo* (309-355, the Typhon digression), *Hermes* (8, and also in the shorter *Hymn* in his honor), and *Aphrodite* (40-44).

Nor is the Tonaia the only Samian cult toward which we find gestures in the *Homeric Hymns*: the short *Hymn to Hermes* includes an alternative valediction in which the god is addressed as *charidotes*, not part of his normal epic titlature, but according to Plutarch (*Moralia* 303b) a cult title for him on Samos; similarly, the *Homeric Hymn to Poseidon* refers to that god as “possessing Helicon,” perhaps a reference to the cult of Poseidon Heliconios located on Mt. Mykale near the island.

These references are slight, to be sure, and many of those found in longer *Hymns* appear in passages which have been characterized as digressions, or even outright interpolations. This makes it possible, however, that the references were added to existing poems to please a local Samian audience. If such a Samian text were used as a source by the eventual compiler of the *Homeric Hymns* as we possess them, it would explain why they have persisted to this day.

While far from certain, such a hypothesis would be one way to map the journey of the *Homeric Hymns* from individual poems to a complete collection.

Bibliography

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