

# AN OVERVIEW: GREEK SANCTUARIES AND WORSHIP



**Location**

**The Altar**

**The Temenos**

**Priests and Priestesses**

**Sacred Days**

**Dedications**

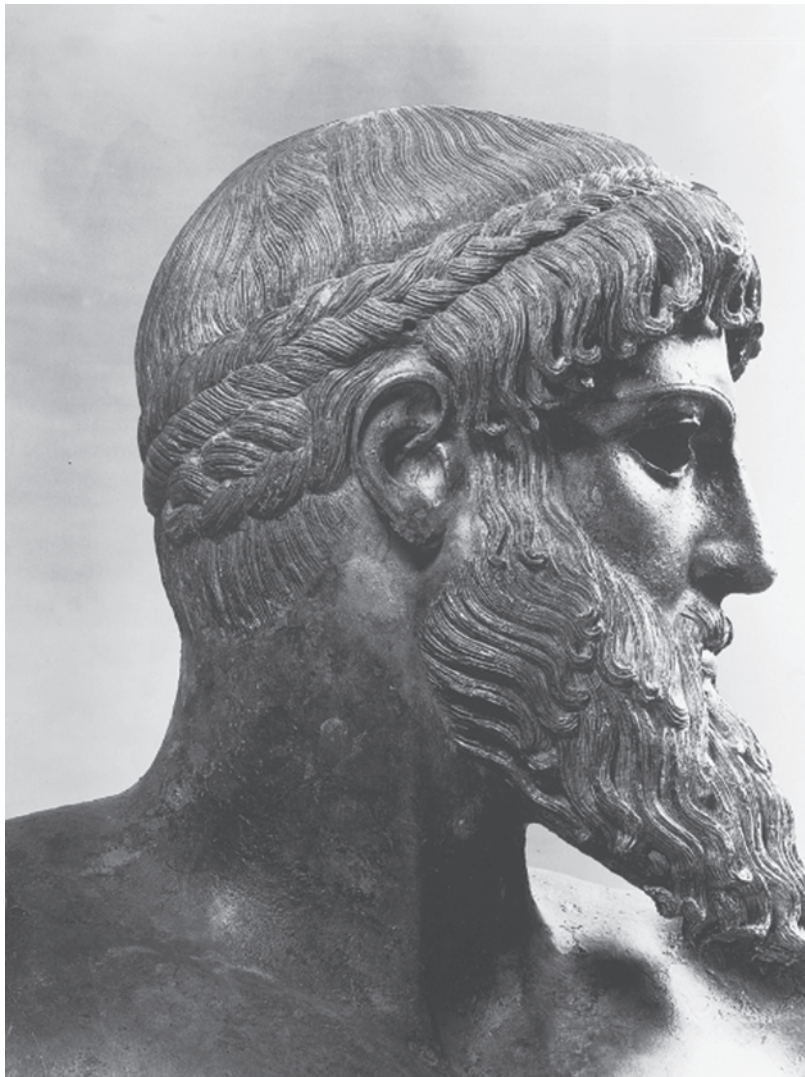
**Statue and Temple**

**Worship**



Greeks most often prayed and made offerings to a deity in that deity's own sanctuary. In this chapter we begin by constructing such a sanctuary, first introducing the essential elements and then adding features found in many sanctuaries. In its simpler form, with an altar and a surrounding fence, our sanctuary will be typical of thousands of sanctuaries in the city-state of Athens alone and of many more thousands elsewhere in the Greek world; in its developed state, with a temple and monumental statue of the deity, it will be similar to only about twenty major sanctuaries even in Athens, the richest of the Greek city-states at this time.

Ours will be a sanctuary of Poseidon, the god who, for all Greeks, was, among other roles, the master of the sea. For Athenians in the fifth century B.C.E.,



**Figure 1.1** Head of a bronze statue of a god, usually identified as Poseidon or Zeus and dated to about 460 B.C.E. For a photograph of the complete statue, see Figure 1.7. It was recovered from the sea near Cape Artemisium off the east coast of Greece in the 1920s and is now in the National Museum, Athens. Courtesy of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Athens, neg. no. Hege 850.

Poseidon was particularly important because their navy was instrumental in establishing and maintaining their empire and because trade by sea, especially the importation of the grain necessary to feed their people, was central to their economy. The Athenians were the most sea-oriented of all Greeks in this period, and for them Poseidon assumed a special importance.

Our sanctuary of Poseidon will be located at Sunium, on the summit of a promontory on the southernmost tip of the Athenian coastline. This promontory overlooks a large expanse of the Aegean Sea which Athenian warships and freighters regularly traversed as they made their way to and from the Athenian harbor at Piraeus. We have chosen this cult site for our Poseidon because the Athenians chose it for theirs. By the middle of the fifth century B.C.E. the Athenians had at Sunium a fully developed sanctuary of Poseidon, with a temple still visible today from many miles out at sea. We re-create, hypothetically, the beginnings and development of this sanctuary, not in an attempt to describe and explain the features of the real cult of Poseidon there but to establish a model for the nature and development of Greek sanctuaries in general.<sup>1</sup> We shall later see many modifications to this model as we examine the cults of Athena on the Athenian Acropolis, of Demeter at Eleusis, of Apollo at Delphi, and several others, but it will be useful to have a model of typical sanctuaries in mind before we turn to the exceptions.



Map I.1 Map of Attica.

## Location

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Why did the Athenians locate a cult of Poseidon at just this spot on the Athenian coast? How were cult sites in general selected? Some sites apparently had a natural mystique. Mountain tops were often sacred to Zeus, the god of the sky and the weather. Springs, the source of the water always in short supply in Greece, and caves almost always attracted cults. Springs and caves were often assigned to the Nymphs. The god Pan, himself often associated with Nymphs, was given a cave on the north slope of the Acropolis when his cult was established in Athens about 490 B.C.E. Artemis preferred rural sanctuaries, also often associated with sources of water. A water source, necessary for medicinal purposes, may have played a role in locating Asclepius' sanctuary on the south slope of the Acropolis in 420/19. Places touched by the gods themselves, as by Zeus with his lightning or by Poseidon with his trident on the Athenian Acropolis, also became sacred. By contrast to these naturally numinous places, many cult sites, especially in urban areas, seem to have been selected based on the deity's function. Athena, the armed patroness and protectress of Athens, had her major



**Figure 1.2** View of the Aegean Sea from the *cella* of the Temple of Poseidon at Sunium. Photograph by the author.

sanctuaries on the Acropolis, the city's fortified citadel. The cult sites of Zeus Boulaios (of the Council), Zeus Eleutherios (of Freedom), and Apollo Patroös (Ancestral) were clustered on the west side of the Agora (marketplace), in the Classical Period the governmental and archival center of Athens. Similarly Hephaestus, the god of fire, shared a temple with Athena in an area of Athens that housed foundries and blacksmiths. The siting of these sanctuaries as well as of many in new cities founded as colonies suggests that often the Greeks were willing to locate sanctuaries, as we do churches, on the basis of land available and to fit them into a larger urban design. These sanctuaries were built in places appropriate to the gods' activities in civic affairs, not in a place sacred, as it were, by nature. In these cases the site was made sacred by the establishment of the sanctuary. The reasons for choices of sites for cults surely varied widely, and we can see patterns but no one pattern. Myths, as we shall later see for the cult of Apollo at Delphi, sometimes explained that the deity selected the location of a cult site. Many of the smaller cult sites throughout the Greek world also had myths explaining their origins, but these myths do not survive, and we now have no way of knowing why they were where they were.

For our cult of Poseidon, the site of Sunium seems an obvious choice, with its commanding view over one of the major sea lanes to and from Piraeus, the last such vantage point before the ships disappear from view on the open sea and the first point from which hostile ships would be sighted. It may also be that this site was initially chosen or later developed especially because of its frontier location, with the intent of laying permanent claim to this remote spot and establishing Poseidon as a potent defender against the form of attack most likely at this border. In the late fifth century, in fact, the Poseidon sanctuary at Sunium was enclosed within a large military fort with considerable naval installations.

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## The Altar

The altar serves to receive offerings to the deity, and since giving offerings was a fundamental form of worship for the Greeks, the altar was the one essential physical component of the cult. An altar may, in fact, serve as the litmus test for a religious cult: if a deity had one, we can be sure that he or she was worshiped and was a part of practiced Greek religion. If a deity did not have an altar, that deity was most probably a creation of the literary tradition or of folklore, not of the religious tradition, and did not receive sacrifice, prayer, or dedications. A few figures such as the personifications Eirene (Peace) and Agathe Tyche (Good Fortune) made the transition from literary to religious figures by the fourth century B.C.E., and we recognize that transformation in Athens when altars are built and dedicated to them.

Some altars were simple pits (*bothroi*) or low-lying structures with openings to the bare earth (*escharai*). Liquid offerings such as wine, oil, water, milk, and

honey were poured into these. These altars were for deities and divine figures thought to dwell *in* or *beneath* the earth, and, presumably, the offerings were thought to seep down into the earth to their recipients. Poseidon is, however, an *ouranic* (“of the sky”) deity who dwelled and moved about above ground, in the sky. The offerings to these deities are directed upwards, towards the sky. Their altars (*bômoi*) needed to have a flat surface on top to hold the offerings, but otherwise could assume a variety of shapes – usually rectangular but sometimes square or cylindrical. Altars ranged greatly in size, often in proportion to the size of the sanctuary itself. Simple altars might be waist high, a block of stone a meter square, or a cylinder equally tall. Monumental altars were often features of panhellenic sanctuaries. The altar of Zeus at Nemea, for example, was a rectangular structure over 41.5 meters long and 2.42 meters wide and that of Zeus at Olympia was 38.1 meters in circumference at its base and 6.7 meters high. Such were, however, very much the exception.

Since the ouranic deities were in the sky, for the offerings to be visible to them and for the savor of the burnt offerings to reach them their altars had to be outdoors, not within a building and covered by a roof, and so altars within a temple were a rarity. Finally, altars of the ouranic deities were oriented to the east. The priest, as he made the offerings or sacrifice, stood on the west side of the altar, facing east. Offerings to ouranic deities were made before noon, often at dawn, and as he performed his rituals the priest would be looking towards the rising sun.

The altar will be the first element of our sanctuary of Poseidon. Let us make it a block of stone. In other cities we might well use limestone, but in Athens, with its mountains of marble, we can make it of this beautiful and durable stone. Let us make it of Pentelic marble, about  $1\frac{1}{4}$  meters high and wide, 2 meters long, and with a molding around the top edge. We are obliged to carve Poseidon’s



**Figure 1.3** A marble altar, dedicated by the Athenians to Aphrodite and the Charites in 194/3 B.C.E. It was discovered by the Agora in Athens and is now on display in the National Museum. Photograph courtesy of the National Museum, Athens, inv. no. 1495.

name on it, so that both the god and visitors know it is his. Each altar is so designated with the god's name or with the name of a specific group of gods because there were no "common" altars to serve all the gods. If one wished to make an offering to Athena, one must offer it on her altar. If, as in our case, the offering is to Poseidon, it must be made on his altar. An offering to Poseidon on an altar of Athena would be received by and would influence neither deity. Our altar is of stone because it must endure the elements. On occasion we will want to burn offerings on it, and then we will put on the altar a metal pan to protect its surface from the fire and ashes. We will orient our altar, as always, to the east, but, by chance, in our sanctuary at Sunium it will appropriately also face the open sea. We have inscribed on it Poseidon's name in large letters, perhaps painted for ease of reading.

In this way our sanctuary of Poseidon is founded. The one essential element, the altar, is in place, inscribed with Poseidon's name. The altar is oriented to the east and overlooks the Aegean. Since it is of marble and has sculpted moldings, it is a little more elaborate than altars found in the simplest sanctuaries, and this betokens future development of the sanctuary.

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## The *Temenos*

As was very commonly done, we will mark off an area around our altar. We might use boundary stones (*horoi*) at the corners or a surrounding fence (*peribolos*), thereby establishing the enclosed area as a separate precinct. We are "cutting off" (for which the Greek is *temnein*) an area from the surrounding land, and the Greek term for such an enclosed area is *temenos*. Our *temenos* is to be dedicated to a god and hence is "sacred" (*hieron*), and the two terms together, *temenos* and *hieron*, mark the two aspects of our sanctuary: a *temenos* as a separate precinct and a *hieron* as a sacred place, the god's property. Let us use a low fence, quite probably of mud brick or field stone, which will serve more to demarcate the sacred area than to protect it. It might deter the wandering cow or sheep, but its gate would not be locked and the *temenos* would be readily accessible to human visitors. Everything within the *temenos* is "sacred," that is, the property of the deity, and the deity, not the fence, will protect it. *Sylân* is the Greek word for "to steal," and property and persons in Greek sanctuaries enjoyed *asylia*, the right "not to be stolen." Individuals seeking refuge in these sanctuaries had *asylum*. They were under the protection of the god of the sanctuary and could not be removed against their will. They might be tricked out or starved out, but under no circumstances could they be forcibly dragged out. To steal property of the god from a *temenos* was both a

The abode of the gods is a protection shared by all men.

Euripides, *Heraclidae* 260

The altar is an unbreakable shield, stronger than a fortification tower.

Aeschylus, *Suppliant Women* 190

civil and a religious crime. In Athens such malefactors if caught would be prosecuted in the courts, but an even greater danger faced them, caught or not, from the wrath of the offended deity.

Most cults of Poseidon had open access and were not, like some Greek cults, limited to either men or women worshipers. Let us assume that men, women, and children of Athens could enter the *temenos* of our Poseidon cult at will – unless they were “polluted.” The Greek term for religious pollution is *miasma*. Those polluted were ritually impure and were denied access to virtually all sanctuaries in the Greek world. One “polluted” from sexual intercourse must bathe to remove the pollution before entering the sanctuary. Those who had entered the home of a woman just having given birth could not enter a sanctuary for three days, and new mothers and midwives probably had to wait longer. Men and women who were “polluted” from attending a funeral or being in the presence of a corpse were excluded from sanctuaries for a specific period of time. In some cults menstruating women were not allowed entry. At the entrance of some sanctuaries lists were posted of what was considered polluting acts or situations, some including even having eaten certain foods. Period, sexual intercourse, childbirth, and death are, of course, normal events of life and were not in moral terms “polluting” or reproachable, but they made one ritually impure, repulsive to the divine. Those who had killed another, except in battle, voluntarily or not, were also polluted, and they were forbidden entrance until they had undergone formal rites of purification, rituals distinct from any legal proceedings that might be involved. An individual recently engaged in these various activities “did not belong” and was “out of place” in a sanctuary, and the concept of *miasma* was a marker for that. A person, while polluted, was excluded from the worshiping community. If a polluted person was in the sanctuary, the deity would not come, and prayers and offerings would be in vain. *Miasma* in the classical Greek religious tradition is a quasi-physical state – in the sense that pollution is a symbolic “dirt” that can be passed on by contact. It was contagious like a virus or germ. If a polluted person entered a sanctuary and was found out, she or he was banned from the precinct, and the sanctuary and the altar needed to be ritually purified, often with sulphur or water, before

one could continue communicating with the gods. Certain kinds of pollution also had a moral dimension: sexual intercourse with a prostitute was more polluting than intercourse with one’s own spouse. Breach of major moral and religious tenets that directly involved the gods, such as perjury or a violent removal of suppliants from a sanctuary, incurred inner pollution, often expressed as an impurity of heart, soul, or mind, rather than physical pollution.

Whoever wishes to sacrifice shall enter the sanctuary, being pure from childbirth on the ninth day; from miscarriage (or an abortion), for forty-four days; from menstruation, on the seventh day; from a funeral, for seven days; from (eating) goat meat and mutton, on the third day; from other (prohibited) foods, having washed oneself from the head down, on the same day; from sexual intercourse, on the same day, having washed oneself...

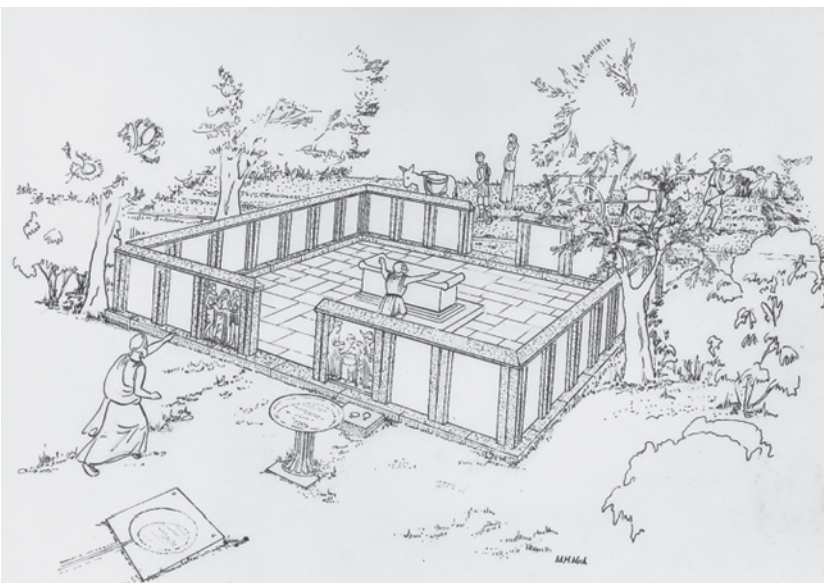
Inscription from a sanctuary of Isis and Serapis in Megalopolis, third century b.c.e., *SEG XXVIII 421*, lines 3–15

One rids oneself of ritual pollution (*miasma*) by washing, by the gradually cleansing passage of time, or by appropriate rituals. The impure “dirt” from sexual intercourse, childbirth, and murder are physical and in some cases obvious. The polluting aspect of funerals and the aversion to the dead may be explained by the nature of the ouranic gods themselves. They were by nature deathless, the gods of the living, and in the Greek tradition these gods abhorred death and withdrew from anything (except their own sacrificial victims) tainted by it. For this reason the dead, those who had recently attended the dead, and murderers were excluded from the gods’ sanctuaries. As the whole of the island of Delos gradually became thought of as the sanctuary of Apollo, the Athenian tyrant Pisistratus in the sixth century removed from the surrounding hills all tombs that even overlooked Apollo’s *temenos*, and then in 426/5 the Athenians had all the remaining tombs removed from the island.

It has been destined for her to die and depart from life on this day. I leave now this house that is very dear to me so that pollution may not reach me in this house.

Apollo, on the forthcoming death of Alcestis.  
Euripides, *Alcestis* 20–3

The same acts that pollute individuals and prevent them from entering sanctuaries are all the greater dangers if they occur *in* a sanctuary, and therefore every effort was made to prevent sexual intercourse, childbirth, or a death from occurring there. Those caught trysting in a sanctuary could even be put to death, and on Delos it became the practice to remove both those who were dying and women in childbirth to a nearby island before they “polluted” Apollo’s sacred island, and, of course, to kill someone in a sanctuary was a heinous sacrilege that would be punished by the god.



**Figure 1.4** Drawing of the sanctuary of the Twelve Gods, founded in Athens by the grandson of the tyrant Pisistratus in 522/1 B.C.E. It served also as the official central milestone from which all distances in Attica were measured. It has the typical form of a sacred *temenos* with an altar facing east, a *peribolos* wall, and a *perirrhanterion* at the main gate. Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies, Athens: Agora Excavations.

Never, from dawn forward, pour a shining libation of wine to Zeus or the other immortals, without washing your hands first.

When you do, they do not hear your prayers; they spit them back at you.

Hesiod, *Works and Days* 724–6 (Lattimore translation)

Pollution can also be imagined as a form of real “dirt” or “filth” and in its most minor forms could simply be washed away. Greeks wished to be physically clean when they approached their deities, freshly washed and typically dressed for the occasion in clean white clothes. Often, just at the gate of

a sanctuary, stood a basin (*perirrhanterion*) of water with which the worshipers sprinkled themselves, symbolically cleansing before approaching the divine. A Hippocratic author (*On the Sacred Disease* 4.55–60) describes the act as follows:

We ourselves establish boundaries of the sanctuaries and precincts for the god so that no one may pass over them unless he is pure. When we go in, we sprinkle water around ourselves, not as though we were polluted but to purify an uncleanness we had before.

Sprinkling the water from the *perirrhanterion* around oneself would not eliminate the more serious pollutions of association with the dead and of murder, but it would suffice for the accumulated “dirt” of the day.

For our cult of Poseidon let the first *temenos* fence be of mud brick, low, perhaps a meter high, and with a single gate. For most sanctuaries the area enclosed was probably quite small, with land enough just for the altar and for the priest to perform the necessary rituals. Poseidon, however, is a major deity, and even as we establish his cult at Sunium we foresee expansion and development of the sanctuary. Therefore we make his initial *temenos* rather large, 10 × 20 meters. Let us have also a *perirrhanterion* at the gate for the worshipers’ final “cleansing” before they enter the sanctuary. With the altar, its surrounding fence, and the *perirrhanterion* we now have the basic elements of a Greek sanctuary – the altar being required, the fence and *perirrhanterion* being very common. Our *temenos* is somewhat larger and our altar a bit more elaborate than most, but together they represent the most common form of a Greek sanctuary.

## Priests and Priestesses

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For Poseidon and his sanctuary we need a priest (*hierous*) since our deity is male. If our deity were female, Athena or Artemis, we would have a priestess (*hierieia*). The priest will probably be an elder of the family that has tended Poseidon on this site for decades or even centuries. We have been imagining that “we” are founding this cult of Poseidon, but in fact such a cult would probably have been originally founded, perhaps in the eighth century B.C.E. or earlier, by an aristocratic family who owned the property, and the priest is quite

likely a descendant of the family of the original founders. He is chosen by the family and will hold his priesthood for life or until he cedes it to another member of the family. The foundation of our cult predates the establishment of Athenian democratic institutions in 508/7. For state cults established after this date priests and priestesses were often, in the tradition of Athenian democracy, selected by lot for annual terms. The priest's prime responsibility as *hiereus* is to manage the *hiera*: the offerings, sacrifices, and the sanctuary itself and its property, all of which were *hiera* ("sacred"). The priest would surely know much of the traditions and rituals of the cult, but for a cult of Poseidon, unlike, for example, that of Demeter at Eleusis, this would not be an esoteric, closely held, secret knowledge. Even the rituals of sacrifice would be, as it were, generic, common to the cults of many deities, but with, perhaps, one or two local idiosyncracies. The priest's role was not that of a rabbi or pastor – he tended not the worshipers but the deity. He would serve only the cult of one deity, and his authority as priest was limited to the cult of that deity. There were no "colleges" of priests whereby individual priests might combine their authority or knowledge and make pronouncements on matters of religion in general. In a small cult such as ours the priest's duties would occupy only a few days each year, and he would be, if not retired, a farmer, sailor, merchant, stone mason, or engaged in some other occupation. While holding his priesthood he could serve in the military and hold government office. His income from his priesthood would be minimal, probably only portions, often the skins, of the animals sacrificed on the altar or of other food offerings left there. Our priest would live in his own home away from the sanctuary and would have no special restrictions on his dress and behavior. Except on festival days, when he might wear special robes, he would be indistinguishable from his fellow citizens. The priesthood would, however, bring him a certain respect in the community, perhaps even a reserved front row seat in the theater for the tragedies and comedies in the annual festival of Dionysos.

The priest of Amphiaraus is to frequent the sanctuary from when winter ends up to the season of ploughing, being absent for no more than three days, and he is to remain in the sanctuary no less than ten days each month. And he is to require the *neokoros* to take care of the sanctuary in accordance with the law and to take care of those who come into the sanctuary.

The priest is to pray over the offerings and to place them on the altar when he is present. When he is not present, each sacrificer is himself to pray at his sacrifice, but the priest is to pray over the state's offerings. The skins of all the animals sacrificed in the sanctuary are sacred. Each person may sacrifice whatever animal he wishes, but the meat is not to be removed from the *temenos*. The sacrificers are to give to the priest the shoulder from each victim, except when there is the public festival. Then let the priest receive from the state's offerings a shoulder from each of the victims.

Some regulations concerning the priest of Amphiaraus, a healing god, at Oropus, near Athens. 386–374 B.C.E. P.J. Rhodes and R. Osborne, *Greek Historical Inscriptions: 404–323 b.c.*, #27, lines 2–8 and 25–36.

Priests, as tradition says, are expert in giving gifts through sacrifices from us to the gods as the gods wish them and in asking for us from the gods in prayers the acquisition of good things.

Plato, *Politicus* 290c8–d2.

## Sacred Days

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Virtually every one of the hundreds or even thousands of deities with cult sites in a Greek city-state had one day each year that was specially his or hers. The day might be celebrated by only the family that tended the cult, by the people of the neighborhood, or by all the citizens of the state. Worship on this day was intended, in general terms, to keep the deity happy with his devotees throughout the year. It was, as it were, routine religious maintenance and might be thought of, in crude terms, as an annual auto or home insurance payment. However, unlike an insurance payment, it was also an expression of gratitude for the previous year's support. For a cult tended by one family, it might well involve just a simple prayer and offering by the priest in the morning. The family might also sacrifice a goat or sheep and have a feast for family members and friends. The deity's festival day might also include the whole neighborhood or village that participated in this cult.

Let us imagine at this early stage a rather simple festival day for Poseidon at Sunium. For all Athenians the eighth day of each month was sacred to Poseidon, so let us put his annual festival day on the eighth day of the month Posideon. This,



**Figure 1.5** The tombstone (0.62 meters high) of the Athenian priest Simos of the deme Myrrhinous, dating from 370 to 360 B.C.E. His priesthood is indicated by the sacrificial knife he carries and by his long, unbelted garment. Courtesy of National Museum, Athens, inv. no. 772.

the sixth month of the Athenian year, fell in mid-winter and was named, like most Greek months, after a festival held in it – here the Posidea of Poseidon. Therefore, on Posideon 8, the priest, members of his family, and some neighbors will gather at the sanctuary at dawn to celebrate the Posidea. They will offer a prayer to Poseidon to come to their sanctuary – since Greek gods were not omnipresent – to receive their offering, and to protect them and their friends as they venture out to sea, and then they will make an offering. This might well be the end of it, and they then would turn to other business of the day. If they sacrifice an animal, however, they will probably make a day of it, butchering and cooking the animal and settling down for a feast in the afternoon. The prayer and sacrifice will offer moments of great religious solemnity, but they will occur in the context of the pleasures of family, friends, neighbors, and good food.

*Months of the Athenian Year*

Hekatombaion	June–July
Metageitnion	July–August
Boedromion	August–September
Pyanopsion	September–October
Maimakterion	October–November
Posideon	November–December
Gamelion	December–January
Anthesterion	January–February
Elaphebolion	February–March
Mounichion	March–April
Thargelion	April–May
Skirophorion	May–June



**Figure I.6** An Athenian red-figure *crater* (mixing bowl for wine) from about 425 B.C.E., by the Cleophon painter or a member of his circle; 42.3 cm high and 47 cm in diameter. In the lower center stands the altar over which the bearded sacrificer washes his hands in a bowl held by a young man. In his left hand the young man holds a container for the sacrificial knife. The victim, a sheep, is depicted on the left. Note the double-flute player on the far left and the garlands worn by all. Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 95.25. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. On similar sacrifice scenes on vases, see T. Carpenter, "Greek Religion and Art," 409–15 in Ogden, *Companion*.

## Dedications

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There were also occasions of worship apart from the annual festival days, and these often arose in times of personal need. We might imagine that Apollodorus is about to make a business trip, sailing with a cargo of wine to Byzantium and planning, with the proceeds of the sale, to buy grain, sail back to Athens, and sell the grain there for another profit. Apollodorus might well come to our sanctuary and promise Poseidon one-tenth of his profits if he returns safely from this long and dangerous voyage. He makes a *vow* to Poseidon in a prayer, and, if all goes as he wishes, he must give to Poseidon what he promised. The gift he gives to Poseidon as a result of such a *vow* is a *votive offering*, and, in the Greek tradition, he would most likely not give the cash but would have made from the cash a beautiful object (*agalma*) such as a small statuette or a sculpted or painted plaque, which would *adorn* the sanctuary. He would, of course, wish to memorialize his gift, to let the god and visitors to the sanctuary know who gave it, and so he would inscribe his name on it, perhaps in a text like this:

Apollodorus, son of Diopethes, after having made a vow, Erects this for you, Poseidon, as a tithe.

Similarly Diocles, after a long and successful career as a sailor, might present the sanctuary with a *thank-offering* – perhaps some tools of his trade or a terracotta plaque inscribed simply,

With thanks, to Poseidon, from Diocles, son of Hermias, a sailor.

We call such gifts, both votive offerings and thank-offerings, *dedications*, and we find them today in museum cases throughout the world. They include vases of all types, often in miniature; statues and statuettes of deities and of the animals commonly sacrificed to them; stone, wooden, and terracotta plaques representing the deity or the worshipers praying and sacrificing to the deity; clothing and tools; and inscriptions describing the deity's services to the individual. When these gifts have been dedicated in a sanctuary, they become the god's property and are sacred. Some might be used for processions and other religious purposes, but they otherwise cannot be removed from the *temenos*. We should imagine them set on pedestals or benches, hung from the *temenos* wall, nailed to or hung from trees within the sanctuary, perhaps set on the altar, and displayed in various other ways.

After a few decades, there would be dozens of such dedications in our sanctuary of Poseidon. They are now his property, but more importantly they demonstrate to all visitors the power of the deity. Each represents, in its own way, an individual who thought he was helped by Poseidon, who thought his prayers to Poseidon were answered. This is well illustrated by an anecdote set on the island Samothrace at the sanctuary of the Great Gods who, like Poseidon, protected sailors at sea. A friend is trying to convince the notoriously impious Diagoras of

Melos that the gods are concerned with human affairs. He points to the many dedications in the sanctuary and asks, “Do you not see from so many painted votive tablets how many men by their vows escaped the violence of storms and arrived safely into port?” His argument did not impress Diagoras, but the anecdote serves to record how most Greeks would view the collection of dedications in a Greek sanctuary.<sup>2</sup> Taken as a group, dedications are tangible evidence of the deity’s existence, power, and the range of that power, and they show the *honor* in which the deity is held by his worshipers.

These dedications are durable goods, unlike the food of offerings and sacrifices on the altar. They were probably meant to survive in the sanctuary forever, but, of course, some were more durable than others. Silver statuettes, for example, might suffer from the elements and from pigeon droppings, and we will soon want to erect in our sanctuary a small building to protect them. In major panhellenic sanctuaries like Delphi and Olympia there were many such *treasury buildings*, finely built, often of marble with elaborate sculptural decoration, often given by prosperous city-states to house their dedications in the sanctuary. However, for our Poseidon sanctuary we imagine in a corner of the *temenos* a rather simple wooden building, roofed, with shelves on the interior walls to hold the dedications. It might have a locked door, but perhaps not. Again, the prime protection for these and all dedications is their location in a sanctuary and the god’s concern for his own property. It is most important that our treasury building be *within* the sanctuary. We are not to remove any of the god’s property from his *temenos*. If some of the vase or terracotta dedications are accidentally broken and become unsightly, we will bury them in a *votive pit* within the sanctuary. Even when old and broken, they must still be respected as the god’s property. Once buried, these *votive deposits* may survive through the centuries and millennia, and when discovered by archaeologists they are a prime source for the many Greek dedications we see in the museums today.

Now, before we undertake a major expansion of our sanctuary, let us review what we have: an altar, inscribed with Poseidon’s name, oriented to the east; a *peribolos* enclosing the altar in a *temenos* about 10 × 20 meters; dozens of dedications, both votive and thank-offerings, displayed throughout the sanctuary; and a treasury building housing the more perishable and perhaps more precious dedications. All of this is superintended by the priest of Poseidon.

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## Statue and Temple

Let us imagine that we are now in 479 B.C.E. The Greeks have in the past year successfully repelled a massive invasion of their lands by the Persian king Xerxes with, as Herodotus (7.184–5) claims, his 1,000 warships and 2,500,000 soldiers of many eastern nationalities. Decisive in the Greek success was their total victory in the sea battle in the Bay of Salamis, off the coast of southern Attica and a mere two hours’ voyage from Sunium. After this victory the Persian navy fled

to Asia Minor, and Xerxes himself retreated north with the bulk of his army. More battles on land at Plataea and on land and sea at Mycale on the coast of Asia Minor would follow, but the victory at Salamis seriously crippled the Persian invasion and marked the turning point of the war for the Greeks. It was their first major victory in this war, and from it they went from victory to victory.

The Persians during their occupation of Attica had impiously and sacrilegiously pillaged and burned all the sanctuaries, including our sanctuary of Poseidon, and we will first have to rebuild it. In the rebuilding we will have to expand the sanctuary because from the spoils of the victory at Salamis the Greeks dedicated Phoenician warships captured in the battle to Poseidon of the Isthmus of Corinth, to Ajax of Salamis, and to our Poseidon (Herodotus 8.121). The Phoenicians had the best navy of those serving under the Persians, and these dedicated warships, one in each sanctuary, represent the Greek victory over the very best that the Persians had to put up against them.

At the war's end the Greeks made further dedications: a magnificent gold tripod with snake-stand for Apollo at Delphi; a four-and-one-half-meter tall bronze statue of Zeus at Olympia; and a similar, three-meter statue of Poseidon at the Isthmus. Each of these panhellenic dedications was made at a panhellenic sanctuary (Herodotus 9.81.1). Since individual Greek cities also honored deities of their homelands for the victory, let us have the Athenians at this time give Poseidon of Sunium a new title, "Soter" (Savior), for the help he gave them at Salamis, and let us hypothesize – since there is no evidence to support this – that the Athenians also promised on this occasion a statue to our Poseidon, now Poseidon Soter, a specifically Athenian dedication to join the captured Phoenician warship dedicated by the Greeks as a group. This statue of Poseidon is to be made of bronze, two meters tall, bearded, wielding in his right hand a trident.

The Persian destruction and burning of our sanctuary, the victories at Salamis and elsewhere over the Persians, and the resulting major dedications of the captured Phoenician ship and the new bronze statue of Poseidon will require major repairs and expansion of the sanctuary. We must repair or replace the altar – but on the same exact site as the original one. Most of the pre-war dedications that survived the Persian pillaging have been damaged, and they must be buried in votive pits within the sanctuary. If some dedications of silver or bronze survive in pieces, we will melt them down and cast from them new vases or statuettes, taking care that all the precious metal is returned to the god and that the names of the original donors are kept on record. We need to restore the *temenos* wall, but it seems just the right time to expand the sanctuary so that it can include the Phoenician ship and the statue. A neighbor might donate additional land – itself a form of dedication to Poseidon –, or the state, flush with the spoils of the war, might simply purchase it. In either case, let us expand the size of our sanctuary now to be 60 × 80 meters, a size appropriate for a deity who has become – after the victories at sea and the beginnings of the Athenian naval empire – one of the most important patrons of the Athenian people. Let us also replace

the mudbrick *peribolos* with one built of rectangular blocks of poros stone, a substantial wall that will also serve as a terrace wall to allow us to level the land of the hill top. We can now make an impressive gateway of marble, with several doorways. The gate will be on one of the long north–south sides of the *peribolos*, giving direct access to the sacrificial area at the altar, but however large and impressive, the *peribolos* and the gateway are still both designed not so much to protect as to mark the sacred area.

After the devastation of all Athens and Attica by the Persians, the restoration and expansion of our sanctuary will take time. Soon after the retreat of the Persians in 479 the sanctuary would be cleaned, the debris buried, and a temporary altar erected. Within a decade or so we may have a new marble altar, a stone *peribolos* with its marble gateway, and, off at one end of the sanctuary, the Phoenician warship – probably now on temporary wooden supports. By the 440s our long-promised bronze statue of Poseidon Soter is being constructed, at state expense. Until now we have had in our sanctuary statuettes of Poseidon dedicated by individual worshipers, but no single, larger than life-size, dominating statue of the god. Most cults in the Greek world, like our original simple sanctuary, would never have had such a statue. Of those few that did, some, like that of Athena Polias on the Acropolis, had statues of great antiquity and veneration, some reputedly having appeared in miraculous circumstances. Most others, like our cult of Poseidon, had specially made statues, often, as for us, thank-offerings financed by the state with booty from victory in war. Such a statue, as a dedication to the deity, was of course sacred. A finely wrought statue by a great artist would also be widely admired for its beauty – an *agalma* – and this, too, has a religious aspect because the Greeks always wished to adorn the sanctuaries of their deities. Greek deities, like Greek people, appreciated fine art. The statue, in the Greek tradition, represented but did not embody the deity. It usually has the attributes described in epic poetry – armor for Athena, for example, or the bow for Apollo, or, as for us, the trident for Poseidon. The statue would certainly make a strong impression on the worshiper by its size and appearance, but it would not be given a special, distinct sanctity as if it were the deity. It is a welcome addition to our cult, but unlike the altar it is not essential. If stolen or destroyed, it could be, like any other dedication, replaced.

Our new two-meter tall bronze statue of Poseidon Soter will become a second focal point of the sanctuary – the first being, of course, the altar. We must plan where to place it and how to shelter it, and this introduces the most familiar but perhaps least common element of a Greek sanctuary, the temple. The temple is, in essence, a large rectangular room, oriented to the east, with a door on the short, eastern side. It may, but not necessarily, have a front porch, a back porch, and a detached colonnade supporting the superstructure of the roof. The Greek term for the whole building is *naos*, for the central interior room *megaron*, but for both we most commonly use Latin-based terms, for the building *temple*, for the inner room *cella*. The columns are usually fluted, the entablature above the architrave and the pediments may be decorated with sculpture appropriate to the deity, and the roof may be surmounted with ornaments. However, the

central room, the *cella*, is our concern now, because it will house the new statue of Poseidon. He will stand on a base near the west end of this room, facing toward the door of the *cella*. It is often said that Greek temples are oriented to the east. That is true, but the matter can be better stated. In a sanctuary the altar – which almost always pre-exists the temple – is oriented to the east, and the temple is oriented to the altar. Both thus face east, but the altar determines the orientation of the temple. As a result, we will have aligned, facing the east, our monumental statue of Poseidon Soter, the building in which he stands, and the altar. We should imagine that on his festival day, the Posidea of Posideon 8, when the *cella's* doors are opened in early morning, the light of the sun rising in the east flows in upon Poseidon, illuminating him and bringing the bronze to life in an otherwise rather dark room. Poseidon's gaze, in turn, is directed through the open doors and falls upon the activities around his own altar. Our bronze Poseidon will observe the acts of worship directed to the real Poseidon at his altar on his festival day.



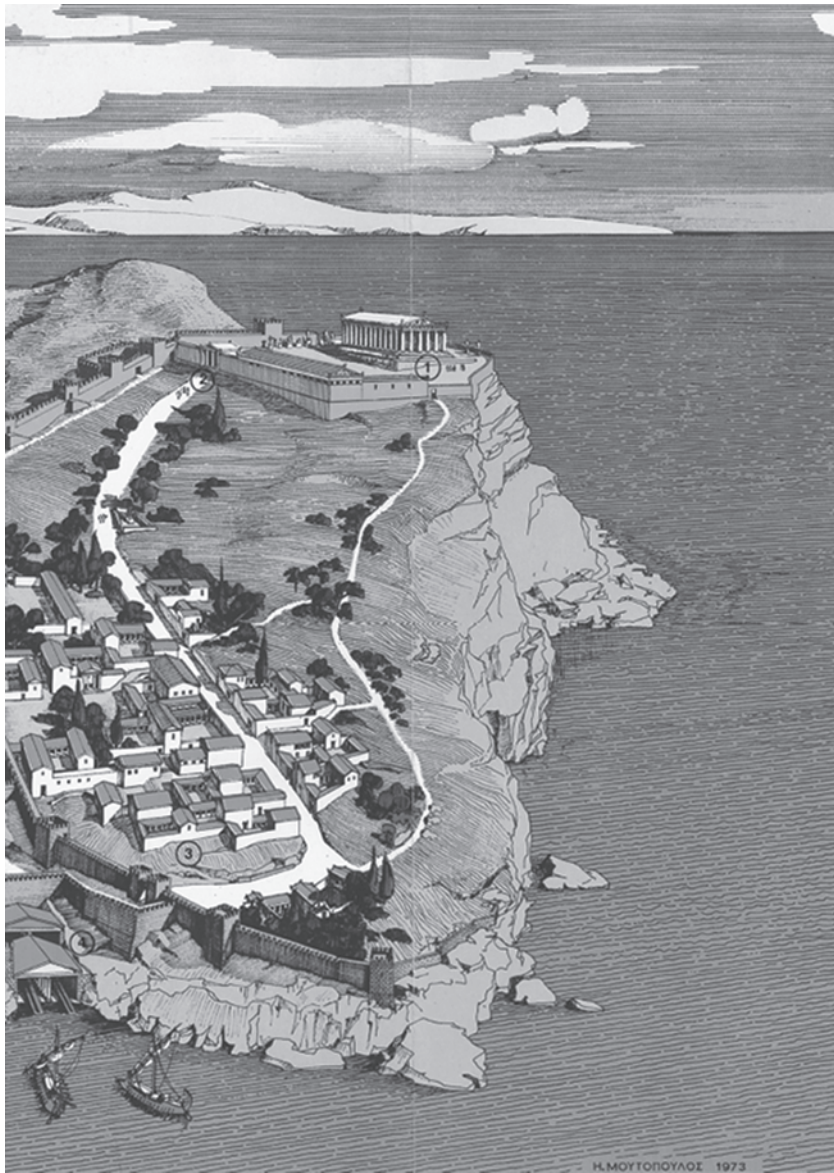
**Figure 1.7** Bronze statue of a god, 2.09 meters high, usually identified as Poseidon or Zeus, from about 460 B.C.E. It was recovered from the sea near Cape Artemisium off the east coast of Greece and is now in the National Museum, Athens. For a close view of the head, see Figure 1.1. It is this statue we use as a model for the statue of Poseidon Soter in his sanctuary at Sunium. On this statue see Robertson, *A History*, 196–7 and Stewart, who identifies him with Zeus, in *Sculpture*, 146–7. Courtesy of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Athens, neg. no. Wagner N.M. 4533.

The temple itself is a dedication to the deity, albeit a very expensive one, paid for by the state, often from the booty of war or, as at this time by the Athenians, from revenues from their empire. Like other dedications it may be a thank-offering for victory in war, a votive offering fulfilling a vow made by the state in unusually desperate circumstances, or even a gift to appease an angry deity. Unlike a Christian church, the temple does not house the altar and is not the central place of worship. In the Greek sanctuary the outdoor altar remains the religious center, the place of offering and prayer. The temple functions rather as an elaborate treasury building, sheltering the statue and other particularly precious or fragile dedications made to the deity.

Our sanctuary of Poseidon at Sunium has now undergone repair, expansion, and elaboration, and for our purposes is complete. Let us survey the results and imagine the sanctuary as it appeared in about 440 B.C.E. The altar is very much like the original, a rectangular block of marble,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  meters high and wide, 2 meters long, inscribed with Poseidon's name and epithet (Poseidon Soter). It is surrounded by a stone *temenos* wall, 2 meters high, enclosing a level area of  $60 \times 80$  meters, with an ornate, marble gateway. Beside the gate now stands a handsome marble *perirrhanterion*, inscribed with Poseidon's name. To the west of the altar and oriented on it stands the temple, and let it be the one the Athenians themselves built at Sunium in just these years. It is a Doric temple of white marble from a local quarry, about 31 meters long and 13 meters wide, with 34 exterior columns (6 on the front and back, 13 on each long side) supporting an entablature of marble and a roof of wood. It has both a front porch and a back porch. A sculptured frieze represents the battle of the Centaurs against the Lapiths, that of the gods against the giants, and the labors of Theseus, Poseidon's son – all symbolizing the victory of the forces of civilization over those of violence and disorder. Inside the *cella*, at its west end, stands on a marble base the bronze Poseidon Soter wielding his trident. Also inside the *cella*, probably on shelves and pedestals, are precious dedications accumulated in recent years. The whole sanctuary is gradually being filled by statuettes, plaques, inscriptions, and other private dedications, but most prominent among them, perhaps along one long side of the *temenos* wall, is the Phoenician ship, now on a marble base, with an inscription in large letters reading,

“To Poseidon Soter of Sunium, from the ships of the Phoenicians and Persians in the glorious victory of the Athenians around divine Salamis.”

Our sanctuary is now large, elaborate, and quite wealthy, and a single priest can no longer assume all the responsibilities for it. He may well appoint a lay assistant, a *neokoros*, who will tend to the maintenance of the buildings and grounds. The Athenian state, which has invested heavily in our sanctuary, may also appoint, annually, a lay committee of *hierotamiai* (sacred treasurers) or *epimeletai* (overseers) to superintend the finances of our sanctuary, both of its property and its expenditures for festivals and other activities. The state thereby establishes jurisdiction over financial matters, but the purely religious matters



**Figure 1.8** A reconstruction of the sanctuary of Poseidon Soter at Sunium and of the fort which enclosed it in the late fifth century B.C.E. 1. The temple of Poseidon Soter. 2. The gateway to the sanctuary. 3. The quarters of the soldiers and sailors manning the fort. 4. The naval installations of the fort. Courtesy of EKDOTIKE ATHENON S.A.

of worship – sacrifice, prayer, and dedication – are still under the authority of our priest. In our cult the priest is still selected by his family, largely free from any state authority.

As we have completed our sanctuary, we caution again here that it is not intended to represent precisely the actual sanctuary at Sunium that one can

trace on the ground at the site or in the plans of books describing it.<sup>3</sup> Our sanctuary has most of the elements actually found there, but is intended primarily as a model of a typical, fully developed Greek sanctuary, and each real sanctuary, including that of Poseidon at Sunium, had some distinct, idiosyncratic features of buildings, dedications, priesthoods, and ritual. The same is true of the activities of worship we now attribute to our cult of Poseidon Soter at Sunium. Most are not expressly attested for this sanctuary by historical sources, but all are typical of such activities at other sanctuaries and thus, like the sanctuary itself, form a standard model for comparison with religious activities we describe in later chapters.

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## Worship

With our sanctuary complete, we can now turn to the worship of Poseidon. What is worship in the Greek religious tradition? Greek religious worship is fundamentally the doing of deeds and the giving of gifts that show *honor* (*timê*) to the deity. Worshipers wanted to honor the deity for the power the deity had and for the good things that deity provided. Greek gods wanted from their devotees “honor” and “respect,” not “love.” Unlike in the Christian tradition, the Greek god, even Zeus, is not “our father,” and we are not “his children.” We are not expected to love a Greek deity as children would their parents. It is “honor” and “respect” that the Greek gods want from humans. What kind of “honor” is this to be? It is not the honor that children owe their parents, nor the honor that masters demanded from their slaves. The Greeks, who themselves had slaves and thought slavish honor unworthy of a freeman and typical of barbarian societies like the Persian, would not subject themselves to it, even for their gods. Rather it is, I think, the kind of “honor” a subject owes the king, the kind of honor a *good* subject owes to a *good* king. That was the case in highly democratic Athens of the fifth century B.C.E. when Athenian worshipers thought themselves subjects of a good, divine royalty. This may seem paradoxical, but fundamental Greek conceptions of the relationship of god to man had been established centuries before, in the Mycenaean (ca. 2200–1100 B.C.E.) and Dark (ca. 1100–750 B.C.E.) Ages, and those conceptions of the relationship, because of the strong conservatism in Greek religious tradition, maintained themselves through the various changes of the political systems of Athens and other Greek city-states.

The Greeks honored their gods because these gods had the power to help them and did help them in matters that the Greeks thought lay beyond their control. These matters included, in the most general terms, 1) fertility of crops, animals, and human beings, 2) economic prosperity, 3) good health, and 4) safety in the dangers of war and seafaring. Most Greek gods contributed to human life in one or more of these areas. The rites of Demeter, for example, were very much directed to fertility of crops and probably aided the fertility of animals and

We do not see the gods themselves, but we infer their immortality from the honors which they have and from the good things they provide us.

Pericles, in Plutarch, *Life of Pericles* 8.6

As far as you have the power, do sacrifice to the immortals, innocently and cleanly; burn them the shining thighbones; at other times, propitiate them with libations and burnings, when you go to bed, and when the holy light goes up in the sky; so They may have a complacent feeling and thought about you; so you may buy someone else's land, not have someone buy yours.

Hesiod, *Works and Days* 336–41 (Lattimore translation)

I do not believe that the gods, if they thought they were wronged by me, did not punish me when they had me amidst the greatest dangers. For what danger is greater for men than to sail the sea in wintertime? When they had my person in this situation, when they had control of my life and property, then were they saving me? Were they not able even to prevent my body from getting proper burial?

Andocides 1.137–8

humans as well. Aphrodite had her role in human fertility, Hera in marriage, and Zeus gave the rain necessary for abundant harvests, promoting both fertility of crops and economic prosperity for this farming society. Artisans turned to Hephaestus and Athena in their work, and merchant sailors to, of course, our Poseidon. For good health in the mid-fifth century the Athenians turned to local heroes, to Apollo, and even to a cult of Athena Hygieia (Of Health) on the Acropolis, but in 420, after a devastating plague, they imported Asclepius from Epidaurus and established major sanctuaries and healing centers for him in both Piraeus and Athens itself. The Athenians faced constant, annual dangers from war and seafaring, and for the former they turned especially to their armed patroness, Athena, and for the latter to Poseidon. In each of these areas the Greeks recognized the importance of their own efforts, but

in each there was a large element of the uncontrollable, and it was there that they sought the gods' favor. When they went to war or sailed on their small boats on the windy, choppy Aegean, they wanted the gods to be happy with them – hence the annual festivals – and ready to help if need be. They wanted the gods as an umbrella of protection under which they could exercise their own human abilities. They looked to the gods' protection as subjects would look to the protection of a king in matters beyond their control, and, just as subjects would respect and thank a king for helping in times of need, so the Greeks “honored” and thanked the gods when they helped them. Most notably *not* on the list of items the Greeks thought beyond their control was their own behavior. The Greeks did not have their gods lay down a code of human behavior or enforce any such code. The Greeks worked out their standards of ethical behavior in earlier times, especially through their poetic literature and their law codes and later through philosophy. As we shall see later, Greek gods do occasionally punish human injustice, but not nearly so often in everyday life as in Greek literature, and usually only when that behavior impinges on the honor due to the gods. By and large, in practiced religion the Greeks thought that their gods showed little interest in the ethical behavior of their devotees towards their fellow Greeks.

Piety did, however, concern the gods greatly, and piety in the Greek tradition has two interrelated aspects: *eusebeia*, showing “proper respect” for the gods; and *hosiotēs*, “religious correctness,” acting in ways that conform to the religious laws and traditions of the community. As an example of the difference, not to sacrifice to the gods at all was an act of disrespect of them (*asebeia*), but to sacrifice at the wrong time or place or in the wrong manner was religiously incorrect (*anosion*). Proper respect for the gods, one component of piety, was, for the Greeks, a matter not so much of emotion as of “commonsense” (*sophrosyne*). It is only “reasonable” to respect and honor someone or some god who helps us in important ways, and therefore “proper respect” of the gods is largely a matter of *reason*. The person who does not respect the gods – the one who does not repay good services with honor – is not lacking in “faith” (a formulation which the Greeks did not use) but lacks “reason.” That person is foolish and quite often described as “insane,” and for such lack of respect the gods would punish that person. The lack of respect by an individual can also, by alienating the gods, affect the welfare of the community in which he or she lives, and the citizens through state courts (as some Athenians did Socrates) prosecuted individuals for “lack of respect of the gods” (*asebeia*), for a failure to “believe in and recognize the gods worshiped by the state” or “for introducing new gods unsanctioned by the state,” or for violating other religious traditions of the state. The legal punishments were usually quite severe for those convicted, either death or exile.

Our worshipers are, however, properly respectful of the gods, and they express appropriate honors to Poseidon on appropriate occasions and in traditional ways. The occasions, as we have seen, are Poseidon’s annual festivals, times of personal need, and at the successful completion of actions, whether sea battles, voyages, or careers, that benefited from the god’s help. His worshipers express their honor by giving the god things that “please” him. They want the god, at all times, to be *pleased*, and if they sense the god is not pleased, they make efforts to *appease* him, to bring themselves back into his good favor.

If someone knows how to say and do in his prayers and sacrifices what is pleasing to the gods, these things are religiously correct and save private households and the common interests of the city. But the opposites of those pleasing things are religiously incorrect, and they overthrow and destroy everything.

Euthyphro in Plato, *Euthyphro* 14b

By what are gods *pleased*? They are pleased by gifts given to them in their honor, but they have a rather broad definition of what a gift might be. The gift might well be a beautiful hymn composed in their honor, praising their contributions, and sung by a chorus of young men or women at their festival. Dancing might well accompany the singing of the hymn, and other dances and competitions could also be performed in the god’s honor. All these are gifts to the deity. Gods are also pleased by the dedications, another form of gift, which adorn their sanctuaries. The gods are also pleased, as are we humans, by gifts of food and drink, and that brings us to *sacrifice*.

Sacrifice is essentially a process, a ritual, by which a profane, non-sacred object is given as a gift to a deity. It is like a dedication in the sense that the non-sacred object is given to the deity and hence becomes sacred, but unlike a durable dedication a sacrifice is usually taken to mean the giving of food or drink – for example, cakes, fruits, animal meat, milk, and especially wine – all foods and drinks that the Greeks themselves enjoyed. “Sacrifice” is a Latin term, “sacer-facere,” to “make sacred,” and we tend to use the term rather loosely to indicate the ritual by which the food or drink is given to the deity and hence “made sacred.” We should perhaps distinguish between *offering* on the altar cakes, fruits, and vegetables; *pouring* on the altar libations of wine and other beverages; and the *sacrifice* of animals. The common conception that Greek sacrifice was simply the killing of animals for the gods is mistaken in a number of ways. The killing of the animal was only one step, albeit a necessary one, in the ritual of presenting the animal to the god. When a cow was sacrificed, it was first cleansed and decorated, then led to the altar, stunned, killed, bled, butchered, and finally offered to the deity. Usually only portions of the animal were offered, and in a sense the burning of the designated parts of the animal on the deity’s altar was the culmination of the sacrificial ritual. Other elements of sacrificial ritual, such as the killing or the feast afterwards, prepared for it or followed from it. The Greek term for “to sacrifice” is *thyein*, and, related to the Latin *fumus*, it means “to make smoke.” The designated parts of the animal, or in some cases, in *holocausts*, the whole animal was “made to smoke” on the altar, and it was this savory smoke from the burning meat that rose and “pleased” the ouranic deities in the sky. Virtually all Greek animal sacrifices were also communal rituals, performed in the presence of the family, the village, the state, or other social/political units, and all members of that community would share in the feast that concluded the sacrifice. A Greek sacrifice thus, in addition to honoring the god, would by inclusion mark off and unify the community, bringing it together for a solemn and also festive occasion, thereby reasserting its sense of solidarity.

Sacrifices were, like offerings, libations, songs, dances, and dedications, gifts to the deities, gifts that humans gave them to express their honor toward the deity in return for what the deity offered them. The deity, in turn, was pleased by these gifts. The Greeks expressed this complex of ideas in terms of *charis* (χάρις). A *charis* was a “favor,” a favor that was expected to be repaid, and the mutual exchange of “favors” or “gifts” is at the heart of a successful human/divine relationship. This relationship – based on aristocratic rather than mercantile values – is a more subtle and complex one than the formula *do ut des* (“I give so that you may give”), often used to describe what it implies. The model

for the relationship of a human to a god was, as we suggested, that of a good subject to a beneficent king, a relationship in which “favors” of very different types and monetary values might be exchanged for a variety of

One must sacrifice to the gods for three purposes: to give honor, to show gratitude, or because of one’s need of good things.

Theophrastus, *On Piety*, frag. 12 Pötscher, 42–4

purposes. The favors the Greek gods give are, as we saw, successes in fertility, economic prosperity, health, and safety. The favors humans give (or return) to gods are necessarily of a different order and include sanctuaries, offerings, libations, sacrifices, dedications, hymns, and dances. The gods, in turn, “rejoice” (*chairein*, *χαίρειν*, etymologically related to *charis*) in these gifts of honor. These gifts of humans may be, in addition, “adornment” (*kosmos*) for the deities

For of all cities beneath the sun and the starry heaven  
Dwelt in by men who live upon earth, there has  
never been one  
Honoured nearer to my heart than sacred Iliion  
And Priam, and the people of Priam of the strong  
ash spear.  
Never yet has my altar gone without fair sacrifice,  
The libation and the savour, since this is our portion  
of honour.

Zeus to his wife Hera about Priam and Troy,  
Homer, *Iliad* 4.44–9 (Lattimore translation)

and their sanctuaries, and much of the finest Greek art, architecture, and poetry results from the inclination of the Greeks to make their gifts to the gods beautiful. In short, humans endeavor, through cult, to establish and maintain with their deities mutually beneficial relationships based on both “honor” and *charis*.

We now have our sanctuary of Poseidon at Sunium complete. Because of Poseidon’s own contributions to the Athenians in the battle of Salamis, his cult now has national attention, interest, and financial support. The Posideion 8 is no longer just a day of celebration for the priest’s family, friends, and neighbors, but is now a major *state festival*, a holiday financed by the state and celebrated by as many Athenians as can make their way to Sunium on that day. There were a number of such annual state festivals for major deities, some of several days’ duration. They might differ significantly in details and tone from one another as we shall later see when we describe other deities’ festivals in Chapter IV, but the general pattern is 1) a procession, 2) a hymn to the deity, 3) a prayer, 4) a sacrifice, 5) special events, often competitions, appropriate to the deity, and 6) a communal banquet on the meat of the sacrificed animals.

Therefore, today, Posideion 8, we Athenians will show Poseidon Soter the honor in which we hold him by having a state festival in our newly completed sanctuary. Our procession will begin, of course, down at the seaside at dawn, and will in a stately and leisurely manner make its way to the top of the promontory where the sanctuary is. We are, in essence, escorting Poseidon to his own festival. The priest will lead the way, dressed in his finest robes and, like all present on this day, wearing a wreath. Behind him will come the *neokoros* and the state officials who oversee the festival and the finances of the sanctuary. With them will be top governmental officials, especially those concerned with military affairs and the navy. In the procession will be the three or four bulls, adorned with garlands, that we intend to sacrifice to Poseidon, and bringing up the rear will be a throng of Athenian men, women, and children, also dressed in their festival best and all observing the rules of ritual purity. The Panathenaea, which we will describe in Chapter IV, drew

tens of thousands of participants, but for our Posidea, way out here in Sunium, let us assume a crowd of several hundred. As they pass through the gates of the sanctuary, each person sprinkles himself with water from the *perirrhanterion*. The bulls are led to the altar, and the priest takes his position at the west side of the altar while the others crowd around it. They will all be under the gaze, through the open doors of the temple, of the magnificent statue of Poseidon. A chorus of young men sing a hymn to Poseidon, inviting him to come, describing his ancestry, his arrival in Athens, and the aid he offered in the great war against the Persians. The priest then faces the altar, raises his hands, palms upwards, and prays that Poseidon receive with a welcoming heart the honors the Athenians are about to give him and that he continue to protect the sailors and ships of the Athenians. Sacrificial attendants then stun the bulls with a blow to the head, slit their throats, and capture the flowing blood in vessels. The animals are then butchered, and the thigh bones are wrapped in fat and perhaps the tails are burned on the altar. The savory smoke rises from the altar up to Poseidon. He smells it and is pleased that we have remembered him, that we have shown him this “honor.” He feels rewarded for having saved us from the dangers of the sea in the past and feels kindly towards us now, and he will no doubt save us from future dangers when we sail the Aegean. Then the vital organs, the kidneys, hearts, lungs, and spleens of the victims, are cooked on spits over the altar fire and distributed to the officials to eat. All of this is accomplished before midmorning, certainly by noon. What remains of the animals is then cooked, usually by boiling in large cauldrons. While this lengthy process of preparing and cooking of the animals is under way, several teams of young men compete in a regatta, in full view of the festival-goers on the ridge of the promontory. The winning team, which could have won only with the help of Poseidon, is awarded a handsome prize – perhaps a tripod, inscribed with their names, which they in turn will dedicate in the sanctuary as a gift to the god and a memorial of their victory. When the regatta is finished, the meat is ready to be served, and the competitors, the priests, and all in attendance will settle down to a fine communal feast on the meat of the sacrificed animals. That will bring to a close this year’s Posidea of Poseidon Soter. As in our much simpler celebration of Poseidon’s festival day, there are moments of great religious solemnity, at the hymn, the prayer, and the sacrifice, but there are also times of considerable pleasure and enjoyment of good food, good entertainment, and good company.

Our festival is intended to engender good feelings in Poseidon towards us by showing him honor, and we will attempt to maintain those good feelings and our close relationship with Poseidon in the future by more festivals, more sacrifices, more hymns and prayers, and more dedications. As Greeks, of course, we will be doing much the same at many other sanctuaries throughout the year for the other deities who protect us and sustain us in other areas of our need.

## Notes

1. For a description of the real development of this cult and site as it can best be determined by archaeology, see Z. Theodoropoulou-Polychroniadis, *Sounion Revisited: The Sanctuaries of Poseidon and Athena at Sounion in Attica* (Oxford, 2015), 104–44.
2. Diagoras' reply: "It is like that because those who shipwrecked and perished at sea are never painted on votive tablets" (Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 3.89). The same anecdote is associated with the cynic philosopher Diogenes who more wittily responded, "There would be many more dedications if those who were not saved also set up dedications" (Diogenes Laertius, 6.59).
3. For one such book, beautifully illustrated, see A.B. Tataki, *Sunium: The Temple of Poseidon* (Athens, 1994).

## Further Reading

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