CHAPTER EIGHT

INSIDE THE AIGINETAN MESOCOSM

8.1 The Matrix: Gods-People-Land

In chapter 7, we studied the evidence with a view to determining social roles of individual deities attested on Aigina in the late 5th century BCE. In the present chapter, I take the findings of chapter 7 on board and return to the conceptual questions raised in chapters 4 and 5, to consider whether the Aiginetan deities taken together constitute a chaotic, haphazard assemblage or a coordinated whole. Chaos or system?

We should be able to answer this question in simple terms if we established the presence or absence of interconnections between the local deities. What sorts of connections would we be looking for and where? The connections between local deities, if they were conceived and perceived by worshippers, would likely find a reflection in stories, aetia related to origins or characteristics of cult, and in ritual practice. Hence, we will be looking at the indicia of connections in two dimensions: in myths, via literary evidence; and in cultic practice, for example, in joint sacrifices, shared sanctuaries, similar votives. Such observations, however, would spell out only explicit connections between deities, but would not necessarily tell us why such connections are there. Another level of analysis would involve comparing the underlying purpose of each deity’s presence on Aigina, that is, their respective spheres of activity, with the structures and dynamics of the worshippers’ social world. In other words, we would be looking to model not a 2D map of relationships among deities alone, but a 3D environment where deities and worshippers interact. Apollo might not appear connected to Zeus directly (if we register only explicit connections), but as each can be shown to serve as a marker of Aiginetan identity in international contexts, the two would be interlinked via this third component, a common social function. Thus, while a comparative analysis of roles exercised by all deities cumulatively would reveal a spectrum of all social concerns relevant to local worshippers, it would be the points (or nodes) of intersection between the roles of individual deities as they relate to the areas of local social interests that would determine whether we see interconnected religious structures as such, and whether a distinctive image...
of the local Aiginetan mesocosm would emerge. I shall proceed from the
discussion of explicit connections between Aiginetan deities as detectable
in myths and cultic practice to the analysis of implicit connections via
the comparison of their social roles.

The discussion of evidence in chapter 7 has shown that in a number
of cases (e.g., Artemis, Athena, Kybele) we are not absolutely sure if a
particular deity had a cult on Aigina in the late 5th century BCE, our tar-
get date for synchronic analysis. In several other cases, the evidence has
proven insufficient for reaching definitive conclusions about a deity’s
social roles. This concerns Artemis, Dionysos, Kybele, Koliadai, Pan, The-
basimakhos, and Zeus Pasios. For this reason, at present, it is possible to
include in the functional analysis only Aiakos and the Aiakids, Aigina,
Aphaia, Aphrodite, Apollo(s), Asklepios, Damia and Auxesia, Demeter
Thesmophoros, Hekate, Herakles, Poseidon, and Zeus Hellanios. In the
future, new evidence might come to light that would enable us to deter-
mine with greater clarity the social roles of the presently known Aigin-
etan deities, while yet other cults might also be discovered and added to
the picture. We might ask whether the potential, in fact, the guaranteed
incompleteness, of our data invalidates our attempts to reconstruct the
Aiginetan polytheistic mesocosm. To my mind, it does not. The existing
religious data, as demonstrated in chapter 7, constitute a sufficient critical
mass to enable our modeling exercise: they give a realistic sense of the
complexity at hand, and new data will help to enrich the model further.

Another remark on the presently known number of Aiginetan deities is
due. Evaluation of the evidence has revealed that in the late 5th century
BCE there were at least sixteen active cults on Aigina. Although it is guar-
anteed that the present count is incomplete, it is still reasonable to assume
that many, perhaps most, of the local cults that were present then, found
reflection in our sources. Nonetheless we could tentatively speculate that
up to fifty percent of contemporary local cults still remain unknown to us.
If that were the case, we would have to envision some thirty-two active
cults on Aigina in the period of our interest. This number, and any lower
number down to the securely attested sixteen, is in perfect accord with
the findings of scholars who study local pantheons of other polytheistic
cultures (see 5.2). Such a number of deities would have been well within
the cognitive capacities of the locals, and we may be confident that most
Aiginetans would thus have been capable of keeping in mind the meaning
and the relationships of all local cults.