



DOES NATURE MAKE A RATIONAL
CHOICE?

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Does nature make a rational choice? I stole this question from a work of art by Susan Ossman, anthropologist, artist and 2016/17 Wiko spouse. She in turn had extrapolated it from my musings upon her question to us all – what did we take away from our year as

academics and as human beings? Early on, we had been told that every year, a sort of beauty contest emerges between fields – over who has the more gracious method, model, argument or even access to “truth” – and more often than not the competition arises between the Humanities and Social Sciences, on the one hand, and the Life Sciences, on the other. Our year was no exception, except that with a Focus Group of evolutionary biologists working on “adult sex ratio”, a somewhat aggressive language of natural selection and reproductive success became part of our daily vocabulary. Michael Jennions’ stimulating yet highly controversial colloquium at the beginning of the year using sex and sex roles among humans to explain how evolution by natural selection might work was probably creatively misunderstood by most humanists, including me. But it did leave a lasting impression that here a vocabulary was being crafted that ultimately was designed, or in any case would be unconsciously used, to describe and understand human development. And that also means to interpret historical processes, to explain why some types of society survive and others do not; why some cultures incorporate others and prevail; why some religious forms keep traction and others do not.

Why would a classicist be concerned with these problems? I am working on a book entitled “Gods around the Pond: Religion, Society and the Sea in the Early Mediterranean Economy”. The project examines the interaction of religious practices and economic patterns in the first-millennium BC Mediterranean, that is to say the role of myth, ritual and cult in shaping and being shaped by economic processes, activities and ideas. This is a period of radical social transformation and economic growth, characterized by constantly changing patterns of mobility and exchange by sea, incessant adaptations to, and exploitation of, the opportunities offered by the maritime environment. Using literary sources, epigraphy and archaeology from Spain to the Black Sea, the project’s objective is to pinpoint a conceptual link between religious and economic systems by identifying religious practice and cognition as the context for the enactment of principles of contemporary economic theory, economic sociology and moral economics, such as rationality, risk, regulation and ethics. I argue for Greek religion as Mediterranean religion, emerging out of maritime, transcultural economic mobility rather than the landed city-state. Embedded in patterns of seaborne connectivity, the forging of religious ties and the ritualisation of economic relations emerge as cultural mechanisms inculcating, and materializing, trust, credibility and reliable social bonds lasting across time and space in a volatile Mediterranean ecology. The development of polytheism and economic transformation in the Mediterranean will emerge as interdependent and inextricably intertwined.

One might say that such a project pitches qualitative and quantitative approaches against one another. Religious historians tend to be anthropologically informed and believe in the agency of collective imagination, cultural constructs and social conventions; economists and an increasing number of economic historians have moved away from economic anthropology into rational-choice derived models based on methodological individualism and market dynamics to explain social and economic transformation. As historians of the ancient world, we are of course aware of the messy historical conditions in which economic choices are made; but even neo-institutionalism, popular in the field, is only a step away from unadulterated profit or utility maximization.

Much of my work on this project has been trying to bridge qualitative and quantitative approaches: the sort of maritime polytheism of my model appears as both regulating but also as productive in economic processes, enabling transformation and not least economic growth. The additional step into the vocabulary of evolutionary biology, however, and the possible misunderstandings that this can cause, have made me more cautious. What I had not, or not consciously, realized, is how close the thinking behind game theory and utility maximization in Economics or some branches of Political Science is to the evolutionary models theorizing the “survival of the fittest” with their singular goal of reproductive success in the Life Sciences. It is one thing to use such approaches to experiment with deliberate reductionism within your own field, where your colleagues’ knowledge of the data enables them to appreciate strengths, flaws and subtleties of the model in application to the evidence. When talking to others, however, one can no longer claim modelling as merely a playground for the construction of plausible scenarios; models become ideological and their uses prone to dangerous misunderstandings. Moreover, while many of these methods are good to think with, there is a risk that isolating factors from their context and simplifying data through quantification may reduce the complexity of historical processes, obscure the beautifully unclear causalities, straighten out the arbitrariness of cultural life. Many of our discussions ended up being ideological and I don’t believe that anyone moved greatly from their positions. Nevertheless, the constant dangling of mirrors in front of you taught you something – and if only an amused awareness that the same terms can mean entirely different things depending on your discipline’s methodological persuasion.

If I single out this particular discussion, it is simply because it conveniently framed the entire year, setting it off in September with Michael Jennions’ (Biology) colloquium and completing it in July with a dispute between him and Michael Lambek (Anthropology).

Inside, this frame included a wealth of perhaps less fundamental but certainly more refined discourses that it would be impossible to do justice to. On previous fellowships of this sort, I have sometimes refused to travel widely and avoided giving papers in order to have the time and leisure to absorb it all. This year, I went for a different approach: I structured my work on the project in such a way as to deliver substantial, i.e. hour-long papers approximately every four to five weeks at a variety of institutions in Europe and North America. Each of these lectures was based on new material, a different thematic dossier and a new set of methodological questions; none was a repeat performance. This allowed me to make swift and significant progress on three of five chapters of the book. At the same time, it gave me the opportunity to revive long-standing contacts in Europe that, for reasons of time and geographical separation, had fallen somewhat by the wayside after my move to the US in 2010. These papers included two public lectures in Athens, at the American School of Classical Studies (October 2016) and at the University of Athens (May 2017); a lecture at the University of Oxford (November 2016); at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Classical Studies in Toronto (January 2017); at the Centre ANHIMA (formerly Centre Gernet) in Paris (May 2017); at the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard (June 2017); and at the University of Göttingen (June 2017). I also participated in conferences in Louvain (December 2016) and London (July 2017).

This programme might sound like a bit of a challenge – and it was, especially if you don't want to miss out on everything else on offer at Wiko, academically, socially, culturally, let alone the attractions of the city of Berlin. But whatever deadlines were looming in front of me, I could be sure that for every dossier that came up, I had willing and inspiring interlocutors (or victims) giving me their discipline's perspective at lunch or dinner, at the photocopier, in the corridors, at the bus-stop, on the way from the Villa Walther to the main building. Without getting too deeply into the minutiae of my project, let me give a few examples of analogies between fields that led to intriguing thought experiments.

A goal for a set of papers was to build the case for Greek religion as a maritime belief system and to explore the resulting dynamic for economic interaction. The pre-modern Mediterranean with which we work today is a network of interconnected routes of travel without centres and peripheries; a web of incessantly interacting but highly fragmented major and minor seaborne ecologies, a world exposed to volatile climates, uneven resource division, and irregular productivity. These necessitate frequently changing patterns of redistribution, resulting in a thoroughly transcultural space where maritime mobility and exchange are as much a strategy of survival and risk mitigation as a source of unlikely

opportunities. Central to my project is the idea that religious practice and imagination played a vital role in counteracting, while also benefitting from, the unpredictability of this maritime world, organizing the sea cognitively and psychologically, socially and economically.

In “Converting Risk into Knowledge: Religion and the Economics of the Sea at the Bronze Age-Iron Age Transition”, I argue that a fundamental change in attitudes towards the sea took shape in the precarious, stateless world resulting from the so-called Bronze Age decline, ca. 1200–800 BC. This entails a valorisation of, and investment into, interconnected coastal locations, allowing for the use of the sea as a productive force in social and economic relations. Myths, rituals and cults tied into the epic cycles appear to underlie new conceptions of seaborne economic connectivity and come to structure the formation of what I tentatively term “cabotage religion” – a broadly diffused belief system spanning maritime regions in short-haul trajectories, bound up with landscape, ecology and the rhythms of navigation, and underlying the geography of mobility throughout antiquity. It is superficially a paradox that in a period of crisis and uncertainty people would choose the risks of settlement by the coast. But coastal regions provided security because of their interconnectedness; this is where survival lay, and even a degree of prosperity. While I might be preoccupied thinking about maritime mobility as a gateway to self-sufficiency, the biologists (e.g. Jon Harrison, 2016/17 Wiko spouse, and Steve Beissinger) respond that coastal zones are biologically the most productive, measured by protein accumulation and characterized by species richness, diversity and innovation; and that delta landscapes, a massive driver of economic growth in the Mediterranean from the 6th century BC onwards, are the most nutritious due to their concentration of resources (i.e. proteins).

The maritime perspective also offers insights into the interaction of religion and cross-cultural trade and the construction of the divine in transcultural environments. Comparatively speaking, maritime belief systems, far removed from regulating authorities, often develop their own religious forms; shared risk and the focus on survival tend to elide social and cultural difference. A paper on “Assimilation, Acculturation, Adaptation in Ancient Polytheism? The View from the Sea” proposes that in the institution-less yet highly mobile world of travelling Phoenicians, Greeks and others following the demise of Bronze Age civilizations, transcultural divinities emerge, literally, from the sea, whose powers develop to enable economic interaction – the most familiar such divinities are Aphrodite: Phoenician Astarte; Zeus Soter (“saviour”): Baal; Herakles: Melqart. None of

these, however, appear to have a maritime or economic dimension “at home” or in their Bronze Age past, but as soon as they embark on a boat, they turn into something different – the sea has transformative power even for the gods. Instead of thinking about translation, syncretism or acculturation in ancient religions, we might rather wonder about the mechanisms of trust that allow for these gods and their multi-cultural worshippers to emerge. Jennifer Fewell, an evolutionary biologist working on social insects, at first jokingly, then more seriously, identified this as a problem of cooperation, comparing it to the “green-beard effect”, a model in the biological sciences used to explain selective altruism: cases in which actors recognize that helping is valuable and reciprocity carries mutual benefits. Such a display of reciprocity is not arbitrary; rather individuals direct their behaviour to those who are seen to have “tags” or “traits”. In animal systems, different helping behaviours are reciprocated as commodities – e.g. grooming and feeding, a language deliberately chosen to allow it to be projected onto the trading of commodities and services in human social interaction.

The interaction of religion with actual historical economies also appears in a different light when seen from the perspective of a maritime belief system. If, from the early fifth century BC onwards, Hellenic Demeter stood as Ceres in Rome’s earliest river port, this shows the future megalopolis’ distinct awareness of its dependence on cereals arriving from across the sea. Antiquity was a world of economic interdependence and reciprocity where communities, cities and states operated through network dynamics to ensure survival. In “Déméter, le grain et la mer: entre religion et économie politique en Grèce ancienne”, I presented a model that I had been thinking about for a while: that of a “political economy of religion”, in which the adoption and development of public cults is tied to the needs of a civic economy that is part of a broader network of maritime connectivity in the Mediterranean. This allows for innovation and change in religious practice alongside economic growth. Demeter is a goddess intimately associated with grain, growth and wealth; her role in public cult neatly embraces the changing policies of grain provision in the cities of Aegean Greece from the archaic to the early Hellenistic periods between ideals of self-sufficiency, civic pride and Panhellenic interdependence. I picked the intersection of religion and the grain supply because 18th-century notions of “political economy” arose out of the conundrum of state control versus free trade, in which cereal provision was likewise central to a state’s moral economy. Discussions with Mary O’Sullivan (Economics) and Daniel Schönplflug (History) about these early modern contexts revealed how different solutions were found to ultimately not dissimilar problems.



Raoul Dufy. Cérès au bord de la mer, 1928.

It would be easy enough just to continue listing fertile conversations that routinely produced new ideas. Giacomo Todeschini (Medieval History) was a sounding board on all matters religious and economic; in particular, in writing about the religiosity of the maritime trader (“At Sea with the Merchants”), his insights on how early modern merchants justified economic profit in religious and social terms led me to understand how ancient Greek merchants’ concerns with risk, profitability and travel are echoed in the construction of their deities. Thinking about “Economic Theory, Economic Anthropology and the Study of Greek Religion” offered the chance to engage in a widespread reconsideration within history, economics and anthropology of towering figures such as Adam Smith, Max Weber and Karl Polanyi, together with social scientists with a more immediate stake in the debate: in addition to those already

named, Rogers Brubaker (Sociology), Jackie Solway (Economic Anthropology, 2016/17 Wiko spouse) and Lena Lavinias (Economics). Nor were discussions about “what is religion?” in short supply or definitions easily agreed upon by presentist social scientists and historians. And finally, one of the most enjoyable and sustained conversations through the entire year was with Michael Lambek (Anthropology) about the nature of polytheism: a topic curiously under-conceptualised in anthropology, it is perhaps over-rationalized in the study of Greek religion. A goal for the future, and for a workshop in the making, is to develop the intellectual tools that can pinpoint the workings of a pluralistic divine in a comparative context.

But I did not work solely on my project. Much of my research in the past has been on ancient song culture in its social process, that is to say, how music and ritual performance generate social and political transformation in the ancient world. I returned to this in a conference on music, aesthetics and philosophy in Louvain and on Music and Memory in the Ancient World at the Radcliffe Institute, Harvard. “Music, Landscape and Memory on Crete” argued that long-term memories of regional economic integration were transmitted through music and ritual performance from the archaic and classical period to the Roman Empire. Thanks to Andrea Bohlman (Music), I could venture into the exciting world of sound studies, all the while learning about the budding field of ecocriticism from an ethnomusicological perspective. One of the most delightful undertakings was to introduce Philipp Deines, another artist and 2016/17 Wiko spouse, and the concepts and techniques behind his graphic novel. This is set, not unlike Mediterranean mythologies, in a milieu of empires and colonization, producing hybrid cultural and social forms narrated in sequential images, again not unlike images of heroic narrative in ancient art. Among the many and varied topics of conversation I shared with my neighbour along the office corridor, Cornelia Jöchner (Art History), I single out topology, the mathematical model that underlies network theory, a popular method in current ancient Mediterranean studies; with Maria Mavroudi (History), the world of Byzantium and modern Greece; and the Mediterranean as a poetic space generative of maritime epic with Gianna Pomata (History). One special treat at the Wiko is to be thrown in together with artists, writers, composers, journalists, filmmakers, photographers – a substantial minority demanding very different things from their work, including a different attitude towards public reach, diffusion and communicability. I thank them all here collectively for their insights and subtlety in identifying the human condition in academic research!

I left Germany some twenty years ago for the UK and later the US. It would take a separate report to detail my impressions of contemporary Germany. In retrospect I feel

like having been on a turbo-track of acquiring an adult perspective on my own country, taking in anything from Berlin's recent cosmopolitanism built on the remnants of a Cold War city, to political activism and environmentalism, to the very different role of research in the public domain; the extraordinary amount and level of cultural events, from the theatre landscape, the Berlinale, the Leipziger Buchmesse, the documenta, to a whole array of contemporary music festivals.

On one of my last Berlin days, I persuaded my brother to help me carry some 500 books back from my flat and office to the library. If this process took several hours of glancing at titles regarding anything from Bronze Age ancient coastlines to Byzantine hagiography to early modern mercantilism to contemporary Islamic mysticism, this gives tangible testimony to the extraordinary breadth, depth and variety of competing discourses that the Wiko allows us all to keep in mind all at the same time. I am extremely grateful to everyone at the Wiko for having created this space for us, to Vera Pfeffer for solving any practical problem within it, and above all to the library staff for helping me get all those books!

Papers referred to, 2016/2017

"Converting Risk into Knowledge: Religion and the Economics of the Sea at the Bronze Age-Iron Age Transition." American School of Classical Studies at Athens, October 2016.

"Assimilation, Acculturation, Adaptation in Ancient Polytheism? The View from the Sea." Ancient History Seminar, Oxford, November 2016.

"Economic Theory, Economic Anthropology, and the Study of Greek Religion." God the Anthropologist, Panel, Society for Classical Studies, Toronto, January 2017.

"Lesbians at Sea: Myth, Cult, and the Maritime World of Early Greek Lyric." University of Athens, May 2017.

"Déméter, le grain et la mer: entre religion et économie politique en Grèce ancienne." Centre ANHIMA, Paris, May 2017.

"Music, Landscape and Memory on Crete." Music and Memory in the Ancient Mediterranean. Workshop, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, June 2017.

"Religion and the Economics of the Sea in the Early Mediterranean." Althistorisches Kolloquium, Universität Göttingen, June 2017.

"At Sea with the Merchants." Belief and the Individual in Ancient Greek Religion. Conference, Institute of Classical Studies, London, July 2017.