

Blessings for the sailors. The cult of the Great Gods of Samothrace in the Mediterranean context between the Hellenistic and Roman Ages

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to underline some cultic features of the cult of the Great Gods of Samothrace, in its development between Hellenistic and Roman Age. In this regard, we analyze the mythological background of this cult, with particular reference to Trojan war and Aeneas saga and the influences on the cultic performances and ideology in Roman age. Our main goal is to show, through an analysis of the different syncretic cults (*Dioskuroi*, *Penates*, *Lares*) and the archaeological data, how the metaphors of sea and sailing influenced the transmission of this soteriological cult in Rome and how these cultural changes represent a weighty argument to demonstrate the very important revolution introduced by the Samothracian cult in the religious thought of classical world.

KEYWORDS

Great Gods, Samothrace, sailors, Rome, *Penates*, *Lares*

At the end of the third century BC, as is commonly known, Rome's military commitment in the eastern Mediterranean strongly marked the life and culture of the Republic. In fact, the transformations already underway within Roman society were accelerated by the arrival of images, knowledge and customs that would strongly transform a society that, until then, had largely demonstrated a strong conservative inclination. Expansionism in the eastern Mediterranean

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would bring Rome and its citizens into contact with a different way of life, as well as with cults and habits that would strongly influence changes in various aspects of public and private life. Clear evidence of these aspects can undoubtedly be found in religious life and in the way in which certain cults developed. In fact, a true mythopoeic work began in the period that, through the work of historians and the propaganda of the most eminent officials of the state, indissolubly linked the origins of Rome to the Trojan saga of Aeneas. This cultic link can be found in one of the most famous ancient sanctuaries, dedicated to gods always recognized as ancient, whose nature and origin were difficult to define even then and, perhaps for this very reason, were more easily molded: the Sanctuary of the Great Gods in Samothrace (Fig. 1).¹

It is difficult to establish when this process began, but we can certainly identify an important fact in the dedication by M. Claudius Marcellus, between 212 and 211 BC, of *pinakes* and treasures from the victorious siege of Syracuse in the famous sanctuary dedicated to the so-called Cabiri at Samothrace.²

Later on, Rome's expansionist policy seemed to converge more and more strongly towards a geographical and cultural geographical area which, since the time of Alexander the Great, had its religious epicenter in the Sanctuary of the Samothracian Great Gods. Fausto Zevi³ suggested the fascinating hypothesis that it was in this historical context, following the victory at Cape Myonessos in 190 BC, that the Rhodians and the Romans dedicated together the famous Nike of Samothrace. The thesis is rather controversial and is still debated by experts. More recently, Olga Palagia⁴ presented a theory already proposed by H. Knell⁵ that saw the Romans as the likely authors of the dedication following a naval victory. While rejecting a connection with the battle of Cape Myonessos and the time frame of the dedication in the second century BC, the scholar accepted the idea that the Romans, the new conquerors of the eastern Mediterranean, were the most likely people to have raised such a monument. According to her, this event occurred shortly after the famous battle of Pidna in 168 BC. Palagia explains this hypothesis through the connection between Rome and Pergamon, thereby assuming a connection with the artistic workers of the frieze of the Great Altar, in addition to the interest that the Romans had in the sanctuary of Samothrace and its pantheon.

Although the exact location of this dedication is still doubtful, it is clear that the events that saw Rome involved in the eastern Mediterranean between the middle and late Republican age

¹On the Sanctuary of the Great Gods in Samothrace and the related cult, see: COLE, S. G.: *Theoi Megaloi: The cult of the Great Gods at Samothrace*. Leiden 1984; DAUMAS, M.: *Cabiriaca. Recherches sur l'iconographie du culte des Cabires*. Paris 1998; CRUCCAS, E.: *Gli dei senza nome. Sincretismi, ritualità e iconografia dei Cabiri e dei Grandi Dei tra Grecia e Asia Minore*. Rahden/Westf. 2014; BREMMER, J. N.: *Initiation into the Mysteries of the Ancient World*. Berlin 2014, here 21–54.

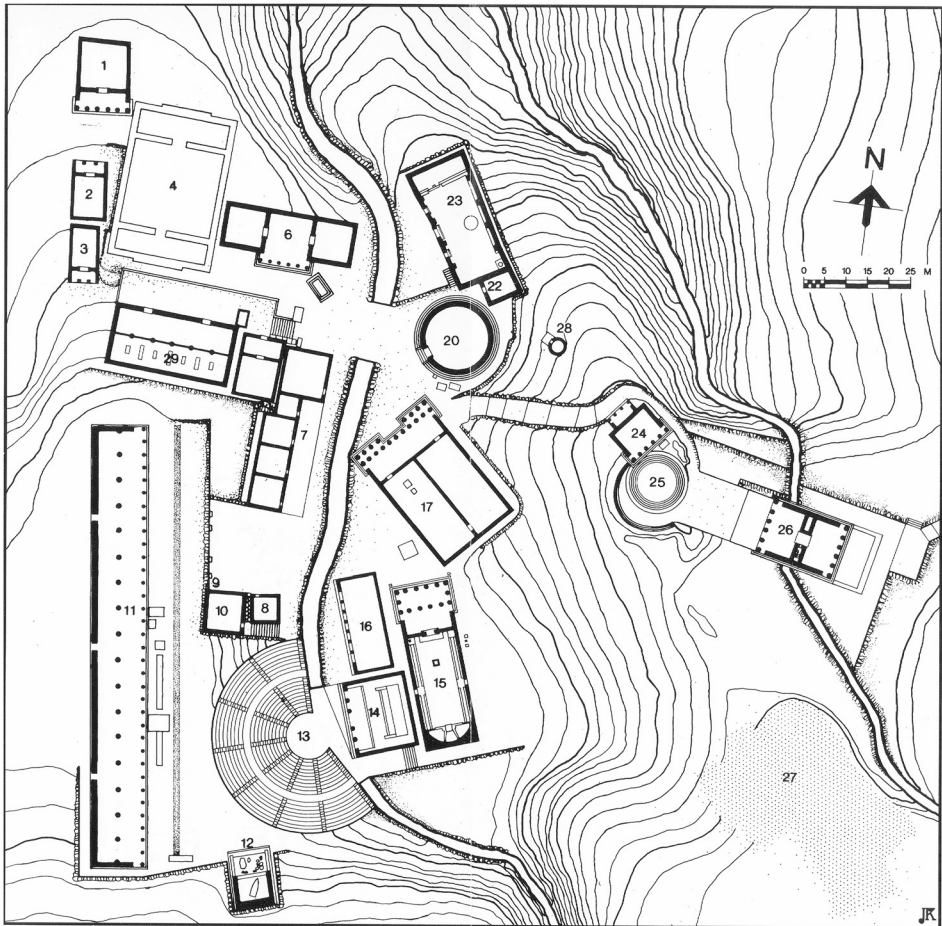
²Plu. *Marc.* 30. 6. On this topic, see STEHLE, E.: *Dii Penates a Samothracia sublati*. *Latomus* 50 (1991) 598–599, here 581–601.

³ZEVI, F.: Il tempio dei Lari Permarini, la Roma degli Emilii e il mondo greco. *MDAI(R)* 104 (1997) 81–115, here 89–90.

⁴PALAGIA, O.: The Victory of Samothrace and the Aftermath of the Battle of Pydna. In PALAGIA, O. – WESCOAT, B. D. (eds): *Samothracians Connections. Essays in honor of James R. McCredie*. Oxford 2010, 154–164, here 161.

⁵KNELL, H.: *Die Nike von Samothrake: Typus, Form, Bedeutung und Wirkungsgeschichte eines rhodischen Sieges-Anathems im Kabirenheiligtum von Samothrake*. Darmstadt 1995, here 82–101.





Plan IV. Restored Sketch Plan of the Sanctuary of the Great Gods (First Century after Christ).
Drawn by John Kurtich, 1978

Fig. 1. Plan of the Sanctuary of the Great Gods of Samothrace (after LEHMANN, K.: *Samothrace. A guide to excavations and the Museum* [6th ed.]. Thessaloniki 1998)

were the main reasons for the Romans' interest in the island sanctuary. At the same time, these important events were the means, through a deep rethinking and through forms of syncretism by which the cult of *μεγάλοι θεοί* was introduced to the city. Events linked to the victory over Perseus⁶ were emblematic of the role that the sanctuary of Samothrace played in political balances in the Hellenistic era: defeated by L. Aemilius Paulus in 168 BC, the last king of Macedonia appealed for the protection of the Great Gods, taking refuge in what was effectively

⁶Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 45. 4–5.



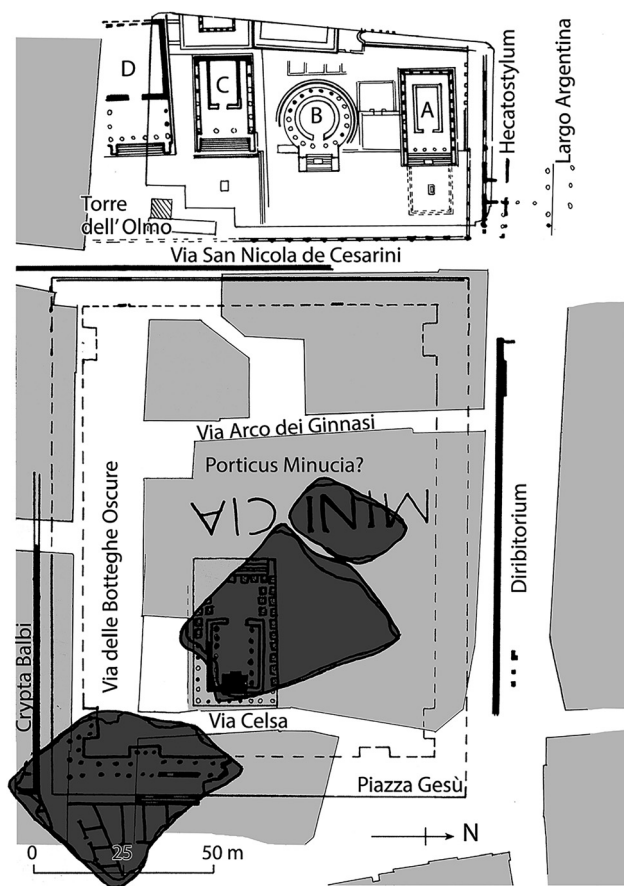


Fig. 2. Archaeological area near via delle Botteghe Oscure in Rome with the temple of the *Lares Permarini* (after POPKIN, M. L.: Samothracian Influences at Rome: Cultic and Architectural Exchange in the Second Century B.C.E. *AJA* 119.3 [2015])

one of his “family sanctuaries”.⁷ The tale concluded with the Gods of the island’s refusal to offer asylum to those who had besmirched themselves with so many crimes, as Livius narrates.⁸

Internal political events and the war in the East gave an occasion to some politicians for introducing some cults from the East to Rome, and especially cults related to significant locations. In fact, it was in this historical context that the temple to the *Lares Permarini* was built in Rome, commissioned in 190 BC by the *praetor navalis* L. Aemilius Regillus, following his

⁷PALOMBI, D.: *Tra Palatino ed Esquilino: Velia, Carinae, Fagutal. Storia urbana di tre quartieri di Roma antica* [Rivista dell’Istituto Nazionale d’Archeologia e Storia dell’Arte – Supplemento I]. Roma 1997, here 100–101.

⁸Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 45. 5. 1–45. 5. 4.



triumph in the war against Antiochus III of Syria in 189 BC.⁹ While he was a censor in 179 BC,¹⁰ M. Aemilius Lepidus dedicated the temple to the *Lares*, whose epiclesis *Permarini* seems to have been unprecedented.

Fausto Zevi has identified this temple within the ruins of the large complex located between Via delle Botteghe Oscure and Via Celsa, not far from Largo Argentina (Fig. 2). It is a Corinthian octagonal *peripteros* temple, preceded by a low front staircase and a *pronaos* with a double row of columns. The construction is noteworthy for the use of stuccoed travertine, imitating the marble, and is marked by structural and decorative elements that make it a rare and significant example of the Hellenistic style in a period when Rome was experimenting with allogeneic and innovative architectural solutions.¹¹ As previously said, F. Zevi linked the contemporary victory of the Myonessos to the construction of this temple and the formalization of the doctrine of Samothracian origin by the Roman *Penates*. The scholar has also convincingly connected the dedication of this place of worship and the *Permarini* epiclesis to the function of salvation from the dangers of the sea. This aspect is undoubtedly one of the most famous in the Cabiric religion: protection from the dangers of the sea, including shipwrecks and pirate attacks, is an element that characterizes this religion and which, during the Hellenistic age, influenced the identification of such deities. This is a characteristic aspect of the Cabiric cult which, according to a generic salvific function of the cult, was already evident in earlier ages.¹²

The mythological images of vases from another well-known sanctuary of the *Kabiroi* at Thebes, in Boeotia, also refer to the salvific and prophylactic purpose of the cult. The presence of Odysseus in many depictions on the Cabiric vases, with the hero engaged in his wanderings, reflects an idea of the sea as a metaphor for the dangers of human life and the expected rescue and salvation connected to the worship of these deities.¹³

There is a cultural background to the cult of the Great Gods, with which the Romans came into contact, which highlights particular aspects that were progressively received and absorbed by the new conquerors through a mediation that essentially concerns cults of Italic tradition. Among these latter, the *Penates* are certainly worth mentioning. Along with the *Lares*, they constitute a set of divine groups often identified in sources with the Cabiri of Samothrace. The *Dioskouroi* also constitute a link with the insular cult, whose characteristic duality was fundamental in their identification with the Great Gods and, consequently, with the *Penates*. During the Hellenistic age in the Greek world, and more generally in the eastern Mediterranean, the substantial identity between Cabiri and *Dioskouroi* is not only known, but also epigraphically testified to by sources discovered in the sanctuary of Delos.¹⁴ The gods worshipped in this

⁹Zevi (n. 3) 81.

¹⁰Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 40. 52. 4.

¹¹POPKIN, M. L.: Samothracian Influences at Rome: Cultic and Architectural Exchange in the Second Century B.C.E. *AJA* 119.3 (2015) 343–373, here 350.

¹²This is the case, for example, of a votive dedication from the sanctuary of Lemnos to the Lemnian Cabiri: D'AMORE, L.: *Lesteia e nauagia: le paure dell'uomo greco sui mari*. In CHIOFFI, L. – KAJAVA, M. – ÖRMA, S. (eds): *Naviganti, popoli e culture ad Ischia e in altri luoghi della costa tirrenica. Atti del convegno internazionale Sant'Angelo di Ischia, 9-11 ottobre 2015*. Rome 2017, 193–211, here 204.

¹³On this topic, see GADALETA, G.: La zattera di Odisseo e il culto cabirico a Tebe. *Ostraka* 18.2 (2009) 357–375.

¹⁴ID 1562 (Θεῶν Με[γάλων Σαμο]θράκων Δωσκόρουων [Καβείρων]). On the cult on Delos: CRUCCAS (n. 1) 83–87.



sanctuary are known by the name of *Theoi Samothrakes Dioskouroi*. The divine twins, sons of Tyndareus and – according to some authors – forming a triad with a goddess such as Artemis (or with Helen), were identified with the Cabiri of Samothrace and with the stars that protected sailors.¹⁵

The forms of devotion to these deities, whose blessing guaranteed salvation from the dangers on the sea, can be found in Samothrace in some important buildings and monuments, among which, not least, are the Rotunda of Arsinoe II, wife of Lysimachus, who probably also dedicated the building known as *Neorion* – this was a large room within which recent reconstructions have located a votive ship – perhaps offered by the queen to thank the gods for an escaped shipwreck.¹⁶

As far as the true Samothracian cult is concerned, there are elements that underline the particularity and exceptionality of the ritual: in fact, the local ceremonies were characterized by a strong sense of community. Despite their personal needs (salvation, good fortune, requests for blessings), the faithful shared the process of acquiring such benefits by means of mysterious ceremonies held in large assembly halls or in theatrical spaces, together with the entire community of devotees. The exceptionality of this aspect lies in the heterogeneous nature of the members of this group of believers; epigraphic findings from the sanctuary and from various cities in the Mediterranean basin testify to different genders, social backgrounds, ages and geographical origins of the devotees of the Samothracian gods.¹⁷ Those who took part in the ceremonies shared the same needs and, in the hope of salvation in the next world, asked the gods for protection from everyday dangers, such as the risk of an adverse event during a journey on the sea. It was precisely these initiates who provided the means through which Rome received and re-elaborated the Samothrace cult. The identification with *Penates* and *Dioskouroi* obviously can be understood through the relationship between *Dioskouroi* and the soteriological aspects of the Great Gods of Samothrace, derived from mythographic constructs of the Hellenistic age. This development has been clarified by F. Cumont,¹⁸ who highlighted the fact that the divine twins had iconographic peculiarities suitable for a religious hope of a happy afterlife, particularly with reference to some widespread philosophical doctrines in the Hellenistic age. However, it should be remembered that, although borrowed from a Greek medium, the cult of the *Dioskouroi* had already been reshaped and embedded in the Etruscan-Italic environment in the late Archaic age. This is reflected in their close link with the underworld, and even in their famous symbols, such as the double amphorae and the *dokana*.¹⁹

One of the central (from both a topographical point of view and from the general meaning of the ceremonies in the sanctuary of Samothrace) buildings is known as the *Altar Court* (Fig. 3). It

¹⁵On this topic, see CHAPOUTHIER, F.: *Les Dioscures au service d'une Déesse. Étude d'iconographie religieuse*. Paris 1935.

¹⁶WESCOAT, D. B.: Buildings for votive ships on Delos and Samothrace. In YEROULANOU, M. – STAMATOPOULOU, M. (eds): *Architecture and Archaeology in the Cyclades. Papers in honour of J.J. Coulton*. Oxford 2005, 153–172, here 171.

¹⁷DIMITROVA, N.: *Theoroi and Initiates in Samothrace. The Epigraphical Evidence* [Hesperia Supplement 37]. Princeton 2008.

¹⁸CUMONT, F.: *Recherches sur le symbolisme funéraire des Romains*. Paris 1942, here 64–103.

¹⁹On this topic, see: COLONNA, G.: Il *dokanon*, il culto dei Dioscuri e gli aspetti ellenizzanti della religione dei morti nell'Etruria tardo-archaica. In BACCHIELLI, L. – BONANNO ARAVANTINOS, M. (eds): *Scritti di antichità in memoria di Sandro Stucchi II*. Roma 1996, 165–184; GUARDUCCI, M.: Le insegne dei Dioscuri. *ArchClass* 36 (1984) 133–154.



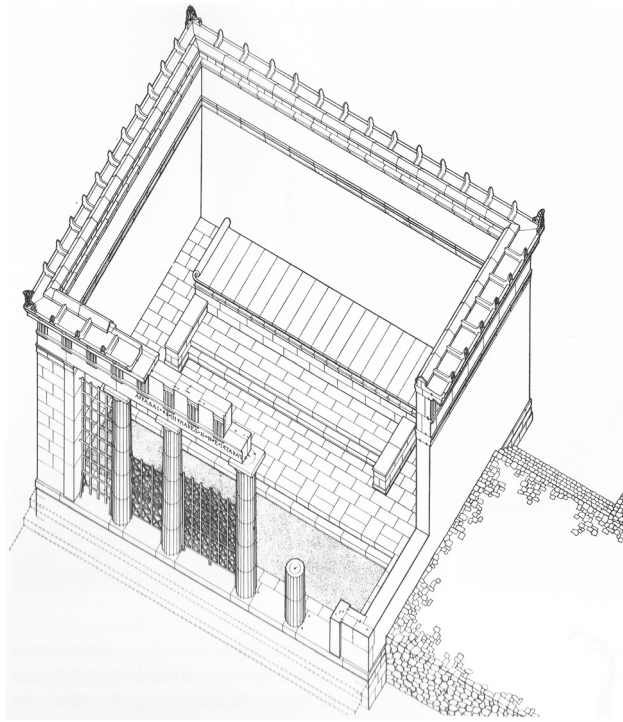


Fig. 3. Axonometry of the Altar Court of the Sanctuary of the Great Gods of Samothrace (after EHRHARDT, H.: *Samothrake: Heiligtümer in ihrer Landschaft und Geschichte als Zeugen Antiken Geisteslebens*. Stuttgart 1985)

is a rectangular structure approximately 14×17 m in size, with an altar inside, located near the south-west corner of the *Hieron* and placed in front of a theatrical area. The entrance included four columns, supporting a Doric entablature with *sima* and lion heads, between two doors, with a frontal staircase. Initially interpreted as an altar for bloody sacrifices, this structure has been identified as a sort of *aedicula* aimed at celebrating the divine epiphany of the *Dioskouroi*-Cabiri. This is due to both obvious structural reasons (its large size of approximately 12 m and its shape are more likely comparable to a *kline* for *theoxenia*) and for reasons related to the cultural context.²⁰ *Theoxenia* was the offering of a ritual meal to the divine twins, seen in many contexts as itinerant deities. The representation of this particular rite took place with the simple presence of an altar, *dokana* and amphorae, elements that immediately recalled the Dioscuri. The *Theoxenia* images on *pinakes* from Tarentum and Hellenistic reliefs represent a precise image of this ritual

Defined “Trojan Gods” by some sources and therefore at first connected to the mythical transport of sacred objects of the Samothracian cult from Dardanus to Phrygia and to Troy, and

²⁰SEYRIG, M. H.: Un edifice et un rite de Samothrace. *CRAI* 1965, 105–110, here 107–109.





Fig. 4. Ara Pacis Augustae, detail (photo by author)

later from Aeneas to Troy and to Italy, the *Penates* were often identified with the *Cabiri* and then, for their transitive property, with the *Dioskuroi*. Sources testify that it is no coincidence that Aeneas' mythical companion on this journey was Saon, who later introduced the dance of the *Salii* in Lavinium, and who, like *Kouretes* and *Korybantes* of the Greek world, had a strong connection with the *Cabiric* cult.²¹

The *Penates* had a cult site in Rome, located *sub Veliis*: they are defined by the sources as protective divinities of the community, as witnessed for example by Cicero: *Vos di patrii ac Penates qui huic urbi atque huic reipublicae praesideti*.²² Although there are no particular archaeological elements concerning this *aedes*, it is now accepted that a representation of this place of worship can be recognized in the temple, depicted in one of the panels of the *Ara Pacis* (Fig. 4). The depiction in question is, of course, the representation of Aeneas in the act of sacrificing. In the background there is a small building perched on a hill with a front staircase, defined by walls in *opus quadratum* and a façade with Corinthian pillasters (Fig. 5).²³ Behind a balustrade the *simulacra* of the *Penates* are visible, which, according to an account by Dionysius,²⁴ are works of ancient craftsmanship that represent two seated young people holding spears. This representation of the *Penates* recalls some depictions of the *Lares*, who were also considered protective divinities: *In summa Sacra Via*, a temple was dedicated to the *Lares* with the epiclesis of *praestites*. Inside the temple they were probably represented in a similar way to

²¹On this topic, see: BLAKELY, S.: *Myth, Ritual, and Metallurgy in Ancient Greece and Recent Africa*. Cambridge 2006. On the the dance of the *Salii* and the connection with *Kouretes*, see TORELLI, M.: *Appius Alce*. La gemma fiorentina con rito saliare e la presenza dei Claudii in Etruria. *SE* 63 (1997) 227–255.

²²Cicero, *Pro Sulla* 86.

²³PALOMBI (n. 7) 102.

²⁴D.H. 1. 68. 2.





Fig. 5. *Ara Pacis Augustae*, detail (after <http://arachne.uni-koeln.de/item/marbilder/7246976>, Arbeitsstelle für Digitale Archäologie – Archäologisches Institut, Universität zu Köln)



Fig. 6. Coin of Lucius Caesius with representation of *Lares Praestites* (after CRAWFORD, M. H.: *Roman Republican Coinage*. Cambridge 1974)

that of the *Penates* of Velia: evidence of these *simulacra* is found on a denarius by Lucius Caesius, issued in 112/111 BC (Fig. 6).²⁵ Here, the *Lares* take on the appearance of two young people sitting down, dressed in fur or in a cloak that leaves the upper part of the body bare, while both hold a spear in their left hand. Between the two figures is a dog, an animal connected with these deities.

The representation of the denarius contains the bust of Vulcanus and the pliers for his forge. The inscription *LA RE* is written on the coin, probably to be read as *La(res) (P)r(a)e(st)ites*). Ovid explains the epicletic of these gods:

²⁵RRC 1975, 298/1.



*Causa tamen positi fuerat cognominis illis
 quod praestant oculis omnia tuta suis.
 Stant quoque pro nobis et praesunt moenibus urbis
 et sunt praesentes auxiliumque ferunt.
 At canis ante pedes saxo fabricatus eodem
 stabat: quae standi cum Lare causa fuit?
 servat uterque domum, domino quoque fidus uterque:
 compita grata deo, compita grata cani.
 exagitant et Lar et turba Diania fures:
 pervigilantque Lares, pervigilantque canes'*

(Fast. 5. 131–142)

The reason for their epithet of Guardian,
 Is that they keep safe watch over everything.
 They support us, and protect the City walls,
 And they're propitious, and bring us aid.
 A dog, carved from the same stone, used to stand
 At their feet: why did it stand there with the Lares?
 Both guard the house: both are loyal to their master:
 Crossroads are dear to the god, and to dogs.
 Both the Lar and Diana's pack chase away thieves:
 And the Lares are watchful, and so are dogs.²⁶

The protective function of these deities would also fit perfectly with the topographical position of the temple, if we accept the reconstruction by C. Cecamore.²⁷ She places it outside the Porta Mugonia, near the temple of *Iuppiter Stator*, a deity supposed to defend the city walls from enemies and who would also share with the *Lares* his *dies natalis* on 27th June.²⁸ The reference to the salvific and protective aspect of the divine groups, similar to the Great Gods of Samothrace, seems rather evident here. Additionally, the presence of an animal similar to a dog represents a clarifying element, both in the cultural context, and in confirmation of the topographic location. Buried canids could be found at numerous city gates, since they represent a victim suitable for liminal, prophylactic and expiatory sacrifices.²⁹

As in the case of both the Hall of Votive Gifts of Samothrace and the temple of the *Penates* on Velia, here too, through the exhibition of their ancient *simulacra*, the divine twins were celebrated and offerings were dedicated to them in a way similar to the *theoxenia* of the *Dioskouroi*-Cabiri in the sanctuary of Samothrace. It seems conceivable that this structure was a

²⁶Translation by A. S. Kline @2004 (free document online, [it.scribd.com](https://www.scribd.com))

²⁷CECAMORE, C.: Palatium. Topografia Storica del Palatino tra III sec. a.C. e I sec. d.C. [Bullettino della Commissione Archeologica Comunale di Roma - Supplementi 9]. Roma 2002, here 33–41.

²⁸COARELLI, F.: *Il foro romano. Periodo arcaico*. Roma 1983, here 26–33.

²⁹On this topic, see AMOROSO, A. – DI GENNARO, F.: Le fortificazioni di Fidenae e il culto dei Lari. In *Preistoria e protostoria in Etruria XI*. Centro studi di preistoria e archeologia, Milano 2014, 281–300; MICHETTI, L. M.: Riti e miti di fondazione nell'Italia antica. Riflessioni su alcuni contesti di area etrusca. *ScAnt* 19.2–3 (2013) 333–357; DI GIUSEPPE, H.: Pasti per una divinità presso il trivio della Porta Mugonia a Roma. *Oebalus* 9 (2015) 243–283; SASSÙ, A.: Through impurity: a few remarks on the role of the dog in purification rituals of the Greek world. In JOHNSTON, P. A. – MASTROCINQUE, A. – PAPAIOANNOU, S. (eds): *Animals in Greek and Roman Religion and Myth*. Newcastle upon Tyne 2016, 393–418.



sort of *aedicula*, a building designed specifically for the periodical public exhibition of statues of the divine twins, a fact that would make the cult of the Penates of Velia significantly more similar to those of the Gods of Samothrace. The blessing that the latter bestowed on sailors, in the form of a pair of divine twins identified with the *Dioskouroi*, is probably the key to understanding and decoding the transfer of this cult from the mysterious eastern Greek world to Italy. The Roman pantheon already had groups of gods responsible for protecting travelers from dangers of everyday life: groups such as those of *Lares*, *Penates* and *Dioskouroi* were already playing this role before Rome became a consolidated maritime power. The encounter with a cult with a strong connection to the sea was brought to Rome by officials, merchants and simple travelers who had come into contact with these gods from the third century BC on, and inevitably found favor with people seeking constant protection from their traditional gods against the dangers associated with normal daily activities. Expansion into the eastern Mediterranean was probably the engine that drove Rome and its citizens to embrace this cult and seek the blessing of these deities. All this was clearly done through the mediation of cults and the mythical background linked to the origins of Rome: it was not by chance that even in the sanctuary of the Madonnella in Lavinium the heroic cult of Aeneas was connected to the *Dioskouroi*. Links can be found in the interpretations of young people and of knights, who were identified with the stars of navigation, as demonstrated by the sacred law reported in one of the lamellae from the sanctuary of Lavinium: *Cerere(m) auliquoquibus/Vespernam poro*.³⁰ The goddess Vesperna in this inscription is the personification of Venus, a star associated with the goddess in her role of protectress of navigators. It is clear that the Italian cultural background of the Republican Age was suitable for embedding a cult such as that of Samothrace. Political events both in Rome and in the East facilitated this passage. The journeys of Roman political and military representatives and the simultaneous creation of a network of commercial exchanges were probably the means by which this cult took firm roots. This happened thanks to both periodical visits to the island of Samothrace for mystery ceremonies, and to a public procession organized in the city. The latter was probably held near the temple of the Penates *sub Veliis*, where these divinities of Latin tradition was worshipped. In response to the public display of their *simulacra*, they granted their blessing and protection.

³⁰TORELLI, M.: *Lavinio e Roma. Riti iniziatici e matrimonio tra archeologia e storia*. Roma 1984, here 164.

