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The Binding of Ares in Myth and Cult: A Re-assessment

The mythical and cultic binding of Ares has long evoked interest and commentary. Most scholars seek to explain these stories and practices by Ares' supposedly "dishonored" status, and both ancients and moderns have counted Ares among the "Forces of Evil" from which *poleis* protected themselves by a magical, prophylactic binding of his statue. But this view fails to place Ares' binding within the larger phenomenon of bound cult statues and do not account for the surprisingly complex image of the god in epic and tragedy. A brief exposition of generally neglected evidence will establish that cult statues, including Ares', were not chained to incapacitate their power, but to ensure their continued presence as protective powers. Moreover, for Ares in particular, literary and epigraphic evidence suggests that he was bound to the city as the avenging protector of the city's land and agent of Zeus' daughter Dike.

The binding of Ares' cult images is not an isolated phenomenon. Several ancient authorities, clearly testify that the images of the gods were bound in an effort keep them tied to their cities. The fifth century sources on this point speak with one voice. Their consistent reference to the binding of "Daidalian" sculptures indicates a practice considered ancient even in the fifth century B.C., and the many mythical bindings of various deities, including Zeus, shows such rituals to be extremely archaic indeed. While it is true that liminal and potentially troublesome deities like Aphrodite, Artemis, and Dionysos account for the lion's share of the explicit evidence for bound cult statues, we should remember that the power of every Greek god was a double-edged sword. Apollo could be the bearer or averter of disease. Demeter could either insure the fertility of crops or drive humans into a frenzy of pre-agricultural cannibalism. The cult of Ares, I would argue, was no different in this respect.

The complex rationales for Ares' binding appear most clearly in two inscriptions from southern Asia Minor, one from Pamphylian Syedra, and another example from Iconium. In both cases, an oracle bade the cities to create a statue group depicting Ares bound before Hermes and Dike. While the position of Ares as suppliant before an image of Justice could imply a malevolent and hostile relationship between Ares and the city, a closer reading of the inscription tends to undermine this reading. The relationship of Ares and Dike had earlier received considerable elaboration by none other than Aeschylus in his *Septem* and *Oresteia*. In these four plays, Ares is constantly and consistently depicted as the *träger* of cosmic, retributive justice. It is in this capacity that Ares appears alongside Zeus and Athena at the heart of the Athenian Ephebic oath, and similar concerns likely informed Ares' binding at Syedra and Iconium. Ares was bound and placed before Dike so that his violent and retributive energies would not harm the *polis*. Far from diminishing the god's power, cities sought to focus Ares' potentially destructive energies outward by binding his image to the land and subjecting him to *Dike*. This is the Ares found alongside Athena on the *Shield of Achilles* and invoked in the *Hymn to Ares* as "ally of Themis."