

2

Greek Ritual Norms

The Textuality of Ritual Norms ('Sacred Laws') in the
Ancient Greek World

J.M. van der Molen



The past decade, various scholars have endeavored to re-examine¹ the *status quaestionis* of the discipline of epigraphy concerning, more specifically, the texts known as *leges sacrae* (meaning *sacred laws*—a corpus of which was first collated by Hans von Prott and Ludwig Ziehen, published as the *Leges Graecorum Sacrae* (LGS I and II)²). What this means is that it was found that the way the inscriptions designated by the umbrella term as ‘sacred laws’ were categorized or taxonomized until now was, simply put, inconsistent and imprecise. As such, from new angles³ and by different definitions, scholars have attempted to contribute to a recategorization and, indeed, a better understanding of the inscriptions falling under the ‘rubric’ of ancient Greek ritual norms. This essay aims to follow suit and join the discussion by examining the textuality of those ritual norms by means of exploring possible answers to two questions in particular: why have these *leges sacrae* been written down in a time where traditionally people largely operated on the faculties of their personal and collective memory? And second: how do these so-called ‘sacred laws’ move worshippers to adhere to their instructions and injunctions? When looking at inscriptions in pursuit of answers, I will do as I did in the first essay⁴ of this bipartite series, and appeal to J.L. Austin’s *speech act theory*

¹ J.-M. Carbon and V. Pirenne-Delforge, “Codifying ‘Sacred Laws’ in Ancient Greece,” *Writing Laws in Antiquity. L’écriture du droit dans l’Antiquité*, ed. D. Jaillard and C. Nihan (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2017), 141.

² Eran Lupu, “Greek Sacred Law: A Collection of New Documents (NGSL2). (2nd Edition with a Postscript),” in *Religions in the Graeco-Roman World* 152, ed. H.S. Versnel, D. Frankfurter and J. Hahn (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 5, BRILL Online Books.

³ J.-M. Carbon and V. Pirenne-Delforge, “Beyond Greek ‘Sacred Laws’,” *Kernos* 25 (2012): 163. <http://journals.openedition.org/kernos/2115>.

⁴ J.-M. van der Molen, “The Language of Asclepius: The Role and Diffusion of the Written Word in—and the Visual Language of—the Cult of Asclepius,” part of course *Text, Language & Religion* (Groningen University: Academia, 2019), 1-5.

wherever relevant or useful.

First, I'll briefly address the nature of the object of this essay: ritual norms—what are they? According to Parker⁵—taking for the time being into account the aforementioned *work in process* that is the categorization of these inscriptions—some of them may be described as laws whereas others better fit the description of 'decrees'. In either case, they could be issued to protect, proclaim, prescribe, prevent, prohibit or penalize in the context of a wide range of topics and are upheld, enforced or executed by sometimes or sometimes not indicated or identifiable 'authorities'. If indeed any indications of a specific authority are absent, Parker says a ritual norm may initially have carried no more weight than a private 'no parking sign', aimed to scare off potential transgressors⁶—in which case, by means of its perlocutionary force, conscientious observers of such a sign may have ended up regulating themselves still.

Examples of such ritual norms are aplenty. For instance, one decree (*IG* II² 1234)⁷ from the Hephaisteion in Athens directs an 'elected' group of members of a cult to perform a religious ceremony whereby in case of refusal, they will face a fine to be paid in drachmas. What's most notable here, is that the decree refers to the ceremony as one where the addressees are ordered to perform the appropriate ritual duties 'according to tradition'. This law refers to tradition in a way that implies the religious rituals for this ceremony are common knowledge that needn't be put into writing. The only point here is to clarify that which apparently wouldn't necessarily remain in people's memory: the *consequences* of *not complying*. In other words, the value or utility of the written word in the case of a sacred law like that, seems to lie more in its regulatory impact.

To answer the question of why ritual norms were written down as they were, we should perhaps ask ourselves if any one authority could efficiently direct and regulate people *just* by having rules informally enforced by means of social custom. Would for example *without* the Astypalaia inscription (*SIG*³ 980)⁸ that prohibits entering a sanctuary while 'impure'—warning that transgressing against the decree would 'weigh on one's mind'—still manage to enforce its sacred law if only relying on social custom? People or experts are not always around to recite the rules—textualized ritual norms however, are. Harris for example

⁵ Robert C.T. Parker, "What Are Greek Sacred Laws?," *The Laws and The Courts in Ancient Greece*, ed. Edward M. Harris and L. Rubinstein (London: Duckworth, 2004), 58.

⁶ Parker, "What Are Greek," 58.

⁷ The Packard Humanities Institute (PHI). *Inscriptiones Graecae* (*IG*), I-XIV, 2015. Accessed October 2019. <https://inscriptions.packhum.org/allregions>.

⁸ G.H.R. Horsley and Stephen Llewelyn, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity, 4: A Review of Greek Inscriptions and Papyri Published in 1979* (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 111.

says⁹ that according to Herodotus (V, 72, 3) a sacred law was enacted that prohibited Dorians from entering the Acropolis in Athens. He states that in this case, the law was written down to ensure that Dorian compliance wouldn't depend on mere 'social pressure'. Beside reasons for effect, Carbon and Pirenne-Delforge state¹⁰ that, if Greek ritual traditions and norms were written down, it was also because of the things they would record that were of such a noteworthy or exceptional nature. As such, Chaniotis adds,¹¹ ritual norms are useful and necessary in understanding the rituals they regulated. Lupu voices the same definition of sacred laws as Parker, by underpinning that said—according to him still least inadequately encapsulated by the word νόμος (meaning *nomos*)—laws would 'put forth customs, usages, rules, laws' to 'govern cult performance and religious activities' and adds¹² that really, the bottom line qualification for a sacred law is to be 'prescriptive'. On the matter of why any one such 'prescription' evolved to being messengered by means of textualizing them, Lupu points out¹³ that inscribed ritual norms may be placed in *multiple locations* and prevent or warn against 'disorderly conduct' both in the presence *and absence* of authorities—and, as such, eliminate one's option of making the now untenable excuse of saying to not have been made aware of the rules. The textualization of sacred laws or ritual norms, in Lupu's words, 'maximizes exposure' in this way.

Having considered some of the reasons for the textualization of ritual norms, we are left with the question of how worshippers were brought to follow said norms. In a way, this translates to the question of what illocutionary or perlocutionary forces the discussed sacred laws or decrees exerted on their addressees. For example, in a decree or law¹⁴ concerning purity in a sanctuary on Rhodes, it is said three stelai were erected with inscribed on them all 'displeasing' things to the gods that may not enter (e.g. any 'animal with a long-haired tail') and the 'punishments' for those who would ignore these restrictions. On the surface of it, one would guess the main reason for the average worshipper to not defy this sacred law would be to not want to face punishment (paying a fine of 'one *obol* per animal' or be considered 'impious'). This particular sacred law however, also clearly indicates the authority that issued it ('the *mastroi* and people of Ialysos'). The illocutionary or *intended meaning* of that utterance would impress strongly on visitors of the sanctuary, as it's an opening sentence

⁹ E.M. Harris, "Toward a Typology of Greek Regulations about Religious Matters: A Legal Approach," *Kernos* 28 (2015): 53-83, <https://journals.openedition.org/kernos/2328>.

¹⁰ Carbon and Pirenne-Delforge, "Codifying 'Sacred Laws'," 143.

¹¹ A. Chaniotis, "Rituals between Norms and Emotions: Rituals as Shared Experience and Memory," in E. Stavrianopoulou (Hrsg.), *Ritual and Communication in the Graeco-Roman World* (Liège, 2006), 211-238.

¹² Lupu, "Greek Sacred Law," 8.

¹³ Lupu, "Greek Sacred Law," 14, 24.

¹⁴ CGRN 90, 1-5, 9-10, 23-25, 29-31.

conveying an intimidating ‘we, the state and people’ that decree. To not adhere to this law, many may have felt, would have been to ostracize oneself.

Looking at another text, we may infer different motivations for the addressees to comply with the regulatory norms. This sacred law¹⁵ both provides instructions and injunctions for priests and worshippers alike. They concern however, the conduct of ritual at a sanctuary—the Amphiareion at Oropos—with a purpose similar to that of the Asclepieion at Epidauros: ‘to be treated by the god’, ‘incubating in the dormitory’. Again, transgressing against the rules of the sanctuary is punishable by fine, but with this particular sanctuary, one can imagine that worshippers in need of healing or therapy would virtually by definition try their best to follow the ritual norms, as not doing so could surely—from their perspective—lead to an unsuccessful treatment.

Another stele’s inscription that regulates the conduit of cult is that of the Attic deme of Paiania¹⁶. The decree promulgated on the stele advances prescriptions or injunctions regarding particular sacred duties: ‘...the priestess shall provide for (...) roasting meat (...) spits, a bronze pot [and] the religious officials (...) shall carry rods.’ ‘The priestess’ may be a general addressing of priestesses tasked with performing the sacred duties in question. The repeated mentioning of the ambiguous word τῆδε (meaning “here”) in this inscription however, makes some scholars including Nilsson speculate¹⁷ this ought to be interpreted as—in my words using speech act theory terminology—an illocutionary utterance rather than a mere locutionary utterance, *intended* to imply a specific priestess is being instructed here. Whichever is the case, what *does* remain clear here is the threat of monetary penalty if it is such that the prerequisites for the prescribed sacred duties aren’t met.

In another text¹⁸ it is again an Attic decree issued by the people (so I interpret ‘the city of Athens’—as the Athenians would have themselves) that seeks to regulate ‘cult personnel’. The decree concerns the cult of Asclepius in Piraeus and instructs the *epistatai* (‘overseers’) of the—what is implied to be a *new*—sanctuary to split allocated funds over ‘preliminary sacrifices’ and the ‘building of the temple’. Furthermore, it is prescribed that other cult officials are to make preparations for a (inaugurational) festival and oversee the proper distribution of the sacrifices’ meat among the authorities present at the festival’s procession. What’s notable about this inscription—considering, surely, its importance as it seems to deal

¹⁵ CGRN 75, 20-25, 45-47.

¹⁶ IG I³ 250 (or CGRN 25).

¹⁷ M.P. Nilsson, “Die eleusinischen Kulte der attischen Deme und das neue Sakralgesetz aus Paiania,” *Eranos* 42 (1944): 70-76.

¹⁸ CGRN 46, 1-17.

with the creation of a new cult, or branch of the existing one—is that it doesn't go into the possible consequences of incomppliance. This may be explained by the fact that the addressees of the particular ritual norms decreed, are themselves members of the body of people holding offices of authority in Athens (involved are the *hieropoioi*, *archontes* and *prytaneis*). In comparison, were a government official today faced with similar injunctions, that person would be likely to assume on his own what dire consequences could ensue if he were to elect incomppliance over law obedience. The weight of this decree being issued by 'the people' (implying 'government business') would likely have ensured compliance as thwarting the entire body of Attic governance (or so it may have come across) would have had the perlocutionary effect of rendering incomppliance rather unattractive.

I would suppose it stands to reason that observers of Greek ritual norms would adhere to them more often than they would not. And though that being the case for various reasons, there seems to be at least one notable common denominator when it comes to sacred laws regulating worshippers or, indeed, officials themselves; which is that they all in some form or another seem to rely on the presumption of conscientiousness on the part of laws' observers—as was for example the case with the Astypalaia inscription whereby incomppliance would 'weigh' on one's 'mind'. Lupu points out this (perlocutionary) 'force' by which to regulate can be found in various other texts, in one example (LSAM 17)¹⁹ inscribed in a similar way even, as it states that, upon harming a sanctuary's sacred fish, 'may that evil person doing any such thing perish in an evil destruction having himself become food for fish.'

At any rate, having dealt with some of the relevant literature and normative character of various inscriptions it would seem that sacred laws were inscribed because, for one, they were a more effective mode of communication than the traditional oral transference of ritual norms as well as that they were more durable and consistent in the way they enforced those norms.

¹⁹ Lupu, "Greek Sacred Law," 29-30.

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