ENSURING RITUAL COMPETENCE IN ANCIENT GREECE.
A NEGOTIABLE MATTER: RELIGIOUS SPECIALIST

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“Anyone is good enough to be a priest”, claimed the Attic orator Isocrates (II Nikokles, 6) in the 4th century BCE, and meant that the functions of the priestly office required no particular talent, in contrast to the office of a King.¹ The same criticism and mistrust of the role of ritual specialists in ancient Greek cults, which one can detect in this statement,² can be observed in the research literature since the publishing of Jules Martha’s book on the Athenian priesthood in 1882. Most of the scholars speak denigratingly of Greek priests and priestesses, while at the same time pointing to the high reputation they had in the society of that time as well as their role as executors of rituals.³

For Walter Burkert the Ancient Greek religion is “a religion without priests.”⁴ For, alongside those persons who can be considered

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¹ Cf. Demosthenes, Prooimia. 55, p. 1461.
² Cf. also the statement in Xenophon, Cyropaedia 1, 6, 2: “[...] For I had you taught this art on purpose that you might not have to learn the counsels of the gods through others as interpreters, but that you yourself, both seeing what is to be seen and hearing what is to be heard, might understand; for I would not have you at the mercy of the soothsayers, in case they should wish to deceive you by saying other things than those revealed by the gods [...]”
⁴ Burkert (1985: 95): “Greek religion might almost be called a religion without priests: there is no priestly caste as a closed group with fixed tradition, education, initiation, and hierarchy, and even in the permanently established cults there is no disciplina, but only usage, nomos. The god in principle admits anyone, as long as he is willing to fit in to the local community; [...] among the Greeks, sacrifice can be performed by anyone who is possessed of the desire and the means, including housewives and slaves.” See further Rüpke 1996: 245f. (who points out that our image of religious specialists in the Graeco-Roman antiquity was rather formed by Christianity); Jameson 1997: 175f.; Sourvinou-Inwood 2000: 39f.; Gordon 2001. For a discussion on the term “religious specialist” see Turner 1972; cf. also the collective reflections in the volume of Beard & North 1990 on the religious specialists in the Ancient World.
specialists in ritual (priests, exegetes, oracle interpreters), the ability and the right to perform a ritual were also accorded to both magistrates and private persons. The head of the family was permitted to carry out sacrifices at home himself; the ‘traditional sacrifice’ (thysia patrioi) was conducted by the heads of a clan, for the community it was very often the demarch (the head or mayor) and for the state partly the magistrates who were responsible for these sacrifices; private persons were permitted to perform purifications and atonements. Moreover, the Greek specialists in ritual do not appear to have corresponded to the image of an intermediary between god and the people, for no special training and no special knowledge were necessary in order to hold the office of a priest. In addition, many priests only remained in office for a short time, having received it through the drawing of lots or even by purchase, and even among those in whose families the priesthood was hereditary there were many who held other positions in the state besides that of priest.

This rather confusing picture on the role of Greek priests contrasts with the special interest on the correct performance of a ritual action as revealed from a group of epigraphic sources known summarily as ‘sacred laws’ in the research literature on ancient history. Detailed descriptions of sacrificial rituals, the exact planning of processions, lists of purity commandments and regulations governing ritual specialists make up the contents of these so-called sacred laws. They represent the written fixation of old and new regulations and alterations, and especially the visible announcement of them to the entire religious community.

The peculiarity of the sacred laws for us lies in the fact that they are, in their majority, the result of a political process of discussion, i.e.

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5 For the complexity of the relations between priests and magistrates see Gschnitzer 1989.
6 Cf. Stengel 1898: 32: “… auch die Griechen, wie andere Völker, geglaubt haben, gewisse Personen stünden den Göttern näher als die andern, hätten von ihnen besondere Kräfte und Fähigkeiten erhalten und seien deshalb geeignet und imstande, auch andern die Gunst der Gottheit zu verschaffen und zu sichern. Dann aber mußte die Folge sein, daß man ihnen die Vermittlung zwischen dem Gotte und der Menge überließ, sie mit der Ausübung des Kultes […] und dessen Formen und Gebrauche sie allein kannten und richtig zu üben verstanden, betraute.”
7 On the different opinions in scholarship upon the ritual competence of Greek priests see Garland 1984: 114f. and 1990: 73–91; Gladigow 1997: 103–118; Chaniotis forthc.
9 For discussions on this problematic term see now Parker 2004 and Lupu 2005: 4–9.