Sacrifice and prayer were the cornerstones of Greek religious practice. The rites regularly enacted to honor the gods were accompanied by a variety of spoken communications, and the synonymous performance of these rites formed the basis of Greek religious experience. Unlike sacrifice, which is well-attested in ancient sources and much discussed in modern scholarship, prayer and other ritual speech acts are elusive. There were a range of oral performances in honor of the gods, including prayer, oaths, curses, a variety of songs and music (begging songs, hymns, dithyrambs, paians, lament), proclamations, announcements of results of sacrifices, and exegesis, the specialist advice given on sacrificial procedure, supplication, and purification. The nature and content of most of these ritual utterances are absent from the written record, an absence which has been interpreted as a consequence of their secondary or marginal role. Without written documentation or attestations of sequence and traditional patterns similar to those found in literary and epigraphic descriptions of sacrifice, religious speech acts have seemed improvisational and therefore relatively less important to modern scholars.

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1 This study will focus specifically on democratic Athens; in this context, the connection between prayer and sacrifice is described by Isoc.Paneg.43.4, Lys.4.4, 6.51, Pl. Euthphr.14b, (Ps.) ALC.148e.5, Leg.885b8, 909b4, 910b3, Menex.244a5, and Thuc.8.70.

2 Because they were not committed to writing, Henrichs (1936) laments that, 'with few exceptions, the entire oral dimension of Greek religion—cult songs, public prayers, ritual utterances and exclamations, and the so-called sacred tales (hieroi logoi) have vanished without a trace'. Burkert describes the lack of 'liturgical prayer formula' as 'striking' (1985) 74, cf. p. 4. Both Henrichs and Burkert conclude that actions were valued more than words, Burkert (1985) 55 and Henrichs (1998) and (2003) 40. On the importance of hymns and music in Greek worship, particularly as public displays, Furley (2007) 118 ff. Much of the extent evidence is collected in Porta’s unpublished dissertation (1999); for an overview of prayer, see Pulleyn (1997), who gives an appendix of inscribed ex voto prayers, pp. 218–219; essays discussing lament can be found in Suter (2008); hymns are collected by Furley and Bremer (2001). Inscribed metrical religious texts are collected by Petrovic and Petrovic (2006), none of which come from democratic Athens.
In these theories, written documentation is required for the preservation of traditional liturgies, and the absence of this kind of ritual text, the secondary importance of speech acts in relation to material offerings, and the marginalization of the priesthood, who might be expected to control such texts, are seen as related characteristics unique to Greek religion. Ancient Greek religion is unparalleled among religious systems in the ancient Mediterranean in its lack of formally recognized religious scripture or sacred texts and the relatively powerless position of Greek cult officials, who were subject neither to official training nor the expert knowledge entailed by a canon of sacred texts, which are the exclusive preserve of priests in many ancient cultures. Although writing to gods on inscribed votives, recorded hymns in praise of gods, or texts documenting divine voices in oracles are found throughout the Greek world from a very early stage, there are no formally recognized texts or traditional liturgies for the practice of Greek religion.

A further complication for the intersection between writing and Greek religion is the association in Athens of religious documents with countercultural or foreign religious movements, reinforcing the notion that written texts were not part of the mainstream Greek religious experience. In Classical Athens, references to the possession or use of religious documents are used in court cases and in drama to characterize people as outsiders or ignorant fools, easily susceptible to foreign influences and cheap salesmen, who peddle such documents.

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3 The absence of ritual liturgies as related to the nebulous form of Greek religious authority is summarized by Pulleyn: ‘Ancient Greece had no Book of Common Prayer and knew no centrally organized religious authority’, (1997) 156; so also Parker (1996) 54: ‘Elaborate ritual texts are the hallmark of a more specialized priesthood and a more autonomous religious order than those of Greece’; cf. Burkert (1985) 4, Harris (1989) 83. I will use the terms ‘priest’ and ‘cult official’ interchangeably in reference to people (men and women) charged with religious duties on behalf of the community, although neither adequately suits the various state-appointed religious offices in Athens under discussion; the problematic English terminology is discussed by Beard and North (1990) 3, Henrichs (2008) 4–5.

4 Egyptian priests used a sacred language known only to priests, and early Sanskrit texts seem to have played a similar role in the caste system. Extensive ritual texts survive from Hittite Anatolia which seem to have been used during ritual performances and prescribe exact words to be spoken; e.g. Rutherford’s (2008) study on ritual lament in Hittite culture. Parker contrasts the attestations of extensive ritual liturgies in Near Eastern traditions with the centrality of actions in Greek ritual, (1996) 51.