Although Greek ritual hymns were performed orally, we encounter them, of course, through the medium of writing. Some survive quoted in literary texts, while many more are preserved in inscriptions. How—and, more important, why—did these songs come to be textualized, and, in particular, inscribed? The following survey of inscribed hymns suggests that despite the permanence that inscribing affords, a hymn’s textualization rarely represents its canonization within a ritual liturgy. There is very little evidence that inscriptions served as aids to performance or as a means of preserving hymns for future performances. Instead, hymns seem to have been inscribed most often to commemorate a particular past performance, perhaps the hymn’s only performance. The event, rather than the song, seems to have been the object of memorialization.

Inscribed Hymns

For some hymns, the steps from its composition and initial oral performance to its textualization were both few and short; some hymns, for example, were inscribed, as best we can tell, soon after their first, and maybe only, performance. One such example is the paean of Philodamus of Skarpheia, composed for the annual Theoxenia festival at Delphi and inscribed there around 340 BC. The paean is followed on its stele by a Delphic honorary decree explaining that the Delphians had granted special privileges to Philodamus and his brothers as a show of gratitude for their contribution of this very paean to Dionysus. These honors were
given and, presumably, inscribed during the poet’s lifetime, perhaps even in the immediate wake of the performance of Philodamus’ paean. We can imagine a simple process of transmission: the poet submitted a written version of the paean to the Delphian authorities for their archives, and it, or a copy recorded in the archived (and primary) version of the honorary decree, served as the basis for the written exemplar the mason used as his model.

Moreover, while Philodamus’ poetry is what attracts our attention, it was probably the bestowal of honors that prompted the textualization of this paean. Other inscriptions at Delphi attest to honors given to poets who composed new ritual songs for the rich Delphic festival calendar, and there is at least one other example of song(s) and honorary decree being inscribed together, in the case of Aristonous of Corinth. An honorary decree for Aristonous and two of his hymns form part of a large-scale inscribing project, consisting of at least sixteen honorary decrees across at least three stones. The honorary decree explicitly recognizes Aristonous for ‘the hymns,’ texts of which follow the decree: a paean immediately below the decree and a hymn to Hestia on what must have been the adjacent stele. Aristonous’ shared status as a Delphic honoree justifies his inclusion with the fifteen other men, and the texts of the two songs provide proof of the poet’s worthiness of such recognition. I suggest Philodamus’ paean was also committed to writing primarily as an adjunct to his honorary decree, even though the paean comes before the decree on his stele. The ordering of texts should not be taken to reflect

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3 *FD* 3:2, no. 78, for example, is an honorary decree of the late third century BC for the poet Cleocharis of Athens, for composing a processionary song, paean, and hymn for Delphi’s Theoxenia festival. Aristonous: *FD* 3:2, 190 (decree), 191 (paean), 192 (hymn to Hestia); Furley and Bremer (2001) nos. 2.4, 2.3.

4 The set of inscriptions is *FD* 3:2, nos. 176–193 (Pl. XIII, 3–5). They were all inscribed by the same hand in the third century, and the stelai are of uniform dimensions. Aristonous’ hymn to Hestia is followed by an honorary decree, proof that the decree for Aristonous and his two hymns were fully incorporated within what appears to be a project to gather together disparate honorary inscriptions, each originally on its own stele, and recopy them as a group. Except for Aristonous, all of these honorary decrees were passed in the first half of the third century BC, but only two under the same archon. Aristonous stands out in this group, not only because of the inclusion of his two hymns, but also because his decree is by far the oldest, dating to around 340 BC. Daux speculates that all the honorary decrees in this collection honor poets, but only Aristonous is explicitly identified as such ([1942/3] 139 n. 3). Presumably Aristonous’ decree and hymns were originally published, like Philodamus’, around the time of the hymns’ composition, and on their own stele, but with the decree preceding the two hymns, while in Philodamus’ case the decree follows his paean.