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GIFTS FOR THE GODS*

οὐ μέγεθος πίνακος θαυμαστέον ἀλλὰ τὸ θεῖον

I. Introduction

In order to enter into and sustain a good personal relationship with his gods the ancient Greek resorted primarily to three means: prayer, sacrifice and the votive offering.\(^1\) These three are normally closely connected. Whoever decides to study one of them will usually find that he must deal with the other two as well. The subject of the present paper is the votive offering in so far as it sheds light on the personal religiosity of the Greeks. I shall also be devoting some attention to sacrifices, albeit far less than such an important aspect of the Greek cult would require in order to be properly understood. For a thorough treatment of prayer the reader should turn to the article by H. S. Versnel.

What follows will be mainly confined to the archaic and classical periods of the Greek world (6th-4th century B.C.). I shall not, however, be restricting myself too narrowly to these chronological limits. Whenever it might be illuminating material will also be taken from other periods and areas. Whoever goes into this subject soon finds that, over the years,

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\(^1\) Prayer, sacrifice and votive offering mentioned together in the inscription BE 1960, 223 (Bulgaria): εὐξάμενος θυσίας εὐχὴν ἀνέθηκα τὸ δῶρον.

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* Abbreviations, in addition to those in general use:

* Raubitschek = A. E. Raubitschek, Dedications from the Athenian Akropolis (1949).
* Rouse = W. H. D. Rouse, Greek votive offerings (1902).
* SEG = Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum.
* Svoronos = J. N. Svoronos, Das Athener Nationalmuseum (1908-1937).

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votive religion displays a considerable number of constant components, some of which survived in Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox circles and persist until modern times.\(^2\)

It comes as no surprise to find sacrifices and votive offerings often mentioned in the same breath in ancient sources.\(^3\) At a superficial glance they have an obvious feature in common: in both cases something is offered to the gods.\(^4\) On the other hand, as long as we limit ourselves to fairly broad lines, the difference between the two is not difficult to determine. We talk of sacrifices when the object offered is intended for consumption (human or divine), while votive offerings are basically durable—a general definition which does indeed serve our purpose, although it does not do justice to the complex of phenomena contained in the term 'sacrifice'.

What are the motives and considerations which could play a rôle in the presentation of a sacrifice or a votive offering? Let us begin with the sacrifice.\(^5\) Why was a sacrifice made? Theophrastus gives a clear answer: τριῶν ἑνεκα θυτεόν τοῖς θεοῖς· ἦ γὰρ διὰ τιμῆν ἦ διὰ χάριν ἦ διὰ χρείαν τῶν ἀγαθῶν.\(^6\)

We must sacrifice to the gods in order to honour them or to thank them or to ask them for something (good). But Theophrastus' clear and rational division is far from reflecting the current Greek concepts of sacrifice in anything like an exhaustive manner, as we shall see from the following examples.

\(^2\) A thorough treatment of modern ex votos, and general questions concerning votive offerings, is to be found in the beautifully illustrated book by L. Kriss-Rettenbeck, Ex Voto—Zeichen, Bild und Abbild im christlichen Votivbrauchtum (1972); for a slightly different approach see R. Kriss, Zum Problem der religiösen Magie und ihre Rolle im volkstümlichen Opferbrauchtum und Sakramentalien-Wesen, in L. Petzoldt (ed.), Magie und Religion (1978) 385-403. Further references in Appendix, C4.

\(^3\) Plato, Leg. 909-910; Herondas IV 11-19; for presenting a votive offering, elsewhere ἀνατιθημα, in Arcadian ἄναθω or ὄνδω are used: IG V 2, 554 and 555; SEG 11, 1162; Hesperia 28 (1959) 153; Lazzarini p. 72.

\(^4\) The votive offering is often called δῶρον: Lazzarini 750 ff.; SEG 1, 248; above nt. 1. Cf. Eurip., Med. 964 πείθειν δῶρα καὶ θεοῖς, λόγος.


\(^6\) Theophr., Peri euseb. fr. 12 Pötscher, 42-44.