CHAPTER 2

Public Sacrifice in Roman Athens*

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These are exciting times for scholars interested in sacrifice. Several fascinating studies have been published over the past few years questioning the models that had been current for over four decades. Most of the widely accepted theories about the origins of sacrifice, its meaning, or its social functions are being challenged. Most of the traditional certainties about how it ‘worked’, who actually took an active part in both the sacrifice itself and the banquet afterwards, who benefited most, and even the attitude of the victims, are being thoroughly reviewed.1

The new consensus casts doubt on the centrality of sacrifice within Graeco-Roman ritual and takes for granted that it should no longer be thought of as a single, undifferentiated category. It also tries to historicise the practice2 in such a way that sacrifice is best thought of as a ‘vacant sign’, capable of assuming different meanings in different contexts, especially over time.3 Some brilliant studies along these lines have already been produced, for example on the evolution of the theology of sacrifice in Late Antiquity and on its place within early Christianity.4

This exciting panorama, however, does not include the fate of public sacrifice in the Greek world during the Roman era.5 The highly stereotyped nature

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1 General revisions of scholarship on sacrifice: Georgoudi, Koch Piettre & Schmidt (eds.) 2005; Mehl & Brulé (eds.) 2008; Wright Knust & Várhelyi (eds.) 2012; Naiden 2013; Rutherford & Hitch (eds.) 2017 (non vidi).
3 Gordon 1990, 206.
5 In my view, ‘public’ rites were those performed by a public officer on behalf of the démos or some of its sub-units. Different definitions of ‘public’: Dasen, Piérart (eds.) 2005; Georgoudi 1998; Lambert 2010. For the sake of clarity, I should also point out that, when
of the sources, and a marked tendency to ignore public religion after the Classical and early Hellenistic periods, may explain this almost complete void. Admittedly, the evidence is ostensibly rather unappealing: as usual the best examples come from Athens, where sacrifices by public officials on behalf of the dēmos apparently continued to be performed as usual in the early Roman period. The sources, almost exclusively epigraphic, do not include as many descriptions and details as before; but, at first sight, the same things continued to be done and the only noticeable change was the omission of the age-old verbose formulae.

Continuity, however, also needs to be explained, especially when it takes place in such a drastically new context as the (long) Roman Empire. Roman rule brought with it a completely new political framework which must have affected the development and the meaning of public sacrifice. This paper will try to show that some apparently minor changes in the epigraphic record of sacrifice may be a sign of deeper shifts within the management of public religion in Roman Athens and, consequently, imply variations in the very meaning of sacrifice in that context.

As a point of departure, I will use one of the best preserved epigraphic series in the history of Athens, namely the prytany decrees, an extraordinarily rich record of the activities of the prytaneis, beginning with the overthrow of Demetrios of Phaleron in 307/6 BC and lasting well into the 2nd century AD. More than 200 rather formulaic decrees of this type, best exemplified by the long inscription Agora XV.194 of 178/7 BC (see Appendix 1), survive from the period up to the sack of Athens by Sulla in 86 BC. At that time, it was usual for two different decrees to be inscribed, one by the dēmos and the other by the boulē. Both praise the prytaneis and their officers for having done their duty in making the customary sacrifices before the meetings of the dēmos, and the tamias (treasurer of each tribe), and the rest of the officers for having performed all the proper sacrifices on behalf of the boulê and the dēmos and handled all other relevant matters.

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I refer here to ‘Roman times’, I mean the period starting at the beginning of the 2nd century BC. On sacrifice in the Greek cities of the Roman Empire: PETROPOULOU 2008.

6 The prytany decrees have been the subject of DOW 1937; GEAGAN 1967, 92–116; MERITT & TRAILL 1974.

7 As explained by MERITT & TRAILL 1974, 5, ‘[...] there is no way of telling a priori in any given text which of these two decrees will turn out in actual point of time to be first and which the second.’ The decree of the boulê was differentiated from that of the dēmos around 257/6 BC or perhaps a little earlier.