De Novis Libris Iudicia

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Giving the gods a portion of what one had gained in return for their divine gifts was a widespread religious practice in the ancient world. For ancient Greece a wealth of evidence, predominantly epigraphical, attests to numerous aparchai, conventionally translated as ‘first fruits’, and dekatai, tithes, for the gods. Considering that for many years gift-giving has been center stage in scholarship as an essential component of Greek religion, these specific types of gift, so familiar to every student of ancient Greece, have elicited surprisingly little focused attention. Theodora Jim’s rich monograph Sharing with the Gods now fills this lacuna in an exemplary way. Based on an impressive collection of evidence, Jim offers a well-argued view on the function of these gifts in Greek religion and with it on the Greek religious mentality more broadly.

Most gifts were offered to the gods in advance, often accompanied by a vow, to ask the gods for agatha (good gifts) to come in the (near) future. Aparchai and dekatai, by contrast, were retrospective, giving to the gods a part of what one had obtained owing to divine favours (82-84). This procedure does not mean that such gifts were never promised to the gods in advance, but the act of giving took place after receiving the results of divine support, not before and in expectation of them. Jim translates aparchai by ‘first offerings’ rather than by ‘first fruits’, to dissociate these gifts from too strong a connection with agriculture. They could be any part given to the gods before humans would enjoy the remainder, and the fact that humans and gods partook of the same produce brought about a sense of sharing with the gods absent—or at least less prominent—in offerings given in advance. The part for the gods could be either a portion of the produce (of the kind that easily comes to mind when thinking of agricultural offerings, such as the first wine or the first sheaf of grain), which Jim labels ‘raw’ offerings, or a portion that was ‘converted', i.e.
when the produce of whatever kind was first sold and next the money used to pay for an aparche in the shape of a present of some kind (statue, relief or any other gift). The ‘raw’ parts for the gods were not always or necessarily the choicest, despite the expression akrothinia (‘top of the heap’) for the aparchai from war booty, but rather the preliminary share the gods were entitled to in gratitude for their gifts. Jim identifies four types of aparchai (18-19): dedications, sacrificial offerings, offerings of food and drink, and cult payments. A fifth type, of human beings, occurs only in myth and therefore is discussed separately (281-288). Especially in animal sacrifice the idea was not just giving a part, but actual sharing the offering with the gods (57). Dekatai, in principle indeed a tenth of the proceeds, were paid not only in religious, but also in non-religious contexts, for instance as taxes, whereas aparche was used only for the divine share. Giving the gods their part before anyone else marked the gift as a sign of the honour (time) one owed them for their immortal powers and support.

With her analysis of these gifts to the gods, Jim engages with several current issues in the study of Greek religion. Showing that the Greeks gave these gifts both as communities (polis, subgroup, family, army contingent or any other group) and as individuals, she argues that the same mentality underlay ‘public’ and ‘private’ religious actions, transcending the distinction of Greek religion into polis-religion and individual piety that recently has preoccupied the debate. By emphasising the religious mentality evidenced in these gifts, furthermore, Jim wants to change the common understanding of Greek religion as consisting primarily of religious acts, notably rituals, into one in which beliefs, expectations and feelings play a central role. As to the kinds of feelings involved, Jim gives a new dimension to the current view that gift-giving with the gods entailed mutual charis with the divine. In the evidence she encounters a sense not only of gratitude for and reciprocal response to the divine gifts, but also of being in debt to the gods (68-75). Debt, far more than reciprocity, characterises the inequality of the parties involved, she argues, and in the case of the gods it is not only their superior powers, but more markedly the ‘ultimate unknowability’, as Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood put it, of how they will use their powers, that undercuts a straightforward reciprocal exchange between humans and gods (88).

Aparchai and dekatai were, in one way or another, gifts that could be of economic value, whether great or small, and here Jim’s analysis intersects with current debates on the economic nature of divine and human transactions and of the nature of divine and human properties, including treasuries. In D. 24, Against Timocrates, the portion of war booty for the gods is a substantial part of the fiscal policies at stake in this speech. Moreover, some gifts to