

‘My beauty, my virtue, my wealth’: Personal Assertion in Public Religious Contexts

In this paper I will explore the articulation of personal religious experience within the structures of public religion through an analysis of selected dedications.

Much of the attention given to personal religion has focused on those forms of religion which an individual may opt into (or out of), and which operate on an individual rather than a state level: mystery cults, healing cults, curse tablets. In this paper, I discuss instead the personal as it is asserted within public religion, in the form of dedications. The range of votives offered to a deity at a given shrine is (in most cases) richly varied, and an individual’s choice of votives often says more about the dedicant than the deity. Moreover such dedications are frequently given in regard to personal matters, rather than as part of a public festival or communal ritual, as can be seen by the nature of the dedications and their inscriptions. This is true even – or perhaps especially – of major state cults.

The vast majority of dedications are anonymous and inexpensive – although that does not mean that they were not carefully chosen. And yet there are many types of dedications in which the close tie between the individual and the dedication is made evident, by such means as identification through inscription; self-representation through iconography; choice of personal effects (clothing, jewellery, and the like) or of objects related to the dedicator’s profession; and so forth. Dedicators may also show an interest in the placement of their votives – ideally as conspicuous as possible, to the extent that many shrines restricted placement, or even formed no-votive areas: ‘No one is permitted to request that an image be raised or some other votive offering set up in the lower part of the sanctuary...’ (*LSS* 107, from the Asklepieion of Rhodes; van Straten 2001, 213-14). Some dedications were renewed or reforged in order to keep them prominent and to avoid the periodic clearances that major sanctuaries made.

While there is a considerable body of work on the nature of dedications (e.g. van Straten 2001; *ThesCRA* I.2.d), I will explore in particular areas in which the personal rubs closely against the public face of the cult. I will argue that dedications may, and commonly did, assert individual identity or seek to form a connection with the deity for a specific and personal purpose, within a cult that is publically focused on the community as a whole. The importance of such a tie, and the tension between personal and public, is tested by the cases in which a group of individual dedications is melted down to create something more impressive or useful. In such a case, the names of the original dedicants and the weights of their dedications may be inscribed on a stele so as to preserve the relationship between dedicant, offering, and deity even after the original votives are gone (e.g. *IG II² 839*; *LSCG* 41; van Straten 2001, 215). In contrast, Demosthenes 24.180-82 attacks Androtion for melting down crowns without preserving their inscriptions – and yet the latter does so with the people’s consent. Finally, ‘penalty’ dedications such as the Zanes at Olympia offer the individual a less welcome form of personal attention within the sanctuary.

Bibliography

- LSCG* = Sokolowski, F. 1969. *Lois sacrées des cités grecques, Travaux et mémoires* fasc. 18, Paris, E. de Boccard
- ThesCRA* = *Thesaurus cultus et rituum antiquorum*, Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum 2005-2006
- van Straten, F. 2001. ‘Votives and Votaries in Greek Sanctuaries’, in R. Buxton, ed., *Oxford Readings in Greek Religion*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 191-225