

Rhetoric of Religion in Anaximenes of Lampsacus and Hellenistic Sacred Law

It is a truism that ancient Greek religious practice was tradition bound (Walbank 1993, 209 and Shipley 2000, 153-155). A number of Greek sacred laws state that sacrifices and processions had to be done “according to tradition.” But even in Greek religion, tradition could not be locked in amber; each generation redefines and reifies it in legal, social, cultural practices. In a striking yet overlooked passage by Anaximenes of Lampsacus, the rhetorician outlines arguments that could be used for justifying maintaining, increasing, or even reducing traditional religious practices (*Rhet. ad Alex.* 1423a-b). In this paper, I argue that Anaximenes’ strategies were not merely academic. When issuing laws regulating changes to traditional rites, some communities used rhetorical strategies remarkably similar to those found in Anaximenes’ handbook. An analysis of these laws reveals how communities balanced the twin requirements of tradition and change.

According to Anaximenes, when trying to persuade the people to maintain existing rites one should argue that it is wrong to deviate from ancestral customs. Advocates for the augmentation of rites, however, should tell the assembly that doing so would enhance the splendor of tradition and pay greater honor to the gods and give the people greater confidence. Besides, even their ancestors altered rites from time to time. When decreasing rites, one should argue that the gods prefer modest sacrifices to extravagant ones and show little sympathy for those who spend lavishly under dire fiscal conditions. Although Anaximenes’ advice may seem like a sophisticated and manipulative, I argue that it demonstrates a flexibility of traditional Greek religious practices that often eludes the attention of modern scholars. His advice was not meant for an academic or royal audience alone but was to be applied to real debates as the circumstances required.

In fact, we can see his rhetorical strategies at work in a second-century decree from Magnesia-on-the-Maeander where the people decided to add an appendage festival to the traditional Leucophryeneia (*I.Magnesia* 100A=*LSAM* 33). In this decree, a new festival called the Eisiteria is framed as an “augmentation” (*epauxêsis*) of traditional rites when in fact it is introducing something new. Moreover, a second-century BC Athenian decree (*SEG* 21.469C=*LSS* 14) explicates rules for the enhancement and renewal of the Thargelia in honor of Apollo Patroös, Pythios, and Alexikakos. This festival, however, had been defunct for more than a century (Mikalson 1998, 273). Reviving it would require careful reasoning since ancient Greeks were uneasy about neglecting or downsizing traditional rites (e.g. Xen. *Anab.* 3.2.12 and Lys. 30.18-19). The Athenians’ careful phrasing cloaked an apparent neglect of the Thargelia by framing the legislation in terms of enhancement. This suggests a strategy similar to that which Anaximenes recommends. Although we cannot know whether the Athenians or Magnesians had Anaximenes specifically in mind when crafting their laws, the phrasing of their decrees indicates that Hellenistic communities were at least aware of the rhetorical strategies that Anaximenes promoted and employed these strategies to different scenarios. While these case studies show that Greek religious traditions were flexible, local circumstances were usually more complicated than the three scenarios that Anaximenes lists. Necessity required great festivals to be downsized and even defunct rites to be revived. The way in which these processes unfolded is seen in the rhetoric of religious change.

Works Cited

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