



## Research project

# Athenian Cults, Religious Festivals and Ritual Practices through the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC Oratory

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## Research topic

The topic of this Doctoral project is a sociopolitical and historical-religious study of Athenian festivals, cults, rites and religious practices present in the orators of the 4th century BC, conducted through the examination of documentation and the critical analysis of modern research, supported by the creation of a searchable database, structured into different sections and tabs, that contains the product of this research. The quantity of religious topics in oratory is indeed very wide and, so far, analyses have been conducted only from a rhetorical point of view or, in any case, limited to some specific theme or author.

The thesis will focus on religious practices and rites since, being in close connection with the life of the state<sup>1</sup>, they are consolidated formal patterns of social behaviour that bind the community and the different subgroups of it, they are political means, a source of private and public morality<sup>2</sup>, a tool for the creation of the identity of individuals and, as H. Willey recently recalled, they are also "the setting in relation to which life in the *polis* is experienced and located"<sup>3</sup>. The scope of research is, as already mentioned, that of oratory, since many important religious questions find expression in it (the abundant use of which makes us understand how familiar they were to the audience<sup>4</sup> and present in everyday life<sup>5</sup>) and since:

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<sup>1</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood 2000, pp. 13, 22, 37.

<sup>2</sup> Bearzot 1981, pp. 99, 102; Martin 2009, pp. 274-275.

<sup>3</sup> Willey 2018, p. 297.

<sup>4</sup> Mikalson 1983.

<sup>5</sup> Serafim 2021, p. 67.



“Rhetoric is no less embedded in Greek religion than Greek religion is in rhetoric (...) Religion is always open to be debated and articulated; rhetoric, in other words, has been the major vehicle through which religion is phrased, discussed, analyzed and propagated” (Serafim 2021, pp. 10, 32).

The reference period for the research is the 4th century BC for the extreme flowering of oratory in that age and because, despite the profound wave of rationalism<sup>6</sup>, religion plays a particular and still central role<sup>7</sup>. This can also be seen in the official documents in which a double dating now appears: the *bouletic* one and the festive one. Lastly, the geographical area of interest is Athens since, thanks to the oratory, we have received more testimonies regarding the religious practices of this place than of any other Greek state<sup>8</sup>.

### *Status quaestionis*

There is an abundant bibliography on religious topics in the orators of the 4th century BC. However, the studies conducted so far carry out an analysis from a rhetorical and linguistic point of view, they try to understand how these themes managed to move the emotions of the audience and to persuade them (like King<sup>9</sup>) or focus on limited and specific topics (for example Martin<sup>10</sup> deals with the conception of the gods within the assembly, Parker<sup>11</sup> studies the presence of divine figures between tragedy and oratory and Dowden<sup>12</sup> examines prayers and hymns from the rhetorical point of view) or on certain orators (Vielberg on Lysurgus, Willey on the Demosthenic *corpus*, Bearzot on Isocrates<sup>13</sup>). Again, in 1983 Mikalson<sup>14</sup> wrote a book on

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<sup>6</sup> Humphreys 2004, pp. 51-55, 66.

<sup>7</sup> Bearzot 1981, p. 102; as can be gleaned from Gernet 2000 and as A. Taddei writes in the introduction to the same volume, religion in Athens between the 5th and 4th centuries BC still has a certain importance, especially in the social and legal dimensions. In fact, "la dimensione consuetudinaria" must be understood "non solo come uno sfondo rituale da cui le procedure sono sorte dopo una progressiva oggettivazione e razionalizzazione; essa è anche il complesso magico-religioso che influenza la realtà sostanziale e procedurale ancora in età classica e, in buona misura, anche in età ellenistica. Il 'costume' sembra condizionare pesantemente l'etica processuale, i sistemi probatori e l'elaborazione stessa delle norme" (Gernet 2000, p. XXXIII), which is why law (one of the main areas of oratory) becomes "mezzo per lo studio di fatti mentali studiati nel loro divenire storico" (Gernet 2000, pp. XXVIII-XIX). After all, the political and judicial places of Athens were mostly composed not of professionals, but of ordinary people (Gernet 2000, pp. 140-141).

<sup>8</sup> Parker 2005, p. 156.

<sup>9</sup> King 1955.

<sup>10</sup> Martin 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Parker 1997.

<sup>12</sup> Dowden 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Vielberg 1991; Willey 2018; Bearzot 1981.



Athenian popular religion and to obtain certain information he used some orators, but he only reported what they witnessed, limiting the context and the topics covered.

The two main works on religious themes in the orators of the 4th century BC are those of Martin<sup>15</sup> and Serafim<sup>16</sup>. Martin focuses on Demosthenes and, furthermore, analyses the themes only from a rhetorical and linguistic point of view, studying how they served the author to move the audience and its emotions and to achieve certain objectives. Serafim, in turn, focuses on what he defines as "religious discourse", i.e. the religious arguments and rhetorical techniques through which or for the purpose of which they were exposed. Indeed, he claims to have found, in the ten orators of the canon, approximately 931 sections dealing with religious themes; however, in his work he reports in a general way only a limited number of thematic elements which he selects based on quantity and frequency. These are not explored in depth, but once again they are analysed only from the point of view of rhetoric and persuasion<sup>17</sup>. At most they are seen as an example, not so much of religious practices, but of an idea of religion considered as something that unites men and answers the fundamental questions of existence<sup>18</sup>.

What is therefore missing is an analysis of these religious topics extended to all the orators of the 4th century BC and conducted not from a rhetorical point of view, but by placing them in a historical, religious, social and cultural context. Thus, in the research remains a field to be explored for the analysis of religious topics, practices and celebrations referred to in oratory.

### **Project description and methodology**

Athenian religious topics in the orators of the 4th century BC in fact provide the possibility of conducting an in-depth examination not only of the structures of the cults themselves, of the festivals and religious practices, but also of their cultural, political and social value, as well as of the Athenian reality itself whose common values were precisely exposed in the assemblies and in the courts, the venues for the speeches of the orators.

In the first year of research, we therefore aim to find and file the passages in the orators in which religious themes are treated, then to divide these by type of religious topic, author and, again, context of execution and purpose of the oration. In the works of the orators, in fact,

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<sup>14</sup> Mikalson 1983.

<sup>15</sup> Martin 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Serafim 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Such an analysis on some religious themes, inserted however in a general context concerning the study of the persuasion techniques of the Attic orators, had already been carried out to a small extent by Serafim 2017.

<sup>18</sup> This limitation is highlighted in Rebecca Van Hove's review (<https://journals.openedition.org/kernos/4797>).



references to religion range from topics such as religious festivals<sup>19</sup>, liturgies, sacred objects and clothing<sup>20</sup> to others such as the rites of the *polis* and its administrative and decision-making bodies<sup>21</sup>, religious practices in civic groups, in the phratries, in the *oikoi* and in the *gene*<sup>22</sup>, the laws linked to religion<sup>23</sup>, the offenses against religious festivals and the sacred<sup>24</sup>. There are sacrifices, prayers, rituals and oaths and the use of these for political purposes by citizens and foreigners<sup>25</sup>. Rituals connected to sanctuaries, sacred lands, dedications and ritual topography are also mentioned<sup>26</sup>; the orators talk about oracles<sup>27</sup>, ministers of the sacred<sup>28</sup>, divine epithets<sup>29</sup>, rites practiced in prison<sup>30</sup>. The funerary rites and both their political and of legitimation of citizenship and descent function<sup>31</sup>, the role of women and marriage<sup>32</sup>, slaves and foreigners in

<sup>19</sup> Aesch. 1.43; Dem. 21.51-54; Isocr. 4.43.

<sup>20</sup> Liturgies: Dem. 21.51-54, 156; Lys. 21.1-2. Sacred objects: Dem. 21.16, 51-54, 171.

<sup>21</sup> Aesch. 1.23; Antiphon. 6.45; Dem. 21.114-115; Lyc. XIV (εἰρεσιώνη).

<sup>22</sup> Civic groups: Dem. 21.13, 68, 156, 171 (tribes). *Oikoi* and *gene*: Dem. 19.199-200 (here the orator is talking about mixed mystery rites between Dionysus, Sabazius and the Great Mother and, therefore, information can be drawn on these exotic and syncretic rites). Phratry: Isaeus 8.15-16 (presentation of the son to the phratry to demonstrate his legitimacy: first step towards being a full Athenian citizen).

<sup>23</sup> Aesch. 3.176 (a law prohibits cowards from accessing sacred places); Dem. 24.26 (the promulgation of laws interrupts the peace guaranteed by the state); Dem. 25.99 (a copy of the Athenian laws is placed in the sanctuary of the Mother Goddess).

<sup>24</sup> Since breaking the rules of worship goes against everything that is sacred, civic and shared as in Dem. 21.147, 178 (illegal acts against Hermes and Dionysus respectively).

<sup>25</sup> Aesch. 3.53 (Demosthenes betrays a man with whom he shared sacrifices); Dem. 9.32 (Philip sends his servants to manage the games at the Pythian festivals offending the Greeks); Dem. 19.128 (Aeschines participates in Philip's ἐπινίκια rites); Lys. 26.6-7 (the imminence of religious rites for Zeus Σωτήρ is exploited for political purposes).

<sup>26</sup> Aesch. 3.166 (irregularity of the time in which the shields are hung in the temple of Apollo). Ritual topography: Lyc. *Contra Leocr.* 17 (on which Taddei 2016). Sacred lands: Hyp. 4 (division of sacred lands between tribes).

<sup>27</sup> Aesch. 3.130 (Demosthenes believes that the Pythia prophesies in favour of Philip: use of religion for political purposes).

<sup>28</sup> Dem. 47.71 (advice of the ἐξηγητής same as the law); Lyc. VI (*On the priestess*); Lyc. VII (*On the Priesthood*).

<sup>29</sup> Isaeus 8.15-16 (Δύ (...) τῷ Κτησίῳ).

<sup>30</sup> Din. 2.9.

<sup>31</sup> Isaeus 8.21-22 (the legitimacy of the heir and, therefore, of the kinship is highlighted by participation in the funeral rites of a deceased relative); Lys. 12.21 (the brother's failed burial is a sign of bad government). Furthermore, such rituals and their importance for the legitimation of the individual are described in the first volume of his work by Humphreys 2008.

<sup>32</sup> Isaeus 8.18-19 (wedding banquet at the phratry).



the cult are described too in the speeches<sup>33</sup>. They also focus on private cultic associations (which often show the status of different social groups and the influence of foreign cults and rites)<sup>34</sup>, on ancestral rites and on bringing the *ἱερὰ πατρῶα* to a foreign land<sup>35</sup>.

In the second year, other types of sources will be researched (primarily epigraphic and literary) necessary to understand what the rites, religious practices and celebrations covered by the orators actually were, aimed at comparing the oratory description to the "real" structure of these, to understand why precisely those orators, in that specific historical and contingent context, cited such arguments and how they modified and manipulated them and for what purpose.

In fact, religious arguments cannot be accepted and analysed only according to how they were treated by the orators, but, as said in the previous paragraph, an in-depth analysis must be carried out at multiple levels and in multiple areas. There are, in fact, some difficulties that will need to be addressed during the research:

- Religious themes were treated by orators differently based on the audience, the author of the speech, the situation and the time.
- The audience itself was not an anonymous mass, but a collection of different people belonging to different social groups and religious associations, families and areas characterized by different levels of culture.
- The rhetorical strategy and the rhetorical purpose for which they are used can influence the way in which references to the sacred are transmitted to us: hence the need to coordinate with other types of sources to obtain as objective data as possible.

During the third year we will therefore proceed with the drafting of the thesis (with any necessary updates and corrections) and the creation of a database with individual cards that present the various topics in the different orators, in the diverse types of speeches and in ancillary sources.

## Objective

Finally, the objective is a comprehensive analysis of Athenian cults, festivals and ritual practices through the words of the orators of the 4th century BC and the use they make of it in specific contexts and situations, trying to reconstruct these practices and religious festivals, then placing them in their sociopolitical and historical-religious context, showing how and why they were manipulated and modified by the orators and, considering all this, in what manner were perceived by the orators and the audience. In such a way, we hope to show the Athenian ritual and religious practices of the 4th century BC from a new and characteristic point of view.

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<sup>33</sup> Dem. 59.92 (talks about the participation of foreigners in the sacrifices).

<sup>34</sup> Dem. 54.17 (οἱ τελοῦντες ἀλλήλους τῷ ἰθυφάλλῳ), 39 (Τριβαλλοὺς ἐπωνυμίαν ἔχειν); Isaeus 9.30 (brotherhood of Hercules); Lys. 8.

<sup>35</sup> Lyc. *Contra Leocr.* 25.





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