

Pollution and Purification at Selinous

J.A. North

Michael H. Jameson, David R. Jordan and Roy D. Kotansky, *A Lex Sacra from Selinous (Greek Roman and Byzantine Monographs 11)*, 1993, xiii + 171pp., frontispiece, 2 folding plates, 19 plates, 1 figure.

Jameson, Jordan and Kotansky have provided a magnificently researched and illuminating edition of a document whose importance for the understanding of Greek religion in the fifth century BC can hardly be overstated, even though it comes from the edges of the Greek world and from a city whose religious life is otherwise only poorly documented. Not only do they provide a scholarly text and lucid translation, but all the materials necessary for its study, including excellent photographs, detailed drawings of the texts, a commentary and discussions of the main problems. They have also collected all the materials necessary to put the *lex sacra* and its rituals into context. Few texts receive such luxurious treatment, but few can ever have offered such a rich return for the labour and love invested in them.

The *lex* is preserved on a large lead tablet presented as a gift to the J. Paul Getty Museum in 1981 and returned to Italy in 1992. The editors' first achievement is to have established beyond reasonable doubt that the document must have come from Selinous in Sicily, probably from the sanctuary of Zeus Meilichios on the Gaggera hill outside the city. Its date can also be established with confidence as fifth-century BC (pp. 46-49). They argue convincingly that the rituals in the text belong in a Greek tradition and that they show no sign of the Punic influence that might have been looked for after 409 BC when Selinous passed under Carthaginian control.

It must be said that the resulting book is not easy to use. The reader needs to turn constantly to the index — useful but not exhaustive — to find which problems are discussed in the commentary, which in the discussion of rituals, or in that of the gods, and which in the chapter on the "Character of the Text". It is not easy to guess or to be quite sure that you have the definitive version of the editors' views. But the complaint seems churlish, when such a rich collection of materials is on offer and the fact is that the issues raised by the text are themselves of great complexity, so that no organization could have been straightforward.

The lead tablet consists of two columns divided by a bronze bar. The first column, column A, is written one way up and the second column, column B, the other way up. Both have horizontal guidelines, though in one case (column A) the guidelines stop before the text, in the other the text stops before the guidelines. The tablet was secured by a bronze bar with three nailholes, so a possibility would be that it was fixed to a table that could be turned to read the second text. The two columns are different in their character and are written in different hands, but their content seems to make it perfectly clear that they relate to the same topic and it may be that they are simply separate parts of the same document or set of documents. There is, of course, a problem about why they should be written in different directions on the tablet. Perhaps this has to do with the way the document was displayed, or perhaps (as the editors ingeniously suggest) with the irregular shape of the lead sheet on which they are inscribed. That is a point that will need further discussion.

That the two texts are connected seems quite clear from two considerations, both established by the editors. First, the theme of pollution and of hostile powers or demons seems common to both. In column A, this is made clear by the nature of the rituals described and by the particular deities chosen, who are in one way or another connected with pollution and purification. Meanwhile, in column B, the concept of purification from hostile powers is perfectly explicit. So both deal with the same topic. Secondly, both contain remarkable rituals that mark the transition of the powers with which they are concerned from the status of polluting demons to the status of divinities or at least recipients of worship.

These two links make it perfectly clear that these are very closely related documents, so that it is scarcely credible that they should have been inscribed together by accident. The first, column A, is a list of rituals to named deities, with indications of time. It is not clear at first sight either who is issuing the document or to whom it is addressed, but it is clear that it is some kind of group or community. We shall come back to this point. Column B, on the other hand, is quite clearly addressed to individual human beings. Precisely which human beings and exactly what they are being told is again problematic, but this basic distinction between the regulations addressed to some kind of community and the regulations addressed to individuals persecuted by *elasteroi* is sharp and clear. So far then, we have a good deal of valuable information, most spectacularly about these beings that are transmuted from demonic powers into gods, but also about the character of the various cults mentioned and about the rituals to be carried out in dealing with them.

One more certainty to notice is that this is a text entirely concerned with what we would classify as religious issues, issues of ritual and purification; it goes into some detail about the actions to be performed. It is therefore unusual amongst pagan religious documents, in that it is not concerned with the financing or organisation of ritual, but directly with telling people what rituals they

should be performing and, to some extent, how to perform them. That too is a remarkable discovery and an important and potentially illuminating one. But of course all these observations would be much more valuable to us if we could: a) specify the nature of the transactions involved and b) get some idea of the context in which these particular ritual actions are required.

The closest parallel we have, as the editors point out (55), is the great *lex sacra* from Cyrene (Sokolowski, *LSSupp.* 115B; see Parker, *Miasma* (1983), 347), though the spirits are there called *hikesioi*, not *elasteroi*. But the resemblance in treatment of the spirits is notably close. For discussion of possible explanations of the connection between Cyrene and Selinous, see 58-9, 109-14.

Like the Cyrene text, both the Selinous documents are creating religious regulations, seemingly permanent ones, not *ad hoc* arrangements for a particular situation. Column A specifies sacrifices in particular cults at particular times. It starts with a reference to the *homosepuoi* (members of a gentile group or *oikos*), who are to burn parts of the victim; specifies offerings to Zeus Eumenes and to two distinct cults of Zeus Meilichios; and a much more elaborate sequence of rituals to the Tritopatores. In later parts of the text, there is provision for the ritual's being repeated in the second year, and perhaps even in the third year, starting from whatever year it was first performed. Meanwhile, there is no hint in column B either that the regulations follow a specific event. Indeed the arrangement being made here is that this ritual should be invoked by the individual, at his own discretion, in his own time. Again, it is a standing opportunity, not a specific occasion that seems to be in question.

The interpretation of column B presents considerable difficulties. Here we meet two words that were previously unknown, though the editors claim in both cases to be able to establish what they mean. In the case of *elasteroi* (ἐλαστέροι) they are clearly right, because it is a variant of similar words that are of a known sense and use (*alastor* and *alastoros*, see pp. 54, 116-20). The force must be "a wrathful spirit". However, the second new word is more problematic and crucial: it occurs in B9 *houtorektas* (ἡούτορέκτας), the *autorrektas*. The interpretation of this word is really critical to the whole of the document for reasons that will become clear below.

The editors argue that the word *autorrektas* should be related to other Greek words which also begin with *auto*, such as *autophonos* or *autourgos*, and that it should therefore mean killer or murderer (p. 54). This is of course plausible in itself, since killers and the consequences of violent deaths provide good enough reasons for the individuals to be afflicted with hostile spirits and the terms related to *elasteroi* often imply the vengeful dead. So this suggestion clearly makes sense. It is, however, important to notice the context in which the word occurs. We have here two clauses which seem to be alternatives. The first is: if a man wishes to be purified from *elasteroi*, he should (it goes on to tell him what

he ought to do) (B1). The second, starting at B7, apparently specifies a second possibility (though on the interpretation, see below):

αἱ τίς κα λῆι ξενικὸν ἢ πατρῷον, ἢ ἴπακουστὸν ἢ ἴφορατὸν
 ἢ καὶ χῶντινα καθαίρεσθαι, τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον καθαίρεσθω
 ἡόνπερ ἡούτορέκτας ἐπεὶ κ' ἔλαστέρο ἀποκαθάρεται.

If a man wishes to be purified with respect to a foreign or ancestral one, one that has been heard or one that has been seen, or any one at all, let him purify himself in the same way as does the *autorrektas* when he is purified of an *elasteros*.

So, there seem to be different types of *elasteroi*, against whom precautions might have to be taken. It is in the context of this second clause that the example of the killer is brought up. What these people must do who wish to purify themselves of *elasteroi*, whether “foreign or ancestral, heard or seen, or any one at all”, is whatever must be done by the *autorrektas* who wishes to purify himself.

There are here several possible interpretations. The one the editors prefer is that what the second group of persons are being told is that they should follow the same procedures as the first group of persons. It follows therefore that the first group of persons were themselves killers. So, the first group wanting purification are those who have killed somebody and are being pursued by the *elasteroi*, vengeful spirits of the dead appropriate for those who have committed a killing. The second group of people are those who are being pursued by the other types of *elasteroi* specified, and they are to follow the same procedures as the first group. This seems a very odd sequence of instructions. In the first place, it seems rather peculiar to specify these two separate groups, if what they are going to do is exactly the same. Secondly, the logic is odd because in the second clause the *elasteroi* are specified by qualifying adjectives, but in the first clause they must apparently have been defined by the character of the man seeking purification, that is the killer himself. So the sense is: if you are a killer seeking purification from spirits, you must perform action X; if are seeking purification from a spirit other than those specialising in killers, you must also perform action X. This is not of course impossible but it is peculiar. Thirdly, we have to deal with the status of the next clause that comes up, beginning from B10 and instructing somebody or other to go to the public altar — i.e. to perform a public act, whereas previously the person concerned has been able to act exactly as he likes. But is the person who goes to the public altar only the person specified under clause 2 or is it both the persons specified? Either seems possible. If it is only the second, however, then the logic again becomes very peculiar, because that would be an instruction that, if you are a murderer and wish to be free of the spirit, then you perform action X. If you are not a murderer and wish to be free of the spirit, you perform action X and then you go on to perform a sacrifice at the public altar. Thus, it is more difficult to achieve purification if you are not a killer than if you are. It is possible that these objections are based on over-rationalisation, that we should be thinking ourselves into a strange thought-

world in which such inconsistencies do not matter. However, these problems are being generated by our attempts to explain the text and there seems no reason to abandon our own rationality until we have exhausted other options.

There are still other options: one is that the reference to the purification of the killer in clause 2 is not in fact a reference back to clause 1 at all, but simply the citation either of something commonly known, or of something in a different part of this document or set of documents. That would imply, I take it, that neither clause 1 nor clause 2 is dealing with killers, and that killers only come into the picture by way of a parallel for the procedure to be adopted. That may not seem very likely, but it is not impossible. A third possibility is that the word *autorrektas*, whatever its etymology, does not in the dialect of Selinous mean a killer at all, but some other category of seeker after purification, who is indeed the figure implied in clause 1.

There is another possible interpretation of the whole text of Column B, which was suggested to me in discussion by David Harvey during a conference in Exeter in September 1995. This reading of the text would not see two different groups, one starting at B1 and the second at B7, but a single group seeking purification and reaching it in two stages: the first stage of purification is marked by the words:

καὶ ποταγορέσθω καὶ εἰς τὸν ἡαιρέσθω καὶ καθευδέτο ἡόπε κα λῆι

let him be addressed and take food for himself and sleep wherever he wishes. On this view this is not complete purification, but only a release from the most severe restrictions to which the polluted person had been subjected.

The formula which then follows at B7 (quoted above: αἴ τις καλεῖ ξενικὸν ἔ πατρῶιον ... etc.), simply means "whatever the type of spirit being dealt with" and the regulations proceed with more ceremonies leading up to the climax of the public sacrifice. Only then is full purification achieved:

... θύσας καθαρὸς ἔστο

... having sacrificed, let him be pure.

There seems no doubt that this is a simplifying theory, resolving many of the logical puzzles about the relationship between the two postulated groups of persons seeking purification. It also carries with it the implication that the person referred to, to whom the whole of column B is now seen to be devoted, is *not* after all a killer, an *autorrektas*, because he is instructed to act in relation to purification in the same way as the killer. The debate about the meaning of column B seems likely to be only in its early stages and it will no doubt take some time to reach resolution.

What seems certain is that there could be reasons for the *elasteroi* to be hostile and to be pursuing individuals, appearing to them, haunting them or at least polluting them in some way, without killing coming into the question at all. It is not therefore difficult to explain the text without the hypothesis that it is killing that is at issue. You need not look further than the very closely parallel regulations from Cyrene to see that hostile spirits can be caused by other events

than murder, for instance by spells deliberately designed to turn the spirits against you. The fact is that these spirits may be being detected because they are causing disease or, as we might say, mental disturbance.

Nothing in column B makes it certain that we are dealing with bloodshed or murder, or the spirits of those who are dead. It might be argued that the implication is clearer in column A: here there is a series of sacrifices and rituals addressed to gods who might have to do with hostile spirits of the murdered, or generated by the murdered or protecting the murdered. The Eumenides in A9 point strongly in that direction and Zeus Eumenes, previously unknown, must presumably bear the same relation to the Eumenides as does Zeus Alastoros to the *alastor*, or Zeus Elasteros to the *elasteroi* of column B. However, Zeus Meilichios seems not to be connected to the avenging of the dead in particular, though he is to protect them from hostile spirits; and the Tritopatores, seemingly the most important element in column A, seem on the basis of evidence from elsewhere, particularly Athens, to be the collective ancestors of a group — in Athens of the phratry or deme, having no necessary connection with bloodshed or violence and not at all resembling the Erinyes/Eumenides. So the hypothesis of killing as the context is consistent with column A, but seems not to be required to explain its contents.

The editors' suggestion to interpret the document as a whole is that we are faced with an outbreak of civil disturbance at Selinous and provisions for dealing with the consequences of the bloodshed (56-60). This hypothesis has the advantage of explaining how a city is passing regulations to help a killer achieve purification from the consequences of his own action, which an organised city would normally avoid doing. In the case of civil violence on a large scale, after many murders between gentile groups and individuals, it would make a good deal of sense to pass regulations to cope with the pollution in a practical way. In fact it might be essential to do that in order to allow normal civic life to resume.

There are, as we have seen, problems with this hypothesis. First of all, the notion of murder or bloodshed is not apparently integral to the text, unless you accept the theory that the parallel quoted in clause 2 refers back to clause 1. Even if you do accept that, only clause 1 and not clause 2 can be dealing with bloodshed, so far as one can understand them. But there is worse to come in this regard. The opening of column A, or the surviving part of it, having mentioned the *homosepuoi*, the members of an *oikos*, goes on to make it clear that the sacrifices have to be performed before certain public events, one of which is apparently annual, i.e. the festival of the Kotytia, the other of which is the truce of the Olympic games in the fifth year. That seems to imply that the ceremony that follows has to be performed before a certain date in any particular year, if it is going to happen at all. This chronological regulation does not apply to part B which is, as we have seen, private and which explicitly and emphatically leaves the individual free to perform the ceremonies as and when he wants. But in both

cases, what we have is not specific regulations for dealing with a specific crisis but general regulations to be applied at appropriate times. The idea that these regulations have been supplied to the community of Selinous by some visiting expert such as Epimenides or Empedocles clearly has its romantic charm, but it is not at all clear that that is going to cope with the facts here. You have to make a further step and accept that bloodshed on a large scale was a regular event in the community of Selinous. So the postulated religious expert was invited in to provide a regular prescription to be employed whenever they had a revolution and massive bloodletting. The regulations on the lead sheet are then the result. I find that hard to believe.

If you make a different set of assumptions about the whole situation, then some of these problems seem easier, even though they do not go away. For instance, suppose for the sake of argument that what we are talking about is some kind of outbreak, not of bloodshed but of a disease or a period of infertility that is believed to have been brought on by hostile spirits, and if this disease were interpreted as persecution by *elasteroi*, then we can make sense of most of what is in front of us, without appealing to widespread bloodshed or murder. We have, at least, to take account of a range of possibilities here, before we allow one particular view to become consecrated.

The most remarkable feature of the religious programme and the religious rituals in these two documents, which I have already mentioned as common to both columns, may throw some light here. That feature is made clear in the editors' analysis of the ritual: the Tritopatores start by being impure (τοῖς Τριτοπατρεῶσι τοῖς μιαινοῖς) and, as impure, receive ceremonies which do not provide entertainment for them but do purify them, with instructions for ritual action "as to the heroes" (ὡς περ τοῖς ἡρώεσι) not as to divinities. Then there follow sacrifices for the pure Tritopatores (τοῖς καθαρῶσι), where the instruction is that they should be treated like the gods (ὡς περ τοῖς θεοῖς). In this second sequence, these "gods" are entertained:

pouring down a libation of honey mixture, (let him set out) a table and a couch, and let him put on (them) a pure cloth and crowns of olive and honey mixture in new cups and cakes and meat.

So, once the Tritopatores are gods, they are to receive entertainment (*theoxenia* — on which see also Jameson in R. Hägg (ed.), *Ancient Greek Cult Practice from the Epigraphical Evidence*, 35-57). The same shift from non-divine to divine occurs also in the case of the *elasteroi*, who start as spirits from whom people need to be purified, in other words as polluting demons; but who by the last sentences of the text receive quite different treatment: "whenever one needs to sacrifice to the *elasteros*, sacrifice in the same way as to the immortals". (ὡς καὶ τῷ ἐλαστέρωι χρέζει θύειν, θύειν ὡς περ τοῖς ἀθανάτοις). But then the mixed nature of the spirit is recognised by the fact that the blood has to flow to the earth (σφαζέτω δ' ἐς γᾶν [B13]). So the *elasteroi* are divine, but chthonic,

powers by the end of B. The shift is from spirits that appear to be close to human beings, acting on their behalf or pursuing their murderers, to beings who receive sacrifice and are to be treated, if not quite as gods, at any rate as divine figures of some kind. This religious phenomenon has, of course, been discussed before (e.g., by Jean-Pierre Vernant in *Mythe et société en Grèce Ancienne*, pp. 121-40 = *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, pp. 110-29). But we now have an astonishingly clear ritual programme in both documents for expressing that shift, the most important piece of religious information that the document brings us. It makes it clear above all how ritual performed by human beings can change the status, as well as the benevolence, of suprahuman beings and raises fundamental questions about the Greek conception of deity in general.

Does this help us with the basic problem of interpreting the character of the situation implied by the *lex sacra*? That is of course a question of what kind of impurity the Tritopatores should be seen as having in column A, or the *elasteros* in column B. If the Tritopatores are simply the communal ancestors of the group, as they seem to have been in Athens, connected with the tradition of the family and especially with its fertility, its continuity through time, it is by no means impossible that they might be seen as being polluted by any illness that threatened the fertility or continuity of the family. The text does not tell us what is going on, but again we need to reckon with a range of possibilities.

The editors see the religious life revealed here, not as very specifically Sicilian and certainly not yet under strong Carthaginian influence (though there is the possibility of a connection between Meilichios and MLK/Molek, see 139ff.), but they do regard the phenomenon of the *elasteroi* and the cults of the vengeful dead as belonging to traditions more backward than we usually connect with fifth/fourth-century BC mainland Greece. The Cyrene parallel text might even suggest that we are dealing here with a local tradition of North African and Western Sicilian Greeks, distinct from other areas (see p. 59). But in any case, they suggest, these might be seen as archaic traditions surviving in gentilician cults after the rise of rationality in more respectable civic contexts (58-60, 118-20).

The authority behind the documents cannot, however, be a local group or *oikos*; still less could they have been just private rules of action, like a magician's notebook, or anything of that kind. They clearly imply a city and can only have been authorised ultimately by city authority. Who else would be laying it down that sacrifices should be made at the public altar, or that events should be coordinated with the public calendar? That does not rule out the editors' hypothesis of some travelling religious expert, who is actually dictating the rules to the city authorities, nor does it rule out the involvement of a gentilician group in the action, which is clearly implied in the text; but there must be city authority behind the imposition of this set of regulations. They are general principles for dealing with a disaster that might recur, attributed to demonic or dark powers,

which must be somehow transformed by the right rituals. An essential element is the purification of the individual by sacrifices and rituals of purification. There would be nothing surprising if the texts were kept and used by a priestly group in the city, though there is no indication in the texts themselves that that was so.

The assumptions behind this hint of backwardness in Selinuntine religious life compared to the Athenian (“traditional, irrational modes of thought were by no means banished even from that most sophisticated of Greek cities”, p. 119) ought to call for a final reflection. It appeals implicitly to an evolutionary scheme of development from irrationality, magic and demon-worship towards the sophisticated life of fifth-century BC Athens. We today have of course a perfect right to say that fear of vengeful demons rates lower in our own classification of sophistication than does fear of Zeus and Hera. But of course belief in demons and in the power of magic are constantly recurrent phenomena of religious life in many times and places, not just of the Greek archaic period. Meanwhile, all we can really say about Athens is that their traditions excluded much reference to such beliefs in the courts and in public affairs. Undoubtedly there is a cultural difference to be noticed here, at least in terms of the cities’ self-representation, between Athens and Selinus; but it is not helpful to conceptualise it as simply backwardness against modernity.

University College London