Naming a Gift: the Vocabulary and Purposes of Greek Religious Offerings

Theodora Suk Fong Jim

The last few decades have seen several valuable studies on the vocabulary of offerings to the gods in ancient Greece. After Rudhardt’s useful analysis of Greek religious practices and vocabulary first published in the 1950s, Casabona provided a detailed treatment of the words for sacrifice, followed by Lazzarini’s research on the formulae of votive offerings in Archaic Greece. More recently Lazzarini has a short note on several religious terms in epigraphic evidence, and the Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum also has a succinct section on various Greek terms and formulae of dedications. Given these important studies, there may seem to be no need for further work on this subject. Nevertheless, while existing scholarship has discussed different forms of offerings, most notably ἀναθήματα, ἄγαλμα, ἱερά, θυσία, and ἐνάγισμα, historians have failed to differentiate among the purposes of

offerings. Worshippers could make a θυσία or set up an ἀνάθημα for a range of reasons and with varying expectations, such as in gratitude for deliverance, to commemorate a victory, to mark the end of childbirth, and to honour the gods for other kinds of assistance; and different Greek words might be used to denote offerings made for different purposes. This article examines the terminology for various types of offerings made on different occasions. My main concern is with vocabulary expressing the reason or purpose, but not the form or the location, of the offering. I have included every relevant term (though not every instance of the term) that I have been able to discover, but I am likely to have missed some: the topic has barely been discussed before, and my purpose is to demonstrate its interest.

Greek religious offerings could take many forms. Some worshippers might offer an animal sacrifice; this could be accompanied, or substituted, by less expensive bloodless offerings in the form of vegetarian foodstuff, cakes, and/or libations. Other worshippers might prefer more durable dedications, which could be objects originally intended for other uses (so-called ‘raw’ dedications) or specially commissioned for dedi-


3 E.g. προσφύγαρος θυσία (‘sacrifice at the hearth’, e.g. ILindos II 582, 585, 592, 593), προβόμιος θυσία (‘sacrifice before the altar’, e.g. Eur. Ion 376, SEG IX 72.61, 67–68 = Rhodes/Osborne 97). See Blinkenberg in ILindos II p.908.

Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies 52 (2012) 310–337
NAMING A GIFT

—

Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies

5 (2012) 310–337

312

310–337

cation (‘converted’ dedications). Animal sacrifice, offerings of food and drink, and dedications all feature in the present study. Since in most cases the form of offering had no direct correlation with the purpose for which it was made, I shall treat them together without differentiating among them. The categorization that follows is based on the function and not on the physical form of the offering.

Before proceeding to the sources, it is important to realize that the vocabulary for different types of offerings is not fixed: ancient authors, and especially Greek tragedians, might occasionally borrow a word normally used in the non-religious sphere to specify the function of a religious offering in a particular context. Some of the words discussed below are attested only in certain genres (such as dramatic poetry) or in isolated instances; and offerings made for similar purposes may be variously termed or without any specific terminology at all. In other words, although there exist different names for various types of offerings as we shall see, the application of these terms is fluid and far from formalized. Nevertheless, despite the flexibility and infrequency with which some of the words were used, their very attestation in our sources is significant for historians: the choice of Greek words is closely connected to the context in which the offering was made, and can reveal much about the ancient worshippers’ expectations and religious experience.


5 But note that the offering of a lock of hair from humans was commonly associated with rituals of adolescence and mourning (to be discussed below).
I. Vocabulary for ‘Offerings’

Of the words collected here, three major kinds of offerings may be identified: thank-offerings made retrospectively in acknowledgement of divine assistance, preliminary offerings made before some enterprise, and propitiatory offerings for the gods and the dead. I shall discuss the Greek terms one by one, before reflecting on their wider significance for the study of Greek religion in section II.

(i) Thank-Offerings

εὐαγγέλια

A cognate noun of εὐαγγέλειν (‘to bring good news’), εὐαγγέλιον normally denotes the reward to a messenger for bringing good tidings; its plural form εὐαγγέλια may denote in Classical authors a thank-offering to the gods for good-tidings received. In Aristophanes’ Knights, to curry favour with the boule Paphlagon proposes sacrificing a hundred heifers to Athena as εὐαγγέλια to celebrate some good news: εὐαγγέλια θύειν ἐκατοτὸν βοῦς τῇ θεῷ (654–656). Menander’s Perikeiromene mentions εὐαγγέλια offered to the gods for Glycera’s good luck in finding her family (992–994). Military victory was often the occasion for sacrificing εὐαγγέλια. According to Xenophon, the Spartan commander Eteonicus offered a sacrifice so termed (ἦθε τὰ εὐαγγέλια) for the good news of Athens’ defeat in the battle of Arginusae (Hell. 1.6.37). So closely related were εὐαγγέλια and military victory that Agesilaus, in order not to dishearten his troops with the news of Sparta’s naval disaster at Cnidos, announced instead Lysander’s death and Spartan vic-

---

6 As part of the purpose of this study is to show that some of the names of the offerings could express their purpose or desired effect, in each case I give the etymology and literal meaning of the words where possible before looking at their usages in the sources, but without implying that etymology necessarily can capture sufficiently the word’s meaning. E.g. the words σωτηρία and ἐλευθερία indicate semantically an offering made in relation to ‘saving’ or ‘freeing’, but do not tell us what form of ‘rescue’ or ‘liberty’ is meant, for which we depend on the context in which the word is used.
tory and “offered sacrifice as if for good news, and sent around
to many people portions of the victims which had been
offered”: λέγων καὶ ἐβουθύτει ὡς εὐαγγέλια καὶ πολλοῖς διέ-
πεμπε τῶν τεθυμένων (Hell. 4.3.13–14, transl. Brownson). The
murder of Philip II of Macedon in 336 B.C. was also celebrated
with such offerings.7

ζωάγρια

From ζωγρεῖν or ζωον ἄγρεῖν (‘to take alive’), the word ζω-
άγρια may express the reward to the gods for saving one’s life.8
In the Homeric scene where Thetis comes to Hephaestus for a
new set of armour to be made for Achilles, the god describes
his second fall from Olympus and Thetis’ rescue of him, on
account of which the goddess has a claim to his gratitude: “I
must certainly repay fair-tressed Thetis all price for saving my
life,” τῷ μὲ μάλα χρεῶ πάντα Θέτι καλλιπλοκάμῳ ζωάγρια
tίνειν.9 The expression ζωάγρια τίνειν may be compared to
the phrase ζωάγριον ὀφέλειν in Homer’s Odyssey: Nausicaa
claims that Odysseus owes her the ransom of his life (8.462).
Both applications are extensions of the word’s normal meaning
—the price or ransom paid (usually to warriors) for taking a
prisoner alive—known to Homer and Classical authors.10 Un-
derlying these various usages is the basic idea of a debt of

7 Aeschin. 3.160. For εὐαγγέλια in epigraphic evidence, see e.g. IG XII.2
645.42 (fourth century), XII Suppl. 168.5, I.Ephesos 108.6 (both late fourth
century).
8 P. Chantraine, Études sur le vocabulaire grec (Paris 1956) 51: “le prix payé
pour la vie sauve,” and Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque (Paris 1968–
1980) 401 s.v. ζωάγρια: “‘rançon’ pour sauver la vie d’un prisonnier”; LSJ
s.v. ζωάγρια: “reward for life saved.”
9 Hom. Il. 18.394–409, at 407. G. Ch. Crusius, A Complete Greek and
English Lexicon for the poems of Homer, and the Homeridae (London/Oxford 1868)
187: “ζωός, ἄγρα, a reward for the preservation of life” (citing the
present passage); R. J. Cunliffe, A Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect (London 1924)
176: “the price of one’s life, a reward for preserving one’s life by care or
for saving life.”
10 E.g. Hom. Il. 5.698, Hdt. 3.36.
gratitude for saving or sparing one’s life. The transfer of the word’s normal usages to the religious sphere appears to occur only in verse. Apart from Homer, there are no other early religious usages of ζωάγρια. It is not until perhaps the late third century B.C. that the word came to denote a thank-offering for deliverance from danger.\textsuperscript{11} In two late verse inscriptions the word ζωάγρια was used of an individual’s dedication to Asclepius and other gods for recovery from illness.\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{θεπτήριον}

Derived from θεπτήρ (‘feeder’, ‘rearer’) and τρέφειν (‘to bring up’), the word θεπτήριον is used in the opening scene of Aeschylus’ \textit{Choephoroe} to refer to the lock of hair dedicated by Orestes to Inachus, the river(-god) of Argos, as a thank-offering for nurture.\textsuperscript{13} This is representative of the common practice in ancient Greece, when individuals attained manhood or womanhood, of shedding a lock of hair as an offering to the gods or rivers, as rivers were regarded as κουροτρόφοι.\textsuperscript{14} The ritual is attested already in Homer but the word is not used: Achilles had intended to offer some of his hair to the river Spercheius on his return home; but knowing that he will never go home, he offers it instead to his dead comrade Patroclus in

\textsuperscript{11} Dioscorides XVI in Gow-Page, \textit{HE} I 85–86, II 246–248 (ca. late third century) = \textit{Anth.Gr.} 6.220 (an offering for escape from a lion). Gow and Page do not comment on the word ζωάγρια.

\textsuperscript{12} IG XIV 967 = IGUrbRom 102 (second century A.D.), a.11–12: νούσον τε κακῶν ζωάγρια, “offering for recovery from grievous illness”; b.11: ζωάγρια.

\textsuperscript{13} Aesch. \textit{Cho.} 6: πλόκαµον ἱνάξω θεπτήριον. The sentence is incomplete; some scholars take the word as an adjective qualifying πλόκαµον (e.g. T. G. Tucker, \textit{Aischylou Choephoroi} [Cambridge 1901] 10–11; LSJ s.v. θεπτήριος II) and some as a substantive (e.g. J. Conington, \textit{The Choephoroe of Aeschylus} [London 1857] 5).

mourning (Iliad 23.140–149). The shedding of hair in both rituals of adolescence and rituals of mourning (see below) makes his transfer of the offering to Patroclus possible. The Aeschylean passage is unique in using θρεπτήριον to denote a ‘nurture offering’; no other adolescent hair-offering to the deities is described as such.15 Where the plural θρεπτήρια appears in Classical literature, it frequently refers to the reward or return for rearing made to nurses by parents or children, as an equivalent of τροφεῖα.16 Whether applied to the offering to the gods or the reward to nurses, θρεπτήριον/α is an acknowledgement of the nurture received from them.

κούρειον

Etymologically associated with κείρειν (‘to cut’, ‘to shear’) and κουρά (‘cropping of the hair’),17 κούρειον usually refers to a sacrifice offered for the induction of boys into the phratry on the third day of the Apatouria, called Koureotis.18 A hair-cutting ritual was apparently also performed on this day.19 Another kind of κούρειον is attested in a fourth-century lex sacra from Thebes at Mycale. It requires goatherds to offer to Hermes a young goat from each of their own herds, and shepherds a lamb if there were five new-born, as a κούρειον.20 The word here denotes a shearing offering (of goats and sheep) in spring.

---

15 The rite (not the word) is attested in e.g. Hdt. 4.34, Eur. Hipp. 1425 ff., Theophr. Char. 21.3.
17 Chantraine, Dictionnaire étymologique 510 s.v. κείρω, 573–574 s.v. κουρά; LSJ s.v. κουρεῖον II κούρειον.
19 Suda κ 2179, Hschr. κ 3843.
“une victime ‘immolée à l’occasion de la tonte.’”

From νικητήρια (‘winner’) and νικάω (‘to win’, ‘to prevail’), the substantive νικητήρια refers to a sacrifice or festival in celebration of victory. After his conquest of Sardis and Babylon, Cyrus offered sacrifice and celebrated a festival of victory by a banquet: θύσας δὲ καὶ ὁ Κῦρος νικητήρια ἑστιῶν. On this occasion it was Cyrus who held the festival and provided the sacrificial feast, but νικητήρια might also be held by friends of the victor. Plutarch tells us that when Phocus, son of the Athenian politician Phocion, won the foot-race in the Panathenaia, many people invited him to a victory celebration with a feast: νικήσαντος δὲ καὶ πολλῶν αἰτουµένων ἑστιᾶσαι τά νικητήρια (Phoc. 20.1). These victory celebrations are similar to ἐπινίκια, a sacrifice or feast in honour of victory. Known occasions for ἐπινίκια are, for example, victories in choreic competitions and athletic games.

An epigram attributed to Perses, late fourth or third century

---


22 P. Chantraine, La formation des noms in grec ancien (Paris 1933) 64: “νικητήρια ‘sacrifice pour remercier d’une victoire,’” and Dictionnaire étymologique 755 s.v. νίκη: “νικητήρια ‘sacrifice pour la victoire’”; LSJ s.v. νικητήριος II.2: “festival of victory.”

23 Xen. Cyr. 8.4.1; cf. 2.1.24, 8.3.33, where νικητήρια denotes a prize of victory awarded to a human.

24 LSJ s.v. ἐπινίκιος II.2: “sacrifice for a victory or feast in honour of it.”

NAMING A GIFT

Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies 52 (2012) 310–337

b.c., uses the word ῥύσια, from ῥύεσθαι (‘to save’) and ῥύσιος (‘delivering’, ‘saving’), to signify ‘offerings for deliverance’ made after childbirth:

Πότνια κωροσόος, ταύταν ἐπιπορτίδα νυμφᾶν
καὶ στεφάναν λιπαρῶν ἐκ κεφαλᾶς πλοκάμων,
ὀλβία Ειλήθυια, πολυμνάστοιο φύλασσε
Τισίδος ὀδίνων ῥύσια δεξαμένα.

Goddess, saviour of children, blest Eileithyia, receive and keep as an offering for delivering Tisias, who well remembers, from her pangs, this bridal brooch and the diadem from her glossy hair.26

In this context ῥύσια, with the objective genitive ὀδίνων, refers specifically to an offering to Eileithyia for deliverance from the pain of childbirth. Another word for an offering after childbirth is found in a third-century b.c. inscription from Gonnoi in Thessaly: a woman dedicated to Artemis Eileithyia an offering termed παυσιτοκεῖα (Ἀρτέμιδι Ἡλθύαι Μενέπολις Ἐπίνου παυσιτοκεία ἀνέθηκε). From a compound of παυσι- and τόκος, this otherwise unattested word apparently refers to an offering marking the end of childbirth.27

σῶστρα

A cognate noun of σῴζειν (‘to save’), the word σῶστρα is used in Herodotus on one occasion to denote a thank-offering to the gods for deliverance from danger. In his account of the early history of Persia, Herodotus relates how Cyrus had survived despite his grandfather king Astyages’ order to have him killed by the steward Harpagus. In revenge, pretending that he

27 B. Helly, Gonnoi II no. 175 bis: “Ménéopolis a consacré ‘ce qui met fin à ses couches, ce qui en marque le terme et sa délivrance’”; J. and L. Robert, Bull. épigr. 1973, 247: “en offrande pour la fin des couches”; LSJ Suppl. s.v. παυσιτοκεῖα: “an offering marking the end of childbirth.” Note that the stone has παυσιτοκεῖα, which the commentators have normalized to παυσιτοκεία. Lazzerini, in Atti del II Seminario 211: “l’offerta per un parto …, intenendo letteralmente il termine come ‘cessazione dakkgra vudabza.’”
was “about to sacrifice thank-offerings for the boy’s deliverance to those of the gods to whom this honour belongs” (σῶστρα γάρ τοῦ παιδὸς μέλλων θύειν τοῦι θεῶν τυμή αὕτη προσκέεται), he had Harpagus’ son murdered and his flesh served to Harpagus at the dinner. All other known applications of the term σῶστρα in the Classical period refer to the reward paid to humans for bringing back lost cattle or run-away slaves. Like ζωάγρια, the transfer of the word σῶστρα to the religious sphere is found only in verse; in later Greek σῶστρα may also denote a thank-offering to the gods for escape from death or to Asclepius for healing. Two epigrams on an inscription in Rome describe a physician’s dedication to Asclepius simultaneously as ζωάγρια, σῶστρα, and χαριστήρια, which shows that their meanings and usages are closely related or interchangeable in some contexts.

σωτήρια, ἐλευθέρια

A further word for ‘thank-offering for deliverance’ is σωτήρια, from σωτήρ (‘saviour’) and σωζεῖν (‘to save’). In Xenophon’s Anabasis, the Greek troops vowed to sacrifice σωτήρια to Zeus Soter as soon as they reached a friendly


29 Hdt. 4.9, Xen. Mem. 2.10.2; LSJ s.v. σῶστρα I.2.

30 Anth. Gr. 9.378, dedication for escape from a collapsing wall, attributed to Palladas, fourth century A.D.

31 IG IV2 483 (Epidauros, Roman imperial).

32 IG XIV 967 = IGUrbRom 102, a.1–2: τῷ [σωτήρι] Ἀσκληπιῶ σῶστρα καὶ χαριστήρια Νικομήδης ὁ ἱατρός, b.1–2: τῷ βασιλεῖ Ἀσκληπιῶ σῶστρα καὶ [χαριστήρια] Νικομήδης Σμυρναῖος ἱατρός (for ζωάγρια in these two epigrams see n. 12 above).

33 Chantraine, Dictionnaire étymologique 1084–1085 s.v. σῶς; LSJ s.v. σωτήριος II.2.

34 Presumably because Zeus Soter was thought to have sent the omen: one of his soldiers sneezed when Xenophon mentioned their hopes of deliverance.
land: εὐξασθαι τῷ θεῷ τούτῳ θύσειν σωτήρια ὅπου ἂν πρῶτον εἰς φιλίαν χώραν ἀφικώμεθα; the vow was fulfilled when they reached the Greek city of Trapezus on the Euxine Sea. sacrificial offerings aside, the word can also denote a festival held in honour of the gods and in celebration of deliverance from danger, such as the Soteria at Priene ca. 297 B.C. in honour of liberation from a tyrant (I.Priene 11) and the Delphic Soteria established in 279/8 to commemorate the Greek expulsion of the Gals (Syll.3 398). These are similar in nature to Ἐλευθέρια, “a festival of liberation or liberty” (LSJ) such as the one held at Plataea every four years in commemoration of the Greek victory there in 479.

In post-Classical usages, the word Ἐλευθέρια (from ἐλευθεροῦν, ‘to set free’) may denote an offering for liberation from slavery. A marble dedication to Apollo Tempeites in Larisa ca. 100 B.C. by a freedwoman is inscribed: Ἀπόλλωνι Τεμπείτῃ Τάτιον Κλεοπάτρας καὶ Σωστράτου ἀπελευθέρα ξενικῇ Ἐλευθέριᾳ. Given that Tation was a freedwoman (ἀπελευθέρα), Ἐλευθέρια most probably refers to ‘a thank-offering for liberty’ upon her manumission. Nevertheless, another dedicatory inscription from Larisa might be using Ἐλευθέρια in relation to another form of liberty: Ἀπλουνι Τεμπείτη Αἰσχυλίς Σατύροι Ἐλευθέριαι. If it is correct to identify this dedicator as the

35 Xen. An. 3.2.9, 4.8.25, 5.1.1. For other examples see Arr. Indica 36.3, Anth.Gr. 6.216 (attributed to Simonides but the ascription may not be reliable), SEG XVIII 215 (Delphi, third century B.C.; quoted 322 below).

36 Ἐλευθέρια at Plataea: Plut. Arist. 20.4, 21.1; Diod. 11.29.1; Paus. 9.2.6; but the festival is not attested until the fourth century, see J. Mikalson, Herodotus and Religion in the Persian Wars (London 2003) 90–101.

37 T. Tziaphalias, “Anekdotes Thessalikes Epigraphes,” Thessaliko Hemerologio 7 (1984) 193–234, at 215–216, no. 94 [SEG XXXV 607]. Precisely what ξενικῇ means in manumission documents is disputed: existing suggestions are e.g. a mode of manumission through which the freedman acquired the status of a ξένος, or some privilege enjoyed by a freedman (e.g. exemption from paying taxes called ξενικά?); the different views are summarized in R. Zelnick-Abramovitz, “The Phrase ΞΕΝΙΚΗ ΛΥΣΕΙ in Manumission Inscriptions,” ZPE 153 (2005) 108–112 [SEG LV 597].

Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies 52 (2012) 310–337
Aeschylis who was priestess of Artemis Delphinia and who received an honorific statue from the people of Larisa, she is unlikely to have been a slave-woman. The word ἐλευθέρια probably refers here to an offering for some other form of liberty; Lazzarini suggests “offerta di ringraziamento per l’avvenuto riscatto da briganti o pirati.”

tελεστήρια

In the Classical period the word τελεστήρια is attested only in Xenophon. Towards the end of the Cyropaedia, when Cyrus realized that he was about to die, he offered animal sacrifices to ancestral Zeus and Helios and the other gods, praying that they might accept these things as τελεστήρια and χαριστήρια for his many splendid enterprises: Ζεὺς πατρὸς καὶ Ἡλιος καὶ πάντες θεοί, δέχεσθε τάδε καὶ τελεστήρια πολλῶν καὶ καλῶν πράξεων καὶ χαριστήρια (8.7.3). LSJ had explained τελεστήρια as ‘thank-offering for success’, but in the revised supplement ‘thank offerings to a sanctuary’. Etymologically the word is related to τελεῖν (‘to fulfill’, ‘to accomplish’) and τέλος (‘fulfillment’, ‘achievement’). The sense is doubtless that Cyrus was offering sacrifice as a token of gratitude for his past accomplishments when he looked back on his life, as he went on to acknowledge the gods’ help in his past successes (ἔυτυχίαι). The sense of ‘thank-offering for fulfillment’ is preferable to LSJ’s revised explanation. The word is restored in a fragmentary

38 IG IX.2 1034 (first century B.C.); cf. 1035: Ἀρτέμιδι Δελφινίᾳ Αἰσχυλίᾳ Σατύροι κόρα, γυνὴ Φιλοξενίδα Ἀμουμεῖτος λειτορεύσανσα, and SEG XXV 672: [ὁ] δήμος ὁ Λαρισαίων Αἰσχυλίδαι Σατύροι κόραι Φιλοξενίδα Ἀμουμεῖτες γυναῖκα. LGPN III.B 19 takes Aeschylis in all three inscriptions to be the same person. Cf. G. Daux, “Notes de lecture,” BCH 92 (1968) 625–632.

39 Lazzarini, in Atti del II Seminario 208. LSJ s.v. ἐλευθέρια II: “thank-giving for liberty.”

40 LSJ and Suppl. s.v. τελεστήριον II. Cf. Chantraine, Dictionnaire étymologique 1102 s.v. τέλος: “avec τελεστήρια n. pl. ‘sacrifice pour célébrer un succès.”

41 For religious usages of τελείν and its cognates signifying fulfillment, cf.
inscription at Delphi, dated to the third century B.C.: Προκλής Ἀντικλέως Βοστίχ – – [σ]οι[τήρ]α καὶ τελεστήρια – – – Ἀπόλιστον Πυθίσιοι – – –. According to the supplements, a Bocotian was making a dedication as a σωτήρια and τελεστήρια to Apollo Pythios; but we do not know the context in which it was made.  

τελείουμα

A different kind of fulfillment offering seems to be denoted by the word τελείουμα. We have two dedicatory inscriptions from second-century B.C. Thessaly, in which two female dedicators described their offering as τελείουμα: Ἀρτέμιδι Ὀρσία Ἐὐπάτρα Πασιμελωντείαι τελείουμα, and Δαμιάντης καὶ Κόρως Μέλισσα Ἐπιγενεία τελείουμα.  

Related to τελειοῦν (‘to complete’) and τέλος, τελείουμα probably signifies a thank-offering for some form of fulfillment. But in the absence of further contextual information, it remains disputed whether the word refers to a dedication on attainment of womanhood or completion of childbirth.

---

e.g. Aesch. Ag. 973–974: Ζεῦ, Ζεῦ τέλειε, τὰς ἐμὼς εὐχὰς τέλει· μέλοι δὲ τοῖς σοι τῶνπερ ἀν μέλλῃς τελέιν.

42 J. Bousquet, “Inscriptions de Delphi,” BCH 82 (1958) 61–91, at 66–67 no. 4795 [SEG XVIII 215] (supplements of G. Daux); Bousquet envisaged the possibility of adding [καὶ χαριστήρια] to the end of line two, since the stone is broken on the right-hand edge. Cf. Jacquemin, Annali di archeologia e storia antica 2 (1995) 143 n.18, and Offrandes monumentales 92 and n.81, who notes that we have no literary or epigraphic examples of the two (or three) terms used together. The closest parallels I can find are two later inscriptions (n.32 above) in which ξωάγηρα, σώστρα, and χαριστήρια occur.

43 SEG XXXV 615; IG IX.2 1235 [SEG XLIV 457].


---

Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies 52 (2012) 310–337
Although the word χάρις and its cognates are used as early as Homer,45 it is not until the fourth century, in the works of Xenophon, that χαριστήριον (“thank-offering”) is attested.46 Cyrus sacrificed χαριστήρια to the gods not only in old age (see above), but also earlier in his military career. Having routed the Assyrians, he praises the gods and suggests that “we ought, therefore, to render to the gods thank-offerings for these things of whatsoever we have”: τοῦτον μὲν οὖν χρῆ χαριστήρια ἤν ἄν ἐξωμεν τοῖς θεοῖς ἀποτελεῖν.47 The word χαριστήρια is also used when Xenophon makes Croesus say that he owes Apollo ‘thank-offerings’ for his blissful life and for Cyrus’ kind treatment of him (7.2.28). In epigraphic evidence, the word is attested from the second half of the third century B.C. onwards.48 It is inscribed many times on a group of ceramic vessels dedicated to a Nymph at Kafizin on Cyprus, and on the victory dedications of the Attalids.49 The related word εὐχαριστήριον,

45 E.g. Hom. Il. 9.609, 11.23, Od. 2.12, 5.307.
46 Chantraine, Dictionnaire étymologique 1247–1248 s.v. χάρις; LSJ s.v. χαριστήριος II. The variant χαριστεῖον is also used: e.g. Il. ii. 138 (late third century B.C.), IG XII.3 416 (Thera, first century B.C.), 420 (undated); LSJ s.v. χαριστεῖον.
47 Cyr. 4.1.2 (transl. Miller); see also 4.5.14, where Cyrus’ command seems to be carried out.
48 C. Vatin, “Etruschi a Delfi,” Annali della Fondazione per il Museo “Claudio Faina” 2 (1985) 173–181, thinks he sees a fifth-century bilingual Etruscan-Greek inscription on a dedication by the Tyrrenians in Delphi, the Greek version of which seems to contain the word χαριστεῖον. However, the existence of this inscription has been questioned by M. Pallottino, “Proposte, miraggi, perplessità nella ricostruzione della storia etrusca,” StEtR 53 (1985) 3–16, esp. 7–14; J. Bousquet, Bull. épigr. 1988, 640; SEG XXXVII 415. Note also Vatin’s proposal to restore [χαριστεῖον] in another dedicatory inscription at Delphi of the late sixth or early fifth century: apud G. Colonna, “Apollo, les Étrusques et Lipara,” MEFRA 96 (1984) 557–578, at 565 [SEG XXXIV 405]. However, in the absence of any epigraphic parallel for the word of this early date, Vatin’s supplements must remain highly conjectural.
The Delian inventory lists of the third and second centuries B.C. record many dedications of χορεία dispatched by the theoroi of different Greek cities to Delos. A common formula is, for example, φιάλην ΔΔηλιάδων, χορεῖα ἐπιδόντων Κνιδίων, or ἀνάπτημα ΔΔηλιάδων, χορεῖον ἐπιδόντων Μεγαλοπολίτων (or similar). It is unclear what the word χορεία signified precisely, and on what occasions they were sent to Delos. Bruneau thus explains the practice: “les thérores remettent des hono-
raires, χορεία, aux Déliades qui emploient cette somme à la consécration d’une phiale.” LSJ, on the other hand, take χορεία as ‘thank-offerings for choral victory’. If they were choral thank-offerings brought to the gods, it is unclear why the verb used is ἐπιδιδόμεν (which seems to carry more specialized meanings) instead of the more common ἀναπτήμα or related words.

(ii) Preliminary Offerings

διαβατήρια, ἀναβατήριον

A cognate of διαβαίνειν (‘to cross over’, ‘to pass over’), the word διαβατήρια refers to ‘offerings before crossing the border’ (LSJ). In Classical literature it is confined to Thucydides (three times) and Xenophon (eight); all applications refer to Spartan practices. Before crossing a frontier, the Spartan

---

50 Polyb. 5.14.8: τοῖς Θεοῖς ἔθυεν ἐνχαιριστήρια, and SEG LVII 577 (Macedonia, second century B.C.).
51 E.g. IG XI.2 164.A.55–57 (Rhodes), 199.B.14 (Casos), 219.B.25 (Megalopolis), I.Delos 298.A.117 (Cnidos), 313.25 (Cos).
54 LSJ s.v. χορείας III.
55 Thuc. 5.54.2, 5.55.3, 5.116.1; Xen. Hell. 3.4.3, 3.5.7, 4.7.2, 5.1.33,
army would customarily make sacrificial offerings termed διαβατήρια to provide omens; only if they were favourable would the army advance into the territory. The διαβατήρια were therefore offerings for learning the gods’ will before a military move, a ‘consultative’ sacrifice according to Parker’s categorization. Later Plutarch uses the word in a slightly different context to denote thank-offerings made after (not before) crossing (Luc. 24.6–7): Lucullus sacrificed a bull as διαβατήρια to the river Euphrates (ἔθυσε δὲ καὶ τῷ Εὐφράτῃ ταύρον διαβατήρια) in acknowledgement of his army’s safe passage. Plutarch also uses a related word ἀναβατήριον (from ἀναβαίνειν, ‘to mount’, ‘to go on board’), not attested in any other Greek authors, of an offering for a safe voyage (attained): tradition held that the men sent by Ptolemy Soter to fetch Sarapis from Sinope were blown off course, but were guided by a dolphin to Cirrha in Phocis; in gratitude for the safe voyage they sacrificed ἀναβατήριον.

εἰσιτήρια, εἰσαγώγεια

From εἰσεῖναι (‘to enter’, ‘to go into’) and εἰσιτήριος (‘belonging to entrance’), the word εἰσιτήρια expresses ‘a sacrifice for entry into a year or an office’. Demosthenes twice

57 Parker, in War and Violence 299.  
58 Except in Geoponica 9.17.8.  
59 Plut. Mor. 984B. LSJ s.v. ἀναβατήριον: “sacrifice for fair voyage”; Chantraine, La formation 63: “sacrifice pour obtenir une heureuse traversée.”  
60 Chantraine, La formation 64: “sacrifice offert par le sénat au commence-
refers to this kind of sacrifice: the Athenian *boule* would hold a sacrifice at the beginning of the year, perhaps as an induction of its new members.\(^{61}\) Attic inscriptions have many allusions to εἰσιτητήρια, showing that apart from the *bouleutai*, other groups (such as the hipparchs and ephebes) were also inaugurated by such sacrifice, whether offered by themselves or by priests and priestesses.\(^{62}\) The εἰσιτητήρια could also be called εἰσαγώγεια (from εἰσάγειν ‘to bring in’, ‘to introduce’),\(^{63}\) but this word is not found in literary sources.

προθεάρια

A third-century B.C. inscription from Cyrene has a rarely attested word προθεάρια. Among a long list of names of priests inscribed on a marble stele is a short text mentioning the sacrifice of προθεάρια to Archagetas performed by the treasurers: τοὶ ταμίαι προθεάρια τοῖ Ἀρχαγέται θύωντι.\(^{64}\) Dobias-Lalou explains προθεάρια as sacrifices performed by the *tamiai* to (Apollo) Archegetas before the *thearoi* set off to Delphi.\(^{65}\) Thue...
cydides’ reference to _theoroi_ sacrificing at the altar of Apollo Archegetes at Naxos before sailing from Sicily (6.3.1) makes her view more or less certain. But we cannot exclude the possibility that the word _προθεαρία_ might carry other meanings in a different context, given the wide range of meanings associated with _θεωρία_ which could include the office of _theoros_, festival attendance, sightseeing, contemplation, or public spectacle at festivals or games. An honorific decree from Ambryssos in Phocis has a supplemented _[προ]θεαρία_ apparently meaning ‘front-seating privilege’ (usually denoted by _προεδρία_) at public games or in theatres (IG IX.1 10, second century B.C.).

**προτέλεια**

From _προτέλεια_ (‘to pay beforehand’), the term _προτέλεια_ refers to an offering made before a solemnity, such as before marriage-rites. Iphigenia is described as a _προτέλεια ναὸν_, a sacrifice before the ships could set sail. In another variant of the myth, believing Agamemnon to be giving Iphigenia in marriage to Achilles, Clytemnestra asks whether he has already sacrificed ‘pre-marriage offerings’ to the goddess for their child (_προτέλεια δ’ ἣδη παιδὸς ἐσφαξας θεᾶς_). Perhaps initially a voluntary offering made in kind before marriage, _προτέλεια_

---


67 Chantraine, _Dictionnaire étymologique_ II 433–434 s.v. _θεωρία_; LSJ s.v. _θεωρία_.


69 Aesch. _Ag._ 227. J. D. Denniston and D. Page, _Aeschylus. Agamemnon_ (Oxford 1957) 89: “preliminary sacrifice on behalf of the ships.” E. Fraenkel, _Aeschylus. Agamemnon_ (Oxford 1950) II 40–41, 129, on lines 65 and 227, noted that Aeschylus is inverting a word with cheerful images (because of its usual association with marriage) and giving it a sinister meaning.

70 Eur. _La_ 718; see also 433: Ἀρτέμιδι προτελέζουσι τὴν νεόνιδα.
later signified a cult payment. A fourth-century B.C. *thesauros* on the Athenian acropolis collects one drachma from Athenian maidens as a ‘pre-marriage offering’ (προτέλεια γάμοι) payable to Aphrodite Ourania.\(^71\)

χρηστήριον

Derived from χρήστης (‘one who gives oracles’) and χράσθαι (‘to consult an oracle’), χρηστήριον could denote ‘an offering for the oracle’ made by those consulting it.\(^72\) Euripides’ Ion tells the chorus that if they wish to consult Apollo at Delphi, they can offer a πελανός\(^73\) in front of the temple and advance to the altar, but must not approach its inner shrine if a sheep has not been slaughtered: εἰ μὲν ἐθύσατε πελανόν πρὸ δόμων καὶ τί πυθέσατε χρηστῆτε Φοιβοῦ, πάριτ’ ἐς θυμέλας· ἐπὶ δ’ ἀσφάκτοις μῆλοισι δόμων μὴ πάριτ’ ἐς μυχὸν (Ion 226–229). Later, when Xuthus arrives, he says that he will go inside, since the χρηστήριον—presumably a sheep—has been sacrificed for strangers in common before the shrine: στείχοι’ ἂν εἴσω· καὶ γάρ, ὡς ἐγὼ κλώο, χρηστήριον πέπτωκε τοῖς ἐπήλυσιν κοινὸν πρὸ ναοῦ; and he wants to receive the god’s oracle: βούλομαι δ’ ἐν ἡμέρα τῇ—αἰσία γὰρ—θεοῦ λαβεῖν μαντεύματα (418–421).\(^74\) Instead of offerings made spontaneously, the χρηστήριον is essentially a preliminary sacrifice before oracular consultations.

---

\(^71\) SEG XL1 182. See also IG I 3 5.2: [προτέ]λεια [θ[υε]ν].

\(^72\) Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique* 1276, s.v. χρήσ-: “sacrifice préliminaire avant l’oracle”; LSJ s.v. χρηστήριον II.

\(^73\) A πελανός was originally a vegetarian offering, but later signified a cult payment in oracular consultation and other cult services. E.g. Herod. 4.90–91, with the commentary in I. C. Cunningham, *Herodas. Mimiambi* (Oxford 1971) 145.

(iii) Propitiatory Offerings

ἀρεστήρ, ἀρεστηρία/ἀρεστήριον

Etymologically related to ἀρέσκειν (‘to make amend’, ‘to please’) and ἀρεστός (‘acceptable’, ‘pleasing’), the words ἀρεστήρ and ἀρεστηρία (or ἀρεστήριον) denoted a ‘propitiatory offering’ to the gods. A fourth-century B.C. lex sacra from Piraeus makes provisions for a ‘propitiatory offering’ termed ἀρεστήρ to be offered to Helios and Mnemosyne (Ἡλίωι ἂρεστήρ[α] κηρίον. Μνημοσύνη ἂρεστήρ[α] κηρίον). We know from the lexicographers that an ἀρεστήρ was a form of cake offered to propitiate the gods. A common occasion for making propitiatory offerings was upon making alterations of sacred property. A fourth-century decree from Oropus, concerning restoration work to the fountain and baths at the Amphiareum, prescribes the use of twenty drachmai for an ἀρεστήριον to be made to Amphiaraus. An ἀρεστήριον was likewise required on the occasions of repairing the statue of Athena Nike and of melting down the dedications of the Hero Doctor in Athens. This was probably meant to please the gods and to divert any potential danger that might result from altering divine property.

ἐκλυτήριον

From ἐκλύειν (‘to release’), ἐκλυτήριον appears only once in Classical literature to denote an ‘expiatory offering’. When

---

75 IG II² 4962.B = LSCG 21B; note that side B is thought to be inscribed later. For ἁρεστήρ see also IG II² 4971 = LSCG 22 (Piraeus), LSCG 26 (Athens), IG XII.6 260.8 = LSS 80 (Samos, all both fourth century B.C.).
76 Hsch. α 7134, Phot. α 2801, Suda α 3828, Etym.Magn. 138.54. On cakes in Greek sacrifice see n.2 above.
77 I.Oropos 290.19 (369/8 B.C.).
78 LSCG 35.18–19 (mid-fourth century), 41.46 (third century).
79 Rudhardt, Notions fondamentales 269. Other examples of ἁρεστήριον/ἁρεστηρία are e.g. Meiggs/Lewis 23.38 (Athens, 480 B.C.), LSCG 32.58 = Rhodes/Osborne 58 (Athens, 352/1: restored), IG II² 1672.223, 302 (Athens, 329/8), LSCG 116.24–25 (Chios, fourth century).
Teiresias reveals that Creon must sacrifice his son to appease Ares’ wrath (aroused by Cadmus’ slaughter of his serpent). Creon persuades Menoeceus to flee, saying that he himself is ready to die as an ‘expiatory offering’ for the fatherland: θησαιν έτοιμος πατρίδος ἐκλυτήριον. It is a common mythical motif in Greek literature that a chosen member of the community must die for the common good. It was customary to placate the gods with sacrifice (e.g. Hom. Il. 1.446–478); but no other victim (whether human or animal) for appeasing divine wrath is described as an ἐκλυτήριον.

θελκτήριον

Etymologically related to θελκτήρ (‘soother’, ‘charmer’) and θέλγειν (‘to charm’, ‘to enchant’), the word θελκτήριον is first attested in Homer to refer to a means of enchantment or propitiation. In the Odyssey the Trojan horse is described as θεόν θελκτήριον, a means of appeasing or placating the gods, in other words a ‘propitiatory offering’. In Classical literature the word is confined to Aeschylus and Euripides, but only in one other instance is it applied to offerings. Iphigenia describes her libations to Orestes, consisting of milk, wine, and honey, as νεκροῖς θελκτήρια, “soothing offerings to the dead” (Eur. IT 80).

80 Eur. Phoen. 969. See also the related word λυτήρια (expiatory offering) at Ap. Rhod. 4.704: ἄτρέπτοιο λυτήριον ἦν φόνοι.


82 LSJ s.v. θελκτήριον: “charm, spell.” On the Homeric usages of this word see Crusius, A Complete Greek and English Lexicon 199–200; Cunliffe, A Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect 187; Authenrieth, Homeric Dictionary 150.


---

Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies 52 (2012) 310–337
Non-religious applications of the word will not be discussed here.84

μειλικτήρια, μείλιγμα

Also used of libations for the dead is the substantive μειλικτήρια (‘propitiations’), from μειλίσσειν (‘to soothe’, ‘to appease’, ‘to propitiate’). The word is used only once in Classical literature: Aeschylus describes how the Persian queen brings to the grave of Darius χοαί (of milk, honey, water, wine, oil, and also flowers), as “propitiatory offerings for the dead” (νεκροῖσι μειλικτήριαι).85 Similar in meaning and usage is the cognate μείλιγματα. Orestes offers libations to Agamemnon as “appeasement offerings for the dead” (χοὰς φεροῦσας νεφτέ-ροις μείλιγματα).86 In both Aeschylean passages, we find μειλικτήρια/μειλιγματα used in apposition to χοαί. Propitiatory libations were also made to the chthonic deities. In another play of Aeschylus, the word μειλιγματα is used of χοαί ζωνον for the Erinyes (Eum. 107).

πενθητήριον

Derived from πενθητήρ (‘mourner’) and πενθεῖν (‘to mourn’), πενθητήριον is used of ‘mourning offering’ in Aeschylus’ Choephoroe (6–7). After offering a lock of hair to Inachus as a “nurture offering” (θελκτήριον: see above), Orestes dedicates another lock to Agamemnon as a “mourning offering”: πλό-κομον ἵνα δέντε πενθητήριον. In rituals of mourning, it was customary to cut a strand or

84 These are Aesch. Supp. 447 (μύθου μύθος ἄν θελκτήριος), 1004 (ὀμματος θελκτήριον), Cho. 670 (πόνων θελκτηρία στρομνή), Eum. 81 (θελκτηρίους μύθους), 886 (γλώσσης ἐμῆς μείλιγμα καὶ θελκτήριων); Eur. Hipp. 478 (λόγοι θελκτήριων), 509 (θελκτήρια ἄρατος).


86 Aesch. Cho. 15. LSJ. s.v. μειλιγμα I.2. See also H. Fris Johansen and E. W. Whittle, Aeschylus: The Suppliants III (Copenhagen 1980) 316, on Aesch. Supp. 1029: “μειλίσσειν and its nominal derivatives are most frequently used of propitiatory libations to the dead or the potentially hostile powers below.”
strands of hair and place it upon the corpse or the grave; but only in this Aeschylean passage is the hair offered described as a πενθητήριον. This ritual has been variously interpreted as an act of self-immolation, an act of symbolism by which the living dedicated himself to the dead, or a means of establishing contact with the deceased.

(iv) Other Offerings

έκτήματα

The word ἐκτίματα (Doric for ἐκτιμήτρα), a cognate of ἐκτιμᾶν, is uniquely attested in a dedicatory inscription from Cnidos from perhaps the third century B.C.: Δάματρι καὶ Κοῦραι καὶ τοῖς θεοῖς τοῖς παρὰ Δάματρι καὶ Κοῦραι χαριστεῖα καὶ ἐκτίματα ἀνέθηκε Πλαθαινις Πλάτωνος γυνᾶ (“to Demeter and Kore and the gods with Demeter and Kore, Plathaenis wife of Platon dedicated thank-offering and ἐκτίματα”). Rejecting the view that the word denotes a thank-offering for release (using sacred money) from slavery or captivity, Lazzarini prefers “come ringraziamento e segno del massimo apprezzamento.” Similarly in the revised supplement of LSJ ἐκτίματα is taken as an offering in honour of the goddesses. However, the cognate verb ἐκτιμᾶν, apart from the sense of ‘to honour highly’, can also mean ‘to estimate’ or

87 For hair-offerings for the dead see e.g. Hom. Il. 23.140–149; Soph. Aj. 1174; Eur. El. 91, IA 1437, Phoen. 1524–5, Tr. 480.
89 I. Knidos 138 (= Syll. 3 1146).
90 Syll. 3 1146 n.3.
91 Lazzarini, in Atti del II Seminario 211–212.
92 LSJ Suppl. s.v. ἐκτήματα: “some form of honorific offerings.” Cf. LSJ s.v.: “penalties, SIG 1146 (possibly, = reward for redemption from slavery).”
‘to evaluate’, as in the famous Cyrene cathartic law of the late fourth century B.C.\textsuperscript{93} We cannot exclude the possibility that ἐκτίµατα might have some more specific meaning than an ‘honorable offering’.

II. Offerings in Ancient Greece: Some Observations

This survey of the vocabulary of offerings to the gods (and the dead) is not meant to be exhaustive, as a thorough examination of all the Greek words for ‘offerings’ (and their cognate verbs) would require treatment on a much wider scale. Yet the above analysis suffices to demonstrate the great variety of sacrifice and dedications offered for a range of purposes in ancient Greece, showing that the nature of offerings is much more complex and varied than such categories as ἀναθήματα, ἱερά, and θυσία may lead us to believe.

Many of the words for ‘offerings’ were formed by adding the suffix -τήριος/τήριον, or less frequently -την/τη and -τρα, to a word expressing the reason, context, or desired effect of the offering. Religious terminology formed in this way is seen already in Homer’s θελκτήριον and ζωάγρια; but it is in tragedy that such words are most common. Aeschylus alone provides us with three words for religious offerings ending in -τήριος or -τήρια.\textsuperscript{94} As we have seen, these words are usually based on agent nouns ending in -τηρ or -της or based on a verb.\textsuperscript{95} Nevertheless, the application of these words in our sources is far from consistent. Thus, while Aeschylus uses θεπτήριον,
other authors do not describe adolescent hair-offerings to the deities as such. In Euripides’ *Alcestis*, when the queen is brought back to life by Heracles, Admetus orders his people to hold song-dances and make public sacrifices “for the blessed happenings” (ἐπ’ ἐσθλαῖς συμφοραίσιν, 1155–1156). This is no doubt a thank-offering for a life saved but neither εὐαγγέλια nor σώστρα nor σωτήρια is used. It appears that the same kind of offering may be variously described: the choice of word (if a particular term is used at all) can vary from context to context, and from one author to another. This necessarily complicates the task for anyone studying gifts to the gods: one has to take into account offerings made both with and without the terms, and the contextual information (if any) on the circumstances in which they were made.

The names of types of offerings are of significance not only to linguists but also to Greek historians, as they capture some of the ways in which the worshippers experienced and conceived of their relations with the gods. We have seen that offerings might be made to thank the gods for a range of divine assistance received: for nurture (θρεπτήρια), for deliverance (σώστρα, σωτήρια, ζωάγρια), for good news (εὐαγγέλια), for victory of various kinds (νικητήρια, ἐπινίκια), for the profit from shearing (κούρειον), for fulfillment (τελεστήρια), and for any divine favours (χαριστήρια). It is interesting and significant that most of these terms are extensions from a word, or have an equivalent word, indicating the reward or return made to humans for similar services: an εὐαγγέλιον could denote a reward to a messenger who brought good tidings, θρεπτήρια (in the plural) the return for rearing made to nurses, σώστρα the reward for bringing back run-away cattle or slaves, σωτήρια a physician’s fee in later Greek; ζωάγρια usually meant the ransom paid to a warrior for taking a prisoner alive, νικητήριον and ἐπινίκια could apply to a prize of victory awarded to a successful competitor or warrior, and χαριστήρια could be made to human benefactors. This assimilation between gifts to the gods and rewards to men reflects the Greeks’ perception of their gods as εὐεργέται: the Greeks could appeal to their gods for all kinds of favours and assistance, in return for which they

---

*Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 52 (2012) 310–337
deserved rewards as did human benefactors. It is unclear whether this kind of human-divine relation was modelled on the relation between human benefactors and beneficiaries, or vice versa. What is evident is that in the Greeks’ imagination of the divine, the gods were thought to interact with worshippers by a process of gift-giving similar to that in human social interactions, and to take pleasure in gifts and counter-gifts as men did. This helps to explain why religious life was often construed in terms of exchange relations in ancient Greece. While the nature, scale, and means of effecting the benefaction were different, in both sets of relations the idea of reciprocity was fundamental.

The variety of thank-offerings has important implications for Greek piety. Influenced perhaps by the relatively late appearance of the word χαριστήριον, which is not attested until Xenophon, some scholars in the early twentieth century claimed that thank-offerings were conspicuously lacking in the Greeks’ relations with their gods. Yet the present study shows that Greek terms for ‘thank-offerings’ are by no means lacking, and are variously expressed in words other than χαριστήριον from at least the beginning of the Classical period onwards. Instead of focusing narrowly on χαριστήριον as the Greek equivalent of the English ‘thank-offering,’ historians should allow the possibility that there were other words and means of expressing gratitude in Greek religion. More importantly, the diversity of thank-offerings should nuance the way in which the nature of gift-giving in Greece is understood. Contrary to the emphasis


in scholarship on *do ut des*, these offerings suggest that equally prominent in Greek religion is the mentality of *do quia dedisti*: an offering might be made to the gods for some divine favour attained, whether or not a vow had been made beforehand.

While the terms of thank-offerings indicate the context or reason for bringing the gift, the names of preliminary and propitiatory offerings express semantically the desired effect an offering was intended to bring about. A θελκτήριον was expected to enchant (θέλειν) the gods, a πενθητήριον to mourn (πενθεῖν) the dead, μειλικτήριον to appease (μειλίσσειν) them, an ἐκλυτήριον to release (ἐκλύειν) a community from evil, διαβατήρια to cross (διαβαίνειν) a border, a χρηστήριον to inquire of the god (χρᾶσθαι), and εἰσιτήρια to enter (εἰσεῖναι) a new year or position. These terms make explicit worshippers’ desires, showing that the Greeks could project their hopes and expectations onto the names of the offerings. A similar phenomenon is seen in the choice of cult epithets: individuals and groups might invoke a god with a title that indicates the effect they wanted to achieve. Greek religious vocabulary was therefore a means of expressing the worshippers’ desires, and is revealing about their expectations and motivations.

Finally we should consider how ancient worshippers normally described their gifts to the gods. Many of the words collected here are attested exclusively or more commonly in literary than in epigraphic evidence. Instead of these terms, the most commonly attested words in dedicatory inscriptions that have come down to us are, for example, ἀγαλματα, δόρα, γνήμα, ἱερά, ἀπαρχή, and δεκάτη. Compared with some other Greek religious terminology, such as the title(s) under which a god was invoked, the names for the types of gifts being offered to the gods were perhaps not of crucial importance: for most worshippers, what mattered most was the gift itself; how the gift was called was of secondary importance. In other words, although such terms as διαβατήρια, μειλικτήρια, and ἐκλυτήριον could serve as indicators of the desired effects, the ‘correct’ naming or labelling of a gift had little or no bearing on the offering’s efficacy to achieve the desired result. It was the act of making the offering, not the precision with which the offering
was described, which concerned the giver and the divine recipient. This may explain the prominence of non-context specific terms, such as ἄγαλμα, ἀναθήματα, ἱερά, and θυσία, which are applicable to multiple contexts. Amid the innumerable kinds of gifts offered to the gods in different circumstances, there was as much room for individual and local variation in religious vocabulary as in cult practices. In Greek religion the custom of offering gifts to the gods was flexible enough to allow individual choice and variety, a variety which is reflected in the value and form of the offerings, the frequency with which they were offered, as well as the names they were given.99

April, 2012
Department of History
The University of Hong Kong
Hong Kong
tsfjm@hku.hk

98 E.g. the word τελείωμα in Thessaly.
99 I am most grateful to Professor Robert Parker for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper. I thank also the Society of Scholars in the Humanities at the University of Hong Kong for making possible a period of research, during which this article was written.