

Civic oath-taking is a rite, a carefully formulated vow of individual commitment to a common cause, spoken during a solemn ceremony. In Antiquity, civic oaths were often performed together by the entire (adult male) community in a ritual that was at the same time political, religious, and public (PLESCIA 1970, 60; BEDERMANN 2001, 68). Part of this ritual called for the inscription of the oath in stone, thereby securing it into the collective memory for generations to come. The places where these inscriptions were erected may thus be understood as critical points of focus for matters concerning the community, places of public ritual space. Using examples from various sites in the Hellenistic period, this paper argues that besides their content, the locations of these inscriptions were critical to their role in eliciting rational cooperation among all of the members of a community.

Civic oaths typically indicate a critical turning-point: they may follow some event, such as the end of a mutiny with the ensuing promise of loyalty by the troops to Eumenes I in Pergamon (IvP 13), or they may be a preventive measure in the face of a potential economic crisis, such as the Chersonesan citizens' vow to sell grain to Chersonesos alone (IOSPE P² 401). Democratic values were typically at stake, triggering the need for the vocal commitment of the community to uphold their governmental form (e.g. I.LABRAUNDA 47). But unlike the modern Pledge of Allegiance, oaths were first and foremost religious invocations, usually including curses against one's self (and family and property) should the vows be broken (e.g. SOMMERSTEIN 2007, 2; FRIESENHAHN 1979, 5). In the Hellenistic period oath-takers swore to all the Olympian deities, but at the top of the list are Zeus, Ge and Helios; the Earth and the Sun were physical and omniscient witnesses (CONNOLLY 2007, 204-205). The inclusion of these cosmic powers also shows the importance of place in the real world for these oaths, and this importance extends to the locations where they were inscribed. Oath inscriptions may not always represent the exact spot where the solemn ritual took place, but they do commemorate or even reenact it through the re-reading (e.g. SHEAR 2007, 159). They were thus necessarily located in public ritual space; this gave them meaning, and they in turn increased the public ritual value of these spaces.

Civic oath-taking was a kind of joint action that strengthened the cohesion of the community. According to Chwe (2001), public ritual is a vital pre-condition for such rational cooperation, exposing the event to witnesses through spaces of 'inward-facing circles'. This paper evaluates the idea of civic oaths as 'rational rituals' in light of their content and in view of the locations of their inscriptions. By analyzing their spatial contexts, with regard to public and sacred, their proximity to other monuments, but also with respect to their visibility, it will be clear how ritualized space influenced and was in turn influenced by these inscriptions.