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Public Law, Private Religion: The Case of Laodicea on the Sea

In 174 BC Laodicea on the Sea passed what remains the sole surviving Hellenistic decree of the city (*IGLS IV 1264*). Pierre Roussel published the inscription in 1943, but apart from brief comments by Klaffenbach and the Roberts this important document has drawn surprisingly little scholarly attention. To the extent that scholars have explored this text it has been to support the argument that Seleucid kings ruled with a heavy hand, operating in concert with entrenched oligarchs and micro-managing through personal appointees. The decree was enacted by the *peliganes*, a council of elders and an institutional transplant from Macedonia; the proposal was moved by the *epistates*, perhaps another old Macedonian office, in addition to the civic magistrates. Thus, on the prevailing interpretation the inscription reminds us that Hellenistic cities were administered by powerful men who had the ear of the king. We know. But the decree makes no mention of kings and no hint of power politics. This was a local matter, involving a tangled mess of property rights, religious imperatives, fiscal policy, and legislative problem solving, a piece of local history worth reconstructing.

The occasion of the legislation was as follows. The city had passed a law under which anyone wishing to dedicate a statue on civic property was required to pay a fee, a kind of tax on the dedication's footprint. Now, three brothers owned an entire *amphodon* in the city, on which sat a precinct of Sarapis and Isis, of whom the three were priests; they also owned this precinct. The apparent result of the new tax on dedications was a surge in the number of dedicants wishing to deposit tokens of their piety in the privately owned shrine, where the civic tax did not apply. The boom in the business of dedications was such that the brothers feared lest their precinct be ruined. The civic officials resolved, therefore, that in this particular case the tax was to apply not to the ground on which statues were dedicated, but to the statues themselves.

This fascinating story bears on a number of recent scholarly debates and ought to be brought to the table for discussion. First, the legal compromise shows not the heavy hand of a distant and mighty empire, but the light touch of savvy and concerned local legislators. While many have pointed to a kind of slippage between the categories "public" and "private" in Greek civic finance, religion, and law, in this case the city went to great lengths, offering a narrowly targeted emendation to prior law, something not terribly common in Hellenistic cities, in order to preserve and protect private property rights. This was a case in which a threat to private religion rose to the level of public concern, prompting us to ask not what polis religion is, but under what conditions private religion becomes a matter of public concern. Finally, this text invites us to set aside for a moment our preoccupation with empires, power politics, prominent people, and instead to focus on the intricate legal and economic structures that citizens and Hellenistic cities hammered out in order to make life run.