RATIONALITY AND IRRATIONALITY
IN THE ANCIENT GREEK LAW OF PROCEDURE

Gerhard Thür*

Scholarship is rational. Life is irrational and full of emotion. This paper, 1 dedicated to my friend Laurens, will be on rationality and irrationality in the ancient Greek law of procedure. When did the Greeks start deciding legal disputes in a rational way? What did judgements look like before that? After the publication of the masterly book by E.R. Dodds, the topic “the Greeks and the irrational” has boomed. Nevertheless, the legal aspect has been disregarded. The same may be said of the learned contributions on “rationality in Greek thought” in Frede/Striker (1996). In my opinion what is rational or irrational is largely in the eye of the beholder: what people at that time may have considered a completely rational type of adjudication, today seems irrational. Besides, those people might not always have been aware of the consequences of innovations that were introduced into the system.

I shall concentrate on Draco’s law on homicide dating back to 621-620 B.C. 2 It is the oldest known Greek statute on bloodshed and its prosecution. At the time of the general revision of laws in Athens in 409-408 B.C., it was copied from wooden blocks, axones, 3 onto a marble stele. This stele was found in the 1880s in a poor state of preservation. However, quotations from speeches made in Athenian courts of the fifth and fourth century B.C. allow a partial reconstruction, now edited in the Inscriptiones Graecae (IG I 3 104). 4

1 I present a slightly enlarged and modified version of a paper presented at the International Conference: Ius est ars boni et aequi, Southern African Society of Legal Historians, Pilanesberg 12-16 May 2013. I gratefully acknowledge some comments an’ suggestions made by Laurens, who discussed this topic with me several times and brought to my attention Dodds, E.R., The Greeks and the Irrational Berkeley, 1951, and Frede/Striker (eds.), Rationality in Greek Thought Oxford, 1996.


* Dr. Dr. h.c. mult., Professor Emeritus of Roman Law “Documenta Antiqua – Ancient Legal History”, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna.
My studies on Draco form part of research I have been doing since 1970 in the law of procedure in the archaic Greek polis. In my view, Draco’s law represents an intermediate stage: on the one hand, it is based on the ancient irrational tradition dating from a time when the outcome of litigation was not decided by court judgements, but rather by oaths imposed by the courts and sworn by the parties. On the other hand, in Draco’s law we find formal voting by a panel of judges, which was the nucleus of rational decision-making in classical Athens. Scholars have not as yet grasped the great importance of Draco’s step in the direction of rationality, a step that has influenced western legal culture up to the present day.

In archaic Greek poleis, purgatory oaths imposed by a law court were very well known. By simply swearing, the defendant could refute the plaintiff’s claim. In my opinion, this was then the normal method of settling disputes. Was this method rational or irrational? Today the answer has to be that it was highly irrational. The final verdict depended only on the defendant’s fear of the gods he was invoking in the oath formula. If he perjured himself, he had to fear that the gods would subsequently punish him and perhaps all his offspring. Nevertheless, in archaic times when people generally did believe that the gods interfered directly in their lives, the method seemed to be a rational one: no defendant would risk a purgatory oath if he really were guilty. At least social control might discourage him.

The personal skill of archaic judges consisted in finding the correct divinities, competent to punish the culprit; and in formulating precisely the facts to which the defendant had to swear. For example, as a baby the god Hermes stole Helios’ cows and hid them in a cave. He could easily have sworn a deciding oath “I did not hide them at home”. This would not have been a “straight” (ithys) oath but rather a “crooked” one (scholios horkos). Thus there was also a great deal of rationality in imposing the correct purgatory oath.


7 Homeric Hymns 4.378-396.
I shall base my interpretation of Draco’s law on these assumptions. There is only one problem: the law does not mention oaths at all. However, conclusions from later periods will help. I shall focus on lines 11-13. Before dealing with this text, I shall discuss the reason for Draco’s legislation and the strange beginning with the use of the word καί (and/even) in line 11.

1. Why did Draco enact his law on homicide?

Did he intend, as is generally believed, to codify the homicide law of his time9 or did he respond – albeit in a quite general way – to real problems in Athenian society? I hold the second view. The law was a response to an actual historical situation.

Let us have a look at the beginning of the first axon.10 I translate the preserved text with all its possible variations: “And when (or: even if) someone kills another without intention, he is exiled (or: he shall stand trial). The basileis (“kings,” or at any rate magistrates) are to dikazein (for the moment I shall not translate this word) responsible for homicide … (now, according to the stoichedon order of the inscription there is a gap of exactly seventeen letters) … the person who was planning (conspiring or, preferably, advising, bouleuein). The ephetai (a board of fifty-one dignitaries, not magistrates) are to diagonai (again not translated).” The following text deals with the private pardoning of the killer (aidesis) by the victim’s relatives after they have accepted blood money (poine). Provisions follow, regulating by what degree of kinship someone must be related to the victim in order to be entitled to file a private law suit, a dike phonou. In classical Athens, homicide was still a private matter, there being no public prosecution.11 From speeches made in Athenian courts,12 we know that in the lacuna in line 12, the alternative to bouleuein, however we translate it, must have been “killing by one’s own hand.” Since the publication of the work of Hans Julius Wolff on the subject, this has been

---

8 Recently Gagarin, Michael, Writing Greek Law Cambridge, 2008: 93-109, discussing earlier literature. 
10 IG I3 104, 10-13: πρότερον μήτε ἐργασάμενος ἢκένει τῆς τινα, φεύνε [ἐν δρόκαζεν δὲ τὸς βασιλέας αἰτιών dalos] φόνον ἢ ... 17 ... ἢ [βολεύσαντα τοῖς δὲ ἐφέτας διαγναί[δο]ναί]. [αιδεύσασθαι δ᾽ ... . 
12 Ant. 6:16: Μεμαρτύρεται μὲν οὖν ὁ ἄνδρος περὶ τὸν πρόγραμας ἢ ἐγὼ ὑμῖν ὑπεσχόμην. ἢς αὐτόν δὲ τοῦτον ἴρῃ σκοπεῖν ἢ τε ὁ ὁ οὐδεὶς διωμόσαντο καὶ ἢ ἐγὼ, πότεροι ἄλλοι τέταρτα καὶ εὔορκότερα. διωμόσαντο δὲ οὕτω συνεχόει με διάδοτον βουλεύσαντα τὸν θάνατον, ἢγὼ δὲ μὴ ἀποκτέναι, μήτε χείρι χρησάμενον (Dobree: χρησάμενος mss.) μήτε βουλεύσασα. (17) αἰτεύσατα δὲ οὕτως ... (You have heard the witnesses testify to the facts, gentlemen, as I promised you. From these you must examine what each side swore and decide which of us was more truthful and swore more correctly. They swore that I killed Diodotos by planning his death, but I swore I did not kill him either by my own hand nor by planning ... (Transl. Gagarin in Gagarin, Michael/MacDowell, Douglas M., Antiphon and Andocides Austin TX, 1998, but see below n. 35)) and Andoc. 1.94: καίτ’ οὖσος ὁ νόμος καὶ πρότερον ἢ ... τὸν βουλεύσαντα ἐν τῷ ἀρχείῳ ἐνέχεσθαι καὶ τῷ τῇ τριάδε ράφθαι. (And the following law not only existed in the past ... “One who has planned an act shall be liable to the same penalty as one who committed it with his own hand.” (Transl. MacDowell in Gagarin/MacDowell, above)).
beyond dispute, but it is still not certain what the exact words were that supplemented the seventeen missing letters. *Bouleuein* was an indirect way of killing, committed with and – as we shall see – without the intention of killing.

This introduction was necessary in order to provide an explanation of Draco’s reasoning. Can a legislator, who wants to codify homicide law, begin his law code with “and”? And, moreover, would he start with unintentional killing? Scholars supporting the codification thesis have a possible explanation: Draco’s original law was amended; when the law was rewritten on stone in 409-408 B.C., it was no longer the *ephetai* who had to adjudge intentional homicide, but rather the council of the Areopagus. The original beginning of Draco’s text was therefore omitted when the stone inscription was made. The word *καί* (and) was copied by mistake. Ruschenbusch even reconstructed the wording of the supposedly cancelled beginning of the assumed “law code” – in vain, I think.

Stroud, on the other hand, holds that intentional killing was regulated in a later *axon* no longer legible on the stone; one cannot impute modern systematic thinking to an archaic lawyer. Hence he translates *καί* as “even if,” a possible beginning of a law. Gagarin follows this translation, but disagrees with Stroud’s systematic order. He thinks that intentional killing was not regulated in a later *axon* but rather “implicitly” – with the same consequences as unintentional killing.

For my part, I follow the opposite view: for a century, some scholars have connected the alleged codification with a certain historical event, the sacrilege against the Cylonians, probably committed in the year 636 B.C., one generation before Draco. I think one can explain the strange composition of Draco’s law as a response to this specific historical event.

We have only legendary reports of the Cylonian sacrilege in Herodotus (5.71), Thucydides (1.126.11) and Plutarchus (Solon 12.1-3). It was also mentioned in Pausanias 1.28.1. To sum up, Cylon (Kylon), an aristocrat who had been victorious in the Olympics, set out to rule Athens as a tyrant. After consulting the Delphic oracle and receiving the usual ambiguous response, he, together with a few accomplices, occupied the castle on the Acropolis. His adversaries incited the masses, besieged the Acropolis, and starved out the insurgents. Cylon escaped but in the meantime, his men were dying of hunger in the temple of Athena Polias. Their death there would have meant that the sanctuary would be desecrated. Therefore, the Athenian archons under the Alcmaeonid Megacles (or some

---

16 Stroud (n. 4) 1968: 34-40.
18 Humphreys (n. 9) 1991: 41-45; Thür (n. 9) 2002 (and forthcoming, see n. 2) with further references.
19 Thür (n. 9) 2002.
such name) promised the rebels safe conduct to leave the country. The failing insurgents knotted a woollen thread to the statue of the goddess and under her magic protection “rope” down their way from the castle. Unfortunately and significantly, at the shrine of the Erinnyes the thread broke. Because the goddess had withdrawn her protective hand, Megacles ordered that the suppliants be seized and put to trial. However, before this could happen the crowd stoned the Cylonians, some of whom were even slaughtered at the altars. After that, Athens fell into a crisis of blood feuds between aristocratic families, which ended only under Draco’s regime.

I see the connection between the sacrilege against the Cylonians and Draco’s law in the strange beginning of the text. It seems to fit the historical situation exactly. Firstly, unintentional killing (μὲ ἵκ προφοίης): Megacles and his fellow-archs could assert, when they had ordered the seizure of the rebels, they had not intended that they be killed. Draco’s answer was: even if you killed unintentionally, you will be exiled. At that time exile was the only consequence of killing a person. Secondly, indirect killing (ὅλος ἐφύσαντα): the archons could assert further that they had not killed because they didn’t act “with their own hands”. Draco answered: even those who gave the order or “advised” a measure resulting in the death of the rebels, are responsible for the homicide.

One generation after the sacrilege, Draco, through his statute, enabled the law courts to exile the main culprits in the long lasting crisis and pardon the minor culprits. One may trace the strange order in which unintentional indirect killing received precedence in a law on homicide to the political situation at that time. No legislator, drawing up an abstract law code, would invent such a case.

One can explain also the following paragraphs in the light of the historical situation. Draco enumerated the group of relatives competent to pardon the killer, which was necessary to pacify the polis. Because blood feuds had even led to the extinction of some families, Draco ordered that ten men chosen from the victim’s phratria (members of the broader family cult) could pardon (grant aidesis to) a culprit when there were no other more competent relatives, but only if the culprit had killed unintentionally (ακόν, ll. 16-9). This was the only reference to unintentional killing. Generally, the same sanction was imposed for both intentional and unintentional killing: exile. Later, Solon introduced the death penalty for intentional killing and also permitted the Areopagus, instead of the ephetai, to judge certain murder cases.

2. Homicide trials and oaths

Dealing with the oaths, admittedly not mentioned in the text, means having to restore the seventeen missing letters in line 12.

Firstly, however, two textual problems must quickly be solved. In line 11, phugein can only mean “to be exiled”, not “to stand trial” as Phillips and Pepe recently held.

21 Thür (n. 5) 1990.
Normally, a man accused of killing sought shelter from the relatives’ legitimate blood revenge in a sanctuary. There he could either deny having committed the act and stand trial, or confess and take the safe path into exile.23 Abroad, he was safe from any persecution (ll. 26-29). Draco’s first sentence is therefore a substantive, not a procedural rule.

The third sentence can also be explained easily (l. 13): τὸς δὲ ἔφετας διαγνῶναί. In lines 18-19 the ephetai are also called the “Fifty-one.” In classical Athens, apart from the Areopagus, a board of fifty-one citizens still decided homicide cases.24 The odd figure of fifty-one proves that from Draco’s time onwards, diagnonai meant “deciding by votes.” Because blood revenge was then legitimate, one can be sure that the ephetai voted secretly to avoid revenge that the culprit’s relatives might take. The vote was “guilty” or “not guilty” regarding the alternative claims “killing with one’s own hand” or “by advising” expressed in the second sentence (l. 12). Only in the rare cases where a killer was pardoned, not sentenced, did the ephetai vote on whether the killing was “unintentional” or “intentional.”25

Now we come to the crucial question: what is the dikazein of the basileis of lines 11-12? The persons making up the basileis are quite clear; not so the act of dikazein.

In classical Athens the nearest relative of a victim led a private dike phonou with the archon basileus (the “king” archont), one of the nine highest magistrates. His province was sacred affairs, including lawsuits concerning bloodshed. Depending on the category into which the deed fell, the basileis passed the claim on to the court of the ephetai, sitting at different sanctuaries, or to the Areopagus.26 Before the trial, the plaintiff and the defendant as well as their witnesses had to swear the “greatest and strongest” most reverend oath, the diomosia (Ant. 5.11, Dem. 23.67-68).27 In Draco’s time, the basileis were magistrates. Stroud explained the plural as referring to the annual change of magistrates.28 The better view is that the plural comprises the archon basileus of the polis together with the four phylobasileis of the old Attic phylai, who in classical Athens still had an inferior role in cases of bloodshed.29

What was the dikazein done by these five basileis? In the huge literature about Draco, there is no satisfying answer. One must not transfer the terminology of classical Athenian procedure into archaic times. Later, dikazein and gignoskein were synonyms, both meaning the law courts’ “deciding.” However, in Draco’s law the court of the ephetai was deciding by dignonai. Therefore, the basileis cannot do the same thing. With some juristic plausibility, Wolff holds that dikazein means “pronouncing” the verdict rendered.

---

23 This topic is discussed by Schmitz (n. 6) 2001: 25-26.
25 Pace Ruschenbusch (n. 15) 2010: 19; Carawan (n. 6) 1998: 70, 81; Pepe (n. 22) 2012: 77.
26 MacDowell (n. 11) 1963: 37-38.
27 Sommerstein/Bayliss (n. 6) 2013: 113-115.
28 Stroud (n. 4) 1968: 47.
29 Pepe (n. 22) 2012: 32-33 with further references.
by the ephetai.30 But why is Draco speaking first of pronouncing and then of rendering the sentence? And were five magistrates necessary just for pronouncing a verdict?

I also cannot agree with Ruschenbusch, who thinks that in every homicide trial firstly the basileis decided what the facts were (dikazein): in other words, whether the defendant had killed or not; and that then the ephetai voted on the question of subjective intention (diagnonai).31 However, voting about intention was exceptional and foreseen only in the rare cases of pardoning by the members of the phratria.

In my opinion my late German colleagues were wrong, but their opinions at least made sense. I have a notion that some of our contemporary American colleagues do not pay much attention to the juristic problems. In 1981 Gagarin (at xv-xvi) seemed to follow Wolff: “judge the case” of the ephetai is contrasted with “adjudge responsible” of the basileis, which probably means “pronounce.” In his book published in 2008 (at 96) I see no differentiation from the legal point of view between “judge guilty” (dikazein) and “decide” (diagnonai).32

To my mind, dikazein must be seen in a completely different way. It belongs to the “introductory step” of the trial.33 With reference to my studies on legal procedure in Homeric times, I compare Draco’s dikazein of the seventh century with the “conditional verdict” delivered in other archaic Greek societies. In both the Homeric trial scenes, on the shield of Achilles (II. 18.497-508) and after the chariot race (II. 23.579-585), the court – the gerontes or the hegemones – did not pronounce on guilt, but rather formulated purgatory oaths. It was then up to the defendant to get acquitted by swearing the oath imposed on him, or to confess his guilt when he did not dare perjure himself.34

This model may help explaining the dikazein in Draco’s archaic law. Indeed, in Athenian homicide trials in classical times oaths were sworn, the diomosiai previously mentioned.35 The defendant was no longer allowed to swear a decisive purgatory oath, but both the plaintiff and defendant and their witnesses had to affirm through the most horrible oaths whether the defendant had killed or not. These oaths were taken in court and also before the magistrate, the basileus, during the preparatory, pre-trial sessions called prodikasias. In other private lawsuits, these sessions were called anakrisis. Already the word prodikasia suggests the dikazein of Draco’s basileis.

Anthphon’s sixth speech, on the Choreutes, from 419 B.C., makes matters abundantly clear. In those times the diomosiai were still formulated according to the ancient Draconic law, and we find the restoration of line 12 of the inscription. The leader of a choir, a choregos, had had to train a boys’ choir for a festival. His agent administered a dangerous pharmakon to one of the boys, the choreutes Diodotus, to improve his voice. The boy died. Like Megacles, mentioned above, the choregos was charged with bouleuein, advising, without intending to kill. From the wording of the diomosiai quoted in section 16, one may draw conclusions on the lost wording of the second sentence in

30 Wolff (n. 13) 1961: 74 (1946: 75); Talamanca (n. 6) 1979: 130 agreed.
31 Ruschenbusch (n. 15) 2010: 19.
32 In the same way Phillips (n. 22) 2008: 49-50.
33 Suggested also by Cantarella, Eva, Studi sull’omicidio in diritto greco e romano Milano, 1976: 90-91.
34 For references, see above n. 6.
35 See above n. 27.
RATIONALITY AND IRRATIONALITY IN THE ANCIENT GREEK LAW OF PROCEDURE

Draco’s law, the alternative to bouleuein: “You have heard the witnesses testify to the facts, gentlemen, as I promised you. From these you must examine what each side swore and decide which of us swore more truthfully and more purely. They swore that I killed Diodotos by advising (the cause for) his death, but I swore I did not kill him either by my own hand or by advising.”36

The plaintiff swore that the accused choregos had killed Diodotus by advising, bouleuein. The choregos denied each alternative: I did not kill him either with my own hand or in an indirect way. These were precisely the alternatives covered in l.12 of Draco’s law. To find the supplement to the lacuna I think we need the verb εἶναι proposed by Ruschenbusch and Gagarin: αἴτιον φόνον εἶναι. Then, I think, further supplementing τὸν ἕργασάμενον (Gagarin 1981: xv) is odd, because … [β]ολιούσαντα is without an article too. Up to now Ruschenbusch’s supplement has seemed the best,37 but I would suggest a better word for αὐτόχερ, “with one’s own hands.” When we look closely at the Antiphon editions we find that χειρὶ ἕργασάμενος (Dobree: ἀράμενος mss.) is a conjecture. Most editors of the Antiphon speeches were not able to explain the word ἀράμενος (to raise, lift) with an indirect object χειρὶ. They corrected it to ἐργασάμενος according to Andocides 1.9438 who quoted another, more recent statute. For Antiphon 6, Wilamowitz stayed with ἀράμενος translating “I did not kill him with my hand, having raised it”.39

Staying with Antiphon’s words, not with his syntax, we also have the supplement of line 12: διὰ [κάζεν δὲ τὸς βασιλεὰς αἴτιον φόνον ἐξαι ἐκ γεῖρα ἅρμαν] ἐκ [βολιούσαντα.40

In translation (and interpretation): “The basileis are to order (the plaintiffs to swear): ‘he (the relevant defendant) is responsible for killing’ (now the alternative follows) either ‘having raised the hand (himself)’ or ‘having advised (the cause for ones death).’” This statute, enacted for the special case of the slaughter against the Cylonians, continued to be the basic provision about bloodshed in Athens until classical times.

In this interpretation, dikazein must be understood in its archaic sense: imposing an oath. However, Draco did not impose only one oath, and the verdict was not a conditional one. Rather we may assume that the verdict was delivered by the votes of the ephetai,

36 Text quoted above in n. 12; I changed some crucial terms in Gagarin’s translation.
37 Ruschenbusch (n. 15) 2010: 30: αἴτιον φόνον εἶναι εἰκῆ εἰτέ αὐτόχερ εἰτέ [βολιούσαντα.
38 Quoted above in n. 12.
40 First suggested by Thür (n. 5) 1990: 152 (restoring χεῖρα; in n. 42 the writing χειρ- is explained), consenting Mélèze Modrzejewski, Joseph, “La sanction de l’homicide en droit grec et hellénistique” in: Gagarin (ed.), Symposium 1990 Köln, 1991: 3-16 at 7 (= Droit et justice dans le monde grec et hellénistique Warsaw, 2011: 211-231 at 218). After discussions at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton NJ in March 2014 I think Draco, in a more simple language, wrote the direct object χεῖρα as e.g. used in Arist. Rhet. 1374a35: τὸν ἑπάτητα τὴν χεῖρα ἔπεισεν and still found in a “confession inscription” of Asia Minor, Petzl, Georg, Eipigr. Anatol. 22, 1994, no. 44: ἐπίθη ἄρα[ν(ν)] τῶν χεῖρας. I thank my colleagues Angelos Chaniotis, Christopher Jones and Emmanuel Voutiras for a helpful discussion.
which from Draco’s times onwards determined which side swore “more truthfully and more purely”, as Antiphon characterized the method about 200 years later.

3. Rationality

Draco’s dikazein is rooted in the archaic way of settling disputes by purgatory oaths, which we would call irrational. However, imposing a double oath and having a panel of judges decide which one to believe, points to future rational adjudication. Eventually the art of rhetoric gave the parties more and more opportunity to use rational arguments and convince the judges of their case. Even today, the part played by Greek practical legal thinking in promoting rational court sentences, which still form part of our legal culture, has not been acknowledged.

Nevertheless, I do not overrate Draco’s rationality. From the archaic point of view, the double oath method could be explained as follows: one did not wait for the person who had sworn a false purgatory oath to be punished by the offended god. Rather, in a type of ordeal, one let the god himself speak through the judges’ votes on the double oath. One of the oaths had to be false. Technically speaking, by doubling the oath Draco deprived it of its decisive force; by adding a decisive “ordeal” he amazingly raised the sentence to a more objective, rational level. This simple and still irrational procedural method was the origin of what we term rational adjudication in Greece.

Abstract

The paper deals with what today we would call rational and irrational procedural methods in Greek adjudication in archaic times. In Draco’s law of homicide dating back to 621-620 B.C., I see the first known move from deciding the outcome of a case by imposing purgatory oaths towards voting by a panel of judges. Although deciding on the proper wording of a purgatory oath demanded a great deal of legal experience on the part of the state authorities, the outcome of the trial depended on the irrational decision of the culprit himself to brave the wrath of the gods if he committed perjury. In Draco’s law we find, firstly, the method of imposing contrary oaths (diomosiai) on each litigant (which explains the dikazein of the officials, the basileis). It was therefore not the oaths that were decisive, but the vote of the fifty-one ephetai who decided which oath was the better one. The party who won the case was the one best able to persuade the judges, and in this way, reasoning achieved a new level. This was the origin of the more rational classical Athenian procedural law. In this sense, I restored the text in the much disputed lacuna in IG I3 104.12 from the diomosiai mentioned in Ant. 6.16.