Greek and Roman Festivals

Content, Meaning, and Practice

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What is a Graeco-Roman Festival?

A Polythetic Approach

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Ask a number of Classical scholars what constitutes a festival, and you are likely to get quite different answers and probably also cause some puzzlement, deliberation or downright reluctance to reply.[1] The term festival appears to have a rather loose or wide-ranging meaning to most of us and still we all know roughly what it is about. But to be more specific, what do we mean when speaking about a Greek or Roman festival? Many European languages have their own version of the word 'festival'—such as *feest*, *Fest*, *festa*, *fiesta*, *fête*—all with slightly different content, which can in itself be an obstacle to pinpointing an exact meaning.[2] Would the possible answer be different if the question was put forward as 'Che cosa è una festa?', or 'Was ist ein Fest'? In both Italian and German the key word can signify a single party or celebration of some kind, whereas the English 'festival' does not signify in the same way a singular event such as a birthday party. This paper poses the question in English, hoping that it will be rather comprehensible in this Graeco-Roman context.

DEFINING, CATEGORIZING, CONCEPTUALIZING

Some key concepts or terms must have a commonly accepted meaning or denotation if communication about related phenomena is to be fruitful. In order to study 'literacy', 'imperialism', 'patronage', 'city

state', or 'Romanization', most Classical scholars would agree that our way of defining or understanding the given concept must be accounted for. In a book devoted to ancient festivals, 'festival' is such a key concept that should be made a *definiendum*. No study of ancient festivals or general book on Greek or Roman religion, that I have come across, comprehensively defines 'festival' or discusses its features.[3] Such a peculiarity—if not merely due to my ignorance—should offer not only a justification for addressing the question, but perhaps also a warning that the need for a definition has not been pressing. Nevertheless, by discussing different features of what constitutes a festival, I believe we can sharpen our understanding and interpretive capability, and some studies may even benefit from using a definition or characterization as an analytical tool.

Where do we begin? Can we distinguish different types or categories of festivals and describe them independently? None of the monographs on Greek or Roman festivals seem to categorize or classify festivals according to types; rather, they organize them according to the calendar,[4] or the deity in question.[5] Still, festivals can obviously be grouped or categorized in several ways depending on the purpose of the study. One way would be according to range or size, from the small festivals of a local community or deme, to the larger state (polis) festivals, on to regional or more or less all-inclusive (such as the Panhellenic ones). Yet, we know too little about the scale or number of participants in most festivals to make such a grouping analytically meaningful. Moreover, a number of festivals were expanded either on fixed intervals (*penteterides*) or on special occasions and included a much broader spectrum of participants, such as during the Great Panathenaia. In Hellenistic times, some local festivals were even transformed into Panhellenic festivals, such as the Leucophryeneia in Magnesia-on-the-Maeander.[6]

Another way of categorizing could be according to the religious setting, ritual type, or gender. To a certain extent, festivals can be labelled agricultural, commemorative, or gender-oriented; they may be specified as connected to initiation, transformation, or cleansing; the festivals with agonistic elements could be grouped, so could all those involving fertility rituals, and so on.[7] Attempts to group festivals accordingly might serve a purpose for some studies, but such categories are not mutually exclusive or very informative per se and will thus for most studies not be precise analytical tools.

Years ago scholars were preoccupied with the origin and dating of religious celebrations, and hence another way of classifying festivals could be according to age or origin, such as Archaic/pre-urban, Classical/urban, Hellenistic/Imperial. Our present-day knowledge of the ongoing transformation of civic and religious celebrations, as well as the obvious lack of firm evidence for dating the ancient festivals, however, leads to a dead end.

Finally, there are the Greek and Roman terms for celebrations or festivals: *heortai, eranoi, panegyreis, synodoi, agones, dies festi, ludi,* and *feriae*.[8] But these are not equivalent, mutually exclusive, or hard-and-fast categories; these words are used intermixed, sometimes as synonyms, and often without rendering any precise category. Moreover, in order to have a scholarly value, a concept needs to be determined for *our* purpose and usage, not the ancients'.

In sum, it seems there is no obvious or natural way of categorizing Graeco-Roman festivals, at least not any that will fulfil a need for analytical categories. Consequently, there should be no barrier against seeking a cohesive definition or conceptualization of a festival as such.

A festival is not merely *any* celebration, sacrifice or ceremony—so far we all agree. But what then constitutes a festival, what distinguishes it from other religious acts and festivities? In order to be a meaningful tool, a definition should be relatively open and elastic, that is wide-ranging enough to comprise all important aspects, yet not so wide that it ends up including all possible celebrations such as a wedding, the death of somebody's odious mother-in-law, or three Syrian merchants meeting in Trastevere in Rome to sacrifice a goat to their patron god. What we need is evidently not a clear-cut, monothetic definition (defined in terms of characteristics that are both necessary and sufficient in order to identify members of that class), which ends up excluding celebrations that many scholars would regard as festivals, thus leading to endless discussions of criteria. A polythetic approach seems more prosperous, one in which a category or class is defined in terms of a broad set of criteria that are neither necessary nor sufficient, but with a certain number of defining characteristics, where none of the features has to be found in each member of the category. The polythetic approach that I will consider in this paper is inspired by Benson Saler's *Conceptualizing Religion* (1993). Saler treats several ways of conceptualizing religion, from monothetic to multi-factorial approaches, and insists on viewing religion as an analytical category. His discussion of polythetic

approaches relates to Wittgenstein's theory of family resemblance, principles of taxonomy in the biological sciences, and theories of basic-level categories and prototype definitions. 'Festival' is certainly much less complex a concept than 'religion', even though they are vaguely related, and I shall not try to transfer Saler's conclusions as to how to conceptualize religion, rather I will extract and simplify some points inspired by his thorough discussion.

First, we must identify certain phenomena or features common to Graeco-Roman festivals, where we assert that no single feature is *essential to* group membership, nor is any single feature *sufficient for* group membership. Even though *altar*, *procession*, and *divinity* may be typical ingredients in Graeco-Roman festivals, they are hardly comparable, and we shall have to organize phenomena or features in groups (distinguishing between components, forms, and types), and discuss them according to certain questions or topics. Events or celebrations comprising all features can be viewed as *prototype* festivals, whereas those with only a few will have to be considered borderline cases (yet without clear-cut boundaries). However, not all features in such a polythetic approach are equally important, and we need to address also the question of centrality. There are several ways of determining importance—from statistical occurrence in a sampled group, to a scholarly judgement of substance (considering some features more essential than others). Since for our purpose there is nothing to be gained by determining model features or characteristics unrelated to what are commonly recognized as ancient festivals, our point of departure will have to be the major emblematic exemplars, i.e. the large and well-known festivals such as the Panathenaia and City Dionysia of Athens, the Daphnephoria in Thebes, the Spartan Hyacinthia, the Ludi Romani and Saturnalia of the Romans, and the Panhellenic festivals of Olympia and Delphi. These were important and set the framework also for many other festivals to come, and they are certainly central to our understanding of ancient festivals and can hence be reckoned as typical or *archetypal* festivals. We will expect them to comprise most essential festival features and be close to a prototype, which others would have to be measured against. Considering their size and magnitude, however, they are rather atypical; an average festival was certainly smaller and less momentous than these. Did the smaller festivals by and large also focus on other aspects and emphasize different features than the major ones? To get a more complete picture, we must consider and

give weight also to a range of other smaller festivals of the Greek and Roman world in order to identify and discuss the most essential features. In determining what was central to ancient festivals, we will therefore have to combine a quantitative and a qualitative analysis. Obviously, this cannot be conducted in full in a short initial paper; a more thorough comparative study of all recorded celebrations in ancient calendars would be needed. What I am going to present in the following are accordingly presumptions rather than hard-and-fast results.

I start the quest to identify significant features or aspects with the most clear-cut definition of ancient festivals I have come across. In *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (3rd edn.), Jon D. Mikalson says the following about Greek festivals (1996: p. 593):

> Greek festivals were religious rituals recurring, usually every year, two years, or four years, at fixed times in the calendar. Unlike sacrifices and other rituals performed for specific occasions (e.g. marriage) or in times of crisis, they were intended, in general terms, to maintain or renew the desired relationship with supernatural powers... Festivals proper (*heortai*) should be distinguished from annual sacrifices (*thysiai*), however large, and the many other rituals that together formed the religious calendar... But heortology has traditionally investigated the dating and description of all calendrically recurring rituals, and that is the sense in which 'festival' is usually understood in Classical scholarship.

Mikalson does not address Roman festivals, but I assume that we can adapt this description also to fit them.[9] It is a good point of departure for further discussion, as it focuses on some important matters regarding festivals: time, ritual practice, recipient of worship, and purpose.

FESTIVAL FEATURES

Time and cycles: the calendar

'As the sanctuary articulates space, so the festival articulates time,' Walter Burkert states.[10] A festival is connected to time in one sense or another. The major ancient festivals that spring to mind all seem to fit in with Mikalson's definition as a recurring event, fixed in a calendar, recurring annually, every second or fourth year. Some celebrations

occur even less frequently, however, such as the Great Daidala in Boeotia and the Roman *ludi saeculares*.[11] Still, they are few and connected to time cycles and should not cause any complications. Religious calendars were kept in order to keep track of the festival year in antiquity—although they did not record festivals per se, but official sacrifices—and thus we may consider a calendar entry (or a state of recurring at some other more or less fixed time) as a highly essential feature.[12] This is certainly in accordance with the major archetypal festivals and also many minor festivals, known to us precisely because they *were* recorded in an ancient calendar. A few Greek festivals were celebrated only when particular signs or incidents occurred, for instance the Athenian Pythaïs.[13] Such celebrations were recurring, but not according to a calendar or fixed time cycle, and may thus be more problematic.

The Romans organized their days of festivity slightly differently than the Greeks, and of the public holidays (*feriae publicae*)—the *feriae stativae*, the *feriae conceptivae*, and the *feriae imperativae*—only the *feriae stativae* were fixed in the calendar.[14] The *feriae conceptivae* were held each year, but not on fixed days, and the timing was for the magistrates or priests to decide (Macrob. *Sat.* 1.16). The grand *feriae Latinae* are included among the *conceptivae*; arguably, they were still recurring each year, even if not on an exact date. The *feriae imperativae*, however, were held solely ad hoc in certain emergencies, at the command of a magistrate with *imperium*, and not related to time cycles.

If we follow Mikalson and nonetheless consider 'cyclic or fixed in calendar' as an essential feature of ancient festivals, all ad hoc celebrations fall short. Celebrations of state achievements, such as victories of war, and ruler or elite celebrations connected to events and anniversaries (birthdays, accession to power, weddings and funerals) will not comply with this characteristic, unless they were established as recurring memorials. The Roman triumph was a recurring event, but yet not in a cyclic sense, and on every occasion a unique accomplishment was celebrated.[15] Ad hoc celebrations lack a typical festival feature: regular recurrence.

To take place: location

A festival is something that takes place, and it does so with a gathering of people somewhere at a set location. Today many would consider a

Christmas service as being at the heart of the festival season, yet nobody would consider a family dinner on Boxing Day to be a festival. Arguably, Christian holidays can be celebrated anywhere. What about the proper Graeco-Roman festival, was it conversely always bound to a strict location?

The major ancient cults were located at a sacred place or particular sanctuary of some sort, and fundamental cult activities of the festival took place there, usually with an altar as one focal point. Looking at our major archetypal festivals, it is evident that they took place at the same location every time. Obviously, a festival may include movement from one place to another, such as the Great Brauronia which started in Athens and finished in Brauron,[16] and some festivals were celebrated both in the urban centre as well as locally, as appears to be the case for the Athenian Scira.[17] Rituals may, of course, also change as in the pathway of processions and so on, and damaged temples or shrines may be rebuilt at new locations. But was the location of such importance that members of the community could not celebrate a certain festival if not present at this place? The Spartans of 480 BC had to celebrate their Carnea in Laconia before they could leave for the battle of Thermopylae. Celebrating on the road was not an option, even though Carnea were celebrated by Dorians throughout the Greek world.[18] Yet that and similar events in Greek history can perhaps be given political explanations as well. What about ordinary citizens travelling or temporarily settling abroad, would they observe the religious calendar of their own deme or polis and celebrate festival days accordingly? We have scarce information of such practices, but Callimachus has an Athenian celebrating *his* Athenian Anthesteria in Alexandria (Fr. 178 Pfeiffer). Parker (1994) has furthermore pointed out a peculiar nature of Athenian colonies, namely their cleruchies and the fact that they maintained contact with the cults at Athens. Yet it seems quite clear that unlike the religious holidays of the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim calendars, the Graeco-Roman festivals were principally celebrated at a single predetermined location.

However, some festivals may not strictly adhere to this characteristic, such as the widespread Thargelia with its peculiar scapegoat ritual.[19] The Thesmophoria, to pick another, was celebrated quite similarly by women throughout Greece.[20] It had a local Demeter sanctuary as the focal point, nevertheless, and was apparently celebrated independently at every location. The Ionian Alexandreia of Hellenistic times is recorded as a moveable festival. Furthermore, we

may question how important a certain locality was for the celebration of some of the mysteries, such as the one for Isis that Apuleius' hero Lucius experienced in Corinth (*Met.* 11). Finally, there are also major festivals that deviate from the idea of a strictly location-bound celebration, such as the 'archetype' Saturnalia. It had its core in the Forum Romanum, where the ceremony started with a great sacrifice at the Temple of Saturnus on the seventeenth of December, followed by an open banquet.[21] But detached from these public urban celebrations, the Saturnalia apparently took place with all sorts of merry-making, both in private and throughout Roman territory, without a sacred focal place.[22]

When the city states were incorporated into larger empires under Hellenistic monarchs or the Romans, ruler-cult observance and centralized calendars were imposed. This may have challenged the perceived need for a foundation in a local sacred place. Celebrating Rome, the Roman people, and members of the imperial family in particular, was undertaken throughout the Roman empire, with the stimulus for these events often presented as coming from 'below'.[23] These imperial holidays were arguably also bound to a certain locality, however, since they comprise ceremonies, games, and sacrifices at particular sites, such as can be viewed in the regulations of the Gytheum inscription (*SEG* 11.923). To what extent they were truly tied to a sacred place can always be contested, but the many altars and shrines consecrated to imperial cults make it obvious that they usually had a clear focal point.

What about the old Roman festivals—did they spread from their old urban setting as the Romans expanded? All the twenty-two prevailing calendars of Early Imperial times from outside Rome are synchronized on the Roman religious calendar, leaving almost no trace of local celebrations or pre-Imperial religious timekeeping.[24] If local festivals were substituted for imitations of Roman festivals, this means that the original cult places were unimportant. But as Jörg Rüpke argues, these *fasti* were probably erected mainly to keep track of the Roman Imperial calendar and were not concerned with local religious practices. The inclusion of the Septimontium (a celebration of the Seven Hills of Rome) in Italian calendars and as a school holiday in Tertullian's Carthage (*De idolatria* 10.3) suggests that such a holiday, of importance to the Roman state and order, did not need a local foundation to be observed.[25] In his contribution to this publication, Jörg Rüpke stresses that many festivals are characterized

by 'decentralized commemoration' during the Roman Empire. There is also the 'military' calendar (*feriale*) from Dura Europus (*c.* AD 225), which record many imperial anniversaries and three of the 'ordinary' Roman festivals, the Quinquatria, Vestalia and Neptunalia.[26] A celebration of these in a Mesopotamian garrison suggests that a Roman setting was far from necessary. We may, however, question whether a proper festival was indeed celebrated throughout the Roman empire, even if a holiday was marked on the calendar.

In Roman Imperial times, many days, marked on official calendars for observance or celebrations, seemingly tended to be less dependent on any site or proximate myth than in the realm of the city state. Nevertheless, as the great majority of all recorded festivals were place-bound, it seems reasonable to include ritual activities at a particular location or sacred place as an essential feature, at least for the festivals of Classical Greece and the Roman Republic.

A public event: *communitas*

A typical festival, then, *takes place* largely within the city's public space or connected to a sanctuary outside the urban limits. Festivals are certainly closely connected to social institutions and phenomena. The major archetypal festivals were marked out as periods for gathering and festivity, with spin-offs such as fairs and marketplaces.[27] A festival was a public, inclusive event—inclusive at least for the community; indeed, it was a visible manifestation of, for, or within a community, which was often made up of the inhabitants of a polis/*civitas*, or more specifically, its citizen body. It could be more exclusive (deme/tribe) or less exclusive (regional, Panhellenic—the *panegyris* proper) depending on the given celebration. Not everybody was invited to participate in all parts of the ritual, that is clear, yet most religious celebrations were at least partly open to male citizens. There were some festivals, though, that were solely for women, such as the widespread Greek Thesmophoria and the Roman celebrations of Bona Dea.[28] We also have records of celebrations conducted mainly by foreigners, metics, freedmen, or other people of low legal status, such as the Bendidia at Piraeus and several ruler-cult celebrations in Hellenistic and Roman times. Celebrations of this kind could still be conducted openly in the public space and not restricted to any distinct social group.[29]

A calendar entry would indicate a public celebration.[30] Yet the Roman distinction between *sacra privata* and *sacra publica*, if Festus can be trusted (284L^2), seems to disappear in the celebration of certain festivals. There are calendar entries of official cults for which we have no account of as public celebrations, only as private rituals. This is the case for the Lemuria, for which we only have Ovid's description (*Fasti* 5.419–92) of solely private/domestic ceremonies. We can only assume that there was some kind of official cult activity as well, but as with several other calendar entries, we have no evidence to confirm that this was a public celebration at a specific location. A few Roman festivals were clearly celebrated both in public and private, such as the Compitalia and the Saturnalia mentioned above, and they were labelled *sacra popularia* by Festus (298 L^2).

The Roman *feriae privatae* (and Greek counterparts), on the other hand, were family anniversaries or celebrations, not recorded in official calendars.[31] Yet, for some of the larger families, these could take the form of a great public spectacle, including many other festival features. Marriages, funerals and the *feriae denicales* of the *nobiles* could be even bigger events, but, of course, not recurring at a fixed time in the calendar. Celebrations like these precede the later Imperial ones. Yet the ruler-cult and imperial celebrations were clearly more official, as the ruler personified the state and carried its political authority.

However, numerous annual celebrations were for the initiated only. It was vital for most mystery celebrations (*teletai*) that large parts of the ritual or ceremony were performed in secrecy, for the initiated only. Still, one can argue that for instance the annual celebration of the Great Mysteries in Eleusis was a public event, concerning the whole of Athens. The procession of the *mystai* and a variety of performances would be visible to the public, even if the key ritual was performed in concealment.[32]

Many of the smaller and more private celebrations would not have the character of a public event, however, such as the activities of Hellenistic private associations and Roman *collegia*.[33] The Roman Bacchanalia, quite a large celebration according to our sources and one which included Roman aristocracy, was conducted solely in private and in such a way that it was prohibited in 186 BC, with severe punishments for the convicted celebrants; it was definitely not a public event, but still with many characteristics of a festival. The official quadrennial games, Agon Capitolinus, which the emperor

Domitian instigated in honour of Jupiter in AD 86, would surely qualify as a festival, but what about the private annual games in honour of his favourite Minerva, probably held at his Alban villa? And what about offerings and festivities within, say, the *collegium* of *stuppatores* at Ostia?

This is indeed a matter of opinion, where we cannot reach a definite conclusion. Our archetypal festivals were singled out precisely because they were large and public, and a quantitative approach will depend on what types of celebrations are included. Few scholars will hesitate to speak of privately initiated or arranged festivals, but as a dinner party is not a festival by anybody's standard, there must be a line somewhere between a private gathering and a proper festival, and between what concerns the few and the many. A celebration held in private surroundings for an exclusive group and not attached to the community at large is, in my impression, not a festival. I thus wish to maintain that the Graeco-Roman festival was typically a public event that concerned a large number of people.[34] Private or exclusive celebrations, not included in an official calendar or otherwise given a stamp of communal authority, accordingly fall short. Hence an ancient festival took place in a public space. We may go on to look more closely at what was *taking place* and whether there were ritual features which were so common that they can be described as distinctive to Graeco-Roman festivals.

Ritual programme: key elements

The Graeco-Roman festivals were clearly celebrated according to a more-or-less set ritual programme of some sort. We can take for granted that a festival was established at some point, with certain rites and procedures, which were recorded, if only in the memory of the celebrants, and repeated the next time the festival was celebrated.[35] Obviously, many festival programmes changed over time, and new aspects or cults may have been introduced, such as the cult of Pelops in Olympia (discussed by Gunnel Ekroth below), with or without the awareness of the participants.[36] I have yet to note any festival, however, where the celebration, without any ritual precedence, was reorganized on every occasion. Hence, a ritual programme is an essential feature, even if for most recorded festivals we have scarce or no information about its detailed content.

Ancient festivals involved a variety of ritual types—rituals of rectification, fertility (harvest), initiation, transformation, maintenance, purification, and so on—as well as a variety of ritual components or forms. Clearly, we cannot separate essential from less essential ritual types, but from the great assortment of ritual components, some appear peculiar and particular, others common and customary. I shall here only list some characteristics that seem so widespread that we can deem them essential according to our polythetic definition.[37]

(a) *Celebrants.* Obviously there were no festivals without people. And at the centre were those who presided over the celebration and performed key cult rituals. Customarily, this task was assigned to a college of magistrates or priests (or a single person of authority), who also kept record of the ritual programme, sacred objects, and texts.[38] For the larger public celebrations as discussed above, these colleges were predominantly 'official' representatives, in the sense that they were elected or appointed by the community or the government, to perform a public sacrifice according to the calendar. Besides the priests or ritual masters many festivals also had its ambassadors and special guests (*theorodokia*).[39] Many celebrations were conducted by groups that recruited their own ceremonial masters, but as discussed above we may consider a public display or inclusive occasion as a hallmark of an ancient festival.

(b) *Sacrifice.* The major festivals all include a blood sacrifice (*thysia, sacrificium*); pig, sheep, goat, and oxen being the most popular. Other animals may also appear: at certain festivals, fish (e.g. the Roman Volcanalia) or dogs (e.g. the Roman Lupercalia, Robigalia, the Argive Arnis/Cynophontis) were preferred, and the odd horse can also be found (e.g. Equus October). For some celebrations a bloodless sacrifice may have been favoured, such as for the Black Demeter in Phigaleia (Paus. 8.42). Most of the celebrations recorded in ancient festival calendars that we have knowledge about, however, do have animal sacrifices. In any case, it is hard to imagine a festival without any offerings at all. It seems that the Christian emperors and authorities went right to the heart of pagan celebration when sacrifices were forbidden.[40] Festivals were probably also the peak time of the year regarding votive offerings and gifts (cf. the *agermos* institution).

(c) *Prayer.* 'There is rarely a ritual without prayer, and no important prayer without ritual,' Burkert assures us,[41] and closely connected to the sacrifice in all the major festivals is a prayer of some sort—for the good of the community, its people, or ruler. We shall not enter into a discussion on the composite forms of prayers or their function (dedicatory, supplicatory, imprecatory, votive, etc.), but simply recognize that appeals to divine powers appear essential to the celebrants during a festival. Our lack of procedural knowledge of the many smaller festivals makes this more of a qualified guess than evidence in a quantitative sense.

(d) *Banquet.* Feasting is elemental, to a degree where some may deem a festival without a feast to be a contradiction in terms. The official banquet was not open to everybody. It seems, however, that the major Greek festivals included a large number among their banqueters, where at least meat from the sacrifice (the *kreanomia*) was distributed not only to the ceremonial participators but to the whole (male) citizen body.[42] Indeed, there is much epigraphical evidence of different banqueting arrangements, in relation to special invitees and so on during festivals, to suggest that the Greek social system was not so egalitarian after all.[43] Feasting seems to be somewhat less imperative in Roman festivals; banquets are recorded for eight of the annual celebrations of the Roman calendar, but only the Saturnalia and the Compitalia offered banquets to the public at large.[44] Segregation was the rule in Roman religious feasting. Still, we can assume that dining and drinking together were widespread activities, during these festive days, even if not formally arranged by the celebrants for a large number of people.

(e) *Ritual treatment of key cult objects.* Images of the relevant god, being paraded in the streets, re-dressed, cleansed or showered with garlands or flowers, were a common sight during ancient festivals. Other consecrated objects (*ta hiera, sacra*) central to the cult or major votive gifts may also have been displayed or included in festival rituals. In a few celebrations, however, the ritual treatment may have been carried out in secrecy by a small group of ordained celebrants, such as the cleaning of the statue of Athena by a number of women during the Plynteria.

(f) *Procession.* A procession of some sort is connected to many Greek festivals, and although we lack information about many recorded festivals, I conclude with Burkert: 'Hardly a festival is without its *pompe*'.[45] Even the just mentioned Plynteria, which was conducted in secrecy, had a public procession. Processions appear to have been less important in Roman celebrations, but as pointed out by Jörg Rüpke (below) they were probably an excellent way to produce publicity for

a ritual. Yet, for the great Saturnalia no procession is recorded. We may accordingly be more hesitant to acknowledge the procession as common to all festivals in the entire Graeco-Roman world. Nevertheless, in a polythetic definition it can still pass as a typical element.

(g) *Performance or games.* The whole festival may certainly be viewed as one staged performance, as several distinguished scholars have argued. But a show (*epideixis*) or competition (*agon*)—a visible happening—of some sort was also a customary *element* in a festival programme. And not even always as part of the official programme. Hymns, music, dances, or other forms of ritual performance were part of the liturgies of many well-known festivals, and several also included horse races, torch races, drama, or other spectacles.[46] To fasten firebrands to foxes' tails and have them run in the Circus Maximus, as the Romans did for the Cerealia, were probably among the more bizarre shows, though we have many descriptions of peculiar acts and pageants. Games or competitions, from the drama contest of the City Dionysia, the pyrrhic dances of the Panathenaia, to the athletic games and the Roman *ludi* and *circenses*, were important to many festivals—especially the Panhellenic 'crown games' *(stephanitai)*. Agonistic activities were certainly not mandatory, but quite common, to such a degree that the Roman world saw a great number of travelling performers—athletes, musicians, poets, actors, singers, dancers, and so on—who made up a festival industry. Shows and games united and entertained participants and spectators alike, and a performance of some kind certainly characterized a Graeco-Roman festival.[47]

There are probably other features or elements in the ritual form of festivals in the Classical world that could be highlighted; perhaps some scholars would deem a few of the ones I have included to be insufficiently observable or significant. Nonetheless, I propose the following: no festival is without rituals; the rituals were performed according to a predisposed plan administered by a group of celebrants, and customarily they included prayers, sacrifices, banquets, cult images, processions, and performances of some sort. This leads us now to the far more tricky question of worship and purpose.

Sacred or secular: a question of religion?

All the major archetypal festivals are clearly centred round the worship of the main gods. Hence, we can deduce that cult activity was an

essential feature of Graeco-Roman festivals. 'In historischer Zeit hatte jedoch jedes Fest seinen Gott,' as Martin P. Nilsson puts it in his study of *Griechische Feste*.[48] H. W. Parke starts his *Festivals of the Athenians* by stating that 'by "festival" is meant the days set aside by the Athenian state for the worship of deities. In the ancient Greek city there were no purely secular festivals.'[49] The many smaller festivals known to us do not necessarily involve the main gods, however, and sometimes the actual god or spirit involved is rather blurred, such as the Ionian Apaturia and the Roman Lucaria. What is more, a number of recorded commemorations and festivities do not seem to be connected to divine worship at all, such as the Athenian remembrance of the famous victory at Marathon on the sixth of Boedromion, the Roman Regifugium and Poplifugia and all the 'Geschlechterfeste, deren Bedeutung nicht so sehr religiös war,' as Nilsson observes.[50] Nilsson, moreover, treats Classical Greece and thus ignores Hellenistic ruler-cult celebrations, such as the Demetrieia instituted in Athens in 307 BC in tribute to Antigonus and his son Demetrius.[51]

If we follow Nilsson, Parke, and Mikalson (in his *OCD* definition cited above), festivals involve (communicating with) divine powers. This means that our perhaps most common modern idea of a festival—in Western terms at least—as a secular gathering of people pursuing a common interest, such as music, art, or veteran cars, is not equivalent to an ancient festival. Moreover, looking at national holidays or calendrical days of extra festivity in most Western countries, the ones that are most similar to ancient festivals are either secularized celebrations with a Christian backbone, such as Halloween, Thanksgiving, Carnival, St Patrick's Day, or they are modern non-religious state memorials, such as independence days, days of the constitution, labour day, and so forth. The modern annual festivals of harvests, flowers, and fruits certainly have much in common with ancient festivals, with the German Oktoberfest as a vivid example. Few would label such as religious celebrations, however. The Norwegian national day, the seventeenth of May, celebrating the Norwegian constitution, is a great outdoor event all over Norway, with public processions and parades, games, particular symbols, and massive feasting. However, there is no god at the centre of this celebration (not counting the Constitution as a deity), and nobody would refute that it is secular—yet we, no doubt, would have included it among the key festivals had they been described thus in an

ancient source. We may furthermore ask whether there is a significant difference between these celebrations and, for instance, the Panathenaia. The Panathenaia was certainly not only about worshipping Athena, but was as much a veneration of Athens, her political order and her citizens.[52]

The distinction between religious and secular, profane and sacred is certainly not obvious and uncomplicated, but as Scott Scullion shows in his chapter in this volume, it may occasionally be accounted for even in antiquity. In his description of Roman religion, Polybius holds that it was spectacular and staged, and that the celebrations and public ceremonies were vital to control the masses (6.56.6–15). Yet, this is not a matter of cynical political tactics, he declares; rather, the ceremonies and festivals of the Roman Republic were natural elements in a well-functioning organism. To try to distinguish between truly religious and purely secular celebrations in Graeco-Roman times seems at any rate folly. The religious and the secular are intertwined, but can we be sure that there was a true 'supernatural power' involved in all ancient festivals?

Many scholars and laymen have for instance expressed doubt concerning whether the ancient ruler-cult celebrations were truly religious rituals, concerning supernatural powers. The question can be put thus: Would a Roman take seriously as a religious occurrence the cult of, say, Hadrian's mother-in-law *diva* Matidia, her huge temple on the Campus Martius, and the *supplicatio* (recorded in the Dura Europus military calendar) for her birthday? In the Codex-calendar of 354 (Filocalus) no less than ninety-eight days of imperial *ludi* and *circenses* are recorded, far more than all the 'other' gods and spirits together.[53] Would this escalation in imperial *divi* and the number of holidays in the Roman calendar during Imperial times not be puzzling to a Roman? There is no way to do justice to the vast theoretical debate concerning these issues in this short paper. I am nonetheless persuaded by the arguments put forward by among others, Simon Price and Ittai Gradel, that it is futile and wrong to view the imperial cult as political as opposed to a truly religious cult of the ordinary gods. Divinity can come in many degrees, and cult acts and divine honours are about showing veneration and negotiating the *do ut des* game.[54] The point is that these imperial celebrations were *conducted* as a sacred event, to a divinity. Modern and ancient doubt may count for little; as Alföldy points out: 'Before the victory of the Church, there were no other cults in the Roman empire which enjoyed such success.'[55] Furthermore, we shall not forget the many

present-day worshippers of late and living people, including the cult of certain football teams, or even footballers. And there are probably many similarities between ancient notions of *apotheosis* and divinity, and the cult of Princess Diana.

Celebrating great victories or important occasions within the ruler family certainly had a religious element and it would involve cult activity. We can hence maintain that a Graeco-Roman festival was a religious celebration, even though it often had social or political aims and aspects as well. Cult acts and the worship of gods or less clearly defined divine powers constituted an essential element in a Graeco-Roman festival, and consequently must be one of the central features in a polythetic definition.

A different question connected to divinity is whether we should include Jewish and Christian celebrations. One could, of course, easily argue that celebrations performed by Jews according to the Jewish calendar, whether in Palestine or in Diaspora, were festivals that took place in the Graeco-Roman world. The same goes for the Christian celebrations, when they were instituted, even though they were not firmly established according to the calendar of the church until Late Antiquity. On the other hand, a Graeco-Roman festival would first and foremost be conceived within a polytheistic religious universe of the Greeks and Romans in Classical times.

Connected to worship and divinity is the question of what the purpose was for the ancients of celebrating a festival. Motives and intentions are not easily laid out, and cannot, I assume, be incorporated in a polythetic definition in any fruitful way. Still, the purpose of the Graeco-Roman festival is arguably far more interesting than a mere description of essential features and components. *Why* festivals were celebrated is obviously a key issue—also for our question what a festival is—but cannot be dealt with in much detail in this paper. Several of the other contributions to the present volume delve further into this. To end this quest, I shall limit myself to briefly sketching out some possible reasons for the Greeks and Romans celebrating their festivals.

THE PURPOSE OF THE GRAECO-ROMAN FESTIVAL

We recall Mikalson's claim that festivals 'were intended, in general terms, to maintain or renew the desired relationship with supernatural

powers', and something similar is stated in most studies. We have established above that the Graeco-Roman festival was a religious celebration, and there seems to be no disagreement that its purpose was (like all pagan cult acts) to show veneration for and appease the gods and divine powers, thus fulfilling man's part of a comprehended pact of exchanging favours and deeds. But that was not the only purpose, and sometimes not even the most important purpose. In searching for purpose we may lay weight on both function and intention.

The Graeco-Roman festival, taking place in public with its often vivid ritual programme, certainly united and entertained the participants and spectators, and hence helped reproduce and strengthen common convictions and ideals of the community. This was one of the main purposes of celebrating festivals, or else a required sacrifice could have been performed without further ado. *Communitas*-bolstering can doubtless take many forms and serve more particular purposes, depending on the festival in question. A festival is thus a means to form and preserve the collective memory, be that of communal myths, traditions, values or beliefs. They confirm the world order and keep each individual in his or her place in this order. Festivals are conservative in this sense and therefore also an efficient tool for maintaining the social and political status quo. Through its ritual programme and renewal of the obligations to the gods, the Graeco-Roman festivals in many ways cemented the existing political order as part of the *pax deorum*, commonly with the current political leaders as key celebrants. A festival was about staging power and the existing power structure. But with Clifford Geertz we may state that political rituals do not only construe and give form to power, they also construct power. The introduction of new festivals or the transformation of existing ones may be seen as attempts to adjust or create new sociopolitical ties and ideologies, as argued among others by Noel Robertson, Leslie Kurke, and Barbara Kowalzig.[56] We may consequently view the celebration of ruler-cult festivals as an attempt to buttress a somewhat new political order, including establishing new communities of celebrants, all in keeping with the traditional world order and religion (as pointed out by Buraselis below). Celebrating non-traditional cults, connected to the ruler or a 'foreign' god of the ruling power, may be seen as a mark of submission or loyalty, as so many scholars have claimed, and the main purpose hence political. The introduction of new cults and festivals within a polytheistic society may certainly also merely be an act of acknowledging

a multi-ethnic and multi-religious population and an attempt to maintain peace and stability. The large Panhellenic festivals brought Greeks together in what was largely a celebration of Greekness. And the festivals of the Roman Empire were surely also about unifying the people under Roman rule, within the *pax Romana*, whether we wish to call it Romanization or not.

A festival is furthermore a manifestation of inclusion and exclusion, as it marks out the community of celebrants from others, be it according to age (e.g. festivals with passage rites), gender, legal or social status, residency, or ethnicity. A festival is thus not only about uniting a community, it may also be about outlining subgroups and pointing out differences: virgins, married women, boys, *epheboi*, demesmen, male citizens, *xenoi/peregrini*, slaves, and so on. A festival is thus also about seeing and being seen. The festival would not only concern, but also mark out the community and the residents therein; the deme or tribe as opposed to others, the polis as opposed to other city states, or the Greek or Roman world as opposed to all barbarians. Thus, an objective may be not just boosting 'we together', but also 'us v. them', pointing out who belonged to the community and who did not. Within this frame of mind, the festival—at least the major ones—may also be regarded as attempts to demonstrate some sort of superiority (morally, culturally, economically, politically, etc.) of the particular community or party of celebrants.

Pleasure and merrymaking, surely, was another important reason to celebrate a festival also for the ancients—to break the ordinary rhythm of labour and duties, to eat, drink, and enjoy the festivity, as is evident from Burkert's article in this volume. The games, plays, and athletic competitions of many festivals would clearly have caused anticipation and fuss akin to those of the present day. It was about performing, showing off, spotting talents, socializing, betting, cheering, booing, and, for the participants, competing for the first prize with its material and honorary gains. Certain festivals even had the element of a reversed world order, such as the Saturnalia, and would offer a rare chance to escape the ordinary, so that they possibly also functioned as social safety valves.[57]

These rudimentary thoughts about the purpose of the Graeco-Roman festival are little more than initial ideas and extracts from the work of other scholars. This is a field where more research would be appreciated even if the question of function and intention can never be fully solved. Still, the question of purpose belongs to a discussion of

what a festival is, and I maintain that we need to also focus on *why* festivals were celebrated and *what* they brought about in the Graeco-Roman world, not just on how, where, and by whom. The purpose of particular festivals may vary greatly, but in general terms the festival was as much a civic manifestation and a social event as a religious act.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Following an idea of a polythetic definition or conceptualization, I have proposed a number of essential features or characteristics that constitute the Graeco-Roman festival. They should not be regarded singly either as requisite or sufficient for group 'membership', but as typical hallmarks that in sum would characterize a festival. In my brief discussion I have emphasized the major and well-known festivals, seeing them as archetypes, but have also tried to pay attention to a bulk of smaller and lesser known celebrations that also appear in our sources. According to the idea of a polythetic approach, we shall not end up with a tight definition, but a *prototype* Graeco-Roman festival may be described as:

1. A cyclic celebration, recurring annually (in keeping with a calendar), or less frequently (in accordance with a time measure of some sort).
2. A celebration at a specific place, with a focal point (a shrine, sacred place, sanctuary, altar).
3. A public celebration, based in, and open to, members of the community (whether narrowly or widely defined). Parts of the sacred ritual may, nevertheless, have been performed in secrecy, for initiated celebrants only.
4. A celebration with a ritual programme, customarily comprising: (a) a party of defined celebrants; (b) sacrifice; (c) prayer; (d) banquet; (e) display/treatment of cult objects; (f) procession; (g) other pageants, shows or games.
5. A celebration centred on pagan worship and cult acts, with the purpose of maintaining or renewing the desired relationship with divine powers, and furthermore of construing and bolstering the community it was based in, its common identity, institutions, social order and relations to others.

Not all recorded festivals will fit this prototype description. By claiming that the festival was cyclic, for instance, we exclude all ad hoc celebrations such as weddings, funerals and victories. A celebration is accordingly not in keeping with the prototype unless it is repeated, to commemorate the primary occasion. The Roman *triumphus* lacks this true cyclic feature, but does arguably fulfil all the other hallmarks and may thus by many be regarded as a festival. The triumphs privately celebrated *in Albano monte* lack an official stamp as well and are further from the prototype, as would funeral games (*epitaphioi agones*) for a dead aristocrat.

Many celebrations are merely mentioned somewhere in ancient literature or recorded in a preserved inscription, and the lack of further information makes it impossible to determine whether or not they fit these prototype traits. Of the rather peculiar *festus puerorum lenoniorium* (feast for the boy prostitutes) recorded in the *Fasti Praenestini*, for instance, we know nothing more than its name; nonetheless, based on this alone it appears to fall short of many of the essential characteristics of a Graeco-Roman festival. From the recent studies of calendars, moreover, we have learned that a calendar entry does not necessarily mean that a festival was actually celebrated, and vice versa. Caution must be taken before considering the one to denote the other.

It is evident that not all celebrations can be described as public, or confined to a strict location, or engaging a community at large, or perhaps not even directed at divine worship. Whether or not they ought to be considered festivals according to our polythetic definition would hence depend on how they apply to the other characteristics and the individual scholar's judgement. Some of the features summarized as prototypical above may be regarded as more central or obligatory than others, but beyond the discussion conducted already, I shall not attempt to weigh them any further or ponder how many would be needed to make up a festival; that would arguably undermine the whole idea of a polythetic definition.

NOTES

1. I know, because I have done so. At a preliminary stage of organizing a symposium that eventually led to this publication, I sent all the participants a questionnaire about the nature of the Graeco-Roman

festival. I am grateful for the responses I received, and together with the discussion during the symposium, it inspired this article.

2. e.g. we do not find the Roman festivals under the term 'Fest' in *Der neue Pauly*, but have to look under 'Ludi'.
3. There are, however, some valuable discussions on what constitute a festival in Parker (2005), 155–73; and Slater (2007).
4. Mommsen (1864); Fowler (1908); Parke (1977); Scullard (1981).
5. Nilsson (1906); Deubner (1932); Simon (1983).
6. On Magnesia, see Sumi (2004). On the transformation of Greek festivals in Hellenistic and Roman times, see also Nijf (1999).
7. Cf. Harrison (1922), esp. chs. 1–4.
8. Cf. Burkert, ch. 2 in this volume; also Cartledge (1985) for a good introduction to the Greek terms in regard to different festivals and their nature. Mikalson (1982) gives an interesting discussion of *heortai*, distinguishing them as Greek festivals proper. An alternative for the Greek festivals would be to include all rites recorded ending in a neuter plural *-a*, as suggested by Parker (2005), 158, but, as he also points out, that may exclude obvious festival 'candidates'.
9. The short description of Roman festivals in *OCD* (3rd edn.) by W. K. Pritchett and T. G. E. Powell, retained from a previous edition, does not give a pointed definition.
10. Burkert (1985), 99.
11. The Great Daidala was celebrated every fifty-ninth year according to Pausanias (9.3.5); cf. Strasser (2004). The Roman secular celebrations were to be held with an interval of a *saeculum*, fixed in 17 BC to 110 years; cf. Pighi (1965) and Weiss (1973). Claudius introduced a new cycle when he celebrated secular games in AD 47, on the eight hundredth birthday of Rome, whereas Domitian continued the old cycle in AD 88.
12. e.g. Michels (1967); Mikalson (1975); Herz (1975).
13. Strabo 9.2.11; cf. Boethius (1918); Deubner (1932), 203–4; and Parker (2005), 83–7.
14. Cf. Michels (1967), 73 ff.; Rüpke (1995), 487–92; and Christopher Smith, ch. 9 in the present volume.
15. Fowler (1908) does not account for triumph at all in his monograph on the Roman festivals, whereas Scullard (1981) gives a brief description in a last chapter on 'Other Occasions' without presenting the triumph institution as a festival.
16. Mommsen (1864), 409–10; Parke (1977), 139–40.
17. Cf. Parker (2005), 75–8, 173–7.
18. Cf. Burkert (1985), 234–6; Robertson (2002).
19. Cf. Wilson (2007) for a fresh account.
20. Cf. Nilsson (1906), 313–25.
21. Fowler (1908), 271–3; Scullard (1981), 206.

22. Cf. Macrob. *Sat.* (esp. ch. 1).
23. Fishwick (1987–2005); Price 1984; Gradel (2002).
24. Rüpke (1995), esp. 95–186; cf. also Beard, North and Price (1998), i 322–39.
25. Rüpke (1995), 163.
26. Fink, Hoey and Snyder (1940); Beard, North and Price (1998), ii 71–4 (no. 3.5).
27. Cf. Ligt and Neeve (1988).
28. Versnel (1992); Parker (2005), 270–89.
29. More on gender and social status in Attic festivals in Parker (2005), 165–73.
30. But as argued by Rüpke (1995) and mentioned above, the local calendars from outside Rome in Imperial times do not record the festivals celebrated locally.
31. Cf. Harmon (1978b).
32. Cf. Robertson (1996).
33. Kloppenborg and Wilson (1996); Arnaoutoglou (2003); Rüpke (2002). The problem of private v. public and individual v. community connected to the mysteries is well discussed by Burkert (1998).
34. Cf. Parker (2005), 162: 'Perhaps the real mark of a festival is in fact breadth of participation: an event is a festival if large numbers of the group celebrating it (citizens, for a festival of the city; demesmen, for a deme, and so on) are involved. It would contrast with the many sacrifices "on behalf of the Athenian people" in fact conducted by a small number of people.'
35. Cf. Wörrle (1988) for a detailed study of the establishment of a festival (*panegyris*) with a ritual programme in the Lycian city Oenoanda in AD 124.
36. On changes in ritual practice, cf. inter alia Bell (1997), 210–52, and Slater (2007).
37. Cf Slater (2007), 21, on some Greek epigraphical evidence on festival content.
38. Cf. Burkert (1985), 95–8; Zaidman and Pantel (1992), 46–54; Beard and North (1990), esp. 19–48, 73–91, 177–231; Scullard (1981), 27–31.
39. Cf. Hennig (1997) and Perlman (2000).
40. *Cod. Theod.* 16.10.2; Bradbury (1994).
41. Burkert (1985), 73.
42. e.g. the Panathenaia: *Syll.*[3] 271; the Hyacinthia: *Ath.* 4.139d. Cf. Parke (1977), 47 (for the City Dionysia, p. 127) and Nilsson (1906), 133–4. Kowalzig (2007), 188–201, writes excellently on *thysia, xenia* and banqueting in Delphi.
43. Cf. Slater (2007), 24.
44. Donahue (2003), 429–32.

45. Burkert (1985), 99. On processions see also Nilsson (1951). Since processions are distinctive and may be performed in secrecy, I prefer to keep them apart from the next characteristic (*g*).
46. Cf. many of the contributors in Wilson (ed.) (2007).
47. But see Rüpke's contribution to this publication for a somewhat different view.
48. Nilsson (1906), 463.
49. Parke (1977), 13. He is nonetheless quick to underline that 'the ancient Greeks had no rigid distinction between activities of a religious or of a worldly character'.
50. Parke (1977), 13.
51. Deubner (1932), 235. Much the same goes for the major studies on Roman festivals (Fowler, 1908; Scullard, 1981), which treat Republican Rome and thus do not address Roman Imperial celebrations.
52. Cf. Neils Chapter 6 in this volume, besides Neils (1996), and Connor (2000).
53. Salzman (1990), 131–46.
54. See e.g. Price (1984), esp. chs. 1 and 2; Gradel 2002, esp. ch. 2.
55. Alföldy (1996), 256.
56. e.g. Robertson (1992); Kurke (2007); and Kowalzig (2007).
57. Cf. Bourboulis (1964).

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