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## Religion in the ancient Greek city



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CHAPTER 10

# The festival system: the Athenian case

## SACRED CALENDARS

Festivals in honour of the gods (*heortai* was the most general of several words used) gave a rhythm to the political and everyday life of the city. In many cities the order of the festivals was fixed in accordance with written documents generally called sacred calendars. These were lists of festivals grouped by months of the year and days of the month. In chapter 8 we looked at some Attic deme-calendars; here we shall be concerned with the festival calendar of the Athenian state as such.

This calendar, in the form in which we know it in the Classical period, dated from the time of Solon (early sixth century). It was an integral part of his lawgiving. Almost two centuries later, at the very end of the fifth century, the city commissioned a certain Nikomakhos (who was exceptionally granted citizenship despite being allegedly the son of a public slave) to reduce to order the calendar of state sacrifices. The task was duly completed and the text was inscribed on a wall within the Stoa Basileios (office of the King Arkhon) in the Agora, though Nikomakhos was still prosecuted for his pains (Lysias xxx). Only fragments of this Great Calendar of Sacrifices survive, but by combining these with other sources it is possible to reconstruct a complete Athenian festival calendar month by month (Table 1), though uncertainties of detail remain; there was, however, no popular festival in Maimakterion.

The Athenians, like the Jews among others, worked with a lunisolar calendar, attempting by various means, especially inter-

Table 1. *Principal Athenian festivals*

| Festival            | Month and day             | Divinity  |
|---------------------|---------------------------|-----------|
| Kronia              | Hekatombaion 12           | Kronos    |
| Synoikia            | Hekatombaion 15-16        | Athene    |
| Panathenaia         | Hekatombaion 21-9 (?)     | Athene    |
| Eleusinia           | Metageitnion (?) [4 days] | Demeter   |
| Niketeria           | Boedromion 2              |           |
| Plataia             | Boedromion 3              |           |
| Genesia             | Boedromion 5              | Gē        |
| Artemis Agrotera    | Boedromion 6              | Artemis   |
| Demokratia          | Boedromion 12             |           |
| Eleusinia           | Boedromion 15-17, 19-21   | Demeter   |
| Pyanopsia           | Pyanopsion 7              | Apollo    |
| Theseia             | Pyanopsion 8              | Theseus   |
| Stenia              | Pyanopsion 9              | Demeter   |
| Thesmophoria        | Pyanopsion 11-13          | Demeter   |
| Khalkeia            | Pyanopsion 30             | Athene    |
| Apatouria           | Pyanopsion (?)            |           |
| Oskhophoria         | Pyanopsion (?)            | Athene    |
|                     | [Maimakterion]            |           |
| Haloa               | Poseideon 26              | Demeter   |
| Theogamia           | Gamelion 2                | Hera      |
| Lenaia              | Gamelion 12-15            |           |
| Anthesteria         | Anthesterion 11-13        | Dionysos  |
| Diasia              | Anthesterion 23           | Zeus      |
| Asklepieia          | Elaphebolion 8            | Asklepios |
| City Dionysia       | Elaphebolion 10-14        | Dionysos  |
| Delphinia           | Mounikhion 6              | Apollo    |
| Mounikhia           | Mounikhion 16             | Artemis   |
| Olympieia           | Mounikhion 19             | Zeus      |
| Thargelia           | Thargelion 6-7            | Apollo    |
| Bendideia           | Thargelion 19             | Bendis    |
| Plynteria           | Thargelion 25             | Athene    |
| Kallynteria         | Thargelion (?)            |           |
| Arrhetophoria       | Skirophorion 3            | Athene    |
| Skira               | Skirophorion 12           | Demeter   |
| Dipolieia/Bouphonia | Skirophorion 14           | Zeus      |

calation, to reconcile the disparate solar and lunar years, and to keep the calendar in step with the seasons. (If Aristophanic humour is to be taken seriously, the King Arkhons did not always do the most efficient job in this respect: see *Clouds* 619-23, dated 423.) The twelve lunar months were named after various divini-

Table 2. *Festivals in Hekatombaion*

| Day   | Festival  |
|-------|---|
| 1     | Noumenia  |
| 2     | Agathos Daimon  |
| 3     | Athene  |
| 4     | Herakles, Hermes, Aphrodite and Erōs                                      |
| 6     | Artemis   |
| 7     | Apollo (in this month Athenians celebrated the <i>annual</i> Hekatombaia) |
| 8     | Poseidon and Theseus  |
| 11    | Stated meeting of Assembly  |
| 12    | Kronia  |
| 15    | Biennial sacrifice  |
| 16    | Synoikia  |
| 17–18 | Sacrifice by <i>orgeōnes</i>  |
| 21    | Sacrifices to Kourotrophos by Erkhia deme only                            |
| 22    | Stated meeting of Council of 500  |
| 23    | Meeting of a private religious association                                |
| 28    | Chief day of Panathenaia  |

ties or festivals, differently in different cities. The Athenians' year was deemed to begin in mid-summer, the dead season of the agricultural year, and the months of their year do not coincide precisely with ours: Hekatombaion, the first, began in roughly mid-July and ended in roughly mid-August, and so on. In the Athenian calendar certain festivals were celebrated every month, others only annually. If monthly festivals and annual festivals are combined, a total of 120 days each year counted as festival-days for the Athenians, more than for any other Greek state.

Table 2 sets out the festival-calendar for one month by way of illustration; the first seven days listed were all days of monthly festivals.

These two tables give a good idea of the complexity and diversity of Athenian civic cults. Space forbids a detailed study of the festivals one by one, so we shall aim rather to bring out their general characteristics by taking certain specific examples such as the Panathenaia and the Great (or City) Dionysia. The principal moments of any festival were the procession, the sacrifice with its ensuing festal banquet, and the competitions or other ancillary features.

## PROCESSION (POMPĒ)

The procession often occupied the first day of a festival. It wended its way through the city from a fixed starting-point to the sanctuary of the divine honorand, following an identical route every time. Its organization was laid down in advance, the components differing from festival to festival. The following two examples illustrate some of the possible variations.

Every four years at the Great Panathenaia, on Hekatombaion 28, the Panathenaic procession left from the Dipylon Gate, crossed the Kerameikos (Potters' Quarter) and the Agora, and entered the Akropolis through the Propylaia. It then proceeded the length of the Parthenon and finished up at the east end of the temple in front of the great altar of Zeus and Athene. It thus passed through the city's most vital points, the Agora (heart of political life) and Akropolis (its spiritual crown). Certain sequences of the procession are represented in the Parthenon frieze (Appendix II), the interpretation of which is aided (but not entirely resolved) by literary sources. The procession directly involved several sections of the citizen population: young warriors (hoplites and cavalymen), old men, and daughters of citizens acting as Ergastinai (weavers of the *peplos*, the robe worn by Athene's olive-wood cult-statue) and Kanephoroi (basket-bearers). Resident aliens too were allotted a rôle, they and their sons carrying trays of offerings (Skaphēphoroi), their wives jars of water (Hydriaphoroi), and their daughters parasols (Skiadēphoroi). Perhaps even some of the unfree population were allowed to process. Certainly, foreigners were included, notably in the fifth century the representatives of the allied states in Athens' anti-Persian naval alliance, since they were treated as honorary colonists of Athens. And then of course there were the non-human participants, the cows destined for sacrifice.

The formal object of this solemn procession was to convey Athene's new *peplos*, saffron-dyed and embroidered with scenes of Athene's exploits in combat with the Giants, to the King Arkhon for him to place on Athene's *xoanon* in (eventually) the Erekhtheion (Appendix II). But it also allowed the city of Athens to display spectacularly both the hierarchy of its political organization and the unity in diversity of its population as a whole. This

spectacle was aimed as much at the rest of the Athenian people as at the allied representatives present and the Greek world at large.

The procession – or rather processions – of the Great or City Dionysia were rather different. Shortly before the festival, the statue of Dionysos Eleuthereus was removed from its sanctuary at the foot of the Akropolis near the theatre and transported in procession to a temple near the Academy *gymnasion* (public exercise-ground) on the way to Eleutherai (on the borders of Attica and Boiotia). Later it was returned to its original sanctuary, whence it was taken in a new procession on the first day of the festival proper, Elaphebolion 10, to the *orkhēstra* in the middle of the theatre. The route followed is not certain, but it seems to have been a procession of conventional type, involving civic officials, representatives of different categories of the city's residents, impresarios for the plays (*khoregoi*) dressed in their finery, bearers of offerings or of model phalli, and numerous sacrificial bulls (see p. 30). There followed a great sacrifice and banquet.

The other procession of the central day of the festival was called the *kōmos* (revel, rout), and this with its much less formal atmosphere lived up to its name. It took place at the end of the day, probably immediately after the banquet. Men carrying lighted torches and accompanied by players of *auloi* ran through the streets singing and dancing, enacting on a city-wide scale the revel (also called *kōmos*) that followed a private drinking party (*sumposion*).

The functions of these procession rituals were many and various. One was publicity: the reason for the festival was broadcast, and an invitation to join in was extended to all along the way. Other functions included renewal, a reactivation of the benefactions and virtues of the god whose statue was sometimes carried, and a reaffirmation of the sanctity of the different sites where the crowd halted, especially altars. Speaking generally, the procession served as a symbolic reappropriation of the city's space by the community. To those functions common to all processions may be added those that were specific to the festivals we have considered above. The Panathenaic procession, for example, was intended by the Classical Athenian city to give a visual representation of its unity and power and to embed its religious practice within the civic space. Every festival, we are

reminded finally, was a complex system of rituals that cannot be reduced to a single interpretation.

## THE SACRIFICE

Without rehearsing everything we have said earlier about the details and meanings of sacrifice in general (chapter 4), it will bear restating here that the sacrifice was a powerful ritual moment, present in every festival of the Athenian calendar. The number of the sacrificial victims, known to us through the accounts of the Treasurers of Athene, gives us a material measure of the importance of the post-sacrificial feasts. The sacrifice of a hecatomb (one hundred beasts, hence the month-name Hekatombaion) was frequent, and the figure could rise to over two hundred victims for a single festival. The city bore the cost of these sacrifices, either directly or, as is attested for the Panathenaia and Dionysia, by imposing the liturgy of *hestiasis* on rich men (chapter 9). At the Panathenaia the distribution of the sacrificial meat was made in the Kerameikos among those demesmen who had participated in the procession and sacrifice.

A look down the Athenian monthly calendar (Table 1) shows that, with the apparent exception of Maimakterion, not a month passed without a massive slaughtering of beasts. A city at festival time was thus also a city that reeked with the smells of spilt animal blood and roasted or boiled animal meat, and resounded with the noise of a community eating meat, drinking wine, and making merry.

## COMPETITIONS (AGŌNES)

Not every festival had a competition attached to it, but every competition was part of a religious festival. It is worth remembering that the Greeks invented the ideas of both competitive athletic games and the theatre within the (to us) alien context of religion. We shall take as our illustration of the former the Panathenaic Games, of the latter the Great Dionysia.

The Panathenaia festival had long been celebrated when, in 566, an attempt was made by Athens to produce a rival to the great Panhellenic festivals of the Olympic, Pythian, Nemean and

Isthmian Games, which had been organized into an interlocking circuit (*periodos*) in the previous decade. The attempt did not fully succeed. The Panathenaic Games remained more Athenian than Greek, although the competitions, held every fourth year during the Great Panathenaia, were opened to all Greeks. They included a contest for rhapsodes (reciters of Homeric epic verse), musical competitions of various sorts, and athletic events of the usual kinds (see the Olympics in chapter 11).

Competitors in the latter were males only and divided into three groups by age: children (up to eighteen), young men and older men. Apart from glory, they competed also for material prizes, the peculiarly Athenian Panathenaic amphoras filled with oil specially pressed from Athene's sacred olives. On one side of a Panathenaic amphora was depicted, always in the black-figure silhouette technique, Athene brandishing a sword, and alongside her an inscription that read 'Of the games (*athla*) from Athens'. On the reverse there was a scene of the particular event (chariot-race, race in armour, etc.) for which the amphora was the prize – or rather part of the prize: the winner of the boys' running race, for example, received fifty amphoras. At the Olympics all events were for individuals only, but the Panathenaic Games also included team-competitions: the dance in armour called the Pyrrhikhē, for which the prize was an ox and 100 drachmas, a torch-race, and even rowing-races (held off Cape Sounion).

## FESTIVAL AND THEATRE

The Great or City Dionysia held in Elaphebolion (March–April) included three or more days of dramatic competitions. Like the Panathenaia, these attracted a wider public than just the resident Athenian population. The origins of drama are a horribly complex and controversial issue; without delving into them, we may point out that at Athens all drama (included in the Rural Dionysia in Poseideion and the Lenaia in Gamelion as well as in the Great Dionysia) was staged in honour of Dionysos. His statue stood in the *orkhēstra*, the circular space (perhaps modelled on a threshing-floor) where the chorus performed; the theatre, at first built of wood, later (from the 330s) of stone, was set within his sacred precinct; and the plays were integrated within the rituals

of Dionysiac cult. The function of drama at Athens in the Classical period is another issue too complex to broach here (see further chapter 12), but some essential points that illustrate the integration of religion in civic life should be underlined.

Of the three Athenian play-festivals in honour of Dionysos the Great Dionysia was by far the most important. Competitions were held in tragedy, satyr-drama and comedy, and there was also a competition for choruses singing the special Dionysiac hymn called dithyramb. Over 1,000 Athenian citizens altogether took part as performers every year. The organization of the festival was in the charge of the Eponymous Arkhon, not the King, since this was a relative newcomer to the Athenian festival calendar. It was he who selected the poet-playwrights whose plays were to be performed, who saw to the allocation of the principal actors (*prōtagonistai*), and who appointed the impresarios (*khoregoi*) to fulfil the liturgy of equipping and maintaining a chorus, and he finally who presided over the judging of the various keenly contested competitions.

The theatre programme began at daybreak. The spectators were in festival garb, wearing wreaths on their heads; the distinguished citizens who had been awarded front-seat precedence (*proedria*) were sitting in the front row, together with members of the Council of 500, the ephebes and the specially selected judges. A ritual purification was carried out with the blood of a sacrificed piglet, and the order of competitors was drawn up by lot. Plays went on one after the other until dusk. At the end of the whole competition three prizes had to be decided in each category of drama, for best playwright, best *khoregos* and best actor. The following day an Assembly meeting was held, actually in the theatre (which could hold many more people than the Pnyx), to check the officials' accounts, vote honours and record the results.

The interpenetration of religion and civic life in the Great Dionysia was not confined to the organization of the festival. The plays themselves, by the themes they treated and the way they treated them, demonstrated the seamless connection between Athenian political thought and dramatic representation of myth and the gods. To put it succinctly, even though the characters of the dramas were gods, heroes or mythical figures – such as Athene, Ajax and Oedipus, or the Erinyes (Furies) – the questions

raised by the plots were central to political debate in democratic Athens.

## CONCLUSION

The Athenian festival-calendar, a veritable religious system, is but one example of how the Greeks organized their civic cults. But it does provide a very concrete illustration of the precise functions that festival rituals fulfilled and of the inseparability of festivals from the very definition of Greek civic life. As a micro-cosm of this macro-system we offer in conclusion an extract from a (substantially restored) decree of the later fourth century, governing the celebration, not of the four-yearly Great Panathenaia, but of the ordinary, annual Lesser Panathenaia:

So that with piety [...] annually, and that the procession in honour of Athene in the name of the Athenian people may be organized in the best way possible each year, and that all the necessary administrative measures relating to the festival celebrated in honour of the Goddess may be taken for always by the *hieropoioi*, let the people decree in all other respects in accordance with the Council's recommendation but adding the amendment that the *hieropoioi* shall offer as in the past two sacrifices, one to Athene Hygieia, the other in the ancient temple, that they shall distribute to the *prutaneis* five parts of meat, to the nine Arkhons three parts, to the Treasurers of the Goddess one part, to the *hieropoioi* one part, to the Generals and Taxiarkhs three parts, to the Athenian members of the procession and to the Kanephoroi as usual, and the rest of the meat to Athenian citizens; that, after having bought the sacrificial cattle with the forty-one minai raised from the new lease by agreement with those responsible for the purchase, they should immediately after the procession sacrifice these beasts near the Great Altar of Athene, keeping one of the finest for the altar of Athene Nikē; that, once the sacrifices to Athene Polias and Athene Nikē have been accomplished, they shall distribute to the Athenian People in the Kerameikos the meat of the beasts bought with the forty-one minai, as in other distributions of meat, and they shall distribute the portions by demes in proportion to the numbers of demesmen participating in the procession; that for the expenses of the procession, for the cooking, for the preparation of the great altar, for the other expenses of the festival and of the all-night celebrations (*pannukhis*), they shall be given fifty drachmas; that the *hieropoioi* appointed to run the annual Panathenaia shall celebrate the *pannukhis* in the finest way possible, in honour of the

Goddess; that they shall get the procession underway at sunrise, punishing in conformity with the laws those who do not obey orders . . .

(IG [57] ii<sup>2</sup>: 334)