

Festivals

Learning Objectives:

- To understand Greek and Roman festivals



Introduction

Festivals in both the Greek and Roman worlds were important social events but also possessed a religious link. Very often they would be associated with a particular deity or perhaps a group of deities, and the activities that were part of the festival would have some connection to the deity/deities in question. They could be unique to a particular city, especially in Greece, but in any case were a crucial part of the year's social calendar. Important figures would want to be seen attending them, and being a part of them was considered an honour. Rivalry between cities, especially in the Greek context, played a part in such festivities as they often drew foreigners to witness the events, which offered an opportunity to present the city at its finest.

Greek Festivals

The City Dionysia

Also called the 'Great Dionysia' or simply 'Dionysia', this festival, as the name suggests, was dedicated to the god Dionysius. It was a large festival in the region of Attica in Greece, the location of the city of Athens. The City Dionysia refers specifically to the part of the festival that happened in the city of Athens itself, for the Dionysia would be celebrated throughout the region though the activities would vary somewhat. This was the second most important festival of Athens after the Panathenaia. The festival was organised by one of the Athenian Archons, elected members of the aristocracy who held the highest political post in the city for a year. It would be attended by all Athenian citizens and probably women as well, but crucially occurred in the early spring, a time when there were many visitors in Athens from other Greek cities, and so it was a chance to display the strength and splendour of the city.

The Origin of the City Dionysia

The story of this festival's origin is, as is often the case with origin stories in the ancient world, shrouded in myth. It begins when a town near the city of Athens decided to become a part of the greater Athenian city state, and as part of the ceremony of joining Athens the citizens brought a statue of Dionysius from their town to Athens as a gift. At first the Athenians, who already worshipped Athena as their patron deity, rejected the statue. However, this was quickly seen to be a mistake as a plague swept through the city, leading the Athenians to believe it was caused by the wrath of Dionysius, who was angry at having been rejected. The Athenians sought to make amends and accepted the statue – and, therefore, the god – into their city, which brought an end to the plague. The City Dionysia is a commemoration of this event.

The Festival

The City Dionysia was held in a sacred enclosure on the southern part of the Acropolis, part of which was a great open air theatre dedicated to Dionysius. One of this god's roles was as the God of Theatre, which is why there was such a location dedicated to him. The festival occurred sometime in late March or early April, as spring began, and lasted for around five days. The preparation for the festival involved a torch-lit procession where young men who were completing their military service brought an ancient statue of Dionysius from his temple and to this theatre. This would be followed by a sacrifice of a black male goat performed by the priests of Dionysius. The festival's official opening would be the following morning, with a huge procession to the Temple of Dionysius. This was led by a trumpeter whose playing of his instrument represented both the calling of the god and the announcement of his arrival. At the end of the procession a bull would be sacrificed to the god, and would later be eaten at the

banquet. The main part of the festivities would then begin, which would be composed of a series of plays, tragedies and comedies, over several days. There was a competitive element to this, as judges would at the end select the poet whose plays were deemed the best that year and that poet would receive an award.

The Great Panathenaia

The Great Panathenaia, literally the 'all Athenian festival', was the most important festival of the city of Athens. It was dedicated to the goddess Athena, the patron deity of Athens. This festival would occur only every four years, in July, though a smaller-scale version did occur every year. Athletic contests were part of this event, and it may have served as direct competition to the Olympic Games as an attempt to demonstrate Athenian greatness. All Athenian citizens, and even women (which was rare; they often did not participate in public events), took part, though not slaves. It was not just for Athenians, however, as Greeks from all over would attend and compete in the games. However, it held particular importance to the Athenians, and served to foster unity between the citizens of Athens as well as being a chance to demonstrate their greatness and physical prowess to the other Greeks. While nearly every Greek city held its own games of some description, not all had the same prestige, and the Great Panathenaia was one of the most significant, perhaps second only to the Olympic Games themselves.

The Origin of the Great Panathenaia

Once again, the origin of this festival invoked mythology, though in all such cases it must be remembered that as far as the Greeks themselves were concerned, such myths formed a very real and relevant part of their identity. The festival's origins lie in the victory of Athena over Poseidon in the competition between the two gods to name the city. As Athena had triumphed and was accepted as the patron deity of Athens, it was only right that a great festival was organised in her honour. The timing of the festival was believed to coincide with the goddess's birthday.

The Festival

The Festival was held in the city itself, with the famous Acropolis, the home of the Parthenon temple, being an important part. The event would open with a procession of Athenians to the Acropolis, which culminated in the sacrifice of 100 oxen as well as the granting of rich gifts to Athena in the Parthenon. The main event would then begin, and consisted of different parts: the musical performances, which saw various musicians demonstrate their skills, the athletic contests, such as running, horse racing, and combat sports, and finally a series of traditional events that were for Athenians only. These included a torch race that was run between the villages of Attica, a boat race, and javelin throwing from horseback, as well as traditional Athenian dancing. Winning a contest at the Great Panathenaia brought with it not only great prestige, but also a rich reward, and one relevant to the context: victorious athletes would receive amphorae depicting the event that were filled with olive oil – produce of the tree gifted by Athena that won her the position of patron deity of the city.

Roman Festivals

The Lupercalia

This festival was celebrated on 15th February (the date making some historians believe St Valentine's Day might have been related to this ancient Roman festival) and took place in several locations within Rome: the Lupercal cave (where, according to legend, the she-wolf found and suckled Romulus and Remus), on the Palatine Hill and at the Forum. All three locations were central to the Roman foundation myth, with the Palatine being the location Romulus chose to build his city, and the Forum its first meeting place. The festival was in honour of the Roman god Lupercus, the god of fertility.

The Origin of the Lupercalia

The exact origins of this festival are unknown and shrouded in myth. The myth in question is that of Romulus and Remus, the legendary founders of the city of Rome, and specifically the story of the she-wolf who raised them in their infancy. The festival is thought to have been in honour of this wolf and by extension the god Lupercus, who was also the protector of wild animals, and, therefore, partly responsible for the she-wolf's ability to look after the brothers. The name of the festival also derives from the Latin word for wolf *lupus*, further cementing the link to this animal. The fertility aspect of the festival derives from this also, due to the wolf-rearing of Romulus and Remus.

The Festival

The Lupercalia started with a sacrifice at the Lupercal cave of at least one male goat and a dog. This was performed by Roman priests known as the Luperci. After this sacrifice the feast began, which was followed by the Luperci cutting thongs from the sacrificed animal's skin and running naked around the Palatine, whipping any women they encountered. Women would actually seek to be whipped, as they believed that it would help their fertility, helping the pregnant to deliver their babies safely, and helping those who weren't pregnant to conceive.

The Saturnalia

This festival was held in mid December in honour of the Roman god of agriculture, Saturn. This festival is actually the origin of many of our Christmas traditions today, such as gift-giving and bringing a tree into the home. It was the most popular festival on the Roman calendar and all work was stopped during it, and slaves were even given temporary freedom. In its early days it lasted just one day, but as time passed the festival grew to become a weeklong one. The date of the festival coincided with the winter sowing season.

The Origin of the Saturnalia

Unlike all the other festivals discussed, the Saturnalia had a far more down-to-earth origin. This festival developed from older agricultural rituals and celebrations that marked the winter solstice. Different aspects of the festival, however, do have a more mythological explanation. The giving of candles as gifts was supposed to derive from an old prophecy that requested the Latin people to give *phota*, interpreted as human sacrifice, to the god Saturn. However, the hero Hercules advised that actually what was meant was light, another meaning of the term, and so candles came to be the gift of choice.

The Festival

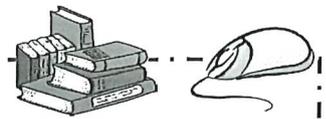
During the Saturnalia, all work came to a stop and schools and law courts were closed. People would decorate their homes with foliage, and instead of wearing plain togas like normal, they would wear more colourful clothes. All Romans would take part, and even slaves were involved in the festivities. Romans undertook activities such as feasting, giving gifts, playing music, singing, even gambling. Common gifts were candles as they symbolised the return of the light after the winter solstice. On the final day of the festivities, many Romans would give their family and friends small terracotta figurines. The festival period could get quite noisy, with many parties occurring during it.

Festivals in the Sources

As festivals were an important part of social life in the ancient world, they feature in some form in the sources, though often forming part of the background or taking place within a larger narrative rather than forming the main part of a story.

Virgil's *Aeneid*

In Book 8 of the *Aeneid*, King Evander welcomes Aeneas and his Trojans as guests to celebrate a local festival. The importance of this festival to the King and his people is demonstrated in how Evander, in asking Aeneas to join them, says that 'it is wrong to delay'. This is a reference to something many of the contemporary Roman readers would have been familiar with, that it was necessary to observe festivals in the right way but also at the right time. What is described next is the feast, which, as we have seen above, is an important part of many festivals. Evander then speaks of the importance of the festival, saying that it was performed 'because we were saved from cruel perils'; he then tells the story of Cacus that we saw in *The Universal Hero*. This is another good example of how the exploits of an important mythical figure, here Hercules, are the origin of the festival, as was often the case.



Independent Research

There are many other festivals that were celebrated by Greeks and Romans. Research an example of one of each from the following and write a brief account about their origins and celebration. Can you identify any similarities or differences between the Greek and Roman ones?

Greek Festivals

1. Boedromia
2. Adonia
3. Thesmophoria
4. Bouphonia
5. Amphidromia

Roman Festivals

1. Agonalia
2. Terminalia
3. Robigalia
4. Mercuralia
5. Augustalia

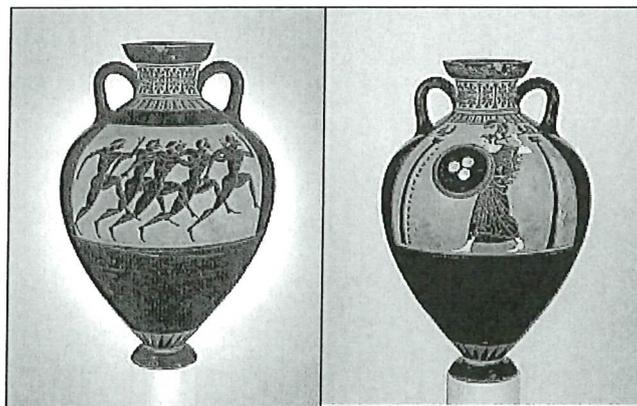
Consolidation Questions

- a) Which Greek city celebrated the City Dionysia and the Great Panathenaia?
- b) Which god did the Saturnalia honour, and which of his roles in particular?
- c) Briefly explain one thing that the Greek and Roman festivals have in common.

Source Question

Classical source-based units include **unseen sources**. These are sources you are not expected to have seen before as they are not on the prescribed list. However, you will be expected to discuss them using the skills you have.

- 1) Look at the source below.



Both sides of an amphora given as a prize for the Panathenaic Games.

Now answer the questions below:

- A. Why should we not be surprised that Athena is depicted here?
- B. What is the significance of the runners depicted on one side?