

Great dionysia festival at athens essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Great Dionysia was a festival in honour of Dionysus, as the name would suggest. He was a god of passion, joy and horror, rather than intellect and reason, thus making him ideally suited to the tragedy and comedy of Greek dramatic contests. The cult of Dionysus often involved the loss of self-restraint and identity through drunken ecstasy and dancing; similarly, the actors would put away their own real identity and pick up a new one for the duration of the play. In these ways, Dionysus lived up to his name of Dionysus Eleutherios, meaning 'Dionysus the Liberator'; clearly he 'liberated' people from their own duties (as seen later) and from their own beings and persons.

The City Dionysia would be held during March, being well timed to fit in with important dates in the Athenian calendar; in the summer, trade, fighting, farming and travel kept the citizens engaged, but in the winter and spring, these stopped, so citizens had enough free time to do other duties.

Altogether, there was over one thousand choregoi: twenty lots of fifty for the dithyrambs, three lots of fifteen for the tragedies (each lot being for a single playwright), and five lots of twenty-four for the comedies.

For the Greeks, religion was an everyday part of life, and the festival became a state affair, as can be seen through its name, 'City Dionysia'. However, the City Dionysia must have been a later religious invention than festivals such as the Lenaia, as it was run and organised by the Eponymous Archon, rather than the Basileus Archon, who organised the rest of the religious events.

A playwright would submit an outline of his intended play, or 'apply for a chorus', to the eponymous archon. The archon chose whoever he wanted,

though it would be in his best interests to choose the best plays, as they were in honour of Dionysus, and the archon would have to justify his choices at the end of the festival.

Ath. Pol. 56. 2-3

“ And the archon...appoints three choregoi for the tragic performances, the richest from all the Athenians”

The archon appointed one choregos for each playwright that he chose, totalling three overall.

The ‘ choregos’ paid for costumes; training costs for the chorus; salaries for musicians, mutes and the chorus; and the party after the contest finished. As the contest was in honour of Dionysus, the choregos, similarly to the archon choosing good plays, would be pressured into spending liberally to ensure that Dionysus was pleased. There was a law about the amount each choregos had to spend, and the success of the play may have depended on how much the choregos was prepared to spend on the play.

Lysias 21. 1-2

“ Furthermore, I won as choregos for a men’s chorus at the Dionysia in the same archonship, and I spent five thousand drachmas including the dedication of the tripod”

This shows how much he spent as choregos: an average day’s wages would have been around three obols, and five thousand drachmas relates to thirty thousand obols. It can be assumed from this that if chosen as choregos, a

citizen would have to be earning more than the average wage, but it still shows the amount prepared to be spent by a choregos.

Some choregoi took on the duty willingly, and even used it in court to prove that they were good citizens. However, some citizens refused to pay the liturgy, which was allowed if a wealthier citizen could be found; some citizens weren't so extreme as to refuse, but they could be miserly and not spend much by using second hand costumes, or by hiring a not-so-good chorus trainer.

Originally the state had no say in which actors the playwright chose, but as more rules, and prizes for the actors, were introduced, the three actors were picked by the state and allocated to each playwright by lot.

A list of suitable kritai (judges) from each of the ten phylai (tribes) was decided by the ' Boule'. These names were then sealed by the presidents of the council and the ' choregoi'. It was a capital offence to interfere with the urns (one for each tribe) once they had been sealed and placed in the public treasury at the acropolis. Before the contest, the urns were taken to the theatre, and the archon drew one name out of each urn. The ten judges chosen thus had to make a pledge of objectivity.

Isokrates 17. 33

" As to Pythodoros, known as ' the shopkeeper', who speaks and acts for Pasion in everything, who among you doesn't know that last year he opened the jars and took out the names of the judges which had been placed there by the council. And yet if a man had the nerve to risk his life for trifling profit

in opening these, which had been sealed by the Prytaneis, and bore the seals of the choregoi, and were guarded by the public treasures and kept on the Acropolis, why should one be surprised...”

Isokrates is saying that if the accused was ready to break the seals on the urns for the Dionysia, he would be prepared to do anything. As such, it implies the magnitude of breaking the seals, because to be prepared to do anything after carrying out such a task, it would follow that the task was so monumental that all others fade in difficulty.

The ‘ Proagon’ was the official ceremony which announced to the public, in detail, the full plans for the festival. In the second half of the fifth century BC, this was held in the Odeion.

Aeschines - Against Ktesiphon 66-67

“ Demosthenes introduced a decree that the executive officers (prytaneis) hold an Assembly on the 8th Elaphebolion, when we sacrifice to Asclepius and hold the Proagon, on a holiday, a thing that no one can remember ever having been done before.”

Aeschines is saying how the Proagon was invented by Demosthenes, and was a brand-new idea.

Pericle’s Odeion in relation to the Theatre of Dionysus.

The chosen poets, with their entourage of choregoi, actors, musicians and chorus members, all splendidly dressed and wearing garlands would be there. There would have been a brief summary of the plays, but no one wore

any masks or costumes, so that the identities of the actors could be publicly known.

Pausanias 1. 20. 2

“ The most ancient sanctuary of Dionysus is next to the theatre there are two shrines in the precinct, and two statues of Dionysus, the one of Dionysus of Eleutherae, and the ivory and gold one made by Alkamenes.”

The statue of Dionysus Eleutherios resided at the theatre in Athens, near the old and new temples.

Pausanias 1. 29. 2

“ In the Academy there is a small temple, to which they bring each year the statue of Dionysus of Eleutherae on the determined days.”

Dionysus Eleutherios' statue is taken to the Academy when it's needed, at the beginning of the festival.

Pausanias 1. 38. 8

“ At Eleutherae, in the fields, there is a shrine of Dionysus; the old wooden statue was taken from here to Athens, the one there at Eleutherae now is an imitation.”

The statue of Dionysus was taken from Eleutherae to Athens, at the beginning of the festival.

These three sources depict the religious importance of the festival, in that they believed that they had to have the presence of the god for the festival.

<https://assignbuster.com/great-dionysia-festival-at-athens-essay-sample/>

Demosthenes 22. 68

“ I should say that [the prison was built for no purpose], if it's true your father went dancing off still wearing his fetters at the procession of the Dionysia”

With the father going off dancing in his fetters, it shows that he was released from prison, presumably for the duration of the festival.

A great procession was lead through the streets, full of singing and dancing.

Scholia on Aristophanes, Acharnians 241

“ At the festival of the Dionysia at Athens well-born girls carried the sacred baskets (kanephorein). The baskets were made of gold, in which they put the ‘ beginnings’ (aparchai) for all the sacrifices.”

Golden baskets of offering were carried by girls of high birth, to be taken to the theatre and temples.

Citizens were dressed in white, and metics in scarlet.

Athenaios 12, 534c

“ Whenever Alkibiades serve as choregos, parading in his purple robe, he was admired as he entered the theatre not only by the men but also by the women.”

Choregoi often wore amazingly coloured robes, such as the purple robe of Alkibiades.

Honours to the ephebes, 122-1 BC

“(and the ephebes) brought Dionysus from the hearth (i. e. the one at the temple in the Academy) back to the theatre by torchlight; and they led in procession a bull worthy of the god and sacrificed it in the procession, at which they were also crowned by the people.”

Bulls and other animals were lead for sacrifice once the column reached the theatre precinct.

Each citizen paid for entry into the theatre, but for the poor who couldn't afford this, there was the Theoric fund, introduced by Pericles, which was paid by the state specifically to allow the poor to enter and watch the plays.

The Dithyrambic competitions took place on the first day. Fifty men and fifty boys, in two different choruses, from each of the ten phylai sang and danced in honour of the god.

On the second day, a piglet was sacrificed to the purity of the theatre, and the gods were honoured with libations.

Scholia on Aristophanes, Acharnians 500-7 425BC

“ The instruction was that the cities should bring the tribute to Athens for the Dionysia.”

The Delian allies attended the festival, bringing a tribute of one silver talent in a jar to represent the balance of tribute of expenditure during the past year.

Aeschines 3. 154 (c. 330 BC)

“...the herald would come forward and introduce the presentation of the orphans whose fathers had died in war, young men, adorned in the panoply...”

The orphaned sons of fathers who had been killed in battle were brought up by the state, and marched on in their state-funded armour before going to their special allocated seats at the front of the theatre.

Lastly was the decision of the judges. The urns were brought down from the treasury, unsealed and the archon drew one name from each, these ten were sworn in to give an impartial verdict.

A trumpet was then sounded, signalling the start of four days of drama.

For the first three days, each poet would have one day to present his three tragedies and one satyr play. On the fourth, there would have had five comedies only.

However, during the Peloponnesian war, this was restricted to only three days, having three tragedies, a satyr play and a comedy on each day, summing up in having only three comedies.

The order of the plays was chosen by lot, in the idea that this choice was down to the gods. This shows the religious nature of the festival in that they did not plan out how they were going to put the plays on, but they were chosen by greater forces.

At the end of the competition, each of the ten kritai would write his order of preference on a tablet and place it in an urn. Five tablets were taken from the urn, and these decided the winners. This, as with the order of the plays, was meant to leave the choice to the gods, meaning that they could choose which plays they wanted to win.

The victorious poet and choregos would be crowned in front of the entire theatre with ivy crowns. After a triumphant procession, the victorious choregos might have placed a stone tablet outside his house, and the actor deemed best might have dedicated his mask to the god.

The Lysikrates monument, one of the more magnificent dedications.

The final event underlined the importance of the whole community, as Athens was a democracy, at the Great Dionysia. A special Assembly of the citizens was held in the theatre to review the festival. The archon's management was discussed, as well as that of other officials, and they would have been complimented and honoured, although it wasn't unknown for them to be attacked. Complaints of violence or misconduct during the procession or contests were raised, and court action may have been taken.

The festival, all-in-all, was in honour of Dionysus, because the Athenians wanted to make sure that their crops would grow the next year thanking the god. Acts such as the dithyrambs were to include more people in the appreciation of Dionysus.