

The City Dionysia

Dionysus on His Festival

I am the son of Zeus and Semele. I am Dionysus, God of wine, drama, laughter and fertility. Those who do not believe this I will punish and these are not feeble words for I showed no mercy to Pentheus of Thebes. He who claimed that I was no God and that I died in the same lightning flash as my mother. Everyone knows that my father is the Almighty Zeus and that I am a true God. I will bring pain to those who do not believe in this.

I do not just have one festival in honour of me but four. The Anthesteria, the Lenaia, the Country Dionysia and the biggest off all, aptly named the Great Dionysia. However before the processions can begin I must first bless the land to awaken the spring. The Spring Festival, a great procession, assisted with my two attendants to join me when I shall bring food and merriment back to Athens. Crowds of people will follow me and why shouldn't they? For I pass through the farms and the fields of Athens blessing the land so that the upcoming harvest will be fruitful. This is not for my needs for the Gods eat ambrosia and drink nectar. Every year people sing and dance, play flutes and trumpets and enjoy the worship of Dionysus.

Every March in Athens, when the seas are free and calm to sail upon and when the farmers have prayed for success in the future when gathering their harvest produced from the Spring Festival, the Great Dionysia can begin. Many people still come to watch and participate in the festival. People come, even if they do not have tickets for the plays, for the festival itself, which is always magnificent. They can still join and enjoy the great procession on the first day. This is a grand momentous procession, which reflects my grand self. Obviously sacrifices are offered, not pigs or sheep, but the most powerful creature the bull who is respected like me a powerful God. Others sacrifices are made but the greatest is the bull. The scene is colourful with any sponsors wearing magnificent gowns and other people wearing brightly coloured clothes. After these sacrifices the plays begin. These plays are devoted to me.

My faithful and loyal followers the Bacchantes worship me. A fine example I made of Pentheus of Thebes through his mother Agave and her sisters, fellow Bacchantes. With my powers I made her believe that Pentheus' head was a lion. She lost her personality and took on the power of me, the God. This is the example I make of people who do not believe in me. Appropriately as I am the God of drama many plays are held in my homage. Actors wearing their masks losing their own personalities like my Bacchantes. As I am also the God of laughter and drama many comedies, tragedies and satyr-plays are performed. Comedies were performed in my reverence, as I am a God who brings laughter to my followers. The word 'comedy' means 'the song of the merrymakers.' My fellow merrymakers accompanied my processions at the dawn of the festival, welcoming my awaited arrival to the city, singing and dancing in their great joy for my destination. For the city I am bound for is the City of Athens. Satyr-plays were also held in my great name. Satyrs were strange wood-creatures but soon became my followers. They often made or drank wine. Lastly, but certainly not the least important, tragedies took place during these climacteric times. Tragic costumes were similar to my robes, which the Bacchantes traditionally dressed me in, as they worshipped me. The full-length robe covered by a shorter cloak, which came below the knees. So one can see how closely tragedies and plays are linked to my nature. 'For I am a god terrible to man, and yet, most gentle'.

However where are all these plays to be held? Nowhere except the oldest theatre in Greece, my theatre, the theatre of Dionysus. This theatre is not the only part dedicated to me, many shrines and temples are at the heart of Athens on the slopes of the Acropolis, as I am in the hearts of all men. Many people visit the theatre from all parts of Greece. In the audience are my priests and in the centre of the orchestra is my altar reminding each and every person that this was still a religious ceremony.

Such an extraordinary festival, The Great Dionysia for such an extraordinary God, myself Dionysus. People from across the seas will know the name of Dionysus and will recognise my important festival.

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First Person Account of the Role of a Choregos

To be picked from among the wealthiest Athenian citizens to be a choregos is a great honour to me, Bion, a proud Athenian man. This year luck is on my side. One of the officials among the committee selected me and two other wealthy Athenians citizens to be choregoi. For I chose this year not to pay taxes and so I was given three options to choose from. Either to pay for all the equipment for a religious ceremony or fit out a warship for active service but with my riches I could easily fit out several warships or hire and train a chorus for one of the festivals and pay for all the production costs. As you all ready know I preferred the latter. This was because I wanted to see the people of Athens dance, praise and be merry. What better way is there for me to do this than financially back the biggest festival of all, the Great Dionysia? In this way I can praise Dionysus and as a bonus display my wealth and gain popularity

I have been appointed to work Sophocles, the fantastic playwright. This was not my decision but lots were drawn to decide my playwright. Although I was chosen at random I think it must be fate for I am a religious man and the God Dionysus must know that I will praise his great name and festival well. For all the preparation and expenses are all for the worship of Dionysus, as he is the God of drama, wine and laughter these plays are aptly dedicated to him.

Some people think that my life is easy being a wealthy man and that being a choregos is easy because all one does is financially back the festival. Then let me ask these people this, how can this be true when the most important person concerned with the arrangement for the festival is the choregos? There are four plays to be presented; three tragedies and I satyr-play. My main duties will be dealing with the chorus. As I have been appointed to work with Sophocles on the tragedy 'Antigone,' I will have to collect a group of fifteen men to be in the chorus. As I will not be training the chorus myself to learn their music, their words by heart and their dances I have to find a talented man and musician to do this. This will not be hard to find talented men because Athens has a superfluous supply. However I have good fortune for Sophocles is not only a masterful playwright but also a talented and expert chorus trainer. Therefore I can rely on him to tutor them well. The chorus is probably the most important part of the play because the judges pay an immense amount of attention to their performance. If they execute their roles badly then these flaws will reflect Sophocles and I and my input into the preparations. So I will spare no expense when paying the chorus' wages, hiring a musician and any special effects. As I have heard correctly Sophocles, a man of many talents, has designed a new invention called the skene. It is a building behind the stage so others call it a stage building. It is wooden and can be used for the actors to change their costumes. It can also be used for background settings such as King Oedipus' Palace in the play 'Antigone.'

As there will be three actors in the play, the archon has drawn lots for an actor for our principal role. Our actor selected is a man called Heracleides. Sophocles has shared his worries with me that the actor chosen may not be capable enough to put on a good performance, for an excellent play can be ruined by a bad actor. Nevertheless, there is a consolation only one actor will be chosen by the archon and Sophocles can choose the deuteragonist, second actor and the tritagonist, third actor. He has already set his mind on these two men, Tlepolemos and Dicaearchos. However it does not

matter how good the actors are they will have to wear costumes to make the play breathtaking and authentic. The finest threads will be used for King Oedipus due to the clear fact that he is a king and should be adorned like one. This will not be for long for as soon as he gives up his throne his brother in law, Creon, will be king. I could make the actor playing King Oedipus take of his clothes and give them to Creon. Why should I, for I am a prosperous man and will take no short cuts when it comes to the worship of Dionysus consequently I will pay for another elaborate costume for King Creon. Creon's sons too will be dressed in all the fineries of heirs to the throne. The tragedy is when the two brothers kill each other in battle trying to decide who the successor to the throne is. Besides costumes I will need the ekkylema, which is a trolley wheeled in and out through the central doors. As the ekkylema is used I will have to find two men who will, during the play, wait and wheel it into position.

However, what is a play with actors and costumes if there are no audience members to be spectators? Well there will be no problem with sending word out about 'Antigone' and advertising it as word travels fast in Athens. That reminds me, I have to send word about the special occasion, which is just before the festival itself. I will be there with Sophocles and our rivals to give Athens an idea of what is to come. The team of Sophocles and I take along our privileged actors, not wearing their masks and costumes but garlands to make crowds aware of the topic of the play. As this play will be held as the festival Great Dionysia there will be a special throne for the priest of Dionysus where he can sit and watch the plays. I too have a reserved place for me, not quite a throne but special seats for only choregoi can sit. To make sure that I will get a good response from the crowd I'll invite my friends to attend because this is my only chance for success with 'Antigone' and the other plays but for Sophocles he can return and do this again if picked.

I can almost picture vividly the second day of the festival in my head. The excitement rising, people wait in anticipation for our plays to begin the noise and merriment is so loud that one can hardly concentrate. As again the order of playwrights are drawn by lots so I do not know if I am first or last. I hope to perform last, as the plays would be fresher in the judges' minds. Then it will come to the day of judgement, where ten out of a hundred ordinary Athenian citizens are chosen to judge. They will have to take a solemn oath to fairly judge the plays and the playwrights with the most votes wins.

I have great faith that 'Antigone' will bring popularity to Sophocles and hopefully myself. I can image myself winning with the crowds of people shouting my name and I can put up a monument to record and declare my victory. Only time and hard work will tell if I am to be victorious or defeated.

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A Comparison of Greek and Modern Theatres

The Greek and modern theatres have many similarities and yet many differences depending on which type of current theatre you look at. All Greek theatres tend to be similar. For example all Greek theatres were huge, open-air buildings. All of them could hold a large number of people compared to today's theatres. Many of them could hold up to 18,000 people and during festivals they were filled with spectators. The theatre itself was made of wood including the stage and seats, which would have been uncomfortable. The foundations were made of stone and the floor was of earth tightly packed together. Modern day theatres have more varieties to them. For example there are small and big ones but not as huge as the Greek. Nearly all the theatres today are roofed because of electrical equipment such as lighting and due to the fact of weather, for example if it rained. They are made of brick and the seats would have been more comfortable. In this era theatres are not really used for religious worship, but are used for special occasions and festivals such as Christmas. At the time of Christmas there is a festive pantomime with occasionally famous people starring in it. The theatre is also used for more formal and important events, for example The Royal Variety Performance.

Greek theatres were extraordinary because although the sizes of them were gigantic it did not effect the sound quality heard by the person because of the acoustics. For instance, if an actor was on the stage performing a person seated in the back row could hear him just as clearly as a person seated in the front row of the audience. This is known because Greek theatres are still there so people can see if it is true. The seats sloped up like today and distinguished visitors had seats reserved for them nearest the stage. The priests of Dionysus had thrones in the front row. The site was picked carefully and the construction was masterful. The builders chose a hill to build the theatre on. Usually today theatres are built in populated areas to give entertainment to the public. As nearly all these theatres are inside this sound quality of sound does not work effectively. However actors use microphones to project their words out into the audience. Also any person can sit anywhere in the theatre provided they have enough money. However, like in ancient times, seats are reserved for very distinguished people like the Queen and other Royalties. Most present theatre plays are held in the evening because they have artificial lighting. However ancient Greeks could not do this because they depended on daylight to watch their plays even if it rained the play would usually continue. This does not happen in today's theatres because they have roofing.

The main parts of a Greek theatre were the seats for the audience, the orchestra, the paradoi, the stage and the stage building. The large circular area (e) is where the chorus danced. The chorus consisted of fifteen male performers who sing dance in honour of the Gods. In the Theatre of Dionysus an altar was there in honour of him and also reminding everyone watching that this was a religious ceremony. The paradoi (f and g) was an 'entrance way' and was used for entering and exiting from the orchestra. The actors performed on the stage, which may have been slightly raised similar to today's stage. Behind the stage was the stage building made of wood and had a flat roof. Today we have quite same features to our theatres. Starting with the parados being very alike to the back stage or side wings of the theatre. The paradoi in ancient times was used for the entrance and exits for the solemn processions at the

beginning and end. Although we do not have solemn processions or any religious connections we still use the side wings to exit and enter onto the stage. However we enter on the stage whereas they entered onto the orchestra. Identically we have a raised stage for our actors to perform but we do not have an 'orchestra' meaning 'dance-floor' but we have an 'orchestra' meaning 'group of people playing musical instruments.' There is not always an orchestra today but usually there is one for a large, expensive production. The orchestra is placed in the front of the stage but slightly lower than the stage. This is so that they do not block anyone's view this is true for Greek theatres where the Chorus dances in front of the stage.

There was a skene or a stage building in archaic Greek theatres. A skene formed the back wall to the stage. It could have been painted to look like a palace or forest. Sometimes when divided into three rooms it could have been used by the actors for changing their costumes or storage for the props. Many characters carried 'hand-props' for example swords, shields, drinking cups and spear for hunting. Basically any 'hand-props' can be taken on to the stage today. They could be picked up from the wings but not in Greek theatres because there was no wings.

Greeks had simple taste when dealing with their scenery they believed the words of the play as more important. We also paint our scenery to create a forest or palace. However more variety in scenery can be achieved because of the opening and closing of the curtains and interlude(s) in the plays. Greeks did not have any breaks in between the plays they performed and with all five actors one can only imagine how exhausting it must have been. In a play scenery is very important it can reinforce the mood of the play and help the actors to convey a better impression of the character he or she is playing.

An ekkuklema was used in old times to show dead bodies, which had been killed off scene. No violence was shown in Greek plays. An ekkuklema was either a large platform with normal scenery painted on it as it was used to carry dead bodies off stage or a pivoting platform. Either way the ekkuklema is definitely not used in modern plays. In the larger theatres a tunnel was built under the audience's seats. This was used to roll round stones down it to create the sound of thunder. This technical and ingenious design is definitely not used today as well. Modern technology has allowed us to create these sounds quite simply by recording them and then playing when it is their cue.

In Greek comedies the art of flying through the air was common. This shows us that it was a popular and favourite effect. Although the mechanisms have not survived a structure probably similar to a crane was used. This must have involved ropes, pulleys and poles controlled from behind the stage building. Today we also use flying in our plays for example the most famous would have to be Peter Pan and maybe Father Christmas' sledge being pulled by reindeers. The same system of ropes, pulley and poles are still used at present.

Some Greek plays are still held today showing us that plays are still very popular now as in Ancient Greece. It was inevitable that theatres would change due to technology but it is surprising the similarities that still remain after hundreds of years.

