

Athenians on Parade: Individual and Collective Experience in Civic Processions

In *Life of Lycurgus*, Plutarch reports a law proposed by Stratonicus, who suggested that the Athenians should conduct all the mysteries and processions since they excelled at it (Plu.*Lyc.*30.6; cf. Paus.1.24.3). Deacy suggests that the multitude of Athenian cults and festivals reflects the size of the Athenian *polis* (Deacy 2007), but this does not fully elucidate why the Athenians devoted so much time and money to organizing elaborate processions and sacrifices. What did these rituals accomplish? While the rituals were designed to please the gods and obtain their blessings, this explanation ignores the personal, social, and cultural aspects of the rituals.

In this paper I focus on civic processions at Athens such as the Panathenaic procession, rituals which possess a tension between the individual and the collective. Individuals attended processions for many reasons, such as spending time with friends (Aeschin.1.43), displaying one's wealth and prestige (D.21.22), and participating in a ritual that produced strong emotions (Plu.*Non Posse.*21). It is possible to broadly reconstruct an individual's experience in a procession by investigating what he or she would have perceived along the route. These rituals derived much of their meaning and power from the rich collection of symbols which the participants perceived along the route. These symbols can be as diverse as the objects carried in procession, the offerings to the deity, the cult statue and other representations of the deity visible to the procession, the buildings and monuments the procession passed, and the imagery visible on these monuments. Part of reconstructing these processions is reassembling the chain of symbols experienced by the worshippers and exploring their possible meanings, in the context of the myths and themes important to the festival. These symbols, some of which were worn, carried, or led in procession, were also perceived by the spectators of the procession, whose experience was very different from the marchers. While some symbols might have to do with the broader message of the festival,

walking in procession was also an opportunity to be seen, to perform, to express one's status and prestige or improve it. In these respects, then, the experience of the procession was deeply individual.

Processions were also collective acts of worship and served social and cultural functions within the community. Inclusion in the procession meant inclusion in the group(s) represented, which could be on a large scale (the community of initiates in the Eleusinian Mysteries) or a smaller scale (the boys who led the Oschophoria procession). Inclusion is particularly important in the Panathenaic procession, an opportunity for Athenians to define and display 'what Athens is' (Maurizio 1998). Processions were also a vehicle for the creation and maintenance of what Assmann calls "cultural memory," "a projection on the part of the collective that wishes to remember and of the individual who remembers in order to belong" (Assmann 2006), a type of diachronic memory that shapes and is shaped by collective activities including religious processions. Cultural memory is entwined with identity; one example is Athenian autochthony, rooted in the myths surrounding the Panathenaia and reiterated in subtle ways every year during the Panathenaic procession. Athenian processions and festivals were important foci for collective memory of specific events, too, as evidenced by momentous happenings which were remembered to have coincided with a festival or procession (Parker 2005). The fact that festivals were repeated regularly can only have reinforced this cultural memory.

Processions formed an integral part of Greek festivals. The sacrifice to the deity was a moment of ritual drama, and the act of sharing the sacrificial meal afterwards surely contributed to the sense of community. The procession to the altar, however, offered a different, extremely rich experience to the individual. He or she observed an array of symbols within the procession and the surrounding landscape which advertised a complex web of meanings for the participant to interpret within the context of the festival and his or her own

cultural framework. At the same time, the individual participated in a collective ritual action which signified his or her belonging to a socio-cultural group. The collective experience of the procession's symbols, myths, and activities shaped and was shaped by the community's cultural memory, woven into the fabric of their identity and reenacted regularly as part of the festival cycle.

Bibliography

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