

Transcript

What was the Lenaia?

Dr Jan Haywood:

The Lenaia was an ancient Athenian festival held on the twelfth day of the month of Gamelion which would correspond to late January in a modern-day calendar. And it was held in honour of the god Dionysus, a god associated with wine, revelry, the theatre, amongst many other things. But typically, the festival would be held in the Lenaion, the sanctuary in the central market area of Athens, the Agora, and it was also held in the theatre of Dionysus on the slopes of the Acropolis.

The Lenaia appears to have been presided over by an elected religious official known as the Archon basileus as well as some of the religious officials. And indeed, religion was key to this festival and we know that people seemed to have proceeded through the centre of Athens, possibly even hurling outrageous statements at people that they kind of pass by in the street.

But also, by the 5th century BCE, it's clear that competition was a central element of it. So that by the 440s comedies were staged and performed in the theatre of Dionysus as part of the festival. And slightly later tragedies and also hymns or dithyrambs were added to the proceedings as well so that it would last over several days.

Well, frustratingly we have no narrative account that gives us full details of what happened during the festival itself. So, we rely on certain literary sources, particularly from the 3rd century BCE onwards. But in addition, we do have some inscriptions that detail the victors of some of these competitions that I was referring to. And we also finally have this important group of vases known as the Lenaia vases.

And on those we see images of women in Bacchic dance appearing to evoke the maenads honouring the god Dionysus who we know is integral to this festival. And we have about 70 surviving instances of those vases.