

Transcript

What was the Panathenaia festival?

Dr Christine Plastow:

The Panathenaia was a religious festival in honour of the goddess Athena and the most important religious festival in Athens. It was held at the end of Hekatombaion, the first month in the Athenian calendar which means it would fall in around mid-August in our modern calendar. An ordinary Panathenaia was held every year but every fourth year the Athenians celebrated the great Panathenaia. A longer and more elaborate version of the festival.

We don't know exactly how long the festival lasted but it probably went on for several days, perhaps as many as eight. Contests were a particularly important component of a festival. Athletic events included foot and chariot races alongside wrestling, boxing and other sporting events. And there were also contests in music and the performance of poetry.

But the centrepiece of the festival was the great procession which began at the Dipylon gate in the north eastern wall of Athens. And proceeded along a designated route, the Panathenaic Way, through the city and up to the Acropolis.

Once there, animal sacrifices would be held and a new peplos, a traditional Greek women's outfit, would be dedicated to and placed on the life size statue of Athena Polias, the patron goddess of the city.

The most famous surviving image we have that probably depicts the Panathenaia is the frieze that ran around the inner chamber of the Parthenon which seems to show the great procession. And includes images of young girls carrying Athena's peplos, priestesses, sacrificial animals, musicians and victors in the athletic games.

We can also see images of those athletic games on the surviving Panathenaic amphorae, large decorated pottery vessels that were rewarded as prizes to the victors.