

Discuss the importance of temple dedication in Athenian religion.

This essay will discuss the concept and importance of temple dedication within Athenian religion in comparison to the importance of worship at deme, oikos and individual level as well as the overall importance of Athenian religion.

To understand temple dedication, the concept of a temple must first be explored. Temples were buildings that housed the image of a god¹. In early temples, such as the Hekatompedon in Samos, this was simply an image carved onto a wooden plank, however, over time, the 'image' became more elaborate and ornate, such as the forty foot tall, ivory and gold statue of Zeus in Olympia commissioned over three hundred years later².

As is implied from the description of Zeus at Olympia, many of the larger temples were famously wealthy, for example, the sanctuary of Delphi³ which had several miniature temples, called treasuries, built by the victors of wars between poleis⁴. This wealth came from vocative offerings, which could range in size from anything as small as a figurine to anything as large as a temple⁵ or land to expand a sanctuary, as mentioned by Pliny the Younger⁶.

The temple building was rarely entered by supplicants, acting more as a storeroom while worship took place outside at an altar in front of the main entrance to the building⁷. There were three types of dedication normally performed at temple altars: vocative offerings, living sacrifice and libations⁸.

Vocative offerings were gifts to the gods to ensure good things that have already happened would happen again⁹. They are reflective of how the Greeks saw interaction with their gods and each other; they assumed that what you do for others, they are obliged to repay¹⁰. In terms of religion, this means gods were not believed in as omnipotent, omnipresent entities¹¹, rather they were acknowledged as beings with great power who had influence over every unpredictable danger that a person faced daily¹².

The most characteristic offering performed by Greek cults was the sacrifice of an animal, however the type, age and gender of the victim varied depending on the occasion¹³. To aid in performing the correct sacrifice, there were calendars, often displayed in the Agora, that described the deities and types of sacrifice to be performed and on which date¹⁴. The sacrifices were very ritualistic¹⁵. They were performed in silence and the victim, a domesticated animal such as a sheep, ox or goat, was prepared beforehand and checked for blemishes that may offend the gods¹⁶. The bones, entrails, fat and thigh meat were burnt on the altar of the god, but the rest of the animal was roasted and

¹ Coldstream 1985:68

² Coldstream 1985:78

³ Hom. Il. 9.404

⁴ Garland 1995:16

⁵ Garland 1995:16

⁶ Plin. Ep. 10.49

⁷ Coldstream 1985:68; Parke 1979:20

⁸ Garland 1995:12-17

⁹ Garland 1995:16

¹⁰ Gould 1985:15

¹¹ Gould 1985:7-8

¹² Gould 1985:6

¹³ Parke 1979:18

¹⁴ Gawlinski 2007:37-38

¹⁵ Garland 1995:13-14

¹⁶ Gould 1985:16-17

consumed by the worshippers¹⁷. The scarcity of sheep and cattle meant meat was rare and most families would only eat it during state festival sacrifices¹⁸.

Libations, the third type of offering normally made at temple altars, was the pouring of a drink in the name of the gods¹⁹. Like vocative offerings and animal sacrifices, libations were meant as an appeal to the gods for favour²⁰. This is seen in many ancient sources, such as in Homer's Iliad when Agamemnon is hoping to convince Achilles to assist him:

'And now bring water for our hands, and ask them to keep holy silence, so that we may make prayer to Zeus, son of Cronos, in the hope that he will have compassion on us.'

So said he and the words that he spoke were pleasing to all. Then heralds poured water over their hands, and youths filled the bowls brim full of drink, and served out to all, pouring first drops for libation into the cups.'²¹

Despite being less expensive than vocative offerings or sacrifices²², this extract shows that libations were considered an equally valid way of honouring the gods. For example, there was a three-day festival, Anthesteria, in which no sacrifices were performed, only libations²³.

As gaining the attention and approval of the gods was the responsibility of the worshipper, prayers were usually accompanied by some form of dedication²⁴. These offerings were either meant as an acknowledgement of a fulfilled vow and granted favour or as a request in anticipation of future favours²⁵. As such, temple dedications in the forms described above were very important in Athenian religion as they established goodwill with the gods²⁶.

However, temple dedications were not the only form of worship in Athenian religion²⁷. There was no specific line between religious actions and secular actions²⁸. Feasting, athletics and acting were acceptable behaviour during festivals and just as pleasing to the gods as sacrifice or libations²⁹.

Worship was not exclusive to state festivals³⁰ but also performed within the *genos* (hereditary family groups whose style of family religion had been absorbed by the state), the *phratry* (a number of *oikoi*, or family groups, of which membership was required to be a citizen), the *deme* (the local beliefs) and the *oikos*³¹. Within the *oikos*, religion was important, particularly when introducing or expelling members such as through marriage or childbirth³². There were rituals to dispel *miasma*, or spiritual dirtiness, such as the slicing of a young pig's throat before the start of each Assembly³³.

¹⁷ Gould 1985:17

¹⁸ Parke 1979:19

¹⁹ Garland 1995:17

²⁰ Garland 1995:17

²¹ Hom. Il. 9. 171-176

²² Parke 1979:19

²³ Gould 1985:19

²⁴ Garland 1995:11

²⁵ Parke 1979:20

²⁶ Garland 1995:11

²⁷ Parke 1978:13

²⁸ Parke 1979:13

²⁹ Parke 1979:13

³⁰ Mikalson 1983:83

³¹ Garland 1995:31

³² Mikalson 1983:84

³³ Parker 1983:21

In conclusion, it can be said that temple dedications were important in Athenian religion as they were a way of directly communicating and earning favour with the gods³⁴. However, temple dedication was considered useless if the worshiper did not consider the gods in other parts of their lives, such as by ignoring worship within the *oikos*³⁵.

³⁴ Garland 1995:11

³⁵ Garland 1995:23

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