

New Sedley Chapter On Ancient Greek Atheism

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I found some hostility to the Athenian festivals from Epicurus' opponents.

Cynics saw the religious festivals as wasteful: “[Philodemus] claims that Epicurus himself took part in Athenian festivals and was even initiated into the Eleusinian Mysteries. The major exceptions to this conventionalism were the Cynics, followers of Diogenes of Sinope on the north-east coast of Asia Minor (c. 400 to c. 325 BC). [...] He was reputed never to take part in religious rituals and to hold that there was nothing wrong with stealing from temples or committing anything else conventionally seen as sacrilegious.” (*Religions of the Ancient Greeks*, 136)

Plato thought that some of the festivals promoted false morality, glorified drunkenness, and generally celebrated vice: “Plato [...] proposes to institute a rigid regime of cultic events that would stand in contrast to the Athenian festivals with their crowds of choruses singing songs of no fixed genre” (*Greek and Roman Festivals: Content, Meaning, and Practice* 220). “Dionysus’ gift of wine, when unmediated, is the originary example of the Dionysiac sympotic behaviour that Plato condemned” (*Performance and Culture in Plato’s Laws* 383). “The Greater Dionysia [...] was celebrated with a bout of public drunkenness of which Plato heartily disapproved (*Laws* I 637a-b)” (*Plato the Myth Maker*, 21).

I did not locate any mentions of either Pyrrho or Epictetus displaying hostility toward public events, but I strongly suspect their derision given the overwhelming Stoic condemnation of intoxicants. Marcus Aurelius seems to only have supported such festivals as a point of control: “Marcus Aurelius [...] was [not] personally keen on public spectacles [...] but, like all emperors, [he] had to placate the mob” (*Marcus Aurelius: A Life* 82). There also seems to be an accusation by critics that festivals eroded civic virtue: “celebrations and ‘religious’ festivals in honor of the gods had become so numerous that the emperor Marcus Aurelius finally had to step in and limit them to a sensible maximum of 135 per year” (*The Hedonism Handbook: Mastering the Lost Arts of Leisure and Pleasure*).

Conversely, the Cyrenaics (at least, their founder) were fond of the public spectacles, and seems to have specifically patronized the goddess of love and sexuality: “The philosopher Aristippus is said to have spent two months a year at the festival [of Aphrodite] with the courtesan Lais” (*Pain and Pleasure in Classical Times* 66).