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The Greek Theatre and Festivals. Documentary Studies. Oxford Studies in Ancient Documents

Peter Wilson, *The Greek theatre and festivals : documentary studies. Oxford studies in ancient documents*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. 1 online resource (xviii, 431 pages) : illustrations, map.. ISBN 9780191535062 \$120.00.

Review by

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This collection of papers, derived from a conference at Oxford in 2003, aims to present new evidence for ancient Greek festivals in which performance (and not necessarily theater) played an important role. “Documentary” in the title refers to the prominent, if not dominant, part epigraphy takes here. While the cover illustration shows the Theater of Dionysus at Athens, the book’s contributors are primarily interested in broadening the study of the place of theater in festival life from its traditional Classical and ‘Athenocentric’ focus. Indeed, the bulk of the essays study inscriptional evidence from the Hellenistic world outside of Athens. But the volume’s lack of focus, combined with some directionless presentations of the documentary evidence from some of the contributors, leave this reader with the sense that the collection as a whole adds up to less than the sum of its parts. Many scholars of Greek theater and religion with a range of interests will find something of distinct value here, but I doubt that more than a few will conclude that the time invested in reading about the more obscure corners of festival life (i.e., outside of their own specialties) was a particularly rewarding experience. The irony of presenting the Athenian evidence as one set among many, *primus inter pares*, is that the contributions on Athens by Peter Wilson and Eric Csapo are the most clearly organized and pointedly argued, so that Athens once again winds up dominating the assembly.

Editor Peter Wilson organizes the essays into three sections. The first, “Festivals and Performers: Some New Perspectives,” is loosely oriented around “big-picture questions”. The second, “Festivals of Athens and Attica,” brings the study of epigraphy and choregic monuments to bear on Athenian festival life and performance. The third section, “Beyond Athens,” extends the field of inquiry to the broader Greek world. Wilson’s own introductory essay is both a truly illuminating overview of movements in the study of Greek drama over the past quarter-century that have situated Greek drama in the context of the festival of the City Dionysia, and a synthesis of the volume’s individual

contributions into something more coherent than the essays themselves at times offer. With respect to the epigraphic sources for the Athenian Dionysia, Wilson points out the need for a thorough new study of the documentary evidence, a project that Wilson promises that he and Csapo have now begun. I am sure I am not the only one who finds this news most welcome and looks forward to its publication. Their contributions in this volume must therefore be seen as a preview of their future work.

“Festivals and Performers: Some New Perspectives” encompasses three studies. William Slater leads off with “Deconstructing Festivals,” whose title suggests a link to literary theory, while offering instead something that evokes the relatively impenetrable prose associated with Derrida and his disciples. While Slater presents a wealth of interesting material on Greek festivals, he does so with no clear organizing principle or thesis. On the essay’s fourth page (24) he announces his aim is to discuss “the variety of festivals.” One learns that a festival’s name can change (27), as can its place and time (31), as well as its periodicity. Sentences with important claims such as “[t]his is how re-performed tragedy entered the Athenian Dionysia” appear in the middle of paragraphs without clear mooring in their analytical context. Less frustrating is “Theatre Rituals” by Angelos Chaniotis, who demonstrates, as did Simon Goldhill for the City Dionysia two decades earlier, how theaters in their festival context were “engines of honor”, both for men and gods. Chaniotis shows how the highly repetitive nature of Hellenistic honorific decrees should be regarded as possessing a quite economical rhetoric of “stereotypical formulae” (54), wherein even the slightest variation is meaningful. Chaniotis relates these formulae to the all-important ceremonial entrances and verbal rituals that comprised the setting of theatrical performance. Next, in “The Organization of Music Contests in the Hellenistic Period and Artists’ Participation: An Attempt at Classification,” Sophia Aneziri examines the role of the theatrical guilds, the Artists of Dionysus, in the organization of festival life, especially in Hellenistic music contests. Aneziri organizes the contests into three categories on the basis of the involvement of the guilds: contests that were organized by the associations, contests where the associations were co-organizers, and contests where the associations only participated. While this essay is a useful overview of a rich subject, Aneziri does not conclude with a particularly strong take on the evidence, instead conceding that these three classifications have a “hypothetical character” and that the evidence “cannot be used as a basis for generalization” (84).

“Festivals of Athens and Attica,” is the literal core of the book and its liveliest section. Eric Csapo leads off with “The Men Who Built the Theatres: *Theatropolitai*, *Theatronai* and *Arkhitektones*,” and this essay will, I suspect, become essential reading for anyone interested in the Athenian Theater of Dionysus, especially with its supplement by Hans Rupprecht Goette on the archaeological evidence. Csapo brings together a collection of epigraphic evidence with a focus on “the theater-lessee”, the man who was in charge of the annual construction of the wooden stands on the south slope of the Acropolis. While Csapo concedes there is no direct evidence for the leasing of the wooden stands to the theater manager in Athens (97), his analysis of a comparable document, the lease for the Piraeus theater in the fourth century, demonstrates clearly the practical terms of the

arrangements between managers and the “sellers” of the wooden stands. I hope it is not captious to lament that Csapo does not provide a full translation of the lease (90-1), as it would be of great interest to theater historians who do not read Greek. The consequences for our understanding of the Dionysia are many, and I shall here highlight only a few. Entrance fees were charged to defray the costs of leasing and constructing the wooden stands annually. The nature of the seating and the parallel straight constraints to the south and north suggest (97-99), perhaps conclusively, that the *theatron* of the fifth-century theater was trapezoidal and the theater itself only could seat 4,000-7,000 and not three to four times that number (though I still suspect one could argue compellingly for around 10,000, with many more on the slope above the theater). The wooden stands were then used for other gatherings of mass audiences, such as the Panathenaea. All told, Csapo has convinced me concerning the shape of the theater and its capacity, though I would caution that the assembled evidence (including Goette’s drawing of the theater with the trapezoidal *theatron*) still allows for a circular orchestra (a topic Csapo does not, of course, address). I also wonder about the additional reconstructions that the performances at the Lenaea would require. Goette next follows with a stimulating overview, “Choregic Monuments and the Athenian Democracy,” which demonstrates, with abundant illustrations, how choregic monuments allowed the elite to display their significance to the *demos* from the fourth century to the Roman era, when Philopappos broke with civic tradition by erecting a monument that glorified only himself and his ancestors, and not the city of Athens. The section closes with an essay by the editor himself, “Performance in the *Pythion* : The Athenian Thargelia,” which contributes strongly to the growing interest in this festival of Apollo, which has traditionally been neglected in favor of the more glamorous Dionysia and Panathenaea. By integrating the choral contests into the festival, Wilson demonstrates the centrality of the Thargelia’s performances in the formation of Athenian civic identity. The two-day structure of the Thargelia balanced the ritual cleansing of the city through the expulsion of *pharmakoi* on the first with, on the second, the procession to the Pythion and choral contests there. These performances served as “an affirmation or symbolic creation of a hierarchical civic order, as an antidote to impurity” (152). Wilson’s rich analysis further explores the location of the performances, the generic problems posed by the performance of dithyramps to Apollo and the relationship between the Thargelia and Delia. I do hope this is not the last time Wilson will write about this festival.

Wilson’s connection of the Athenian Thargelia to the choral competitions on Delos serves as the transition to Part III, “Beyond Athens,” which also continues Wilson’s welcome concentration on the relatively neglected genre of dithyrambic performance. First, in “Dithyramb, Tragedy – and Cyrene,” Paola Ceccarelli and Silvia Milanezi analyze relatively recent epigraphical evidence (published in 1927 and 1998) for dithyramb and tragedy in fourth-century Cyrene. These documents show the concerns of the festival officials for their various expenses, especially the prize ox, which was awarded to the winners of the tragic and dithyrambic contests. This essay’s focus is, understandably, fairly narrow as it begins, but of greater concern is the inconsistent framing of the data. It takes far too long for the authors to establish why their readers

should care about these inscriptions, which is particularly odd since one of their concerns, dithyrambic performance in honor of Apollo (195-9), Wilson shared in his own essay. This article winds up fascinating but frustrating, since the authors present a wealth of intriguing material on matter such as the Karneia and allusions to Euripides' *Alcestis*, but it never gels into a coherent whole, something the authors themselves may admit with the concluding concession (213), "[i]t is difficult to draw any clear-cut conclusions from the evidence surveyed." Next, in "A *Horse* from Teos: Epigraphical Notes on the Ionian Hellespontine Association of Dionysiac Artists," John Ma presents the title of a new Hellenistic dithyramb from second-century Anatolia. The explicit labeling in the records of this work as a dithyramb perhaps suggests a revival of this genre, though now accompanied by *kithara*. Ma's somewhat round-about presentation initially takes the form of a travelogue to the Orient, before settling into an extended analysis of a "squeeze" now kept in Princeton, in addition to Teian inscriptions, whose victor lists shows a rich dramatic festival culture led by the Dionysiac Artists. *The Horse*, which narrates Troy's fall, was composed by one of these performers. Ma concludes with the attractive proposition that the Artists in such songs presented "pseudo-choral poetry" (245), performed by individuals but evoking ancient dithyrambic performances.

Since dithyramb ceases to be of concern in the subsequent essays, perhaps a new section division is needed. Brigitte Le Guen then follows with "Kraton, Son of Zotichos: Artists Associations and Monarchic Power in the Hellenistic Period," which synthesizes available information about this important, and wealthy, aulos player. The Hellenistic kings of Pergamum, through the Dionysiac Artists and Kraton, were able to integrate Dionysiac festival into their own schemes to appear as "New Dionysoses" (275). Ian Rutherford then moves the volume over to second-century Samothrace, with "Theoria and Theatre at Samothrace: The Dardanos by Dymas of Iasos," which centers, in some loose way, around the relationship between a hero cult in honor of Dardanos and a poem by one of the *poeti vaganti*, but Rutherford's interest lies more in presenting a mass of information about these subjects, and the essay's lack of rhetorical shape leaves me unsure as to his point. The volume then travels over to Iasos, thanks to Charles Crowther's "The Dionysia at Iasos: Its Artists, Patrons, and Audience," which gives an overview of the evidence for the thriving theatrical life of this city during the second century. Here Crowther, in order to show the continuity of the Dionysia through difficult times, publishes a number of textual notes on inscriptions, a list of contributors to the Iasian Dionysia, as well as a chronology of the theater lists.

The book closes with a pair of essays based on evidence from fifth-century Sicily, which, because of that island's close relationship with Athens, bring us once again back to Athens itself, and which show how important the work in such a volume as this can be. In "An Opisthographic Lead Tablet from Sicily with a Financial Document and a Curse Concerning choregoi, David Jordan presents the texts of a double-sided lead tablet, with one side presenting a financial transaction and the other a curse from one choragos to potential rivals, both in love and in performance, "because of his love for Eunikos." While the financial document is fairly straightforward and invites little commentary, the suggested (though not proven conclusively) origin of Gela would make the tablet a fairly

important piece of documentary evidence, since Aeschylus worked there in the 470s and “neither he nor Pindar is likely to have been attracted to Gela if the city had no structure of poetic competitions” (344). In other words, this curse tablet could offer us a glimpse into part of their world. Jordan publishes the text of the curse here, and then leaves it to Wilson to translate and interpret in his concluding essay, “Sicilian Choruses.” Starting from the observation that “many theatrical structures in Sicily are found in close proximity to sanctuaries associated with chthonic cults” (354), Wilson speculates that the context for the choral contests mentioned in the tablet may have been the hero-cult of Aeschylus himself. This is a rich and suggestive essay on Sicilian performance culture, and Wilson teases as much out of the tablet as he can, including the participation of women in the festival audience (366) and paternal support for choragoi. Wilson closes by ranging over to the Pronomos vase for comparative support for a reading of “Eunikos” (“Good in victory”) as either the typical name for a member of a theatrical dynasty or a nickname drawn from his trade.

This pairing of textual editing and interpretation of cultural significance in separate but linked articles might have been a more productive practice for the rest of the volume. There is certainly much of interest here for scholars of the world of Greek performance who are not experts in epigraphy, but the book would have succeeded as a whole more had the essays been more consistently organized and their material presented in a way that would have made them more accessible for a broader scholarly audience. I can recommend highly and without reservation the essays by Goette, Wilson and Csapo to anyone who is interested in Greek theater and festivals, but the rest of the work in this volume remains the realm of those interested in the epigraphy of Hellenistic festivals and performance.