

Greek sacrifices

Offerings for the gods

The Greeks had several reasons for wanting to please the gods. Sometimes they hoped to obtain a favour from the god; sometimes, if something bad had happened, they wanted to stop the god being angry with them; sometimes they wanted to thank the god for helping them; sometimes they wanted to celebrate the god's birthday or the god's connection with their city.

One of the best ways of pleasing the gods was to give them gifts or offerings. Common offerings were the first crops at harvest time, vegetables, fruit, specially made cakes, honey, olive oil, cheeses and wine. Greek drinking parties always started with a few drops of wine poured on the ground to honour Dionysos. Individual Greeks made offerings for themselves, but at certain times of year Greek cities organised offerings in large festivals that many of the people took part in.

Animal sacrifices

The most popular kind of offering at large festivals was the sacrifice of animals. Different animals were chosen for different gods: bulls for Zeus, pigs for Demeter. Sometimes hundreds of animals were sacrificed.

Priests dressed in white robes and wearing wreaths killed the animal at an altar. Early altars were heaps of turf or stones. Later they were carved from blocks of stone. The altar of Zeus at Olympia was a huge mound made from the ashes of earlier sacrifices.

After the animal had been killed, the priests burned some fat and bones for the god. The rest of the meat was roasted in the fire and shared among the priests and the people so that they could feast on the same food as the god.

These modern drawings show three stages of an animal sacrifice.

