Festivals and Legends: The Formation of Greek Cities in the Light of Public Ritual

Public festivals are an important but neglected source of evidence for the physical and social development of Greek cities. Each city had a calendar of festivals that reflected the practical needs of the whole community. As the community grew and changed, so did the festival calendar and the program of a given festival. But though much was added, little was dropped; for ritual is by definition unchanging. Indeed the Greek cities, while originating a new form of society for the Western world, were strikingly conservative in their attachment to age-old ritual.

The festivals also gave rise to certain notions of the past that were cherished by the Greeks and still persist in conventional histories. The strange and solemn actions of ritual were inevitably understood as a re-enactment of momentary actions of long ago, actions that deserved to be commemorated. The action of long ago was deduced from the ritual and became a mythical adventure or a legendary battle. This is aetiology, the habit of explaining present customs from past events.

Ten festivals, and also a battlefield custom, have been selected for study. Five of the festivals belong to Athens, the city we know best; the others to Sparta, Argos, Messene, and Phigaleia. The festivals are mostly those addressed to the deities who preside over political organization and warfare, namely Apollo, Athena, and Zeus.

NOEL ROBERTSON is professor of Classics at Brock University. He has written and lectured on many topics of ancient, especially Greek, history and religion.

PHOENIX

Journal of the Classical Association of Canada
Revue de la Société canadienne des études classiques
Supplementary Volume xxxi
Tome supplémentaire xxxi

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UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS
Toronto Buffalo London

www.utppublishing.com

© University of Toronto Press 1992

Toronto Buffalo London

Printed in Canada

Reprinted 1996

ISBN 0-8020-5988-0

Printed on acid-free paper

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Robertson, Noel

Festivals and legends : the formation of Greek cities
in the light of public ritual

(Phoenix. Supplementary volume ; 31 = Phoenix.

Tome supplémentaire, ISSN 0079-1784 ; 31)

ISBN 0-8020-5988-0

1. Festivals – Greece. 2. Legends – Greece. 3. Rites and
ceremonies – Greece. 4. Cities and towns, Ancient –
Greece. 5. War – Mythology. I. Title. II. Series: Phoenix.
Supplementary volume (Toronto, Ont.) ; 31.

DF123.R62 1993

394.2'6938

C92-094545-7

This book has been published with the help of a grant
from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities,
using funds provided by the Social Sciences and
Humanities Research Council of Canada.

For Laura

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