

The New Year did not always begin on the first of January. The month of January itself is a relative newcomer; in their early centuries, the Romans apparently had no names for it and February, perhaps thinking them too uninteresting to be mentioned. March was for them the first month of any importance, when winter loosens its grip; hence the names of September and the other year-end months, which mean literally "seventh" through "tenth", even though after the addition of January and February they were really "ninth" through "twelfth". Mid-winter is, however, a good time to start a new year; in farming communities such as early Latium, it is a quiet time, and the winter blues can be dispelled by a cheery festival. But other times of year are possible too. In Greece, it was more typical to celebrate the New Year in mid-summer; the reason, however, was essentially the same: it was a quiet time on the farm, a natural break in the annual cycle. Most of Greece being too hot for grain to grow in the summer, winter wheat is planted in the fall and harvested in May. When nature affords a convenient break, one often finds human societies reflecting its rhythms.

By the end of June the grain was all harvested, threshed, and stored, so that July (or what corresponds roughly to our July) was the natural new year's month. In Athens, this month was known as Hekatombaion - the month of the hekatomb, or sacrifice of one hundred cattle (a round number only). Sacrifice was the central ritual of pagan religion, and an expected part of any public festival; instead of modest gifts, however, large animals were butchered on these occasions, and the meat distributed to all. Red meat was to be had by

the ordinary person only at the great public sacrifices, which were for that reason much anticipated.

In the New Year's month, a hekatomb was sacrificed for Apollo on the seventh. On the twelfth was the interesting festival of the Kronia, for Kronos, father of Zeus; on this day, masters served slaves at dinner, thus reversing normal roles. Slaves were allowed other freedoms too during the festival; in Rome, the Saturnalia, for Jupiter's father Saturn, was a similar event. It is typical of pagan rites to relax normal social restrictions or even remove them altogether; apart from providing everyone the opportunity to let off a little steam and escape the pressures of everyday existence, these occasions served to reinforce the rightness of the normal situation when it was finally restored. Getting back to normality is comfortable and reassuring after a period of change.

On the sixteenth of Hekatombaion, a festival was held in honour of the union of Attika, the synoikismos; this was the occasion in the distant past on which King Theseus united all the small villages and fiefdoms around Attika into a single nation, that of the Athenians. Such a festival fits very naturally in the New Year's month, which marks the renewal of the natural and civic order for another year. But the greatest patriotic event of the month was the Panathenaia, the festival of all Athenians.

The night of the 27th was an all-night bash, a pannychis, celebrated with wine, food and song throughout the city. At sunrise began the picturesque torch relay taking new fire from the grove of Akademos - where

Plato had his school - to the altar of Athena herself on the Acropolis. At about the same time a procession moved off from the Dipylon Gate in the north-west of the city, proceeding along the Sacred Way towards the Agora (market-place) and thence to the Acropolis, a total distance of about one kilometer. The original purpose of the procession was simply to escort the sacrificial animals to the altar; but every fourth year it was done on a grand scale. Everyone turned out in their finest festival garb - children and old men, private citizens and important officials. Men wore their armour; cavaliers rode horses or chariots. At the centre was a ship on wheels, whose sail was formed by the peplos, a new dress for Athena. (A peplos was a simple rectangle of cloth and could be rigged in such a way.) Girls and women from Athens' oldest families had worked on it for nine months; the scene woven into it was always the Battle of Gods and Giants, showing a victorious Athena rampant in her chariot. Upon reaching the Acropolis, the robe was taken down and presented to Athena - in the form of the old wooden statue in the Erechtheum. The great sacrifice followed (the butchering and cooking was done below in the Agora, where there was more room). Later on, musical and athletic competitions were held - as well as a beauty contest for men! Entrants came from all over the Greek world. The most interesting athletic event involved

getting up some speed in a four-horse chariot, then jumping off, running alongside as long as possible, and jumping back in - all the while wearing full armour. The prize for victory in these competitions was an amphora full of olive oil - a valuable commodity in the ancient world, being used for cooking, heating and lighting as well as cleaning and skin lotion. Attic olive oil was especially good; the Panathenaic prize amphoras also had a distinctive design, with a warlike Athena Promachos on one side and a depiction of the event on the other. Every museum sports one or two of these, since they are a common find for archaeologists digging in Athens.

The Panathenaia was a grand, all-embracing way to end the New Year's month. So well-liked was it that the Athenians saw fit to make it the subject of the famous Ionic frieze on that most patriotic of all buildings, the Parthenon - the new temple of Athena on the Acropolis, completed under Pericles in 433 B.C. The splendid artistry of Phidias has frozen the loyal citizens of Athens for all time as they move in stately procession to honour their goddess. At the head of the parade she waits in the company of her fellow Olympians, while the priest folds the peplos. The sacrifices will soon begin to mark the high point of another New Year's celebration.