

Bouphonia Celebration 2007

Background

The Bouphonia (also known as the Dipolieia) dates back to Ancient Athens, where a curious ritual was performed. There were first sacrifices of barley cakes to Zeus Polieus (Zeus of the City). These cakes were left upon the altar and a number of oxen were lead around it. The first ox which ate of the cakes was killed with an ax and the person wielding the ax ran away. The participants of the festival cooked and ate the ox, offering the bones and fat as in the traditional thusia and afterwards the ax was put on trial, convicted of murder and thrown into the sea. The Athenians then stuffed the hide of the ox. The ceremony was considered antiquated by the time of Aristophanes.

The events of this bizarre ceremony are linked to an Athenian legend. Cakes were offered to Zeus, and an ox came and began to eat them. One of the pious citizens killed the ox, thinking it at first a blasphemy and then ran away, realizing what he had done. Zeus, angered by these actions placed a plague on the Athenians, who went to Delphi to find out the cause and how to lift the disease.

At Delphi, Apollon stated that in order to lift the plague the Athenians needed to bring the murderer of the ox to justice, and to “resurrect” the ox. Unfortunately, by this time, the man who killed the ox was long gone, and the Athenians needed to find another way to bring justice. They thus held a trial and ultimately blamed the ax, which was thrown into the sea. They then stuffed the hide of the ox in order to symbolize it being “resurrected.” The plague was then lifted.

In the ritual, the ax is used to represent guilt (almost like the pharmakhos represents all the miasma in a person, city, town or other community), specifically the guilt of killing an animal that was not meant to be sacrificed (something that the Greeks were very particular about). This is also shown by their attempt to bring the ox back to life, which some historians believe dates back to an early hunting practice, where the hunters venerated their kill.

The modern ritual will reflect these themes, although without the actual killing of an ox. In a celebration with multiple people, the ritual can be divided into several rituals as desired. For example, the day may start with the offering of cakes to Zeus thanking Him for His protection of their community. Next would follow the offering of axes, then a theoxenia. If time permits and there is a desire, games can be played in honor of Zeus. The day is concluded with the offering of the image of an ox, which is a reminder that we must always respect the animals we consume.

The following is a version of the festival to be celebrated by a solitary worshiper. I have condensed everything so that it can be performed in one ritual, although the worshiper may decide to break it up into smaller rituals if they have the desire and the time. Because Zeus is an Olympian God, the ritual is best performed during the day, outdoors at a raised altar.

The Ritual

Preparations: In the main sanctuary, a shrine is set up to Zeus, along with an altar to place offerings. Colors appropriate for this festival are white, brown, red and blue. An image of an ox or bull is also placed upon the shrine. For the festivities of the day you will need:

- silver or gray paper and a small cauldron or heat-proof bowl (for burning things)
- honey or barley cakes for the first offerings
- wine or juice for libations
- khernips, barley, ribbon, tea-lights, altar fire (or altar candle) for the main offertory ritual
- food for a theoxenia
- an image of an ox

Prior to ritual, the worshiper uses the paper to make a small ax, thinking about the virtues that he/she holds dear. In the case of a Hellenic Polytheist, these things can be *xenia*, *kharis*, *arete*, *time'*, and *nomos*.

Procession

Marking Sacred Space and Hand-Washing

Opening Prayer

The worshiper takes a handful of barley and says the following or similar prayer:

*Holy Zeus, God of Justice,
God of Order and Morality;
I ask that You come to my celebration
and that You enjoy the festivities and offerings.
I ask that You continue to protect me and my community,
and I give You thanks for protecting me and mine over the year.
May You help me always to strive to do what is just and good.
And to grant me wisdom to always make good judgments
and to treat people with respect.
Great Zeus, King of the Gods, I celebrate You today!*

The worshiper casts their barley into the offering bowl, in confirmation of this prayer.

Offerings

Cakes

First, an offering of honey cakes are made, thanking Zeus for His assistance through the year and asking that He provide protection for the following year.

Ax Offering

The worshiper then offers their ax to the God, which is either burned on the altar or submerged in khernips. In the case of the latter, the ax is then dried and placed upon the person's shrine as a reminder to always do what is just.

Theoxenia

The worshiper prepares a feast, and offers portions of the feast to Zeus in His offering and libation bowls. The rest of the food is consumed by the worshiper in the company of the God.

Ox Image

After the theoxenia, the worshiper places an image of an ox (or whatever animal they have consumed in their feast) upon the altar. This can either be purchased or made (the latter being more traditional as it is a symbol of the stuffing of the ox in the ancient festival). The worshiper should then take some time to reflect on the fact that in order to stay alive, we must hunt for our food and honor what we eat. In the case of a vegetarian, they may reflect on the time when animals had to be killed for survival.