



Historically Speaking

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Gifts and Gift Giving



Gifts to The Gods

Gifts to the gods were a common form of exchange in the ancient world. A person would gift items to temples or statues in exchange for divine blessings. It is at the temple where community gift giving and displays of personal or political wealth were demonstrated.

For example, in the mid-sixth century, Croesus King of Lydia sent large and expensive items as gifts to Apollo at Delphi, to both impress the Greeks and to gain favor with the oracle. Similar items were also found at the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus. It was noted that Croesus not only donated the pillars for the Temple, but also oxen statues made of gold.

The theme of this month's newsletter is seasonally appropriate. In the times before currency and even after a monetary system emerged, gifts often paid the bills and supplemented the customs within and among ancient societies.

The ultimate gift in ancient Greece, turned out to be the olive tree – lauded for its wood, leaves, fruit and oil that produced food, fuel, and shade for the Greeks. And, because it was known to last hundreds of years, it was cherished as a symbol of peace, wisdom and prosperity. Yes, the olive tree has inspired myths and legends and has enjoyed an unrivaled degree of fame, and it was especially revered during the ancient Egyptian and Roman eras as well as the Greek. In Greece, the history of olive oil is as old as the myths of the gods of Olympus.

A Gift-Giving Contest

According to Greek mythology, the creation of the olive tree was the result of a contest between Athena, Goddess of Wisdom, and Poseidon, God of the Sea which would determine who would become the protector of a newly built city in Attica. The city would then be named after the god or goddess who gave the citizens the most precious, useful and divine gift. Poseidon struck a rock with his trident, causing water to pour forth out of the rock. This created a spring of salty water, symbolizing his gift of sea power. Athena also struck a rock with her spear and produced the first olive tree, an offering signifying fruitfulness and peace. The citizens chose the more economically beneficial gift of Athena and she forever became the patroness of the city named after her, Athens. The story of her precious gift and the recognition of its value have been carried down through the millennia. Even today, an olive tree stands where the story of this legendary competition is said to have taken place. The myth continues as a “living legend” as it is said that all the olive trees in Athens were descended from that first olive tree offered by Athena.

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More on Gifts and Gift Giving

Differences in the nature of gift giving varies across cultures, but most share common origin in early hunter gatherer societies where gift giving was form of social bonding, a conduit for strong tribal connections.

Ancient Greece was no exception. The role of gift giving was paramount in order to maintain family ties, secure successful lineage, societal infrastructure and manage political relations.

Gift giving in Archaic Greece was preferred over commodity exchange. Gift exchange between families, states, overseas powers and domestic aristocrats helped build long-term social relationships.

The Odyssey portrays the cultural form of gift giving, confirming that social and material gifts were repaid in the form of an exchange. The Greeks referred to this process as Xenia, a social rule whereby one must endeavor to give material and non-material gifts, such as hospitality and food, to a traveler or stranger. It was believed that doing so would put one in favor with the gods, especially Zeus as 'protector of guests' and Hermes as 'protector of travelers'. Politically speaking, Xenia was seen as a force for social good and helped to maintain stability within society. The practice encouraged guest-friend relationships through the medium of gift exchange. Relationships established under Xenia could be maintained over great distances, lengths of time and extend outwards beyond established social connections.

One important aspect of Xenia is that it allowed travelers to pass through otherwise hostile territory safely. Ancient Greek city-states did not promise visitors safety or shelter. Guest houses and inns were limited or non-existent, and those that existed could be too expensive for the casual traveller. In this way, Xenia allowed travelers to pass safely between states, provided someone was willing to accommodate their stay and provide food and shelter for the night. In exchange, travelers would leave a parting gift in thanks.

On the part of the host, hospitality was also an opportunity to display wealth. The more one gave to others and charitable causes, the higher one's status was considered to be. As demonstrated in a quote from The

Odyssey:

"Come, friend, and give me something; for you seem to be no lowly man among the Greeks, but their most noble lord — indeed a chief. So, you should offer more than others can — I'd make you famous then in endless lands. I, too, was once a man of means; my house was rich; I often gave to vagabonds, whoever they might be, who came in need." The reputations of both the host and traveler relied on this exchange. One could become well-known purely on the basis of the quality of their hospitality, or the value of the gift given in reciprocity.

In Egypt the economic structure can best be described as being a redistribution, which means that the surplus of the peasant households was collected by the authorities, both state and temple, and redistributed among the sections of society, including officials, priests, the army, necropolis workers and more. This redistribution system was probably more common in cities and towns where a 'peasant society', consisting of households that were largely self-sufficient as far as the necessities of life were concerned. Those goods which they did not produce themselves such as salt, copper, particular types of trinkets, etc., or which did not come to them through redistribution, they acquired either by direct barter from their neighbors or to a minor extent from the marketplace. Another way by which commodities were acquired, particularly the relatively large amount of food needed for festive occasions in the household or services for exceptional activities such as the building of a new house, was reciprocal gift-giving, a form of gift exchange where a return is eventually expected but is probably delayed. In the rural areas, the system was simple barter among neighbors, though those communities were, for the most part, self-sufficient through agriculture and hunting.

My primary sources for this newsletter are:

[Gift Giving in the Ancient World](#)

by KristinD on December 25, 2020

Written by Lydia Serrant, Contributing Writer, Classical Wisdom

and

[Gift-Giving in Ancient Egypt as an Economic Feature](#)

by Jac. J. Janssen