

Athanaeus (fl. c. 200 CE): The Great Spectacle and Procession of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, 285 BCE

[Davis Intro:] When Ptolemy II Philadelphus became king of Egypt (285 B.C.), he celebrated his accession by a magnificent procession and festival at Alexandria. The following is only a part of the description of the very elaborate spectacle. The mere enumeration of all this pomp, power and treasure conveys a striking idea of the riches of the Ptolemaic kings, the splendor of their court, and the resources of their kingdom.

History, Book V, Chap. 25: First I will describe the tent prepared inside the citadel, apart from the place provided to receive the soldiers, artisans, and foreigners. For it was wonderfully beautiful, and worth talking of. Its size was such that it could accommodate one hundred and thirty couches [for banqueters] arranged in a circle. The roof was upborne on wooden pillars fifty cubits high of which four were arranged to look like palm trees. On the outside of the pillars ran a portico, adorned with a peristyle on three sides with a vaulted roof. Here it was the feasters could sit down. The interior of this was surrounded with scarlet curtains; in the middle of the space, however, were suspended strange hides of beasts, strange both for their variegated color, and their remarkable size. The part which surrounded this portico in the open air was shaded by myrtle trees and laurels, and other suitable shrubs.

As for the whole floor, it was strewed with every kind of flower; for Egypt, thanks to its mild climate, and the fondness of its people for gardening, produces abundantly, and all the year round, those flowers which are scarce in other lands, and then come only at special seasons. Roses, white lilies, and many another flower never lack in that country. Wherefore, although this entertainment took place in midwinter, there was a show of flowers that was quite incredible to the foreigners. For flowers of which one could not easily have found enough to make one chaplet in any other city, were here in vast abundance, to make chaplets for the guests . . . and were thickly strewn over the whole floor of the tent; so as really to give the appearance of a most divine meadow.

By the posts around the tent were placed animals carved in marble by the first artists, a full hundred in number; while in the spaces between the posts were hung pictures by the Sicyonian painters. And alternately with these were carefully selected images of every kind, and garments embroidered with gold and splendid cloaks, some having portraits of the kings of Egypt wrought upon them, and some stories from mythology. Above these were placed gold and silver shields alternately.

[A long account follows of the golden couches, golden tripods, silver dishes, and lavers, jewel-set cups, etc., provided for the guests.]

And now to go on to the shows and processions exhibited; for they passed through the Stadium of the city. First of all there went the procession of Lucifer [the name given to the planet Venus] for the fete began at the time when that star first appears. Then came processions in honor of the several gods. In the Dionysus procession, first of all went the Sileni to keep off the multitude, some clad in purple cloaks, and some in scarlet ones. These were followed by Satyrs, bearing gilded lamps made of ivy wood. After them came images of Victory, having golden wings, and they bore in their hands incense burners, six cubits in height, adorned with branches made of ivy wood and gold, and clad in tunics embroidered with figures of animals, and they themselves also had a deal of gold ornament about them. After them followed an altar six cubits high, a double altar, all covered with gilded ivy leaves, having a crown of vine leaves upon it all in gold. Next came boys in purple tunics, bearing frankincense and myrrh, and saffron on golden dishes. And then advanced forty Satyrs, crowned with golden ivy garlands; their bodies were painted some with purple, some with vermilion, and some with other colors. They wore each a golden crown, made to imitate vine leaves and ivy leaves. Presently also came Philiscus the Poet, who was a priest of Dionysus, and with him all the artisans employed in the service of that god; and following were the Delphian tripods as prizes to the trainers of the athletes, one for the trainer of the youths, nine cubits high, the other for the trainer of the men, twelve cubits.

The next was a four-wheeled wagon fourteen cubits high and eight cubits wide; it was drawn by one hundred and eighty men. On it was an image of Dionysus---ten cubits high. He was pouring libations from a golden goblet, and had a purple tunic reaching to his feet. . . In front of him lay a Lacedaemonian goblet of gold, holding fifteen measures of wine, and a golden tripod, in which was a golden incense burner, and two golden bowls full of cassia and saffron; and a shade covered it round adorned with ivy and vine leaves, and all other kinds of greenery. To it were fastened chaplets and fillets, and ivy wands, drums, turbans, and actors' masks.

After many other wagons came one twenty-five cubits long, and fifteen broad; and this was drawn by six hundred men. On this wagon was a sack, holding three thousand measures of wine, and consisting of leopards' skins sewn together. This sack allowed its liquor to escape, and it gradually flowed over the whole road. [An endless array of similar wonders followed; also a vast number of palace servants displaying the golden vessels of the king; twenty-four chariots drawn by four elephants each; the royal menagerie---twelve chariots drawn by antelopes, fifteen by buffaloes, eight by pairs of ostriches, eight by zebras; also many mules, camels, etc., and twenty-four lions.]

After these came a procession of troops---both horsemen and footmen, all

superbly armed and appointed. There were 57,600 infantry, and 23,200 cavalry. All these marched in the procession. . .all in their appointed armor. . .

The cost of this great occasion was 2239 talents and 50 minae [i.e., roughly \$35 million in 1998 dollars--a prodigious sum for any coronation--ed.].

Source:

From: William Stearns Davis, *Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources*, 2 Vols., (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912-1913), Vol. I: Greece and the East, pp. 329-332.