

1911 Encyclopædia Britannica, Volume 2 — Anthesteria



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ANTHESTERIA, one of the four Athenian festivals in honour of Dionysus, held annually for three days (11th–13th) in the month of Anthesterion (February–March). The object of the festival was to celebrate the maturing of the wine stored at the previous vintage, and the beginning of spring. On the first day, called *Pithoigia* (opening of the casks), libations were offered from the newly opened casks to the god of wine, all the household, including servants and slaves, joining in the festivities. The rooms and the drinking vessels in them were adorned with spring flowers, as were also the children over three years of age. The second day, named *Choës* (feast of beakers), was a time of merrymaking. The people dressed themselves gaily, some in the disguise of the mythical personages in the suite of Dionysus, and paid a round of visits to their acquaintances. Drinking clubs met to drink off matches, the winner being he who drained his cup most rapidly. Others poured libations on the tombs of deceased relatives. On the part of the state this day was the occasion of a peculiarly solemn and secret ceremony in one of the sanctuaries of Dionysus in the Lenaeum, which for the rest of the year was closed. The basilissa (or basilinna), wife of the archon basileus for the time, went through a ceremony of marriage to the wine god, in which she was assisted by fourteen Athenian matrons, called *geraerae*, chosen by the basileus and sworn to secrecy. The days on which the Pithoigia and Choës were celebrated were both regarded as ἀποφράδες (*nefasti*) and μιαραί (“defiled”), necessitating expiatory libations; on

them the souls of the dead came up from the underworld and walked abroad; people chewed leaves of whitethorn and besmeared their doors with tar to protect themselves from evil. But at least in private circles the festive character of the ceremonies predominated. The third day was named *Chytri* (feast of pots, from χύτρος, a pot), a festival of the dead. Cooked pulse was offered to Hermes, in his capacity of a god of the lower world, and to the souls of the dead. Although no performances were allowed at the theatre, a sort of rehearsal took place, at which the players for the ensuing dramatic festival were selected.

The name Anthesteria, according to the account of it given above, is usually connected with ἄνθος (“flower,” or the “bloom” of the grape), but A. W. Verrall (*Journal of Hellenic Studies*, xx., 1900, p. 115) explains it as a feast of “revocation” (from ἀναθέσασθαι, to “pray back” or “up”), at which the ghosts of the dead were recalled to the land of the living (*cp.* the Roman *mundus patet*). J. E. Harrison (*ibid.* 100, 109, and *Prolegomena*), regarding the Anthesteria as primarily a festival of all souls, the object of which was the expulsion of ancestral ghosts by means of placation, explains πιθοιγία as the feast of the opening of the graves (πίθος meaning a large urn used for burial purposes), χόες as the day of libations, and χύτροι as the day of the grave-holes (not “pots,” which is χύτραι), in point of time really anterior to the πιθοιγία. E. Rohde and M. P. Nilsson, however, take the χύτροι to mean “water vessels,” and connect the ceremony with the Hydrophoria, a

libation festival to propitiate the dead who had perished in the flood of Deucalion.

See F. Hiller von Gärtringen in Pauly-Wissowa's *Realencyclopädie* (s.v.); J. Girard in Daremberg and Saglio, *Dictionnaire des antiquités* (s.v. "Dionysia"); and F. A. Voigt in Roscher's *Lexikon der Mythologie* (s.v. "Dionysos"); J. E. Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903); M. P. Nilsson, *Studia de Dionysiis Atticis* (1900) and *Griechische Feste* (1906); G. F. Schömann, *Griechische Alterthümer*, ii. (ed. J. H. Lipsius, 1902), p. 516; A. Mommsen, *Feste der Stadt Athen* (1898); E. Rohde, *Psyche* (4th ed., 1907), p. 237.

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