

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY FOR THE STUDY OF ANCIENT RELIGIONS

Introduction

CLCL7003

Staff on the module

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Units for the Module

2nd October	Matthew Cobb	Unit 1 – Introduction
9th October	Matthew Cobb	Unit 2 Ritual and Society
16th October	Louise Steel	Unit 3 Rit. & Ceremony
23rd October	Jessica Keady	Unit 4: Monotheism
30th October	Matthew Cobb	Unit 5: Sacred Texts
6th November	Matthew Cobb	Unit 6: Myth & Religion
13th November	Louise Steel	Unit 7: <i>rites de passage</i>
20th November	Bettina Schmidt	Unit 8: Cosmology, Society
27th November	Thomas Jansen	Unit 9: Power & Religion
4th December	Timothy Baylor	Unit 10: Religion in Contact

Assignments

- 1) 1 x 1,250-word book/article review (25%)**
- 2) 1 x 1,250-word encyclopaedia article (25%)**
- 3) 1 x 2,500-word short essay (50%)**
 - N.B.: Please note that you **MUST** spread your three assessments across the course, i.e. each assignment must relate to another unit of this module.

Overview

What are some key terms and concepts of religions in the Ancient World?

- Orthopraxy – the focus on the correct performance of rituals.
 - Contrast: orthodoxy – appropriate or “correct” beliefs.
- Private versus community religious practices:
 - e.g. *lares* and *penates* in a Roman household;
- Civic religion verses mystery cults:
 - Panathenaia as opposed to the Eleusinian mysteries.
- *religio* verses *superstitio*
 - “*religio* honours the gods, *superstitio* wrongs them.” – Seneca De Clementia 2.5.1.

Characteristics of Graeco-Roman Religion

- ▣ Embeddedness? [see Nongbri (2008): 440-60]
 - Herodotus 1.144.2: 'there is the bond of Hellenic race, by which we are of one blood and of one speech, the common temples of the gods and the common sacrifices, the manners of life which are the same for all'.
- ▣ Polytheism – contra monotheistic religions
 - Increasing henotheism (Isis; Sol Invictus)
- ▣ Piety
 - Isocrates 7.30: believing that piety consists, not in extravagant expenditures, but in disturbing none of the rites which their ancestors had handed on to them.
- ▣ Pollution
- ▣ Religious specialists – contrast Graeco-Roman world with say Judaic practices
- ▣ Poets and Seers
 - Herodotus 2.53.2: Hesiod and Homer I suppose were four hundred years before my time and not more, and these are they who made a theogony for the Hellenes and gave the titles to the gods and distributed to them honours and arts, and set forth their forms

Power and Morality of the Gods

▣ Limits to their power?

- “Do you wish to save from death a man who is mortal [Sarpedon]... Go ahead. But not all the gods will approve... some other god will want to send his own son away from the fierce conflict... you will arouse great resentment among them.” – *Illiad* 16.440ff.

▣ Justice:

- Men punished for slights, pride, as personal favours.
- “You kings, take note of justice. For the immortal gods are close to men and take note of all those who oppress others by crooked judgements...” – *Hesiod Works and Days* 248ff.

▣ Morality:

- Gods as petty, mean-spirited, vindictive, deceitful, greedy and licentious.

▣ Views on Mankind:

- “Earthshaker, you would think I was out of my mind if I were to fight with you for the sake of wretched mortals, who are like leaves, now flourishing and growing warm with life... but then fading away and dying...” – *Illiad* 21.462ff.
- Meeting of Croesus and Solon, reported by Herodotus.

The Afterlife

- ▣ No one strict orthodox view (absence of dogma).
- ▣ **Hades:**
 - Undifferentiated dead.
 - “[Achilles] I’d rather be a day labourer on earth working for a man of little property than lord of all the host of dead.” – *Odyssey* 24.20ff.
 - Lord of the dead Hades/Dis/Pluto – Hermes Psychopompos – Charon the ferryman.
 - Relatively few descriptions or depictions of the underworld (see *Odyssey* and Aristophanes *Frogs*).
- ▣ **Reward and Punishment:**
 - A notion of heaven and hell largely absent, but Minos is judge of the dead (role not to distinguish between saved and damned).
 - Elysian fields and the Isles of the Blest where heroes live.
 - Punishment of dead – Tantalos (serving human flesh to the gods) – Ixion (violation of *xenia*) and Sisyphos (revealed Zeus’ location to the river Asopos).

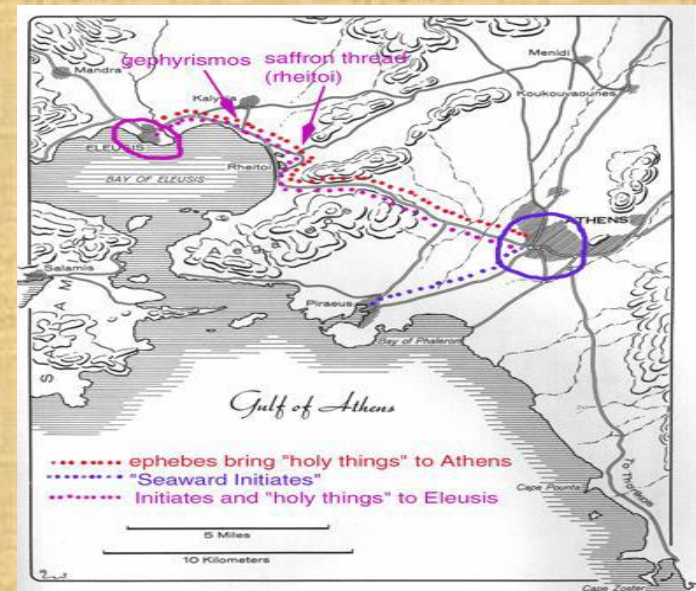
“When a man gets near to the end of his life, he becomes subject to fear and anxiety about what lies ahead. The stories told about people in Hades, that if you commit crimes on earth you must pay for them down below, although they were ridiculed for a while, now begin to disturb a man’s *psyche* with the possibility that they might be true.” – **Plato Republic 1.330d-e.**

Alternatives to Hades

- ❑ The dead may become stars, cf. Castor and Pollux and Orion. Seems to have been done as a reward.
- ❑ Souls (*Psychai*) may join the *aither* – “The moist aither received their psychai, but the earth their bodies.” – IG I² 945. – An epitaph for an Athenian who died at Potidaea (432-429 BC).
- ❑ Transmigration of the souls – the moving of a soul from one body to other as a result of death (*metempsychosis*) – see Plato’s *Phaedo* (107d-108c).

Eleusinian Mysteries

- Eleusinian mysteries celebrated in Eleusis in Attica in honour of Demeter and Persephone.
- Initiatory cult, probably with afterlife connections.
- Everyone welcome bar murderers or those who cannot speak Greek.
- Secret rituals, and three levels of initiation, preliminary initiation into Lesser Mysteries, initiation in the Greater Mysteries (*telete*) and higher initiation (*epopteia*).



Cult Space

- ▣ Not restricted to specific buildings or locations.
- ▣ The Sanctuaries
 - ▣ The *temenos* (lit. 'cut-off place) - *Peribolos* (boundary wall) - *Horoi* (marker stones) - The Propylaea (Gateway) - The Altar(s) - Temple.
 - Others: Treasuries / Stoas/Housing / Dining Rooms / Training Rooms, Exercise Areas, Stadia / Theatres / Fountain Houses / (sometimes) Incubation Houses / Shops

- ▣ Temples were part of religion in the Greek world but cult did not take place in them - houses of cult but not the place of cult practice.



A terracotta model of a temple from Perachora (700 BC)

- The gods required gifts or favours or the promise of favours to be willing to intervene.

- **Sacrifice:**

- Appeasing the gods through blood sacrifice (*thysia*) – sacrificial smoke of offering rising up to Olympus.
- Victims often wreathed with woollen ribbons, horns may be gilded.
- Must be free of blemishes.
- Victims head sprinkled with holy water or grain.
- Throat slit, blood gush on the altar, animals carved up a portion burnt on altar.
- For chthonic deities blood allowed to seep into the ground and the whole animal burnt (*holocaust*).



- **Votive Offerings:**

- Gifts made in anticipation or consequence of divine favour.
- Could range from small figurines to whole temples.
- A portion of spoils after a victory may be dedicated (*dekate*).

- **Libations:**

- Poured to the gods or the dead – *sponde* was a libation to ensure familiar actions under protection of the gods – *choe* was a libation to the dead or chthonic deities.



'The Athenians from the Spartans of Pylos'

Piety and Impiety

- About proper behaviour towards the gods (rather than a Judaeo-Christian concept of sin).
- Piety – *eusebeia* – doing the right thing in regards to reverence (*sebas*). Correct conduct towards one's parents, fatherland and the dead.
- Impiety – *asebia* – offences against established procedure rather than say heresy. Mutilating statues, profaning rites, introducing new gods.
- Presenting the gods in a ludicrous light in plays not necessarily regarded as impious, cf. Aristophanes *Frogs*.

Miasma

- ▣ *Miasma* – stain, defilement, pollution.

- ▣ **Sexual Intercourse:**

- ‘Mildly polluting’, but the Greeks performed no purification rituals after sex – violate a sacred space by having sex in it.
- Worshipers or priest may be enjoined to temporary abstinence before and during certain rites/festivals.
- Babylonians and sex – **Herodotus 1.198.**

- ▣ **Childbirth:**

- Priests avoided contact with women giving birth.
- A house in which a birth was taking place had to be smeared with pitch, either to prevent the pollution seeping out or ‘to drive away *daimones*’.
- Pollution ceased forty days after childbirth.

- ▣ **Death:**

- Purification rituals involved washing the corpse – water outside house for purifying – washing after the funeral.
- Priests forbidden contact with the dead, those in recent contact with the dead stayed away from temples.

- ▣ **Homicide:**

- Deliberate or involuntary both polluting.
- Those condemned to death in Athens compelled to take their own life (e.g. Socrates and hemlock).
- This pollution could be seen to be very harmful to the community (cf. Sophocles *Oedipus*).
- “Not only have fellow-passengers of mine enjoyed the calmest of voyages: but whenever I have attended a sacrifice, that sacrifice has invariably been successful. I claim that these facts furnish the strongest presumption in my favour that the charge brought against me by the prosecution is unfounded; I have witnesses to confirm them.” – **Antiphon *Murder of Herodes* 5.82-83.**