

Syracuse University  
Department of Religion

Fall 2000

**REL 205: Ancient Greek Religion**

Instructor: Prof. Patricia Miller

Office: 501-B Hall of Languages Hours: Thursdays, 3:00-4:30 and by appointment

Teaching Assistant: Marc Beard

"Everything is full of gods." (Thales, 6th c. B.C.E.)

"Many are the shapes of things divine." (Euripides, 5th c. B.C.E.)

This course is an introduction to the world of thought and practice that contemporary scholars call ancient Greek religion. The main materials of the course are drawn from the ancient Greeks themselves—from poets, artists, playwrights, and mythographers. Emphasis will be placed on the myths and festivals that formed the fabric of ancient Greek religious practice and outlook. Ancient perspectives on *cosmos* (universe), *polis* (city and its society), *psyche* (self), and *theos* (gods) will be explored.

The study of ancient Greek religion can be unsettling, as you can see from the two quotations above. It can be unsettling because the sense of religion that many of us in the contemporary United States have has been mediated largely through monotheistic religions like Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. These religions have very different sets of assumptions and values when compared with ancient Greek religion. With its multiplicity of divinities, the absence of Scriptural authority, its sacrificial and ritualistic practices, and more, ancient Greek religion is really an "other" way of being-in-the-world religiously. In order to learn about this other religion in a reflective way, you need to keep these two important perspectives in mind:

1. *imaginative sympathy*: take seriously the world of the ancient Greek person; assume that the religious thought or practice carries real meaning for that person;

2. *critical distance*: try to raise questions that may not be raised by the participants, such as, what effect does this faith or practice have on the participant? on society?; what kinds of values does a given text suggest or implicitly depend upon?; what are the conceptions of human nature that texts and practices envision?; what does a given dimension of Greek religion show to be fundamental to human happiness and welfare?

These are the kinds of questions and issues that you need to keep in mind as you read and reflect on the materials in this course.

**Required Texts** (available in the Orange Student Bookstore)

*Religion in the Ancient Greek City*, by L. Zaidman and P. Pantel (=RAGC on syllabus)

Finley, M. I., *The Ancient Greeks*

Hesiod, *Theogony* (trans. by Norman O. Brown)

Aeschylus, *The Oresteia* (trans. by Robert Fagles)

Euripides, *Alcestis and Other Plays* (Penguin Classics)

Euripides, *Euripides II* (in a series entitled The Complete Greek Tragedies)

Euripides, *Euripides V* (same series)

*The Homeric Hymns* (trans. by Thelma Sargent)

***Schedule of Readings and Requirements:*** Note: Students are responsible for bringing the appropriate ancient texts to class for purposes of discussion and in-class reference.

Introduction: Aug. 28-Sept. 1 [Note: Monday, Sept. 4 is Labor Day; no class]

Reading: RAGC, pp. 3-20

Finley, pp. 1-14

I. Cosmology and Mythology

A. Origins and Relations of the Divine Powers: Sept. 6-13

Reading: Hesiod, *Theogony*

Homeric Hymn to Earth (Sargent, p. 79)

RACG, pp. 143-72, 176-86

Finley, pp. 15-36

*Reading Log Due: Sept. 6*

B. Representing the Divine: Ritual and Cult: Sept. 15-20

Reading: Homeric Hymns to Hermes and Pythian Apollo (Sargent, pp. 20-45)

RAGC, pp. 27-45, 121-28, 191-98

*Reading Log Due: Sept. 15*

C. Divine-Human Interactions in Ritual and Cult: Sept. 22-27

Reading: Homeric Hymns to Hestia, Athena, Artemis, Hephaistos

(Sargent, pp. 74, 78, 60, 77, 76, 70)

RACG, pp. 63-71, 186-91

Reading Log Due: Sept. 22

II. The Hero: Two Views

A. Heracles as Savior: Sept. 29-Oct. 4

Reading: Euripides, *Alcestis*

Homeric Hymn to Heracles (Sargent, p. 64)

RACG, pp. 72-78

Finley, pp. 75-86

Reading Log Due: Sept. 29

B. Heracles as Madman: Oct. 6-13 [Note: Mon., Oct. 9 is Yom Kippur;  
no class]

Reading: Euripides, *Heracles*

Finley, pp. 37-63

Reading Log Due: Oct. 6

**1<sup>ST</sup> TAKE-HOME ESSAY DUE, OCTOBER 13**

III. Divinities and Festivals, 1: Demeter, Harvest, and the Eleusinian Mysteries

A. Harvest Festivals: Oct. 16

Reading: Homeric Hymn to Demeter (Sargent, pp. 2-14)

RAGC, pp. 46-62, 102-111

B. The Eleusinian Mysteries: Oct. 18-23 [Note: Fri, Oct. 20 is Autumn Break;  
no class]

Reading: RAGC, pp. 132-140

Homeric Hymn to Demeter (again)

Reading Log Due: Oct. 18

IV. Divinities and Festivals, 2: Dionysus, Ghosts, Theater, and Bacchants

A. Dionysus and his Festivals: Oct. 25-27

Reading: Homeric Hymns to Dionysus (Sargent, pp. 1, 55, 75)

RAGC, pp. 198-207; review 28-39, 169-175 on sacrifice

Reading Log Due: Oct. 25

B. Dionysus and Drama: Oct. 30-Nov. 3

Reading: Euripides, *The Bacchae*

RAGC, pp. 215-222

Finley, pp. 107-27

Reading Log Due: Oct. 30

V. Divinities and Festivals, 3: Athena, Apollo, the Family Drama, and the City

A. The Family Drama: Nov. 6-15

Reading: Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* (Play 1 of *The Oresteia*)

(Optional: "Introduction," pp. 23-52)

Reading Log Due: Nov. 6

Note: Nov. 10-13: In-class screening of a production of *Agamemnon* by the National Theatre of Great Britain (1990)

Nov. 15: In-class playing of "The House of Atreus," a "romantic barbaric opera" by Virgin Steele

**2<sup>ND</sup> TAKE-HOME ESSAY DUE, NOVEMBER 15**

[Note: No class Nov. 17-26; Prof. Miller is attending the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion from the 17<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup>; Thanksgiving Break is from the 22<sup>nd</sup>-26<sup>th</sup>]

B. The Plot Thickens: Nov. 27-Dec. 1

Reading: Aeschylus, *The Libation Bearers* (Play 2 of *The Oresteia*)

(Optional: "Introduction," pp. 53-70)

Reading Log Due: Nov. 27

C. Athena, Apollo, and the Furies: Resolution?: Dec. 4-8

Reading: Aeschylus, *The Eumenides* (Play 3 of *The Oresteia*)

(Optional: "Introduction," pp. 71-97)

Reading Log Due: Dec. 4

## *Course Requirements*

1. Attendance is required; failure to attend class consistently (*and especially cutting Friday classes*) will result in the lowering of your final grade by one whole letter. Please arrive in class on time; lateness is disruptive for everyone.
2. Reading the materials for each section of the course on time is required, and students are expected to engage in class discussions.
3. Two take-home essays are required; they are due on Oct. 13 and Nov. 15. Each of these should be five to seven pages in length, typed (double-spaced) with standard margins and font size (i.e., no larger than 12). *No late submissions will be accepted*, except in documented cases of medical emergencies. Each paper is worth one-fourth of the final grade.

Topics will be handed out one week before the essays are due. They must reflect thorough knowledge of the readings and an ability to analyze ancient texts in conversation with contemporary scholarly views and issues introduced in class. As you compose your essays, keep in mind that religions provide meaning in many different ways, for example, through mythic stories, ritual practices, artistic symbols, poetry, and so on. Also keep in mind that any given ancient text may have several different dimensions—theological, ethical, political, psychological, cosmological, and so on. How, you might ask yourself, do these dimensions relate to religion?

4. A reading log is required. There are 11 possible reading log entries; ***you must do eight of these entries; otherwise, you will lose credit for the entire assignment*** (this means that if you complete seven of the logs, you will get no credit for them at all). You must submit reading log entries on the dates noted on the syllabus. Obviously, this is an important assignment; it is worth one-fourth of your final grade. Each entry will be graded "S" for satisfactory or "U" for unsatisfactory; too many "U" grades will result in the subtraction of points from the total of 25 points possible for this assignment. In the immortal words of Nike, "Just do it."

For each entry, read the materials listed above the due date. Reading log entries are designed to enable you to identify and reflect upon the most important themes and issues in the ancient texts. You may refer to contemporary writings (e.g., RAGC) to help you in your reflections, but log entries must focus on the ancient texts. Here's one question you can ask yourself after reading a particular text: what sticks like a burr in your imagination? That is, what strikes you about a given text—a theme, an image, a ritual, a characterization of the gods or of human beings—that seems particularly significant for understanding the Greeks and their ways of being religious in the world? How does such an image, theme, etc. provide a focal point or organizing motif for understanding a given text? Once you choose your "burr," write about it as reflectively as you can.

*Each entry must be at least one page in length* (typed, double-spaced, with standard margins and font size). Entries will be collected on the due-dates, graded, and returned. Late entries will not be accepted for any reason other than serious illness, well-documented.

5. *A final essay is required*. It is due on Dec. 15 at 5:00 p.m. in my mailbox in 501 Hall of Languages. On the last day of class, I will hand back the definitions of Greek religion that you wrote on the first day of class. Your assignment is to write an essay of five to eight pages (typed, double-spaced, with standard margins and font size) in which you refine, change, but in any case expand upon your initial definition. Include in this discussion which of the many ancient texts we've read helped bring you to these final thoughts.