

# ANCH110: Introduction to Ancient Greece

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**Essay Topic 4: What were the main ways in which the Greeks worshipped their Gods?**

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The ancient Greeks had a very strong religious culture with a polytheistic pantheon of gods and goddesses whom they worshipped in many different ways.<sup>1</sup> Of these practises, the most common included sacrifice, prayer, divination, festivals, their temples and funerary practices. Asklepios the Healer was also important, as many Greeks would worship him by putting their faith in his healing abilities and repaying him with gifts or prayers. In addition, the females of ancient Greece had their own important role to play in the worship of their deities, which was often different to that of the males. Although there are many more forms of worship that were a part of the religion for the Greeks, these were the most important and more frequently practiced.

For the ancient Greeks, one of the most common methods of worshipping the gods was through sacrifice. The sacrificial slaughter of one or more animals was the most common although bloodless sacrifices of bread, vegetables or other foods were not unheard of.<sup>2</sup> The process usually involved cooking certain parts of the animal to offer to the gods and consuming the leftovers with friends, family or other worshippers, making it a communal activity.<sup>3</sup> Homer's account of a sacrificial slaughter depicts a feast for the worshippers involved, dining on freshly cooked meat and wine after they have made their offering to Athena.<sup>4</sup> However, for those who were poorer it was more likely that they sacrificed most of the animal to the gods and dined on what little they had left over as they could not afford to waste any.<sup>5</sup> There were other forms of worship though that both the poor and the rich could partake in to satisfy their gods.

The ancient Greeks used prayer as a method of worshipping and communicating with the gods, and it was an important feature of their religion. Prayer accompanied every sacrifice or offering to the gods, usually as a way of asking for a favour and to ensure the god or goddess understood what the purpose of the offering was.<sup>6</sup> As well as accompanying sacrificial rituals, families and individuals also prayed to the gods at critical points throughout their life, such as during pregnancy or when a family member was seriously ill.<sup>7</sup> It was also possible for a

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<sup>1</sup> M.Dillon and L.Garland, *The Ancient Greeks: History and Culture from Archaic Times to the Death of Alexander*, New York, 2013, p.74

<sup>2</sup> L.B.Zaidman and P.S Pantel, *Religion in the ancient Greek city*, Cambridge, 1992, p.37

<sup>3</sup> A.M.Bowie, 'Greek Sacrifice: Forms and functions', in A.Powell (ed.), *The Greek World*, London, 1995, p.464

<sup>4</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 3.430-63, 470-72: A Homeric Sacrifice, in M.Dillon and L.Garland, *Ancient Greece: Social and Historical Documents from Archaic Times to the Death of Alexander the Great*, New York, 2010, p.80

<sup>5</sup> Menander, *Samia*, 399-404: The Gods' Share of Sacrifices, in M.Dillon and L.Garland, *Ancient Greece: Social and Historical Documents from Archaic Times to the Death of Alexander the Great*, New York, 2010, p.81

<sup>6</sup> S.Pulley, *Prayer in Greek Religion*, Oxford, 1997, p.14

<sup>7</sup> S.G.Cole, 'Greek Religion', in J.R.Hinnells (ed.), *A Handbook of Ancient Religion*, Cambridge, 2007, p.276

prayer to be undertaken without sacrifice in the case of thanking the gods for past divine acts or asking for further favours by reminding them of offerings made in the past.<sup>8</sup> For more serious issues though, the Greeks used the ancient art of divination to understand the will of the gods.

Of the many forms of divination used by the Greeks to worship their gods, the oracles were by far the most popular. At different sites around Greece, priests and priestesses would listen to queries from those who wished to consult with the gods and would then provide answers from the gods themselves.<sup>9</sup> The Greeks highly valued the opinion and favour of the gods, thus giving the oracles extreme influence over the Greek people.<sup>10</sup> The most famous of these oracles was the *pythia* at Delphi, a priestess serving the god Apollo. Worshippers would present their question in advance and the *pythia* would respond in an ambiguous manner, leaving the interpretation up to the worshipper. Oracles usually required that a gift be given in return for an answer, with payments ranging from cake to a goat depending on which city-state they were in.<sup>11</sup> Each city-state also had their own way of worshipping the gods through religious festivals and celebrations.

Festivals allowed the ancient Greeks to worship their gods in large public gatherings, celebrations, competitive sports and other kinds of festivities. Each city had a calendar listing all the public sacrifices and religious festivals to occur that year, as these activities were very important forms of worship for the Greeks.<sup>12</sup> The largest festivals that were attended by Greeks from all city-states and colonies were the *panhellenic* games at Corinth, Nemea, Delphi and Olympia. These festivals were in honour of a specific god, celebrating their divinity through athletic activities such as chariot racing, boxing, wrestling and running.<sup>13</sup> The most important aspect of these festivities however was the sacred truce of all military hostilities declared before all games, allowing Greeks to safely travel across the country to partake in the religious ceremonies.<sup>14</sup> Another religious activity the Greeks were willing to travel for was to undergo divine healing at the hands of Apollo's son.

Among the many ways in which the Greeks worshipped their gods, the services of Asklepios the Healer were one of the more prominent. The Greeks worshipped Asklepios as a hero since he was the son of a mortal woman and the god Apollo, and would come to him to be cured of illnesses or injuries. Worshippers would be purified with holy water before entering the sanctuary, and would only be given access if they were without stain or blemish. It was also customary to

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<sup>8</sup> S.Pulley, *Prayer in Greek Religion*, Oxford, 1997, p.40

<sup>9</sup> J.Mikalson, *Athenian Popular Religion*, Chapel Hill, 2005, p.18

<sup>10</sup> A.A.Trever, *History of Ancient Civilisation*, Harcourt, 1936, p.210

<sup>11</sup> M.Dillon and L.Garland, *The Ancient Greeks: History and Culture from Archaic Times to the Death of Alexander*, New York, 2013, p.83

<sup>12</sup> S.G.Cole, 'Greek Religion', in J.R.Hinnells (ed.), *A Handbook of Ancient Religion*, Cambridge, 2007, p.276

<sup>13</sup> G.K.Tull, *Early Civilisations*, London, 1966, p.136

<sup>14</sup> L.B.Zaidman and P.S Pantel, *Religion in the ancient Greek city*, Cambridge, 1992, p.128

provide a gift to Asklepios as a consultation fee.<sup>15</sup> The supplicants slept, or incubated, in a sanctuary called the *abaton* overnight, during which time Asklepios would usually appear to them in a dream and either heal them or inform them of the cure for their ailment.<sup>16</sup> One account, although highly unlikely, provides an example of the types of treatment the Greeks believed possible, explaining how a woman who was five years pregnant gave birth after spending a night in the *abaton* of Asklepios.<sup>17</sup> However, Asklepios was not the only deity who had religious sanctuaries erected in his honour.

The ancient Greeks built great sanctuaries and temples dedicated to their gods, providing a place for many kinds of worship. Temples were considered to be the house of the god, and usually contained dedications that worshippers left for the god in return for a favour.<sup>18</sup> Thucydides claimed that they were common to all people, and those who wished to travel to them were guaranteed security to do so,<sup>19</sup> which Zaidman and Pantel confirm by stating temples were open to all Greeks.<sup>20</sup> However, there were certain rules denoting what disrespected actions were forbidden inside the sanctuaries, and worshippers were required to be pure before entering.<sup>21</sup> The priests or priestesses were in charge of enforcing the rules and caring for the temples, and in general male priests attended male deities while female priests attended female deities.<sup>22</sup> In ancient Greece both males and females were able to engage in religious worship.

Although left out of many aspects of society, girls had an important role to play in the worship of the ancient gods of Greece. Women had no political rights but were able to serve female divinities as priestesses, enabling them to have a significant role in the worship of their chosen goddess.<sup>23</sup> Unmarried virgins were known as *parthenoi*, and were able to serve the goddesses Artemis and Athena in a variety of ways.<sup>24</sup> They were often the ones who could carry the items needed for cult rituals in religious ceremonies, proving to be instrumental to the whole

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<sup>15</sup> M.Dillon and L.Garland, *Ancient Greece: Social and Historical Documents from Archaic Times to the Death of Alexander the Great*, New York, 2010, p.92

<sup>16</sup> L.B.Zaidman and P.S Pantel, *Religion in the ancient Greek city*, Cambridge, 1992, p.128

<sup>17</sup> Inscriptions Graecae IV<sup>2</sup> 1, no.121-22: Testimonia to Asklepios' Cult, in M.Dillon and L.Garland, *Ancient Greece: Social and Historical Documents from Archaic Times to the Death of Alexander the Great*, New York, 2010, p.96

<sup>18</sup> M.Dillon and L.Garland, *The Ancient Greeks: History and Culture from Archaic Times to the Death of Alexander*, New York, 2013, p.102

<sup>19</sup> Thucydides, 5.18.1-3: Access to Pan-Hellenic Sanctuaries Guaranteed, in M.Dillon and L.Garland, *Ancient Greece: Social and Historical Documents from Archaic Times to the Death of Alexander the Great*, New York, 2010, p.87

<sup>20</sup> L.B.Zaidman and P.S Pantel, *Religion in the ancient Greek city*, Cambridge, 1992, p.113

<sup>21</sup> M.Dillon and L.Garland, *The Ancient Greeks: History and Culture from Archaic Times to the Death of Alexander*, New York, 2013, p.104

<sup>22</sup> R.S.J.Garland, 'Priests and Power in Classical Athens', in M.Beard and J.North (eds.), *Pagan Priests: Religion and Power in the Ancient World*, London, 1990, p.77

<sup>23</sup> M.Dillon and L.Garland, *The Ancient Greeks: History and Culture from Archaic Times to the Death of Alexander*, New York, 2013, p.110

<sup>24</sup> M.Dillon, *Girls and Women in Classical Greek Religion*, New York, 2002, p.37

process.<sup>25</sup> There were also festivals that only women were allowed to attend, providing the opportunity to worship their goddesses without the influence of men.<sup>26</sup> One of the more prominent of these was the festival of Adonia, Aphrodite's beloved mortal, where women would come together to worship the goddess of love and grief for the loss of Adonia.<sup>27</sup> Death was not only a time for mourning however, as it was also essential for the Greeks to prepare their dead according to religious traditions.

The funerary practise of the ancient Greeks demonstrated an important way in which they worshipped their gods. To leave the bodies of loved ones unburied was a serious crime against the gods, so it was vital to ensure the burial rites were performed to perfection.<sup>28</sup> The process was complex, with specific instructions outlining the preparation of the body with garments and perfumes. Usually the bodies were either cremated or buried,<sup>29</sup> while the tomb itself would be filled with items which the deceased may be expected to need in the next life, such as weapons or utensils. Women would often make frequent offerings of cakes and libations at family tombs.<sup>30</sup> During the period directly after the funeral it was extremely important to abide by traditional funerary practices, as the people who had been closely associated with the deceased were considered to be impure and polluted, and would have to wash thoroughly and be "purified with a pouring of water".<sup>31</sup> Anyone who had recently attended a funeral was refused entry into sanctuaries as it was seen as an insult to the gods and hence must purify themselves before regaining access to the houses of their gods.<sup>32</sup> The religious practices of the Greeks had a strong influence over many aspects of their life, and funerary practices were merely one of their many forms of worship.

Worship was not only extremely important to the Greeks but also an integral part of society, allowing for frequent religious ceremonies, festivals and celebrations throughout the year. Their desire to please and respect the gods was evident in their strong religious culture, particularly their forms of worship. Animal sacrifice was one of the most important for the Greeks, and was often

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<sup>25</sup> Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, 638-51: An Athenian Girl's Service to the State, in M.Dillon and L.Garland, *Ancient Greece: Social and Historical Documents from Archaic Times to the Death of Alexander the Great*, New York, 2010, p.107

<sup>26</sup> A.M.Bowie, 'Greek Sacrifice: Forms and functions', in A.Powell (ed.), *The Greek World*, London, 1995, p.467

<sup>27</sup> M.Dillon and L.Garland, *The Ancient Greeks: History and Culture from Archaic Times to the Death of Alexander*, New York, 2013, p.111

<sup>28</sup> M.Dillon and L.Garland, *The Ancient Greeks: History and Culture from Archaic Times to the Death of Alexander*, New York, 2013, p.106

<sup>29</sup> L.B.Zaidman and P.S Pantel, *Religion in the ancient Greek city*, Cambridge, 1992, p.72

<sup>30</sup> W.H.D.Rouse, *Greek Votive Offerings: An Essay in the History of Greek Religion*, Cambridge, 1902, p.4

<sup>31</sup> LSCG, 97A: Funerary Rites on Keos, in M.Dillon and L.Garland, *Ancient Greece: Social and Historical Documents from Archaic Times to the Death of Alexander the Great*, New York, 2010, p.104

<sup>32</sup> S.G.Cole, 'Greek Religion', in J.R.Hinnells (ed.), *A Handbook of Ancient Religion*, Cambridge, 2007, p.281

accompanied by prayers asking for certain favours.<sup>33</sup> Oracles were utilised for more serious divine questions while Asklepios the Healer was worshipped for his healing abilities and medical advice. Sanctuaries and temples provided places for the Greeks to present the gods with gifts and offerings and were guarded by both men and women, providing females with the chance to worship the gods in their own ways. Even their funeral practices were a reflection of how important religious traditions were. Although the gods of ancient Greece are no longer worshipped today, it was evident that they were once revered.

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<sup>33</sup> M.Dillon and L.Garland, *The Ancient Greeks: History and Culture from Archaic Times to the Death of Alexander*, New York, 2013, p.73

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