I

LIVING WITH THE DIVINE

Greek and Roman Religions, First Edition. Rebecca I. Denova.

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you will be able to:

- Appreciate the differences between the modern field of Religious Studies and traditional methods of studying religion.
- Recognize the central role of the divine in all aspects of life in the ancient world.
- Distinguish the basic elements of religious practice shared by ancient Greece and Rome. (Terms in bold type are also described in the Glossary.)

The ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome have had a lasting influence on Western culture. Artists and dramatists celebrated their stories in their triumphs and tragedies and architects still imitate their building designs. Greek and Roman literature (both mythology and philosophy) provided models for understanding human nature, the human psyche, and reflections on our existence. From these two cultures we inherited our alphabet, democracy, juries, tragedy, comedy, the Olympic Games, epic poetry, law codes, philosophy, the gymnasium, the republican form of government, the veto, our modern calendar, the names of our planets, a welfare system, funeral rites, the keystone arch, aqueducts, amphitheaters, stadiums, road construction, cement, apartment buildings, and last but not least, take-out fast-food.

Studying patterns of human development and behavior in the past can illuminate similar challenges as we continue to evolve. The way in which Greeks and Romans faced economic crises, natural and human-made disasters, and the never-ending challenge of war and conquest can teach us much about our own responses to similar problems. The history of ideas is equally important. The Founding Fathers did not just wake up one morning and invent a new form of governance and a new culture. Inheritors of European models, these men were well schooled in works of Greek and Roman thought and they attempted to utilize the structures of ancient Greece and Rome to create a new government and society.

While applauding this great contribution to the Western tradition from the perspective of our scientific and secular world, we often fail to recognize that many of these achievements were done within the context of a religious worldview. In the modern world, we define ourselves and our culture through categories such as nationality, political affiliation, and religious affiliation. For example, you might say that you are a citizen of the United States, a Democrat, and a Catholic. We also tend to separate secular from sacred. In the ancient world, the category of religion as a separate entity did not exist. In fact, there was no word for religion in most ancient cultures. Religion was the way humans lived each day and bound themselves to the powers in the universe; it was the glue that held culture and society together.

How did these ancient people understand their world? How did they cope with the overwhelming mysteries of life and death? The cycles of nature and

the seasons provided constancy, yet, without warning, crops failed, diseases invaded the body, storms brought destruction, earthquakes toppled cities, and empires succumbed to foreign armies. At the same time, children were born, couples married, harvests were gathered, people were elected to high office, and armies won great victories. We cannot determine the precise time, but at some point people began to believe that unseen powers were responsible for everything, both good and bad. Because of this understanding, humans thought of their surroundings as existing on two planes: the physical world of everyday life, and the supernatural world of the divine. The divine was unknown and dangerous, and thus had to be separated from mundane things. In modern academic parlance, we refer to these two planes as "the sacred" and the "profane." Although separate, the two planes continually interacted.

This textbook is a survey of the way in which ancient Greece and Rome managed the relationship between the sacred and the profane, and the ways in which their religious views interacted with everyday life. Our framework will survey these cultures from 800 BCE to 400 CE. In general, each chapter will discuss the religious concepts and practices of ancient Greece, followed by those of Rome. This is not a claim that the religious traditions of Greece are chronologically older than Rome, but recognizes that Rome borrowed ideas from Greece and it will avoid having to repeat similar ideas and practices when we discuss Rome.

The study of any religious system can be interesting and rewarding, but the religious views of Greece and Rome offer a special fascination of extremes: from the epic heights of glory in battle to the lowly god of a cupboard, from philosophical meditation on the universe, to the practical negotiations for a throw of the dice. The divine realm was *always* present to people in the ancient world. It was active in people's dreams and present in all their daily activities, from plowing a field to leading an army to victory (or defeat). While we will often find common cause with ancient cultures, discovering many elements that we share as human beings, their literal belief in this multiple divine presence and interaction is one of the great differences between the modern world and the ancient one.

The Modern Study of Religion

For centuries in the Western tradition, the study of religion was largely the purview of theologians. Theology, the study of god, is actually the study of the nature of god, and the way in which humans can relate to an established system. Theologians are committed to participation in this relationship; it is an "insider's" point of view, or what we call "faith." The Enlightenment (seventeenth to eighteenth centuries) launched a new direction in the study of religion, recognizing that humans construct religious concepts, based upon their experiences. The study of religion became an important element in the emerging

social sciences that considered human experience as a whole. In other words, religion was not external to human beings but something they created in order to find meaning in their existence.

The next step in a new approach to the study of religion was a revolution in the study of sacred scriptures, beginning with the Bible. No longer willing to accept the divine inspiration behind these stories, scholars joined with the new sciences of archaeology, anthropology, and sociology to begin to investigate the historical societies that produced these sacred texts. Sacred texts and literature could now be studied as evidence of the way in which ancient people understood their cultures.

In the twentieth century, the field of Religious Studies became a separate discipline, devoted to analyzing the way in which humans construct and articulate religious views, without judgment as to the truth of the claims of such views. Often simply referred to as "the academic study of religion," Religious Studies examines religious experience from a multidisciplinary approach, utilizing the disciplines in the liberal arts and social sciences: classics, history, literature, anthropology, archaeology, sociology, philosophy, and psychology. In addition to these fields, the study of religion employs analysis in economics, politics, ethnic studies, ritual, gender studies, the arts, global studies, and cross-cultural approaches. The goal of Religious Studies is to understand religious systems in their historical, social, and cultural contexts, recognizing that changes in context contribute to changes in human understanding in any given age.

All religions, including ancient ones, have formal features that are categorized as conceptual, social, and performative. The conceptual contains a set of beliefs that help to create a worldview. Worldview in this sense indicates the way in which humans conceive their relationship to each other and the universe, how the universe operates, and why things are the way they are. For example, two main functions of ancient **myth** were to demonstrate the origins of the gods, the origins of humans, and to establish the context of the duties and responsibilities of both in a partnership that would keep the universe in a harmonious balance.

Religious beliefs operate within communities with distinctive patterns of social relationships. The hierarchy among the gods and their distinctive functions reflect the hierarchy and functions of distinct social roles in society. Such beliefs validate the social order and establish the rules for social behavior.

All religions are performative in that participants *do* things; they act in specialized manners to make the sacred manifest. Ritual acts are a fundamental means of communication between humans and the divine. At the same time, ritual acts help to establish a sense of communal bonding that transcends personal involvement and concerns. Thus the modern study of religion is the study of human society in all its aspects, and this is the approach that is utilized in this text.

While not separating religion from everyday life, the ancients also did not have a word that we often render "religion." The modern term, which came into use in the seventeenth century, most likely took its meaning from the Latin root, *religio*, sometimes translated as "scrupulous observance of the cult," or those things "that tie or bind one to the gods." Nevertheless, I will

apply the term "religion" to the ancient practices and beliefs as a convenient means to generalize the focus of this study.

Culture and Race

Other terms of convenience, culture and race, are also often applied to the study of ancient societies. It is important to distinguish these concepts as understood in the modern world, from their counterparts in antiquity.

In the ancient world, large nation-states based on the modern model did not exist. No one in the ancient world identified themselves by nationality in the manner one might today. People did not say "I am from Greece." Instead, people identified with a hometown, a village, or a city ("I am from Athens"). When they said, "I am Greek," or "I am Roman," they were often referring to a cultural, ethnic identity that could transcend a geographic area.

People were categorized according to a shared common ancestry, history, homeland, language, rituals, and mythology. According to Herodotus (c. 484–425 BCE), these were the traits that made someone Greek, or not. In modern nations, ethnic groups, or ethnic minorities, are those that differ from the dominant culture in some way, such as language or cultural traits. Minorities in the modern sense sometimes include the concept of race, or racial categories based on physical differences. The modern concept of racial distinction (and racial prejudice) as we understand it did not exist before the fifteenth century. Many Greeks and Romans attributed differences in skin color to climate and geography, as well as to social class (if you were darker, it might indicate that you worked in the fields out in the sun). Cultural traits created the barriers between people, not physical characteristics.

There was certainly cultural prejudice in the ancient world. For the Greeks, most other people were barbarians (particularly in the Hellenistic period) and Romans used the pejorative term "un-Roman" for everyone else. However, both Greece and Rome allowed for changes in ethnic status: once you were granted citizenship, you were "one of us." Or, at least this was the theory. Then as now, your enemies had long memories and could always recall your roots when it was politically useful. For many Romans, some cultural roots would always remain. Even if Gauls (living in what is modern France) succeeded in obtaining a seat in the Senate, Romans thought they would never learn to appreciate wine or good food!

Cults

In the modern world the term **cult**, which typically carries a negative connotation, refers to a religious group whose beliefs are radically different from the mainstream. Groups we call cults have been behind some of the more horrific

headlines in America, such as the Charles Manson family (1969), the Branch Davidians at Waco, Texas (1993), and the Heaven's Gate mass suicide (1997).

The word cult was originally derived from *cultus*, with a general meaning of worship, from the Latin, *colere*, care, or cultivate. So *cultus* included everything involved in the proper care and worship of the gods: the temple or shrine, the incense shovels and burners, trumpets, wands, knives, bowls, prayers, hymns, sacrifices, and everything needed for the cleaning up process. Rather than the modern understanding of cult in relation to theological or spiritual differences, we will use the term **traditional cults** when we refer to the worship of the divinities in the ancient world.

Too Many Gods?

Historians of early Christianity have traditionally attempted to explain the various factors that contributed to the rapid rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire. A popular theory is that the sheer number of gods and goddesses populating the Mediterranean basin created anxiety: too many gods, too many myths, too many empty rituals that caused fear and anxiety in the average person. According to this consensus, insecure people could find solace in Christian monotheism and the promise of eventual salvation. Numbers do not necessarily cause anxiety. As an example, consider Hinduism. The number of Hindu deities may be as high as three million, but individual Hindus do not have to memorize all of them. Most Hindus select one or two as the object of their devotion, while also recognizing and respecting the many powers in the universe.

The large numbers of ancient divinities are a problem for *us* because we deem such a system irrational. Ancient people found nothing irrational about their system – it was just the way things were. We do find evidence of *emotional* anxiety everywhere in the ancient record. Then as now, death, disease, famine, disasters, and war heightened religious responses. However, this type of anxiety could be relieved by appealing to the gods in a variety of ways at many different sacred places. Rather than feeling confused or helpless in light of this diversity, ancient people may have found reassurance in the number of religious options available.

Polytheism and Monotheism

The modern term for belief systems that include multiple powers is **polytheism** (the belief in multiple deities), or sometimes pantheism (the belief in all powers). Polytheistic systems are often explained by contrast with **monotheism**, or the belief in the existence of a single god. Polytheism and monotheism are polarities, with many variations in-between. Scholars also use the term "henotheism" to indicate the belief in many powers, but elevating one deity to a higher position

over the others. Another term, "monolatry," is the recognition of the existence of other gods but choosing to worship only one.

In the Western tradition, monotheism means not only the concept of the existence of a singular god, but specifically refers to the God of the Bible – the God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (always written with a capital "G"). This understanding became the standard way to compare the ancient world to the modern in terms of religious evolution; some moderns still assume that humanity developed progressively from primitive (polytheistic) to modern (monotheistic), with the God of the Bible. However, the term is used incorrectly when it refers to the ancient world, where our modern concept of monotheism did not exist. All ancient people were polytheists in the sense that they acknowledged the existence of other gods (powers), even if they proclaimed the superiority of one god over all the others.

The Jewish Scriptures demonstrate that the god of Israel acknowledged the existence of the gods of other nations. Ancient Jews conceived of hierarchies of powers in Heaven, including "sons of god" (Genesis 6), angels and archangels, cherubim, and seraphim. Late in their history they designated another power to compete with God who eventually became the Devil. Early Christians accepted these levels of powers in Heaven (and Hell), and the apostle Paul often referred to the existence of the gods of other nations in his letters. It was much later in the development of Jewish and Christian monotheism that this term came to mean the existence of only one god. What made Jews and Christians unique in the *ancient* world was their refusal to participate in the *worship* of these other gods, but they did not deny their existence. Thus, ancient Jews fit into the context of a pluralistic worldview, but differed in their exclusive worship of one god.

Toleration and Religious Pluralism

A popular way to describe religion in the Roman Empire is the claim that Rome practiced toleration of religion, a concept associated with that of ***religio licta***, or the granting of legality to religious beliefs. Toleration is a misnomer because it assumes an official policy. There was *no official policy of toleration* issued by Rome, either during the Republic or the early Empire. (This would change in the latter part of the third and early fourth century, when Christianity was granted an "edict of toleration.") Both Greece and Rome simply followed the same tradition as everyone else from time immemorial – *all* the gods of different ethnic groups were acknowledged and respected. This included the gods of your enemy as well. Romans practiced ***evocatio***, where gods of the enemy were invited to switch sides before a battle; Rome promised temples and worship if they did so.

While there were no official, government policies of toleration, that does not mean that we have an ancient equivalent of "freedom of religion." People could not freely and openly disrespect the gods. Particularly in ancient Greece, **impiety**

(not showing respect for the gods) and **sacrilege** (damage or interference with a sacred object, sites, or rituals) carried death sentences. Such actions threatened the prosperity of everyone. One of the most famous cases in ancient Athens was the trial and conviction of the philosopher Socrates (469–399 BCE), who was charged with impiety by corrupting the youth of Athens through his teachings. Other philosophers were known to express their opinions about disbelief in the traditional gods, such as Xenophanes (sixth century BCE), who mocked the idea that the gods looked like us, but there was a very limited audience for such writing, unless the views were expressed publicly. For the most part, the average person who did not believe in the gods (an atheist) did not advertise these thoughts.

Ancient Greeks and Romans accepted religious pluralism as a fact of life, based upon tradition, and that is probably the more accurate way to describe their attitude. While this plurality was acknowledged, there were also boundaries that could not be crossed. Another term that is used for convenience when we analyze religion in the ancient world is conversion. Conversion means moving from one religious system to another. This assumes the existence of formal, codified systems of belief, which were absent in antiquity. For the most part, religion was *ethnic* – you were born into it, so it would be difficult to reject or change physical lineage. Greeks and Romans could move in and out of traditional cults without any process of conversion in the way we understand it. The closest we have to the modern concept would be found in those who joined the followers of Pythagoras or Orpheus, which required lifestyle changes. Similarly, those who left traditional cults to follow Judaism or Christianity could be said to convert in the modern sense. Recruiting people for either of those systems was highly frowned upon until the fourth century, as those systems required a denial of one's ancestral traditions, a cessation of participation in their traditional cults, and the abandoning of the very elements of one's identity.

Paganism

There were hundreds of traditional cults and religious associations in the Mediterranean basin, but there is no simple word that can represent all of them. **Pagan** became the generic term for anyone who was not Christian or Jewish, and originated around the fourth century. It derives from the Latin *paganus*, which means either rustic (not a city dweller) or civilian (and never enrolled in the army). Rustic was a term for people who lived outside of the urban centers; Christians used it as a derogatory term equivalent to "hillbillies," for those who resisted conversion. The term pagan was also associated with traditional cults that focused on nature and fertility, and became an umbrella term for anyone who refused the new faith. Later, in medieval Europe, the term was applied to people who continued to practice aspects of Celtic and Teutonic traditional cults in the same way.

In the second century a group of Christian bishops wrote treatises against the religious beliefs of non-Christians and demonized those beliefs. They claimed that the gods who resided in pagan temples were actually agents of the Devil. In their polemic against the traditional cults, they included standard charges of sexual immorality (like modern political campaigns that go viral when there is a hint of sexual scandal). The church leaders turned to the Jewish Scriptures for their ammunition against pagans, and found it in a host of sexual metaphors against the ancient Canaanites. Canaanite religion was based on fertility and the Israelites claimed that sexual immorality was at the root of this **idolatry** (worship of idols, or images). They charged that Israelite participation in such sins brought disasters to the nation.

Similarly, for early Christians, paganism became associated with sexual immorality, and the term "orgy" was interpreted as sexual excess. The Greek word ***orgia*** simply meant "religious ritual," but it became a popular description of some of the more ecstatic rituals of traditional and Mystery cults which required an initiation. The ancients did have a different attitude toward the body from ours and we can still be shocked by their sexual openness, although this attitude is greatly exaggerated. Hollywood has contributed to the view of ancient Greeks and Romans as sexually promiscuous. For many people, pagans remain associated with unbridled sex, drinking, violence, and every form of perversion. A more recent example of this can be found in the cable TV series *Spartacus*. For others, the term pagan also conjures up images of Satanists, or worshippers of the Devil.

There were so many traditional cults and religious associations that contained innumerable differences so a one-word description does not suffice. The other complication is that ancient peoples had the freedom to belong to several different cults at the same time. So we are stuck with the word, and until we can invent another generic term – pagan is simply easier. Throughout this text, I will attempt to avoid the term when I can, using traditional cults as a more general term. Ironically, the Western Christian tradition adopted many of the elements of pagan religious culture, as we will see in Chapter XIII.

Basic Features of Greco-Roman Religions

This section outlines the shared concepts and vocabulary in Greek and Roman religion that will be highlighted in detail throughout the following chapters. For the sources of this shared material, see the boxes "How Do We Know What Ancient Greeks and Romans Believed?" and "How Do We Know About Religion in Ancient Greece and Rome?"

Religion in the ancient world consisted of the belief in something beyond oneself, belief in the powers of nature and the unseen powers that controlled one's destiny. Modern scholars describe this as a belief in "the sacred," "the holy," or "the other," emphasizing the concept of transcendence, or something

beyond the individual that is nevertheless manifest in everyday experience. For the ancients, the collective concept for that "something" was simply the divine.

The divine consisted of elements of nature personified as gods and goddesses: the sea, the winds, the earth, the sky, the sun, the moon, and the planets, as well as supernatural beings such as a ***daemon***, spirit, ***numen***, or the Fates. There were deities for occupations, disease, fertility and puberty rites, marriage (and the honeymoon), sailors (and pirates), war, peace, death, and the afterlife. Supernatural powers could be called upon to produce and watch over your children, keep snakes out of the house, bless the farm equipment, topple your political rivals, defeat the enemy, and take revenge against your heirs. To people in the ancient world, the divine was manifest everywhere and in everything: the person, the home, the farm, the city, the social classes, the crafts, the military, and whatever form of government was currently in charge.

The divine meant "godlike," or containing powers that were different from those of human beings. While we associate the divine with beauty or goodness, in the ancient world, the divine was a category of *all* powers that transcended humanity, including the monstrous or evil ones. There were powers of the underworld that could be summoned when necessary. The term we use for these specific divinities is **chthonic** (Greek, *chthonios*), meaning "beneath the earth." The line between the heavens and the underworld was not always defined in absolute terms. The living called upon all types of divinities.

Another element of the divine was the personification of abstractions such as peace, fear, night, sleep, death, fidelity, or virtue. We find these supernatural figures as fully functioning characters in epic poetry and art works. We can only determine if these abstractions were worshipped in the usual sense when we have archaeological or inscriptional evidence. For instance, we can confirm poetic references as well as shrines and altars to Youth, and Rome had an altar to Peace (*Ara pacis Augustae*, Augustan Altar of Peace).

Myths and Sacred Stories

All cultures in the Mediterranean basin created stories to explain the origins of both the gods and humans, or what are known generally as creation myths. Many of these myths also functioned as etiologies, or explanations of why things occur the way they do, or why a culture evolved the way it did. In this sense, a mythical etiology explains not just the remote past, but *contemporary* society. Etiologies answer questions such as: "Why are men treated as superior to women?" or "Why do we sacrifice to the gods?"

In modern usage, myth implies something that is not true. However, myth by its very nature is not subject to verification, and the ancients were not concerned about whether their stories were true or false or whether different and competing mythologies contradicted one another. There were several

different myths about a particular god or goddess, arising from several different areas, but as far as we know, this did not create anxiety. Nor did most people worry about the incredible elements of these stories, any more than fans of vampire literature today are concerned that these stories describe things that are improbable.

There are multivalent meanings behind sacred stories within individual contexts of each culture, but some of the more important myths were celebrated as foundation myths, related to the founding of a city or town or a genealogy of famous ancestors. In Athens, the great Panathenaea festival in honor of Athena drew people from near and far, and celebrated Athena's gifts to the city as well as her protection. Rome had two dominant foundation myths, that of Romulus and Remus (who created the city of Rome), and the story of Aeneas, the son of Venus, who had escaped the fall of Troy and connected Roman traditions to the larger cultural and religious elements of Greek tradition (see the box "How Do We Know What Ancient Greeks and Romans Believed? Epic Poetry, Drama, History, and Philosophy").

How Do We Know What Ancient Greeks and Romans Believed? Epic Poetry, Drama, History, and Philosophy

The literary heritage of ancient Greece and Rome is quite extensive. The works of Homer (*The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*) and Hesiod (*Theogony* and *Works and Days*) provide detailed descriptions of religious practice as well as cosmology and genealogies of the gods. The Homeric Hymns were composed by anonymous bards to celebrate individual deities. The lyric poetry of Pindar (522–443 BCE) and others describes the gods as being above the moral judgment of humans. The Roman poet Horace (65–8 BCE) speculated on moral philosophy, Ovid (43 BCE to 18 CE) described religious beliefs and festivals of Rome (*Metamorphoses*, *Fasti*), and Vergil (70–19 BCE) created an epic poem of the founding of Rome by Aeneas, *The Aeneid*.

The literary world of drama sheds light on religious views, some serious, some comic. The first plays in Athens most likely arose from the Dionysus festivals in that city, which evolved into contests for the best plays. The tragedies of the three best known playwrights, Aeschylus (525–455 BCE), Sophocles (497–406 BCE), and Euripides (480–406 BCE) often dealt with the relations between humans and gods, while the comedies of Aristophanes (446–386 BCE), such as *The Clouds*, served as critiques of both religion and the political life of Athens. Very little of Roman tragedy has survived, but we have the comedies of Plautus (254–184 BCE), which presented stock characters of both gods and men.

Many ancient historians described religious or cultural practices. For Greece we have Herodotus, Thucydides (460–395 BCE), and Xenophon (430–354 BCE), and for Rome, Polybius (200–118 BCE), Strabo (63 BCE to 24 CE), Livy (59 BCE to 17 CE), and Dionysius of Halicarnassus (60–7 BCE). The study of philosophy began in the seventh century BCE in Miletus (modern Turkey), but by the fifth century BCE, many schools of philosophy were centered in Athens. Philosophy focused on reason as the way in which to understand both the cosmos and the nature of humans, but shared affinities with religious beliefs in that each school taught a way of life. Philosophers criticized and reinterpreted traditional religious beliefs, while simultaneously offering their own moral and spiritual understanding. Most philosophers in Rome were disciples of the Greek classical schools, particularly the Platonists, Stoics, and the Epicureans.

The divinities of a people are collectively known as pantheons, or the collection of officially recognized gods and goddesses. The traditional listing of the Greek and Roman pantheons are limited to the more important deities, although a complete listing would include hundreds more. In Table I.1, you will find the major deities and their titles (which also indicate their spheres of influence). It is necessary to emphasize that the Romans did not simply borrow the Greek gods, but recognized similar functions and traits with their own divinities, combining these elements with their preexisting gods. For instance, they recognized the aspects of Aphrodite in their images and concepts of Venus which also included ancient Italian beliefs of this fertility goddess.

The term "sacred," derived from the Latin *sacrum* (Greek, *hieros*), is used in the same sense as "holy." It describes anything associated with the divine, including places, people, and objects. All ancient cultures designated areas of **sacred space** as powerful vectors for communicating with the divine. Sacred space is a place, building, or landscape that is either charged with meaning or used for ritual activity. Sacred space brought together the material, social, and spiritual worlds. Altars, temples, and temple complexes were sacred, as well as some monuments and tombs. Once an area was declared sacred, it was understood as being protected by a sacred zone, as a sanctuary. In Greece, sacred lands were set off by the erection of *temenos* walls – cut-out "barriers" – while sacred buildings had *peribolos* walls, which designated a sacred court. Indicating the separation between sacred and profane, these barriers limited access to all except priests and those who had business in the sacred space.

Greek name	*Roman name*	*Title*
Aphrodite	Venus	Goddess of Love/Beauty
Apollo	Apollo	God of Light, Music, Prophecy
Ares	Mars	God of War
Artemis	Diana	Goddess of the Hunt
Athena	Minerva	Goddess of Wisdom
Cronus	Saturn	Father of the Gods
Demeter	Ceres	Goddess of Grain/Crops
Dionysus	Bacchus	God of Fertility, Wine
Enyo	Bellona	Goddess of War
Eros	Cupid	God of Love
Hades	Pluto	God of Underworld
Hephaestus	Vulcan	God of Fire/Metal-working
Hera	Juno	Queen of the Gods
Hermes	Mercury	Messenger of the Gods
Pan	Pan	God of Woods and Pastures
Poseidon	Neptune	God of the Sea
Rhea	Ops	Goddess of Plenty
Zeus	Jupiter	King of Gods

Table I.1 The pantheons of Greece and Rome

In the countryside, sacred space could be found in groves of trees, caves, mountain-tops, lakes, rivers, springs, or any landscape that appeared exceptionally beautiful. We usually don't know what originally made these areas sacred, but a common explanation was that someone had encountered the divine at a particular spot. Collectively termed **hierophanies** or **epiphanies**, these encounters were literal manifestations of the divine through sight, voice, smell, or sound (like a clap of thunder), and were also experienced in dreams. Or, someone might have encountered a nymph, a divine power associated with caves and beautiful landscapes. Often, these sites were marked with a **votive offering**, or an offering made to a deity in acknowledgment of a prayer answered, a wish fulfilled, or a visitation from a god or goddess. The erection of an **altar** or shrine would indicate that a particular landscape was sacred, with an inscription to let other travelers know what happened at this spot.

The most common sacred space was a temple, a building used to house the god or goddess, or a symbolic representation of the divine. Temples consisted of colonnades and a ***cella***, or a room (Greek, *naos*, which also means temple) to house the cult statue or image (Figures I.1 and I.2). In Greece, the *cella* was often in the middle of the building, and in Rome, the *cella* was at the rear. Temples also contained tables to hold offerings and braziers, or fireproof containers for burning incense. Most Greek temples were built upon a three-step platform, while Roman temples were higher, with steps leading up to a portico. With very few exceptions, temples were not crowded with worshippers. The inside was not forbidden, but most ritual activity and sacrifices took place outdoors, under an open sky where people gathered around the outdoor altar.

Within a town or city, sacred space was most commonly located in temples and shrines near the ***agora*** (Greek), or the forum (Roman). Temples and shrines close to these central meeting places facilitated the divine protection and

Figure I.1 Greek temple (Temple of Neptune, 460 BCE). *Source*: iStock/Getty Images Plus.

Figure I.2 Roman temple (Maison Carrée in Nîmes, France, one of the best-preserved Roman temples, an Augustan provincial temple of the Imperial cult). *Source*: elophotos/Adobe Stock.

supervision of the community in all its facets. Urban temples and shrines were numerous and offered opportunities for people to demonstrate their respect for the gods and their beneficial contributions to the community. Much of the city of Rome itself was deemed sacred territory within the ***pomerium*** (the plowed line for the original city drawn by Romulus). No weapons or burials were permitted within this zone, and magistrates holding ***imperium*** (sacred power for certain offices) could not exercise it within the sacred precincts of the city.

Another popular site for temples was an acropolis or a fortified higher section of a town with a citadel for defensive purposes. The acropolis in Athens and the one in Corinth were famous for their large temple complexes (for Athena in Athens and Aphrodite in Corinth), and the Temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline Hill in Rome was built on the older fortifications. Temples to the sea deities were crowded along the quays and seashores. Port cities contained temples and shrines from many different traditional cults, as a convenience for sailors and commercial travelers.

Temples contained cult images (from the Greek, *eikon*, or image), usually in the form of a full-length statue of a god or goddess. (See the box "How Do We Know About Religion in Ancient Greece and Rome? Archaeology, Architecture and Art.") **Icons** could be abstract but from an early date ancient people fashioned icons with anthropomorphic features, as replications of human beings. The gods looked like us, but with either beautiful, ideal features, or grotesque features depending upon the deity's function. Although we associate ancient sculpture with white marble, the statues of the gods and goddesses were painted with lifelike features, flesh tones, and brightly colored clothing. The symbols of their areas of responsibility were held in their hand, worn on their head, or

placed near the base. Far more than just wood or stone representations, these sacred images were treated with respect as a bridge that could connect humans to the divine.

The earliest cult images of ancient Greece may have been carved wooden forms. Ancient artists also crafted terra-cotta, bronze, and ivory images, although most of the ones that have survived are the small votive statues at cult sites that may replicate cult images. By the Classical period, marble and bronze were the preferred materials, although many of the bronze examples have only survived in Roman marble copies. Chryselephantine sculptures were icons that used gold and ivory for the face, eyes, hands, and other accoutrements, with the two best known examples found in the statue of Zeus at Olympia and the statue of Athena in the Parthenon in Athens, both by Phidias. Such wealth and splendor devoted to a cult image reflected the high status of the community able to produce such a luxurious item. In addition to cult images, sculpted figures depicting mythic themes were carved on the pediment and frieze, the area on top of the columns of a temple.

Male gods could be depicted either with minimal clothing or completely nude. In Greece, this conformed to an appreciation for the male body, usually with sculpted muscles and always in the highest athletic state of fitness. For centuries, female deities were always clothed, which conformed to social conventions of women not showing their bodies outside of the home. There were several later anecdotes (and jokes) over the shock and scandal of the first nude depiction of Aphrodite created by the sculptor Praxiteles (c. fourth century BCE) for the citizens of Knidos, a work that also became quite a famous tourist attraction.

How Do We Know About Religion in Ancient Greece and Rome? Archaeology, Architecture and Art

How do scholars begin to reconstruct the religions of ancient Greece and Rome? The material elements of our knowledge of ancient religious life come from the archaeological remains of houses, temples, monuments, tombs, inscriptions, and art (including pottery).

Archaeological excavations of houses have uncovered areas dedicated to household deities. The architecture of temples and sanctuaries reveals the importance of these sites in relation to their placement in urban centers, and the resources dedicated to such monumental buildings. Temple friezes, or the area above the columns, often depicted sculpted or painted scenes from mythology, while the frieze on the Parthenon in Athens depicts a religious procession before the 12 gods of Olympus. In the areas surrounding temples and shrines, archaeologists have found all of the implements necessary in the activities of worship, such as knives, incense holders, vessels, votive pits, and even buried bones of sacrificial animals. Grave pits, tombs, and catacombs reveal ancient beliefs about the afterlife shown on the walls as well as information about daily life that were included as artifacts in tombs.

Added to this plethora of material remains are the votive inscriptions, one of our best sources for ancient practices and concepts. These inscriptions demonstrate the extent of pilgrimage and travel, and illustrate the religious views and beliefs of ancient peoples. There are literally thousands of votives scattered over the lands of the Mediterranean, and oracle sites contain the inscriptions of visitors usually thanking the god of the oracle for guidance, and also list sacred laws. Similarly, inscriptions on tombstones attest to the piety and personal beliefs of individuals.

Art, in the form of statues, votive figurines, paintings, vases, and wall murals (in houses, temples, and tombs) most often incorporated elements of the gods as well as heroes. Around the eighth century BCE, potters began to draw human figures on their wares, particularly for a variety of vessels required in funeral rites. These figures are shown participating in sacrifices, prayers, and religious processions. Scenes from mythology became popular, along with the stories from Homer. The ancients used pottery for tableware, amphorae (to transport or store food, olive oil, and wine), mixing bowls, drinking cups, and small vases for perfumes and cosmetics. There was thus a constant reminder of the divine in daily use.

Acts of Worship

Rituals are those acts involved in the *cultus* of ancient religious systems, or the actions involved in the proper worship of gods, goddesses, and various powers. Rituals could be enacted in sacrifices, prayers, offerings, processions, dance, drama, and festivals. Rituals assumed heightened importance at particular times in one's life, in what are known as rites of passage (birth, maturation, marriage, death). In the areas of sacred space (usually a temple or temple complex), rituals involved the daily life of the temple area. There were **purification rituals** and rituals for the proper cleaning and storing of cult items. All ancient people practiced religious rituals in their own homes as well as in public or community ceremonies.

Rituals involve more than just ritual acts, or the repeated behavior the term usually refers to in the modern sense. Ritual, from the Latin *ritualis*, for things involved with *ritus*, or rite, was also an umbrella term for doing things the proper way they have always been done (Latin, ***mos maiorum***). Thus, tradition is fundamentally important in all rituals; the ritual act must be performed meticulously and according to tradition to ensure its correctness.

Rituals include both words and actions which connect the acts to a known and embedded system of meaning for those of a shared culture. For instance, just as they do for us today, calendar or memorial rituals brought the past and the present together for the community. Rituals involved in feasting and festivals served as public acknowledgments of the shared values of a community, and could act as a solution to communal tension. The shared values always included the community's ancient ties to a god, goddess, or hero (legendary historical characters) or famous ancestors. Thus what appeared to be merely a civic festival was always rooted in the divine connections to the community. Rituals worked in this same manner in the social and political realm, validating the social order and its contemporary leadership.

Sacrifices were offerings of something of value – food, wine, and most commonly, animals – to propitiate (appease) a deity, to show piety, to atone for a violation, or to receive a benefit from the divine. The animals were slaughtered (having their throats cut) on outside altars, or stone rectangles that served as a table of sorts. Some of the blood was then collected and splashed against

the altar, while the rest drained off in runnels built into the complex. Religious specialists examined the entrails to determine if the sacrifice was acceptable. Depending upon the local tradition, the fat and bones were offered to the gods, and sometimes the organs or the choicest parts were shared among the priests. The sacrifice reached the gods through the smoke of burnt offerings (which is why the altars were located outside). For the chthonic deities, dark-haired animals were chosen, and sacrificial parts were burned in what was known as a holocaust. Liquid offerings (most often wine) were called **libations** and poured on the ground.

Although modern culture considers animal sacrifices cruel, they were of fundamental importance to the welfare of the community. Certain portions of the animal were kept by the temple officials (to be shared with helpers and family), but the bulk of the slaughtered animals was distributed to the participants of the religious ceremony. In the larger temple complexes, which often saw hundreds of animals slaughtered at festival times (like the *hecatomb*, or "hundred oxen" sacrifice at Athens), most of the meat was distributed to the populace in public feasts. Communal animal sacrifices were often the only occasions when the poor had the opportunity to eat meat.

Sacrifices were vitally important rituals that served as a communal rite to help connect humans to the gods. The offerings were symbolic of this sacred connection, which included both simple offerings to the household deities, and the more elaborate offerings in public space. No major undertaking was ever done without sacrifices, be it the inauguration of elected officials or setting off to the battlefield. There were regulations that dictated the type of sacrifices, from animals (oxen, bulls and cows, sheep, rams, pigs, goats, birds) to grain, cakes, honey, oil, flowers, and wine. Sacrifices were also a measure of the state's concern for the community.

Many theories attempt to explain the origins of the concept of sacrifice, particularly the blood sacrifices of animals. We cannot pinpoint when animal sacrifice began, but many theorize that it was in the age of hunter-gatherers, with the animal as either a guilt offering to propitiate the god in return for a successful hunt, or a means of allaying community hunger which was then understood as a blessing. From very early times, blood was thought of as the source of life, and therefore sacred.

Propitiation sacrifices were offered to cure diseases, to stave off drought and famine, or to avoid other disasters. Inherent in propitiation sacrifices was an assumption that the gods were angry or that humans had violated the relationship between gods and themselves, intentionally or not. The Latin phrase *do ut des* ("I give so that you may give") is often presented as a summation of the function of sacrifices in the ancient world. Romans believed that they had a contract with their gods; if one god did not reciprocate, there was no contradiction in appealing to another one. Both the concept of *do ut des* and a contract with the divine strikes the modern mind as far too pragmatic to be accompanied by any sense of piety or spirituality. However, these ideas arose in a social context, and in this case, we have the age-old concept and ritual of **gift-exchange**,

practiced at all levels of society. There were rules, even between humans and the divine – reciprocity was expected, or you took your sacrifices elsewhere. The fundamental idea behind these sacrifices was that ultimately, you were appealing to the goodwill of the gods.

Other types of offerings included offerings for one's blessings or the averting of a disaster, and votive offerings made in fulfillment of a promise or a vow. Many sacrifices involved agricultural products and gifts donated in recognition of good harvests, good vintages, and healthy flocks. Gifts in the form of material goods were also known as dedications. These were displayed, and many temples and shrines were jammed full of these offerings – vases of oil and wine, statues, paintings, war shields, and gold and silver artifacts. In this sense, many temples were actually treasuries that stockpiled the dedications of locals and visitors (with appropriate plaques to identity the donor). When temples became full, treasury houses were built nearby to accommodate the overflow. Treasuries lined the path all the way up to the temple of Apollo at Delphi, and crowded the sanctuary at Olympia.

Prayers were invocations or acts that sought communication with the gods and involved the use of words or songs. There were prayers of petitions, praise and thanksgiving and requests for guidance. Then as now, people prayed in private and in public. Prayers always accompanied sacrifices, so that the deity would know exactly what the sacrifice was for. To call upon the gods was no simple undertaking; the gods would not respond without their correct names, titles, honorifics, gender, and function. People could pray in front of cult statues, but many prayed outside at the altar, in the open air, with arms held upward.

Prayers put to music were collectively called **hymns** (Greek, *hymnos*), or songs of praise, and many hymns were extended **invocations**. Hymns of praise were a standard feature of religious festivals, with trained choirs of adults and children, some of whom would go on tour to participate in religious festivals that included competition for prizes. As such, they represented the civic pride of their hometown, as well as the deity who was the object of their praise, emphasizing the divine connection between the two. The hymns of antiquity provide us with remarkable insight into the piety and emotions of ancient religious experience.

We also have prayers of admonition, more commonly known as curses. There were many reasons to call down curses upon someone, such as revenge for an insult, jealousy of someone's success, or a perceived injustice. Through the use of formulaic language distinguished in the literature as spells, people called on deities to enact misfortune or harm to a person. The victim could attempt to reverse the spell by appealing to either the same power or a different deity. Curse tablets, usually made of tin or lead or some other long-lasting material, accompanied the dead in funeral rites. Curse tablets were not directed to the dead person. Rather, dead people would convey the request for a curse to the chthonic deities below, so the body acted as a vehicle to transport the wishes of the living against someone else.

The Priesthoods

Overseeing all of the above were the priesthoods, which included both men and women. They were responsible for the daily activities of the cult and functioned as keepers of the tradition. In general, male gods had priests, and female goddesses had priestesses (although, with a few exceptions, not in Rome). Hierarchies of religious personnel emerged. In Rome, some gods had the equivalent of a high-priest. While some of the priests and priestesses dedicated their lives to the gods, for the most part, being a priest or priestess was a part-time endeavor. When they were not working in the temple or shrine, the priests worked in various occupations and led regular lives.

Purification Rituals

Ritual purity is a complicated concept and is often misunderstood. We traditionally associate it with hygiene because most of our exposure to the concept comes from the Hebrew Scriptures, where the terms are often translated as "clean" or "unclean." However, purity was a state of being. Some common conditions that were subject to purification rites were contact with blood, semen, and corpses. In and of themselves, these items were not in any sense sinful, as they were elements of everyday life. Ancient ritual purity codes are primarily concerned with sacred space; when someone approached the sacred area of a temple or other religious site, ritual purity was required. A major element of purification rites, even among the laity, involved ritual cleansing with water (**ablutions**) to symbolically remove any contagion before entering sacred space.

Communicating with the Divine

How and why did ancient people communicate with the divine? Most attempts were intended to determine the will of the gods. These endeavors involved the art of divination and the utilization of oracles. Divination (from the Latin *divinare*, "to be inspired by a god") was practiced by **seers** (Greek, *manteis*), who had various methods to interpret **omens**, or phenomena that were perceived as signs from the gods. Many signs (known as **prodigies** in Rome) were found in abnormal phenomena in the natural world (the birth of a two-headed calf, raining blood, sweating statues). These signs were taken seriously as indicating that the gods were angry, or that humans had done something wrong in their relationship with the divine.

Another way to determine the will of the gods was **augury**, which involved reading the signs found in lightning and the flights of birds. Others were

specialists in the art of ***hieroskopia*** (Greek), and of the ***haruspices*** in Etruscan and Roman tradition. These experts read the entrails of sacrificial animals to determine if the offering was favorable. Before major battles Greeks performed a ceremony, *sphagia*, to read the entrails to determine if the omens were good. Roman legions had priests who were adept at reading the behavior of sacred chickens and making sacrifices to determine favorable conditions for battle.

Oracles (from the Latin, *orare*, "to speak") were persons or agencies that could manifest or articulate the thoughts and words of the deities. This was also the term used for sites where oracular speech took place. Whereas seers and *augurs* would interpret signs, oracles were understood to convey the literal words of a god or goddess. Most often, the speech of oracles was in a hidden language which would then be translated by a priest or temple servant. At other times, oracles went into a trance-like state, or exhibited ecstatic behavior, when they were thought to be possessed by the god. The founding of new cities or colonies or the decision to go to war was undertaken after first consulting an oracle. There were also oracle sites for the chthonic divinities and heroes. Oracles could be found throughout the region, but in Classical antiquity the most famous sites were at Delphi in Greece, Dodona in Epirus, Didyma in Turkey, the island of Delos in the Aegean Sea, and the cave of the Sibyls at Cumae in Italy.

Games

Ancient civilizations had athletic competitions, or **games**. We tend to think of sports events as solely a category of entertainment, but in the ancient world athletic games were under the auspices of the gods. The circuit games of ancient Greece are probably the most famous, beginning with the games dedicated to Zeus at Olympia in 776 BCE, followed by the Pythian Games at Delphi, the games at Isthmia near Corinth, and Nemea in the northern Peloponnese. The opening day of these games was usually devoted to the god with a festival and sacrifices. Competition was not limited to athletics; dramatic contests (with prizes for the author) were part of week-long religious festivals, and choirs traveled to various cities to compete in singing contests that largely consisted of hymns to the gods. In Rome, the games (***ludi***) during the religious festivals always included plays and the ever-popular chariot races. The races opened with a parade of statues of the gods and sacrifices.

The Afterlife and Funeral Rites

Paleolithic burials may provide our earliest evidence for a belief in the **afterlife**, or a belief in some form of existence beyond death. Views on the afterlife ran the gamut from denial (or annihilation of the self at the death), to a vague form

of eternal sleep, to a belief in the immortality of the soul, to very complicated systems of reward and punishment for the deeds of this life. The more elaborate the forms of reward and punishment, the more elaborate the descriptions of the geography of the place of the dead. For those who did believe in an afterlife, there were oracle sites for the dead, *nekromanteia* (and thus our word, **necromancy**), where someone would attempt to contact the dead.

A great deal of our evidence of the ancient world is found in grave shafts, tombs, catacombs, and inscribed grave markers, and this evidence reveals that ancient people were very concerned about proper funeral rites. Death fractured the family and the community, so there were rituals for both the dead body and the mourners. Then as now, no one could be sure what happened to the dead, or if they even existed in some other form. In case they did exist, there was a great concern for all for them to rest in peace so that they could not harm the living. Both Greece and Rome had special days of the dead, when it was understood that spirits could roam free, with rituals designed to protect the living as well as put the departed back to sleep. At the higher end of society, in both Greece and Rome, **funeral games** could be offered by the survivors, although these were distinct from the regular games. In Greece, funeral games included a variety of the same athletic skills that were the focus of regular games. In Rome, funeral games employed trained gladiators who sometimes fought to the death (***munera***), and were separate events from the regular religious festival games of the calendar.

Summary

- The modern field of Religious Studies has emerged as an academic study of religion, focusing on the historical and social contexts of elements rather than theological faith systems. Religious Studies seeks as much as possible to eliminate anachronism from the analysis of the ancient world.
- The divine had a central role in all aspects of life in the ancient world. Individuals related themselves to this unseen universe in their daily lives as well as their position in society.
- While ethnic, traditional cults differed, there were basic concepts shared by Greece and Rome. The items in bold print will occur throughout the rest of the book and are described in the Glossary.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Eliade, M. gen. ed. 1986. *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. Macmillan. This set of reference volumes contains encyclopedia articles by scholars on the individual elements of religious concepts and ritual practices. This work is available in most libraries, with a later edition in 2005.

Mikalson, J. D. 2010. *Ancient Greek Religion*, 2nd ed. Wiley-Blackwell. An excellent overview of Greek religion which includes myths, detailed rituals, and cults of ancient Greece.

Warrior, V. M. 2006. *Roman Religion*. Cambridge University Press. This is an introductory survey of the religions of Rome, in the family, the state, and the empire.