



Mysteria: Cult and Fraternity in Greece and Rome

Course Description

Did the initiates of Mithras get baptized by the blood of a bull that was suspended above them? There are a multitude of ideas about the mystery cults of antiquity. Questions such as this represent the sorts of issues about how ideas become popularized but are based on very little truth if any. Some ideas about the cults of antiquity are grounded in solid evidence and others are more fanciful. Many cults of Greek and Roman antiquity involved secretive initiation rites and obligations to keep the cult's activities and rituals secret. Initiates often took upon themselves blood oaths swearing themselves to absolute secrecy, never revealing what took place within the "sacred" spaces of these cult organizations. This course offers an in-depth look into those ancient Greek and Roman mystery cults that were based on initiation rituals and secrecy. The study of ancient mystery cults is problematic for modern scholars because the veil of secrecy that shrouds these intimate organizations leaves few clues. We will explore the available evidence for these cults by surveying the archaeological, literary, and epigraphical evidence for each of the mystery cults examined in this course. In doing so, we will distinguish what we can legitimately claim about the ancient mystery cults from those speculative ideas about their true nature. We will consider the evidence within the interpretive framework of various theoretical models of religion in order to reconstruct the experience of the initiate in the mystery cults.

while many ancient authors offered their own speculations on what was going on in these cults, it is often unclear how they (and hence: we) could possibly know. For some prominent cults, we encounter wild ideas and baseless polemics, whereas for others, we hardly get any information at all. This course offers an in-depth look into what can legitimately be said about ancient mystery cults. You will get an opportunity to apply theoretical models of religion in order to interpret the evidence that is available and make attempts to reconstruct the religious experience of the initiates of these cult organizations. Finally, you will consider how our interpretations should be presented to the general public and if any creative licensing is ever appropriate when talking about history.

Learning Objectives

- Analyze, understand and evaluate the written and material evidence relating to the ancient mystery cults;
- Critically evaluate different methodological approaches to ancient religion as a whole;
- Construct an independent argument on an important aspect of the mystery cult experience based on available evidence;
- Distinguish between substantive versus circumstantial evidence along with the quality and nature of the evidence as it is applied to interpreting the past;
- Engage primary sources in relationship to current scholarship; and
- Apply what is learned in this course to contemporary religious and/or social developments.

Required Reading

Meyer, Marvin M., ed. *Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook of Sacred Texts*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

Bowden, Hugh. *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.

Greek Mysteries. *The Archaeology and Ritual of Ancient Greek Secret Cults*, London 2003.

J. Bremmer, *Initiation into the Mysteries of the Ancient World*, Berlin 2014.

Additional readings noted in the Tentative Course Schedule.

Assignments

Attendance and Participation (20%)

Weekly Discussion Thread (20%)

Midterm and Final Exams (30%)
Group Project (30%)

Tentative Course Schedule

Week 1: Introduction to the Course

Week 2: A General look at the concepts of Religion, Cult, and Ritual and a general overview of traditional Greek and Roman Religions.

Readings:

Zaidman, L.B and P.S. Pantel. Religion in the Ancient Greek City. (Cambridge, 2002)
3-23, 27-45.

Rüpke, Jörg, and Richard Gordon. Religion of the Romans. (Cambridge, 2007) 3-24.

Myers Introduction Chapter.

Bowden Introduction Chapter.

Assignment: Weekly Discussion Thread

Week 3: The Eleusinian Mysteries

Readings:

Bowden Pages 26-48

Myers Pages 15-46

J. Bremmer Pages 1 to 20

Assignment: Weekly Discussion Thread

Week 4: The Greek Mysteries of Dionysos

Readings:

Bowden Pages 105-136

Myers Pages 61-101

Assignment: Weekly Discussion Thread

Week 5: The Greek Mysteries of Dionysos (Continued)

Readings:

Bowden Pages 105-136

Myers Pages 61-101

Assignment: Weekly Discussion Thread

Week 6: Mother of the Gods, Magna Mater, Cybele and Galli

Readings:

Bowden Pages 83-104

Myers Pages 111-154

K.A. Lucker (2005) The Gallas: Transgender Priests of Ancient Greece, Rome and the Near East.

Assignment: Weekly Discussion Thread

Week 7: Mother of the Gods, Magna Mater, Cybele and Galli (Continued)

Readings:

Bowden Pages 83-104

Myers Pages 111-154

K.A. Lucker (2005) The Gallas: Transgender Priests of Ancient Greece, Rome and the Near East.

Assignment: Weekly Discussion Thread

Week 8: Mysteries of Samothrace, Orphic-Bacchic Mysteries, and other Greek Mystery Cults

Readings:

Bowden Pages 49-82

Myers Pages 47-60

J. Bremmer Pages 21-79

Assignment: Midterm Exam

Week 9: Initiation Practices and Rituals

Readings:

Bowden Pages 137-147

Assignments: Weekly Discussion Thread

Week 10: The Cult of Isis

Readings:

Bowden Pages 156-180

Myers Pages 155-196

J. Bremmer Pages 110-124

Assignment: Weekly Discussion Thread

Week 11: The Cult of Isis (Continued)

Readings:

Bowden Pages 156-180

Myers Pages 155-196

J. Bremmer Pages 110-124

Assignment: Weekly Discussion Thread

Week 12: The Roman Mystery Cult of Mithras

Readings:

Bowden Pages 181-197

Myers Pages 197-222

J. Bremmer Pages 125-141

Assignment: Weekly Discussion Thread

Week 13: The Roman Mystery Cult of Mithras (Continued)

Readings:

Bowden Pages 181-197

Myers Pages 197-222

J. Bremmer Pages 125-141

Assignment: Weekly Discussion Thread

Week 14: Sacred versus the Profane and the Legacy of the Mystery Cults

Readings:

Bowden Pages 198-223

J. Bremmer Pages 142-165

Assignment: Work on Final Projects

Week 15: Final Projects

Week 16: Final Projects

Assignment: Final Exam