

Written Assignments

History of Ancient Religion • Fall 2022

For this course, you'll write a research essay on an ancient work (due at the end of the semester) and an essay on images of the ancient world.

In addition, you'll also turn in a write-up of the responses to one of the readings and a proposal for your position paper.

Before uploading, make sure your essays meet the Requirements for All Papers. All written assignments must be submitted via BlackBoard.

	Upload by
1. Images Essay	Monday, October 10
2a. Research Essay Proposal	Monday, October 24
2b. Research Essay	Monday, December 12
3. Reading Responses Write-Up	1 week after responses close

IMPORTANT

Watch the video. The overview video explains what I want you to cover in the essay and what I'm expecting in terms of arguments, evidence, and structure.

Before you upload, make sure your essay meets the Requirements for All Papers, including formatting, structure, and citations. You will be marked down drastically if your paper is not properly cited. For how to do citations and bibliographies, see the Citations handout.

Essay on Representations and Images

History of Ancient Religion • Fall 2022

The assignment: Write a 3- to 4-page essay using depictions of religion the ancient world to take a position on the representations of ancient cultural ideas and beliefs, following one of the following two options.

OPTION 1

Two pieces in a museum

How a culture sees abstract ideas (masculinity, virtue, old age, divinity, and so on) is often reflected in its artwork. What can two different works of art depicting the same idea, but from different times or places, tell us about how the cultures that produced them?

For this option, you need to choose two works of art from the ancient world having to do with religion that (a) represent the same idea or concept but (b) come either from different periods or from different places in the ancient world.

In your essay, compare three things that these works have in common, using those comparisons to make an argument about what these two artists believed in and the insights this gives us into the cultures they came from.

Choosing your subjects

- Your two works of art must represent the same idea or concept. For example, you can choose two priestesses, two demigod heroes, two fertility goddesses, etc. The idea is to look for how similarities and differences in representations of the same idea tell us about the cultural beliefs and expectations that shaped the artists and their own culturally-conditioned visions of that idea.
- Your works of art must be from the ancient era (before 500 CE), and they must be from either two different places or two different periods. This allows you to talk about two separate societies and how they represent the same concepts differently. The two pieces can be in any visual medium: sculpture, painting, relief, etc. They do not have to be in the same medium as long as they are depictions of the same idea or concept.
- Ideally, you should experience the artwork face-to-face by attending a museum in person. Possible venues include: Metropolitan Museum's Egypt Collection; Metropolitan Museum's Greek and Roman Art Collection; Brooklyn Museum of Art's Ancient Egyptian Art Collection; and Fordham Museum of Greek, Etruscan and Roman Art. You are, of course, not limited to these venues, and you are not limited to New York. If you are not able to attend a museum in person because of ongoing restrictions, you may find imagery of artworks that meet the requirements on museum websites instead.

Writing your paper

- Choose three aspects of the works you can discuss for both pieces that seem to reflect how the artist felt about the subject and what the subject stood for.
 - Some possibilities include facial expression, dress, use of technique or medium, stiffness/fluidity, apparent strength/weakness, idealism/realism, or any other elements offering some kind of insight into what the artist was trying to convey. Describe and discuss your subjective impressions of these three aspects in the two works.

- For each aspect, compare how it manifests in the first piece; then talk about how the second piece is similar or different and in what way; and finally talk about what these similarities or differences tell us about what each artist believed about their subject and what that might tell us about the cultural beliefs they came from in relation to the subject being depicted.
- For example: say the works you’ve chosen are two sculptures depicting a goddess of love from different cultures, and one has a crafty expression while the other has an innocent expression. The different facial expressions can be used to talk about how each artist, and the cultures they came from, might have thought about things like the gods’ attitudes toward their roles in creating relationships between mortals; the nature of love; the motivations of the gods, etc.
- Make an argument about how consistently the same core idea was seen in the two times or places that produced these two works. If art is an expression of cultural values, what do the differences between these works tell you about the respective cultures they come from? What do their similarities tell you about what these ancient cultures have in common?
- You do not need to preface your essay with background about the periods, the media used, etc. This essay is about your subjective reactions to these two specific works and what you believe they are telling you about the beliefs and social expectations of the cultures they came from.
- On a separate “Works Discussed” page after your essay:
 - List the title of each work, the artist, the approximate date it was created, the city or region it came from originally, and the name of the museum gallery where the work can be found.
 - Paste in photographs of the items. If it’s permitted at the museum, take a picture of the items while you’re there. If it’s not, find pictures of those specific items on the museum’s web site.

OPTION 2

The ancient world on film

Every depiction of an historical event, whether in prose, poetry, painting, theater, or film, involves an artist using history to convey his or her own beliefs. What do the creators of the film and the authors of the source material it was based on want you to believe?

For this option, you need to choose a film that is set in the ancient world that relates to religion and that is based on an ancient primary source. In your essay, compare the agenda of the filmmakers with the agenda of the authors of the primary source. Describe and discuss the similarities and differences in how these creators reshaped this event for their own purposes. Use these similarities and differences to make an argument about the ways in which this particular event is leveraged to impose ideas on audiences and about what this event means to the people who create art about it.

Choosing your subjects

- First, choose and watch any feature-length film set in the ancient era (3500 BCE to 500 CE). You can also choose two episodes of a television series set in the ancient world.
- Then find the ancient primary source material it was based on and read it. For example, if you chose the movie *300*, which is about Spartans fighting Persian invaders at the Battle of Thermopylae, the primary source you’d need would be the main ancient account of that battle, which is in Book 7 of *The Histories* by the famous historian Herodotus. Your primary source(s) must come from the ancient world (before 500 CE).

- Some suggestions for possible films or series and their corresponding sources are below. The list is not exhaustive, and you are not limited to this list as long as the film you choose is set in the ancient world and is based on ancient primary sources.

Writing your paper

- Choose three moments or depictions from the film and find the corresponding events or depictions in the primary source.
 - For each moment or depiction, describe and discuss how it appears in the film and how it is presented similarly or differently in the primary source material.
- Use these similarities or differences to make an argument about (a) the agenda of the primary source author and how it compares to the agenda of the filmmakers, and (b) the ways this historical event is used by others to present their own ideas, and what this tells us about the shape and meaning of this event's impact and legacy on history.
 - Please take note: This essay is about the agenda of the primary source author as much as the filmmakers'. Do not use the source to "fact check" the film and list what it got "wrong". You must consider the primary source to be at least as skewed, manipulative, and agenda-driven as the film.
- On a separate "Works Discussed" page after your essay, list the title of film, year, director, stars and studio. Then list the book or books you drew your written evidence from, using standard citation style. The references to the primary source must also be properly cited in the text as usual.

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Some possibilities for the film and sources option are listed on the course website. Note that is a general list of films depicting the ancient world and some may not have much bearing on religion. Links to most of these primary sources can be found on the ancient texts page on my website.

Research Essay

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The assignment: Write a 5- to 6-page researched essay, due at the end of the semester, that takes a position on the depiction of religion within a major literary work from the ancient world.

A. Choose a work

For this assignment, you need to choose a literary work from the ancient world (before 500 CE) one of the themes of which relates to religion. For example, in *Antigone*, the conflict is driven in part by Antigone's need to respect the gods by burying her brother, despite having been forbidden to do so by the king.

Your goal will be to make an argument about how this work deals with religion—both religious custom between mortals and the relationship between mortals and the divine—and what this tells us about the particular culture this work came from.

Some possible subjects are listed at the bottom of this page, along with links to online versions of the text.

EXAMPLES

What do I mean by "religion" in this context? The idea of "religion" can encompass a lot of different things, so you have some leeway in the kinds of things you can discuss as part of showing how your work relates to religion.

Consider all of the different ways in which concepts of religion affect society; including: the actions of gods and of nature, often inexplicable or capricious; expectations of morality and behavior external to the bonds between mortals; religious iconography and monuments; sacred texts; rituals and sacrifices; magic; legends and myths that explain the way the world works; ideas of time and cosmos beyond the mundane experience of mortals; pollution and sin; death and the afterlife; salvation; the soul as distinct from the mortal body; ideological conflict with other gods or the religious beliefs of other cultures.

What you'll be doing is looking for these kinds of things in the work you're exploring and picking out three moments from the work to discuss and interpret in your essay, with the overall goal of using these interpretations to gain insight into the culture that produced the work you're writing about. This means you will be making an argument concerning what you believe this work tells us about the culture it came from. That brings us to the Proposal, in which you identify which work you're going to be exploring and sketch out what you think might be the position you'll be taking.

B. Write a one-page proposal

The assignment: The proposal is just a brief one-page preview of your essay. It should include:

- The topic you think you'll want to write about and the problem you're interested in addressing. You should be able to delineate the problem by describing the opposing views people might take. To make sure you have two clear opposing opinions, you might want to express them in the form "Some say.... Others say...."
- Your preliminary thesis statement—in other words, what you think you might be arguing in your paper.
 - Your thesis statement, both here and in the final paper, should be a statement of opinion that someone could disagree with. It can take the form of following up the description of the opposing opinions with your own: "I believe...."

Remember that your thesis is provisional. You can change anything about your approach and interpretation after the proposal; in fact, uncovering information as you do your research makes refining or changing your initial assessments very likely.

Your proposal is structured like the introduction (see the example on the course website or in the Elephant Pamphlet), and may serve as the basis for it.

The proposal is not graded, but whether you submitted a proposal on time will be factored into the final grade for the position paper. I will give you feedback on things like the feasibility of researching your topic, whether the scope is too big or too narrow for a paper like this, and some possible sources you might want to look at.

Note: The one-page proposal described here is what's due in Week 7.

C. Research additional perspectives

The bulk of your essay will involve describing, analyzing, and drawing conclusions about three moments from the work that you think most clearly reveal the author's understanding of religion. We'll call the work you've chosen to write about the *main text*.

To support your analysis, I want you to find at least two other additional sources that provide perspective on the work you are studying.

These *additional sources* can be either

- (a) primary sources—sources also from the ancient world—that comment on the subject of the main text, or on the main text itself; or
- (b) secondary sources by modern scholars that focus on interpreting your main text.

You can have two primary sources, two secondary sources, or one of each. In your paper, you'll use these additional sources to support the arguments you make about the main text.

EXAMPLES

An example from the first category: Suppose your main text is *Bacchae*, a tragedy that Dionysos, the Greek god of wine and ritual madness, as its antagonist. To get a handle on Euripides's take on this strange and anomalous god, you could take a look at another ancient work featuring the same god to use as a contrast—*Frogs*, for example, a comedy by Aristophanes in which Dionysos interacts with some famous playwrights (including Euripides). Looking at how differently Aristophanes handles Dionysos will help you gain insight into how Euripides saw Dionysos and the role he had in human society.

An example from the second category might be a scholarly discussion of the main text—for example, a book of essays about the themes that surface in *Bacchae*. Or it might be about a specific topic you're focusing on in the main text—for example, a scholarly article about the way Dionysos was viewed by the Greeks.

My response to your proposal will include some suggestions as to useful additional sources for your essay.

Tertiary sources are not allowed. These include textbooks, encyclopedias, and most websites. See the Research and Citation Center for more on sources.

For guidance on finding full-text online primary and secondary sources, see the Research and Citation Center.

D. Write your essay

- In your introduction, briefly describe the problem and state the position you will argue as a thesis statement. Your introduction should follow the format of the proposal (see above).
- In the body of your paper, make three assertions as to why your thesis statement is valid. For each assertion, describe and discuss the evidence from the primary and secondary sources.

EXAMPLE

For example, if you were writing the Hannibal/elephants paper described in the website, you could start one section with an assertion that elephants were not a bad idea inherently, then discuss evidence showing the effective use of elephants in war.

Then begin the next section with an assertion that Romans were adaptable in war, and discuss evidence showing how Romans changed their military tactics and strategies to meet new kinds of war and new enemies.

Your third section could begin with an assertion that it was Roman adaptability that trumped the effectiveness of Hannibal's evidence, and discuss the evidence that showed how the Romans overcame the use of elephants in the fight with Hannibal.

- Each section starts with an assertion followed by evidence, and each section builds on the previous sections to make an overall argument. Your evidence should come primarily from your main text, with support for your analysis coming from the two additional sources you've chosen.
- End with a conclusion that shows how your three assertions came together to support your thesis.

Your essay must have citations for all quotes, paraphrases, and ideas from both your main text and your additional sources. There must also be a bibliography that lists your main text and all additional sources. We'll talk about this in class, and see the Research and Citation Center for more.

Optional Draft. You may submit an optional draft two weeks before the final due date. It should include most of your paper (at least two thirds of the final content, with sections to be written described in square brackets). I'll give feedback, but not a grade, to help you refine your final paper. To make sure I see it soonest, please email me your optional draft rather than uploading it to BlackBoard.

Possible subjects and links

Possible subjects for this assignment include the following. Links may be found on the web page.

Plays

- *Antigone* by Sophocles (Athens, 5th century BCE). Antigone fights to bury her treasonous brother despite having been forbidden to do so by the grudge-bearing king.
- *Bacchae* by Euripides (Athens, 5th century BCE). Spurned by Thebes, Dionysos tricks its queen into rending her own son to pieces.
- *Eumenides* by Aeschylus (Athens, 5th century BCE). Tormented by the Furies for murdering his faithless mother at Apollo's behest, Orestes appeals to the justice of Athena.
- *The Birds* by Aristophanes (Athens, 5th century BCE). Pisthetaerus convinces the birds to create a great city in the sky, and thus regain their status as the original gods.

Epic Poetry

- *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Sumer, Bronze Age BCE). The king of Uruk, saved from abusive rule by his god-given friend Enkidu, seeks to defeat the forest guardian and defy his own mortality.
- *Theogony* by Hesiod (Greece, 8th century BCE). The origins of the Greek gods and the personalities and intentions.
- "The Death of Patroklos": books 16–18 of *Iliad* by Homer (Greece, 8th century BCE). Seeking glory on behalf of his mentor, Achilles, Patroklos is lured to his death in battle thanks to conflicts among the gods.
- "Aeneas in the Underworld": book 6 of *Aeneid* by Virgil (Rome, 1st century BCE). Required to obtain a bough of gold as a gift for the wife of Pluto, Aeneas descends to the underworld, where he witnesses the fates of the just and the unjust.
- "Gods and Mortals": books 1-2 of *Metamorphoses* by Ovid (Rome, 1st century CE). Stories of creation and the ages of humanity, plus mortal encounters with the gods by Io, Daphne, Europa, and others.

Dialog

- *Babylonian Theodicy* by Šaggil-kīnam-ubbib (Babylon, 11th century BCE). A dialog between an individual experiencing suffering as a result of acts of evil done by people in the society around him, and a friend who urges a positive perspective on morality and fate.
- *Euthyphro* by Plato (Athens, 4th century BCE). Socrates, soon to be put on trial for his life, discusses the meaning of piety and justice.
- *On Divination* by Cicero (Rome, 1st century BCE). A philosophical exploration on the role and purpose of divination in Roman religious ritual and culture.

Sacred Text

- *The Book of Job* (Judea, 4th century BCE). Satan receives God's permission to test the faith a wealthy man by removing his blessings.

Satire

- *The Pumpkinification of Claudius* by Seneca (Rome, 1st century CE). The recently deceased emperor Claudius is depicted ascending to heaven, where the gods are not sure what to do with him.

Prose Fiction

- "Tale of Cupid and Psyche": books 4.27–6 of *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius (Rome, 2nd century CE). The god of love and his beloved overcome various obstacles before finally being able to wed.

Prose Nonfiction

- *Numa* by Plutarch (Rome, 2nd century CE). Biography of the legendary second king of Rome, to whom was attributed the religious traditions and institutions of later Rome.
- *Isis and Osiris* by Plutarch (Egypt, 2nd century CE). A survey of Egyptian religious rites and myths from a Greek perspective.

I'm happy to discuss other possibilities, but alternative choices should be approved by me first before the due date for the proposal.

Responses Write-Up

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The assignment: For one of the the assigned primary source readings, write a 3-page essay that summarizes what the reading tells us.

Your write-up should do the following:

- Briefly summarize what the document says and, more importantly, analyze what the author is trying to say about the subject at hand. In other words, you need to identify and discuss what you believe is the author's interpretation, bias, and point of view and how it affected the author's treatment of the topic. Give examples from the document that illustrate your assessment of the author's spin.
- Using the online responses to that reading by yourself and your classmates, discuss three interpretations or significant features of this reading as it relates to religion that tell us something about the culture that it comes from.

The main point of the presentation and the write-up is NOT to summarize the reading. Summary should be less than 25% of your presentation and your write-up. The main goal here is to use the points raised in the online discussion to analyze the reading and talk about what it means and what it tells us about that place and time in ancient history.

Your write-up needs to be posted to BlackBoard one week after the discussion on that reading closes. For example, if you chose the reading for Week 2, that discussion closes the Sunday after our Week 2 meeting; your write-up is due one week later, on the Sunday after that.

IMPORTANT

You need to sign up for which reading you'll be doing the write-up on. You only need to do one of these for the whole semester. The sign-up page is on the course website.