

# Notes on Quiz #6

*History of Ancient Religion • Fall 2022*

1. **What is a scapegoat ritual? What function is it normally meant to perform? In what sorts of ways does it vary from culture to culture?**

A scapegoat ritual is a purification ritual in which the burdens of a community are placed on an animal, which is then ejected from the community into the wild, taking the burdens with it. These burdens might include plague, sin, or other pollutions requiring purification.

The animal used varies; goats were likely because an inexpensive animal was used, but other animals were used, and sometimes the “scapegoat” being cast out was a woman or a male slave. The officiant varied as well—the ritual might be conducted by the king, as protector of his city (e.g., the Hittites), by the high priest if the relationship with the patron god was at stake (Israel), or the community together (Greece). Most iterations involved only one animal, the one that was sent into the wild, but the Israeli-Jewish version (recorded in Leviticus) included a second goat, which was sacrificed to Yahweh.

A related Roman practice, rarely employed, involved a Roman general “scapegoating” himself and the enemy troops in order to purify his army, with the hope of mitigating the gods’ wrath and enabling a Roman victory.

2. **What were some theories about Minoan religion put forward by the the excavator of Knossos, Sir Arthur Evans, that are now discounted?**

Evans asserted that the Minoans’ religion was dominated by a Great Minoan Mother Goddess, indicating a matriarchal structure both for the divine world and among the Minoans themselves. Minoan religious iconography includes divinities of both genders and does not support a single, overarching female goddess, much less social matriarchy among the Minoans.

Evans also overemphasized fertility as the central concern of the Minoan cult practices, which led Evans to conclude Minoan religion was conceptually primitive. Given the sophisticated and complex urban society and industrial economy of the Minoans, historians have long discounted Evans’s position and assert a religious system of comparable complexity to other urbanized, industrial ancient societies.

3. **According to the author of the text on rituals, what are the key differences between ritual and myth? What do they have in common?**

The author asserted that (a) myth is never a complete reflection of ritual, but only selectively focuses on certain parts of it; (b) what is symbolic and reversible in ritual is realistic and irreversible in myth; and (c) myths are more mobile than ritual.

- EC1. Reconstruction of Minoan mythology and theology can be undertaken with the aid of all of the following EXCEPT:**

- ✓ (a) Literary documents [*Minoan documents are few and the writing system has not been deciphered*]
- (b) Archeological remains
- (c) Wall paintings
- (d) Ring impressions

- EC2. Many festivals of the new year in antiquity involved reversals (masters serving slaves, humiliation of kings, the unfettering of a chained god). What do you think might be some of the reasons behind such reversals? How do they relate to the turning of the calendar?**

One reason, of course, is entertainment. But the reversal rituals of the new year also end the old year with chaos so that the new year can begin with the deliberate reinstallation of order: the master and slave resume their normal roles, the proper king retakes his throne, the primeval god is reshackled.