

# Notes on Quiz #7

*History of Ancient Religion • Fall 2022*

## 1. What are some of the reasons similar stories appear the mythology of different cultures?

Some mythologic motifs are universal, such as the separation of sky and earth, and so generate stories independently in many different ancient cultures. Even some of the explanations are predictable and appear spontaneously in various cultures: e.g., the sky and earth being formed from the separation of a single unity (as in the Babylonian myth of Tiamat's body being dived into earth and heavens). The transition to a more ordered urban civilization also suggests a chaotic past (often represents by older, more savage gods) being succeeded by younger gods who provide order and stability; this motif occurs in many cultures.

Other stories are more singular, and their presence in other cultures is the result of diffusion. For example, the flood narrative originated in Sumer and later spread to Akkad, Babylon, Assyria, and thence to the Hittites, the Jews, and other cultures. This diffusion can be the result of migration, the overlap of neighboring peoples, or the merging of cultures through conquest or synthesis.

In these cases the stories are often altered to reflect a culture's needs and values; e.g., the survivor of the flood in the Sumerian narrative (Utanapishtim) is an outcast because he defied universal mortality; Noah, in the Jewish narrative, is in contrast a prototype for a new morality rooted in the covenant with Yahweh.

## 2. What kinds of elements did the religion of the Minoans and the Mycenaeans seem to have in common? How did the Mycenaeans do things differently?

The Minoans and Mycenaeans shared a lack of urban temples. They also both employed hearths for sacrifices and banqueting and bench sanctuaries. The Mycenaeans may also have been influenced by the Minoans in the choice of the sea god, Poseidon, and the chief god of their pantheon.

The Minoans focused the religious rituals on sacred places deep in nature (peaks, forests, caves). The Mycenaeans, by contrast, had great central hearth rooms at the hearts of their palace cities, indicating rituals regularly performed within the city. Bench sanctuaries were also found within the Mycenaean cities.

## 3. Texts that begin "I will sing" and the like suggest what about the nature of mythology? How does this help explain the diffusion of mythological stories?

That mythology was meant to be orally performed, often by a master storyteller who regularly chanted the ancient stories of a city or town as part of their communal festivals. These performers would be easily accessible to visitors from other communities, who could bring the stories with them as they traveled. The storytellers themselves might also travel and share stories with other communities or each other. Young men might travel in search of a storyteller to train under, bring their own stories with them.

### EC1. Deities attested in Mycenaean Linear B tablets include all of the following EXCEPT:

- (a) Potneija
- (b) Poseidon
- (c) Akhenaten [Akhenaten was an Egyptian pharaoh, but the others are all attested from Linear B]
- (d) Dionysos

### EC2. Why do you think it's difficult for us to nail down what mythology is? Given our discussions and the readings, what do you think is the best way to define mythology as it was used in the ancient world?

This answer will be somewhat subjective, but the key idea here is that categorizing the stories an ancient culture tells according to various functions is a modern phenomenon. In ancient polytheistic cultures, myths, legends, and history were all part of the same fabric of how society worked and how mortals related to the natural world and the divine.

Later, the advent of monotheism meant that some of these stories were "wrong," and mythology was systematically deprecated. But in polytheistic society that was not the case, and all kinds of stories coexisted as a melange of what existed "before" and "outside" the structured world the ancient citizen saw around themselves.