

Notes on Quiz #8

History of Ancient Religion • Fall 2022

1. For the Greeks, what was the basis of the relationship between humans and the divine? Describe how it worked from the Greek perspective.

In everyday religious practice, the Greeks thought in terms of two related ideas: *charis* and *timē*. *Charis* was a favor expected to be repaid; *timē* was honor owed according to a powerful figure who used that power wisely. The process was not a transactional, tit-for-tat dependence, but rather gods treated well because the gods rejoiced in taking care of those who honored them and treated them well. The gods granted the mortals' prayers for crops, prosperity, health, and safety of self, family, and community; in return humans gave sanctuaries, sacrifices, hymns, and dances. The Greeks were also motivated by a desire for *adornment*, a need to make the gods beautiful.

This view is slightly different in literature, particularly epic poetry and tragedy. Literature was more likely to show the relationship with the gods being fractured, in order to highlight the dramatic results of human selfishness and how this displeases the gods. Where the emphasis in literature often seemed to be on wrath and punishment for the dramatic purpose of reinforcing cultural behavioral norms, in everyday life Greeks expected a stable and positive relationship with the gods, with occasional pollution and religious oversights rectified through purification rituals.

2. How is initiation into a mystery cult similar to adolescent rites of passage or joining a guild? What's different about it?

In all three cases, the initiation involves not just the recitation of words or actions, but a transformation of the subject. Undergoing initiation into a mystery cult, as with the other rituals, involves emerging as something new, with a new relationship to society and the divine.

The difference is that mystery cult initiations are not mutually exclusive. In fact, in a polytheistic society having special relationships with multiple gods via different mystery cults might be seen as a benefit. Mystery cult initiation could also be performed more than once by the same subject in the same cult. This is in contrast to adolescent rites of passage and induction into a guild, which were permanent transitions and were exclusive (you could not be inducted into more than one professional guild, for example).

3. What is a divine epithet? How were they used in Greek communities?

A divine epithet was an additional name for a god or goddess, often associated with a special rite or function performed by that deity. For example, Athena Parthenos (Athena the Pure) and Athena Nike (Athena the Victorious) both had temples on the Acropolis.

Epithets often indicated local variation on the panhellenic gods, reasserting the local nature of Greek worship that was smoothed over by the universalization of the gods inherent in the works of Homer and Hesiod. For example, Zeus Syllanius, mentioned in the Great Rhetra, was known only in Sparta.

EC1. Mystery cults tended to do all of the following EXCEPT:

- (a) Demand secrecy from all initiates
- (b) Promise to improve initiates' lives and/or afterlives
- (c) Promise a special relationship with the cult's patron deity
- ✓ (d) Completely replace the initiates' civic religion [*mystery cults were optional rites that supplemented civic religion*]

EC2. The reading mentions an "eighth-century renaissance" at the end of the Greek Dark Age. What kinds of developments are associated with this renaissance?

The eighth-century renaissance involved a dramatic increase in religious building and dedications, including monumental temples and cult statues. Note that this describes edifices and works created in a permanent form (stone, marble) that could be discovered by archaeologists. Mud and brick antecedents may be lost to us.

This is also the period in which the Greeks regained a writing system, which means that the transition to writing of oral performances (especially epic poetry) and the dissemination of these works begins during this time.