**Ancient Greek Religion**

**BACKGROUND NOTES**

**Introduction**

Greek religion, with its numerous gods and strange rituals, can seem totally alien to the modern world. It is possible to recognise the influence of other Greek achievements on our own civilisations; for instance Greek drama, art and philosophy have all, in some way, shaped their modern counterparts. In the case of religion, however, the influences are less clear, with ancient Greek religious practices and beliefs having few modern counterparts.

**Understanding Greek Religion**

To approach any kind of understanding of Greek religion it is important to look at the world the Greeks lived in, as this will have, to a large extent, shaped their religious beliefs. It is also vital to try and see things through Greek eyes, rather than as rational individuals influenced by modern advances in the realm of science.

Life in the ancient world was very precarious: warfare was endemic, subsistence farming meant that there was a constant risk of famine, while plagues and natural disasters, such as earthquakes and floods, were never far from people’s minds. As a consequence life was often seen as a struggle (‘agon’) between humanity and the irrational forces over which there was no control. Greek religion should be understood against this background. It provided a means for explaining and reacting to what could sometimes be a frightening world. The Greeks could look to their gods for aid or advice in times of crisis. They could also explain the unknown in terms of the actions of the gods or other supernatural beings. Thus earthquakes were seen as being manifestations of the anger of the god Poseidon (often known as the ‘earthshaker’) and to prevent or stop one due honours had to be paid to this particular god.

**Greek Religious Rituals**

Greek religion stressed active participation in religious ceremonies and rituals as a fundamental way of acknowledging the gods. A reciprocal relationship was imagined between gods and men: men paid the gods due honours and the gods responded by looking after their interests. If men ignored the gods or failed to observe the correct rituals they would have to face the anger of the gods.

1. Sacrifice

One of the key religious rituals for the Greeks was the sacrifice; basically an act of ritualised slaughter followed by a feast. Sacrifices could take place on different occasions. They often occurred at funerals and more generally sacrificial offerings to the dead were common. But perhaps the most common context for a sacrifice was to honour one of the gods or to obtain a favour.

The sacrifice was usually made at an altar. These were originally just heaps of stone or turf. Later they were replaced by altars carved from stone. These varied in size, sometimes depending on the type of sacrifice to be offered, and were usually rectangular in shape.

The ceremony of sacrifice was normally held at dawn. The altar was covered with garlands and flowers, while the animal chosen was wreathed in garlands and covered with woollen ribbons. The animal victim was usually a domestic animal, such as a goat, sheep or ox. Both the animal and participants were sprinkled with holy water, then the fire was lit on the altar. The priest scattered some grain from a ritual basket over the animal and then, after plucking some hair from its head, he cut its throat with a knife. Following this the victim would have been butchered and the thigh bones wrapped in fat were placed on the altar and burnt as an offering to the god. The rest of the animal would have been cooked and eaten by the participants in the sacrifice. At the sacrifice, prayers would have been made to the gods. Often hymns were also sung and music played on the lyre and pipes.

2. Offerings

Apart from animal sacrifices the Greeks made numerous other offerings to their gods. Offerings of food, for instance barley cakes or some of the products of a harvest, were very common. Indeed first fruit offerings from any form of agricultural activity were a way of thanking the gods for a good crop and also of ensuring that the next harvest would be successful.

Another form of offering was the libation: this was a liquid offering to the gods, often of wine. The wine would have been poured from a bowl usually onto an altar, although this kind of offering could be carried out without an altar. The libation, like all other offerings to the gods, would have been accompanied by prayers to the particular deity being honoured.

Votive offerings were a further common type of gift. These could be everyday objects such as vases or items of equipment used by a particular person for his job. For example a fisherman might dedicate one of his nets to Poseidon as a thanks offering for a successful catch. Other votive objects appear to have been specially made by craftsmen for the sole purpose of being dedicated to a god. Many of the small bronze figurines of animals that can be seen in museums today were these type of gifts.

3. Festivals

Religious festivals were one of the most important features of classical Greek religion. At Athens in the fifth century BC, no less than 120 days in the calendar were devoted to festivals. However Athens was probably exceptional among Greek cities for its number of religious festivals. We should also remember that Athenians would not have gone to all of these festivals; some were for particular interest groups, for instance craftsmen. All the same it is quite clear that festivals were a central part of Greek religious practice. They fulfilled an important social function, by bringing particular groups of people together in the worship of a deity and providing a holiday for all involved in the festival.

The basic rituals of the religious festival seem to have been similar throughout the Greek world: these were a procession, sacrifice and feasting. But within this basic outline there was an enormous amount of variety, both in terms of scale and ceremonial content. The most widely attested state festival in the Greek world was the Thesmophoria held in honour of Demeter, the goddess of agriculture. These agricultural rites were intended to ensure a perpetual increase in the products of the land. They also stress the importance of agriculture to the Greeks. At Athens a number of other state festivals took place, including the City Dionysia, a dramatic festival in honour of Dionysus, and the Panathenaic festival in honour of Athena. Both these festivals brought Athenian citizens together in communal celebrations and thus have a civic as well as religious character.

Finally the notion of competitive excellence as being an appropriate way of showing due respect to the gods is one that was central to many Greek festivals. The City Dionysia at Athens involved a dramatic contest between three tragedians, while athletic games were a feature of the Panathenaic festival. In fact some of the largest Greek festivals involving many states, and known as Panhellenic festivals, were centred around competition in some form. The most famous of these was the Olympic Games, held in honour of Zeus, where Greeks from all parts of the Greek world competed in athletic events.

**Greek Temples**

One major feature of Greek religious practice from the Archaic period onwards was the building of elaborate monumental temples to the gods. In earlier times it seems that an altar placed in an open space was considered adequate for worship. Later it was thought appropriate to house an image of the god (cult statue) inside a building and the temple evolved to meet this need. The temple provided a focus for the cult of an individual deity, but many ceremonies in honour of the god were still performed in the open air. Altars, for instance, remained outside of temples and sacrifices were thus performed outdoors.

Temples were set up in the major cities of the Greek world. For example the elaborate temples on the Athenian Acropolis were dedicated to the city’s patron goddess Athena. They were also built in the countryside, often in places especially sacred to a particular deity. In fact some of the major complexes of Greek religious buildings, known as Panhellenic sanctuaries, were set up at a distance from important urban centres. The two best known Panhellenic sanctuaries are the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi and the sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia. These were important religious sites for all of the Greeks, not just one particular city.

The materials used by the Greeks for their buildings were sun-dried bricks, wood, terracotta and stone. Early temples were built out of sun-dried bricks and wood. Later stone, in particular marble and limestone, became the most important material.

From quite early on Greek temples were built according to a fairly rigid set of requirements, although there were numerous variations in detail and proportions. Basically a central hall (cella), with a columned porch (pronaos) at the front and often one at the back (opisthodomos) was surrounded by a row or several rows of columns, which formed a colonnade (peristylion). One of the ways in which temple design could be varied was in the choice of architectural order. There were two basic orders: Doric, often favoured by mainland Greeks, and Ionic, most commonly used by the Greeks of Asia Minor. These two were later supplemented by the elaborate Corinthian order. Each order had different elements by which it could be distinguished from the other orders.

Greek architecture was an important influence on later architects. Most major cities in Britain have public buildings with strong Greek elements. In London the British Museum, with its ornate Ionic facade, provides an illustration of this phenomenon. Newcastle’s Grey Street also has a number of examples of Classical buildings, including the Theatre Royal with its impressive columned entrance. However it is not only public buildings that were designed to look like Greek temples. Many houses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries display Greek architectural elements. One only has to look at the front doors of many Georgian houses to notice one aspect of the legacy of Greek temples.