

ANCIENT GREECE

Background Information 16: Religion and Burial

A common set of beliefs

- Religion gave Greeks a sense of shared identity.
- Greeks across the Greek world knew same myths, though some places linked to a particular myth.
- Same gods worshipped, generally with the same rituals, across Greek world.
- Temples across Greece differed very little.
- Greeks worshipped by sacrificing animals, offering prayers and singing/dancing.
- Making sacrifices was the most important ritual: highest offering was a bull but also offered other animals, food and wine. Offerings were made to ask for or say thanks for a favour, or to mark a special event.
- Religious practices such as the use of oracles were shared by all Greeks.
- Greeks from across the Greek world attended festivals.
- Magic also played an important role in religion.

The role of the gods

- They didn't represent goodness and perfection.
- Could be violent, jealous, adulterous and inflict suffering on humans.
- They expected prayers and sacrifices from humans.
- In return for the above, mortals could ask for and expect favours from the gods.
- The gods couldn't override fate.

Festivals and Games

- Festivals and games were held to honour the gods, but were also fun occasions.
- In Athens, festival events were held on about ½ the days of the year.
- Athletic, music and drama competitions were part of important festivals.
- Festivals included song & dance, a procession to the temple and sacrifices.
- Important festivals included the Dionysia, Panathenaea, & Thesmophoria.
- Most festivals took place once a year, or sometimes every 4 years.
- Sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi was site of the Pythian Games: had a stadium built above Apollo's temple.
- Olympic Games were part of an important festival to honour Zeus: held every 4 years at Olympia in the Peloponnese.
- Separate games held at Olympia for women called the Heraea, in honour of Hera.
- The Panathenaea was a major festival in Athens to honour the birth of Athena. Was yearly with a larger version every 4 years. Included an athletic competition.

Oracles

- Played an important role in religion.
- A way for humans to ask questions of the gods.
- Most famous oracle was the oracle of Apollo at Delphi:
 - Questions for the god were written down and given to an attendant.
 - A priestess would act as the mouthpiece of the god and give a prophecy, written in lines of verse.
 - The prophecy could be obscurely worded so could be interpreted in different ways.
- Oracles also at Dodona (NW Greece), which took the form of an oak tree and at Siwa in Egypt.
- Seers also made prophecies, usually based on examining the organs of a sacrificed animal.

Temples

- Were houses of the deity.
- Had political as well as religious purpose as often built to celebrate civic power and pride, or give thanks to the patron god for success in war.

- Made of limestone or marble with wooden ceilings & roof tiles of stone or terracotta.
- A great temple of Zeus stood at Olympia.
- During festivals & special occasions, people gathered to perform sacrifices at the temple altar to honour the god.
- The altar was outside the main temple building, which ordinary people could not enter.
- Inside the temple building was a statue of the god, tended by priests and priestesses.
- Important temples became wealthy from the gifts given to the deity.

Burial

- Most people died quite young: men in battle, women in childbirth.
- Most people buried their dead, but some were cremated on a funeral pyre.
- The dead person was washed and dressed by women.
- The body would remain at home for a period of mourning: the person would be laid on a couch, feet facing the door so the spirit would leave.
- The body would be carried to the burial on a stretcher, escorted by mourners in black robes.
- Food & drink sometimes placed in the grave for the journey to the underworld.
- In the Classical period it wasn't common for objects to be buried with the person, though this did occur in earlier periods.
- If the family could afford it, a person was buried in a coffin of wood or stone.
- Wealthier families paid for a marble gravestone (stele), carved with portrait of the deceased.
- Tombs were decorated with scenes of feasts and the deceased's favourite things.

The afterlife

- Greeks believed in an afterlife but ideas about it varied.
- Generally, the kingdom of the dead was thought to be deep in the earth.
- The king of the underworld was the god Hades: the underworld came to be known as Hades also.

- The deceased was carried across the river Styx to the underworld by the ferryman, Charon: the trip cost one obol and sometimes a coin was left on the deceased to pay for this journey.
- If a person was not buried his/her spirit couldn't pass into Hades.
- The underworld was not really a place of punishment but was thought of as a Joyless place.
- Some heroes that were in favour with the gods were believed to journey to the Isles of the Blessed, where they lived amid heavenly pleasures.