Ancient Religions: Public worship of the Greeks and Romans

By E.M. Berens, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.07.16

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TOP: The temple and oracle of Apollo, called the Didymaion in Didyma, an ancient Greek sanctuary on the coast of Ionia (now Turkey), Wikimedia Commons. MIDDLE: The copper statue of Zeus of Artemision in the National Archaeological Museum, Athens, Greece. BOTTOM: Engraving shows the Oracle of Delphi, bathed in shaft of light atop a pedestal and surrounded by cloaked figures, Delphi, Greece. Getty Images.

Temple

Long ago, the Greeks had no shrines or sanctuaries for public worship. They performed their devotions beneath the vast and boundless canopy of heaven, in the great temple of nature itself. Believing that their gods lived above in the clouds, worshippers naturally searched for the highest available points to place themselves in the closest communion possible with their gods. Therefore, the summits of high mountains were selected for devotional purposes. The inconvenience of worshipping outdoors gradually suggested the idea of building temples that would offer shelter from bad weather.

These first temples were of the most simple form, without decoration. As the Greeks became a wealthy and powerful people, temples were built and adorned with great splendor and magnificence. So massively were they constructed that some of them have withstood the ravages of time. The city of Athens especially contains numerous remains of
these buildings of antiquity. These ruins are most valuable since they are sufficiently complete to enable archaeologists to study the plan and character of the original structures.

**Statues**

The Greeks worshiped their gods without any visible representations of them until the time of Cecrops, the founder of Athens. The most ancient of these representations consisted of square blocks of stone, upon which the names of the gods were engraved. The first attempts at sculpture were crude figures, with a head at one end and a shapeless trunk at the other. But the artists of later times devoted all their genius to the successful production of the highest ideals of their gods, some of which are preserved to this day, and are regarded as examples of purest art.

**Altars**

The altar in a Greek temple, which stood in the center of the building and in front of the statue of the presiding god, was generally circular and made of stone. It was customary to engrave upon it the name or distinguishing symbol of the divinity to whom it was dedicated.

In addition to those built in places of public worship, altars were frequently raised in groves, on roadways, or in city marketplaces.

**Priests**

In ancient times the priests were recognized as a special social class. They were distinguished not only by their priestly robes, but also by their piety, wisdom, and blameless life. They offered prayers and sacrifices in the name of the people, and decided which vows, gifts and offerings would be most acceptable to the gods.

**Sacrifices**

Among the Greeks, there were sacrifices of various kinds. Free-will offerings were given as thanks to the gods and usually consisted of the first-fruits of the field or the finest of the flocks and herds. Propitiatory offerings were given to appease the anger of the gods. Finally, sacrifices were also made in fulfillment of a vow, or at the command of an oracle.

Every sacrifice was accompanied by salt and by a libation, or drink, which usually consisted of a cup of wine. When sacrificing to the gods of death and the underworld, the cup containing the libation was filled with blood.
Oracles

Throughout human history, people have tried to see into the future. The Greeks sought prophetic knowledge at the mouths of oracles, whose predictions were interpreted to the people by priests, specially appointed for the purpose. The most famous of these institutions was the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, which was known around the world.

Soothsayers (Augurs)

In addition to oracles, the Greeks also believed that certain men, called soothsayers, were gifted with the power of foretelling future events. They did so by studying dreams, the flight of birds, the intestines of sacrificed animals, and even the direction of the flames and smoke from the altar.

Augurs

The Roman soothsayers were called augurs and played an important part in the history of the Romans. No enterprise was ever undertaken without first consulting them to find out if it would succeed.

Festivals

Festivals were instituted as seasons of rest, rejoicing, and thanksgiving, and as anniversaries to remember events of national importance. The most ancient festivals were those held after the harvest and were celebrated with rejoicings and merry-makings, which lasted many days. Festivals held in honor of special gods often featured processions, games, chariot races and dramatic performances representing episodes in the lives of the gods and heroes.

**GREEK FESTIVALS:**

Eleusinian Mysteries

One of the most ancient and important festivals observed by the Greeks was the Eleusinian Mysteries, which was celebrated in honor of Demeter and Persephone. They were divided into the Greater and Lesser Mysteries, and, according to the general account, were held every five years. The Greater, which was celebrated in honor of Demeter, the goddess of the harvest, was held in autumn. The Lesser, dedicated to Demeter’s daughter Persephone, was held in spring.

Dionysia

A joyous spring festival was held in honor of Dionysus, the god of fertility and wine, in the month of March, and lasted several days.
This festival was celebrated with particular splendor at Athens, and strangers flocked from all parts of the world to take part in the ceremonies. The city was gaily decorated, houses were covered in garland with ivy leaves, crowds moved through the streets and wine was freely poured. Public shows, games and sports took place, and the entire city was full of celebration.

**Panathenaea**

The Panathenæa was a famous festival celebrated in Athens in honor of Athena, the guardian of the state. At the festival, a special garment embroidered with gold, called the Peplus, was hung over the mast of a ship that stood outside the city. The ship was driven forward by means of invisible machinery. The whole population of Athens, bearing olive branches in their hands, took part in the procession. Amid music and rejoicings, this imposing pageant made its way to the temple of Athena, where the Peplus was deposited on the statue of the goddess.

**Daphnephoria**

The Daphnephoria was celebrated at Thebes in honor of Apollo, the god of the sun, every nine years.

The distinguishing feature of this festival was a procession to the temple of Apollo, in which a young priest carried a representation of the sun, moon, stars and days of the year. He was followed by beautiful maidens bearing laurel branches, who sang hymns in honor of the god.

**ROMAN FESTIVALS:**

**Saturnalia**

The Saturnalia, a national festival held in December in honor of Saturn, the god of the harvest, was celebrated after the gathering of the harvest.

It was a time of universal rejoicing, rest from labor and merry-making. School children had holidays, friends sent presents to each other and law courts and businesses were closed.

**Cerealia**

This festival was celebrated in honor of Ceres, the goddess of agriculture and fertility. Women, dressed in white garments, wandered about with torches in their hands to represent the search of the goddess for her daughter Proserpina.
Vestalia

The Vestalia was a festival held in honor of Vesta, the goddess of the home, on the 9th of June. It was celebrated exclusively by women, who walked barefoot in procession to the temple of the goddess.

The priestesses of Vesta, called Vestal Virgins, were young girls chosen from the noblest families in Rome. Their chief duty was to watch and feed the ever-burning flame on the altar of Vesta, the extinction of which was regarded as a bad omen.

*From "The Myths and Legends of Ancient Greece and Rome" by E.M. Berens.*
Quiz

1 Read the selection from the article.

*In addition to those built in places of public worship, altars were frequently raised in groves, on roadways, or in city marketplaces.*

Which of the following can be inferred from the selection above?

(A) Ancient Greeks and Romans did not value the altars enough to keep them out of crowded public places.

(B) Ancient Greeks and Romans believed altars were very important, and everyone should have access to them.

(C) Ancient Greeks and Romans used altars as a method of controlling the people by making them accessible only in public places.

(D) Ancient Greeks and Romans kept altars outside as a way of helping improve sanitation after sacrifices were made.

2 Which idea is BEST supported by the text in “Soothsayers (Augurs)”?

(A) The Greeks believed that soothsayers told the future by interpreting various signs believed to be sent from the gods.

(B) The Greeks encouraged soothsayers to use hallucinogenic drugs to help stimulate visions of the future.

(C) The Greeks believed that only soothsayers could interpret the visions oracles shared.

(D) The Greeks believed that Soothsayers were mostly frauds who pretended to see the future.

3 Read the section “Temples.” Why does the author choose to begin the article with these paragraphs?

(A) The temples were the center of Greek and Roman worship, and all of following details help to define religious practices that occurred in the temple.

(B) The temples were the first structures to disappear from Greece and Rome, so the reader needs to understand why these were important.

(C) The temples were the only place people could practice religion, so it was essential for ancient Greeks and Romans to have temples available.

(D) The temples were only used by the rich and powerful, so readers need to understand what temples meant to the ancient Greeks and Romans.
How do the first and final sections of the article relate to one another?

(A) The first section explains how and why the ancient Greeks and Romans worshiped the gods, and the last section explains where they worshiped.

(B) The first section explains where the ancient Greeks and Romans worshiped, and the last section explains how and why they worshiped.

(C) The first section explains how religion began for the ancient Greeks and Romans, and the last section explains how it changed over time.

(D) The first section explains how religion changed over time for the ancient Greeks and Romans, and the last section explains how it impacted modern religions.
Answer Key

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