



HIS 337: Greek Gods, Heroes, & Worship

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Introduction



This course examines ancient Greek religion and considers its role in the contexts of Greek culture and thought. Literary and material sources, such as epic, drama, architecture, sculpture, and vase painting will be examined in order to establish the nature and function of religion in Greek society. Topics include the gods/goddesses, heroes, cult, magic, curses, initiation rites, athletic competition, local mythic traditions, religious festivals, oracles, and healing sanctuaries.

The Pressbooks textbook is open access and is organized by chapters that correspond to the module topics on the Blackboard course page (so, Module 1 on Blackboard = Chapter 1 in Pressbooks, etc.). Each chapter includes links to the readings and/or other media. Please make sure that you keep up with the chapter assignments so that you are prepared before taking the module tests. The module assignments will include material from the two textbooks (this one and V. Warrior's *Greek Religion*), so it is essential that you complete all of the textbook assignments. Also, make sure to familiarize yourself with the course Blackboard page. There you will find the syllabus, modules, discussion topics, instructions, and other important information. You may read through the Pressbooks textbook at your leisure, however, the module topics in Blackboard will also include links to the assigned Pressbooks readings (see Modules > Module 1, etc.).

Chapter 1: Background to Ancient Greece



Chapter Introduction

Before we begin a detailed examination of ancient Greek religion, it is wise first to consider the general history of ancient Greece and the culture that gave rise to the Greeks' rich polytheistic religion. In order to understand elements of Greek religion, such as animal sacrifice, prophecy, curse tablets, athletic competition, drama, and mythology, it is essential to

be able to put these elements in their appropriate geographical, chronological, and ethnic contexts. For example, while many people have a general knowledge of Greek mythology, not everyone realizes that mythology was a part of Greek religion. Although myth is often considered to be a separate genre that can be studied and enjoyed on its own merits, when removed from its natural context, we miss much of its relationship to Greek culture, history, and religious practice. In essence, myth would not exist in the absence of religious thought, since it centers upon the gods and their relationship with humans and the natural world. The same might be said of Greek tragedy, which was in fact performed as part of religious worship (usually of Dionysos).



The first chapter will provide some context to the ancient Greeks, their history, and their culture. You should keep two important things in mind as you read through the material: 1)

Although the Greeks shared a language and many cultural practices, they were never a politically united people and, as a result, each city-state developed variations of myths that tended to emphasize different gods and heroes. In short, there was no Greek nation in the ancient world; there was not even a concept of nation as we know it today. 2) The vast majority of the preserved material was produced by the Athenians. This means that we tend to have an Atheno-centric view of ancient Greece, while we know comparatively little about the thoughts of other Greeks, such as the Spartans (most of the literary evidence for Spartan society was written by Athenians). For example, many people think that ancient Greece was a democracy; in reality, democracy was invented by the Athenians, while other city-states developed their own political systems that were often quite different (e.g. Sparta had mixture of duarchy and oligarchy). Due to the limited nature of the extant evidence, we must necessarily focus largely upon Athens, however, this course will also strive to include the works of non-Athenian writers (e.g. Homer, Hesiod, Herodotus, and Aristotle), and archaeological and epigraphic evidence from other Greek city-states.



Tasks: Complete the readings, below, then go to the Blackboard course page and take the Module Test.

NB: This chapter includes the links to the readings (see below).

When you click the links, you may have to log in with your CSU library ID and password. PDF copies of all of the readings are available in the One Drive folder (see the left-hand menu of the course Blackboard page for the link to One Drive).

Weblink (for information only): “Ancient Greece” (Ancient History Encyclopedia)

Reading 1: Ancient Greece: A Very Short Introduction (Introduction), P. Cartledge

Reading 2: Ancient Greece: A Very Short Introduction (Ch. 8, Athens), P. Cartledge

Reading 3: Classical Mythology: A Very Short Introduction (Introduction), H. Morales

Chapter 2: The Beginning: Creation and Foundation Myths



Gigantomachy (gods fighting giants), Siphnian Treasury, frieze, c.

525 B.C.

Chapter Introduction

There was no sacred book comparable to the Bible or the Koran in ancient Greek religion; the closest the Greeks came were the works of Homer and Hesiod, both of whom provided written *theogonies* (divine genealogies) that included the attributes and offices of the major deities (cf. Herodotus *Histories* 2.53). There was not even a canon of myths; there were differences between accounts of particular gods and heroes depending upon writer or city-state, and some cults do not appear to have had a particular myth, or story, associated with them, a feature Robert Parker refers to as “cult without myth”.

This chapter will introduce you to the poets Homer and Hesiod, our earliest and most important sources for the origins of the Greek gods and their relationship to humans. Homer and Hesiod both lived during the Archaic period, c. 750-650 BCE, and each produced lengthy poems, which were first sung to audiences (the standard mode of transmission during this period). Chapter 2 of the sourcebook provides excerpts from Hesiod’s *Theogony* and Homer’s *Iliad*. Reading 1, below, provides a general overview of Greek creation myth. Reading 2 provides an overview of Greek religious beliefs and practices (these will be discussed further in subsequent chapters). Reading 3 provides a more detailed analysis of Hesiod’s work, context, and reception by later poets and philosophers.



Tasks: Complete the readings, below, then go to the Blackboard course page. Don't forget that you've also been assigned primary source reading: *Greek Religion, V. Warrior, Chapter 2: pp. 13-33.* Take the Module Test and contribute to Discussion Topic 1. Keep in mind that you have **TWO WEEKS** to complete Module 2.

NB: You will be tested on Readings 1-3. Discussion Topic 1 refers to the assigned reading from the sourcebook.

This chapter includes the links to the readings (see below). When you click the links, you may have to log in with your CSU library ID and password. PDF copies of all of the readings are available in the One Drive folder (see the left-hand menu of the course Blackboard page for the link to One Drive).

Weblink (for information only): Homer (short documentary)

Weblink (for information only): Homer and Hesiod (documentary)

Weblink (for information only): Overview of Hesiod's *Theogony* (Ancient History Encyclopedia)

Reading 1: "The Beginnings of Things" (Chapter 2), in *The Routledge Handbook of Greek Mythology* (2003)

Reading 2: “Why Believe Without Revelation?”, in *On Greek Religion*, R. Parker (2011)

**Reading 3: “The Theogony in the Archaic and Classical Periods”, in *Hesiod’s Theogony*, S. Scully (2016): pp. 1-11
ONLY**

Chapter 3: Polytheism: Greek Gods, Goddesses and Minor Deities



*East pediment of the Parthenon (reconstruction), Athens, mid 5th c.
BCE*

Chapter Introduction

Unlike most major religions practiced today, ancient Greek religion was polytheistic (the worship of multiple gods) and inherently hospitable to new gods, ideas, and interpretations. While specific gods were sometimes invoked, in daily life divinity was often conceived of as a “nameless collective”, if only because people could never be sure which god was responsible for a particular divine intervention. While Greek city-states worshipped the same pantheon of major gods, Greek polytheism was multifaceted and different city-states tended to favor different gods (or more usually goddesses) as their prominent deities. For instance, while the Athenians worshipped all of the Olympian gods, they favored Athena, the namesake of their city. The Parthenon, the greatest temple on the Athenian akropolis, was dedicated to Athena Parthenos, as were several other temples and structures on the akropolis (e.g. Erechtheion and the temple of Athena Nike).

The sourcebook readings (Chs. 9-10) focus upon the ways in which Greek literary sources represented the gods and justice, with a particular emphasis upon Zeus. Reading 1, below, provides a detailed analysis of Greek polytheism, which included not only the major gods of the pantheon, but also lesser gods and even nameless divinities. These were often associated with nature or natural forces. Parker also stresses the different modes of action that deities were associated with, typically expressed by means of epithets (honorary titles), such as Zeus

Basileus (Zeus “the King”) or Athena Hippias (Athena “of the horses”). Reading 2 provides more information about epithets, including the types of epithets and their usages. Reading 3 provides a general discussion of the lesser deities, including nymphs, satyrs, the Muses, and the Seasons.



Tasks: Complete the readings, below, then go to the Blackboard course page. Don't forget that you've also been assigned primary source reading: *Greek Religion, V. Warrior, Chapters 9-10*. Take the Module Test and contribute to Discussion Topic 2. You have TWO WEEKS to complete this Module.

NB: You will be tested on Readings 1-3. Discussion Topic 2 refers to the assigned reading from the sourcebook.

This chapter includes the links to the readings (see below). When you click the links, you may have to log in with your CSU library ID and password. PDF copies of all of the readings are available in the One Drive folder (see the left-hand menu of the course Blackboard page for the link to One Drive).

Weblink: Polytheism (Britannica)

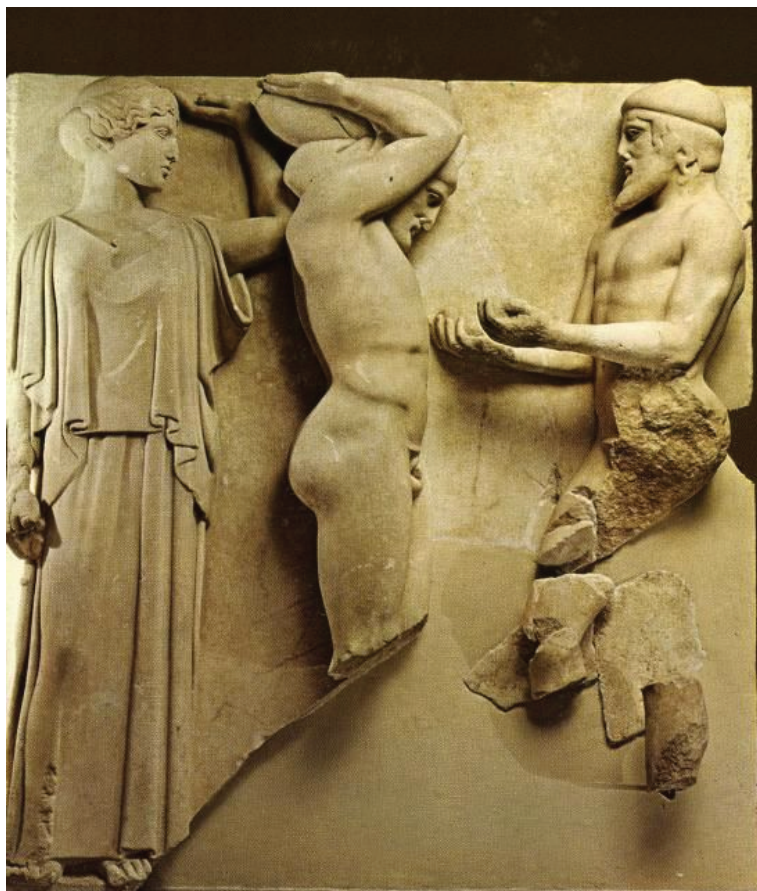
Documentary: Zeus, King of the Gods

Reading 1: “Analyzing Greek Gods”, in *On Greek Religion*, R. Parker (2011)

Reading 2: “Names and Epithets”, in *Greek Gods Abroad*, R. Parker (2017)

Reading 3: “Lesser Deities and Nature-Spirits” (Chapter 6), in *The Routledge Handbook of Greek Mythology* (2004)

Chapter 4: Heroes and Hero Cult



Metope depicting Athena, Herakles, and Atlas, Temple of Zeus, Olympia, 470-456 BCE

Chapter Introduction

When considering Greek heroes it is important to recognize that hero worship was a part of Greek religion; stories of heroes were not just for entertainment. Not only did the Greeks have a rich tradition of myths involving great heroes and heroines, such as Herakles, Achilles, and Helen, the Greeks also worshipped heroes in some of the same ways that they worshipped gods (though, as we shall see, there were also important differences between god and hero worship). The Greek countryside was littered with *heroa* (hero shrines), some for recipients who are

well-known to us today, such as Odysseus and Agamemnon, and others for heroes who have left little trace in the extant sources. For instance, some of Athens' eponymous tribal heroes, such as Oineus and Pandion, are largely unknown aside from their names. Some inscriptions simply refer to anonymous local heroes as "Young Man" or "Gate Keeper".

It is also important to stress that the Greek conception of "hero" (*hērōs* in Greek) was in many ways very different from the modern understanding of the word. Most notably, Greek heroes were not necessarily good people. Goodness, or morality as we might conceive of it, was not expected of heroes (or gods for that matter). Greek heroes committed murder, assault, and other types of physical violence and often left fatherless children in their wake. What was important was not so much that heroes behaved justly but rather that they were powerful and strong and achieved great things. Indeed heroes, much like gods, were terrifying in their strength and power and could easily overcome regular mortals and even monsters. That said, heroes were seen as important precursors to our age and were often worshipped in thanks for the various kinds of assistance they provided. They sometimes did things that helped regular mortals (whether purposefully or inadvertently), such as rid lands of terrifying beasts, found cities, and even civilizations. Heroes were also sometimes worshipped simply out of fear of what they might do if ignored. Above all, heroes expected to be remembered and honored and woe betide anyone who neglected to pay them their due.

The readings in this chapter focus upon the characteristics of

heroes and their importance to Greek religion. In particular, the readings stress the differences and similarities between heroes and gods and their worship. The readings from the sourcebook provide epigraphic and literary examples of primary sources for heroes and depict both panhellenic and local heroes.



Tasks: Complete the readings, below, then go to the Blackboard course page. Don't forget that you've also been assigned primary source reading: *Greek Religion*, V. Warrior, Chapters 8.16-20 (Olympic "heroes"), 10.17-21 (Heracles), and 14.8-11 (Theseus & Orestes). Take the Module Test and contribute to Discussion Topic 3. You have **TWO WEEKS** to complete this Module.

NB: You will be tested on Readings 1-4. Discussion Topic 3 refers to the assigned reading from the sourcebook.

This chapter includes the links to the readings (see below). When you click the links, you may have to log in with your CSU library ID and password. PDF copies of all of the readings are available in the One Drive folder (see the left-hand menu of the course Blackboard page for the link to One Drive).

Documentary: Theseus

Reading 1: "The Power and Nature of Heroes", (Chapter 4) in *On Greek Religion*, R. Parker (2011)

Reading 2: “Annexe: Heroes and Heroines”, in *Polytheism and Society at Athens*, R. Parker (2006)

Reading 3: “Greek Gods, Heroes, and Polytheism”, in *Ancient Greek Religion*, J. Mikalson (2009): focus on “Heroes and Heroines” section pp. 87-107

Reading 4: “The Dead, Heroes, and Cthonic Gods”, (Chapter 4.4-Heroes: **ONLY pp. 203-215 will be tested) in *Greek Religion*, W. Burkert and J. Raffan (1991)**

Chapter 5: Celebrating the Gods: Animal Sacrifice and Festivals



*Sacrificing a boar, Attic red-figure kylix (tondo), c. 510 BCE
(with “kalos” inscription: Epidromos kalos, “Handsome
Epidromos”)*

Chapter Introduction

This chapter examines two related activities that were integral to Greek religion: sacrifice and festivals. The Greeks believed that gods and heroes demanded sacrifice as part of their worship. The sacrifices often, but not always, took the form of live animals, typically goats, pigs, or other common farm animals. The animals would be slaughtered on an altar and then the carcasses

would be prepared and roasted on a spit or boiled in a large pot over a fire. Of course, gods and deceased heroes did not actually partake in the meal, but the Greeks believed that they enjoyed the smell of the roasting meat (who doesn't enjoy the smell of a good barbecue?).

While sacrifice was considered important to the worship and appeasement of gods and heroes, the ritual, including the shared meal, was also important for community cohesion. Most Greeks were relatively poor and it is not unlikely that one of the only times the average person had the opportunity to eat meat was at an animal sacrifice. While these were solemn events, the Greek people no doubt looked forward to these rituals as part of their annual calendar.

The readings in this chapter provide detailed descriptions and analyses of sacrifice and its importance to Greek religious practice. This chapter also includes information about some local and panhellenic festivals, such as the Greater Panathenaia, the Olympics, the Dionysia, and the Mysteries. These festivals were not isolated events, but fit into the broader fabric of Greek society with their focus upon activities such as athletic and dramatic competition (the Olympics and Greek drama actually arose out of religious ritual).



Tasks: Complete the readings, below, then go to the Blackboard course page. Don't forget that you've also been

assigned primary source reading: *Greek Religion*, V. Warrior, Chapter 4. Take the Module Test and contribute to Discussion Topic 4. You have TWO WEEKS to complete this Module.

NB: You will be tested on Readings 1-3 (Reading 4 is recommended but optional). Discussion Topic 4 refers to the assigned reading from the sourcebook.

This chapter includes the links to the readings (see below). When you click the links, you may have to log in with your CSU library ID and password. PDF copies of all of the readings are available in the One Drive folder (see the left-hand menu of the course Blackboard page for the link to One Drive).

Documentary: The Real Olympics (PBS): [segments 1-22](#)

Reading 1: “Killing, Dining, Communicating”, (Chapter 5; [pp. 124-144 only](#)) in *On Greek Religion*, R. Parker (2011)

Reading 2: “Ritual and Sanctuary”, (Chapter 2, [pp. 55 \(from 1.1\)-66 only](#)) in *Greek Religion*, W. Burkert and J. Raffan (1991)

Reading 3: “Five Major Greek Cults”, (Chapter 4) in *Ancient Greek Religion*, J. Mikalson (2009)

- **** optional **** Reading 4: “Festivals and their Celebrants”, (Chapter 2) in *Polytheism and Society at Athens*, R. Parker (2006) **** optional ****

Chapter 6: Folk Religion and Magic



*Attic red-figure kalyx-krater, c. 440 BCE, Odysseus pursuing the
enchantress Circe*

Chapter Introduction

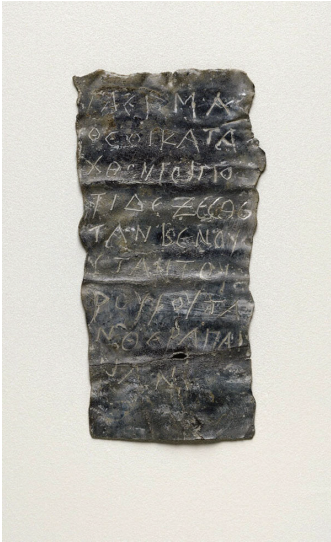
This chapter examines an aspect of Greek religion that is often overlooked: magic. As the assigned readings demonstrate, it is remarkably challenging to provide a suitable definition for

the Greek concept of “magic”, but one thing is



clear: the ancient use of “magic” (the word is based upon the Persian *magu*) had many forms and purposes and has produced an array of fascinating evidence, from binding spells scratched into lead curse tablets, to wax or terracotta “voodoo” dolls pierced with nails, to literary references from poets, philosophers and orators. Far from being confined to the fringes of society, the many references to magic indicate that it pervaded Greek life. While traditional civic religion bound communities together in common worship, magic was much more personalized, revealing a great deal about the people who comprised Greek society, their desires, motivations, their suspicions and insecurities. The evidence related to the use of magic humanizes and individualizes everyday Greeks in a way that most source material does not, as it gives voice not just to the elite members of society, but

to a much larger and more diverse group of individuals who populated the Greek city-states and countryside.



The readings in this chapter provide detailed discussions of magic, which is sometimes referred to variously as “unlicensed religion” or “personal religion”. It is stressed that magic could be either beneficial (e.g. healing) or detrimental (e.g. causing mental or physical harm). While literary sources tend to view the use of magic in a negative light, with practitioners who received pay for their work sometimes described as false prophets or “quacks”, there is no evidence of any laws prohibiting its use (although charges for things such as “impiety”, *asebeia*, might be levied). On the contrary, the sheer amount of evidence attests to the importance of magic in the sphere of Greek religion.



Tasks: Complete the readings, below, then go to the Blackboard course page. Don't forget that you've also been assigned primary source reading: *Greek Religion*, V. Warrior, Chapter 13. Take the Module Test and contribute to Discussion Topic 5. You have TWO WEEKS to complete this Module.

NB: The Module Test will involve questions based upon Readings 1-4. Discussion Topic 5 refers to the assigned reading from the sourcebook *and* Reading 5.

This chapter includes the links to the readings (see below). When you click the links, you may have to log in with your CSU library ID and password. PDF copies of all of the readings are available in the One Drive folder (see the left-hand menu of the course Blackboard page for the link to One Drive).

Reading 1: “Those who make a profession out of rites: unlicensed religion and magic”, (Chapter 6) in *Polytheism and Society at Athens*, R. Parker (2007)

Reading 2: “Binding and Bewitchment”, in R. Parker, *On Greek Religion* (2011), pp. 59-62

Reading 3: “Personal Religion: a productive category for the study of ancient Greek religion?”, J. Kindt, *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 135 (2015)

Reading 4: “Magic, Curses, and Healing”, (Chapter 26), A. D. Gregory, in *A Companion to Science, Technology, and Medicine in Ancient Greece and Rome* (2016)

**** Reading 5: “Patterns of Persecution: ‘Witchcraft’ Trials in Classical Athens”, E. Eidinow, *Past & Present* 28 (2010)**

**** For Discussion Topic 5 only (not included on the Module Test)**

Chapter 7: Oracles and Prophecy



*King Aegeus of Athens consulting the Delphic Pythia, Attic
red-figure kylix (tondo), c. 440 BCE*

Chapter Introduction

In this chapter you will learn about divination, which was another important aspect of Greek religion. Divination could take many forms but the goals were essentially the same: to determine the will of the gods and to ascertain the future. This could be done in various ways, including “reading” signs from the gods, such as the flights of birds, examining the entrails of sacrificed animals, or through oracular consultation. This chapter focuses primarily upon oracles and, in particular, the Delphic Oracle.

While there were many oracles throughout the Greek world, Apollo’s oracle at Delphi was by far the most famous. Delphi was located in central mainland Greece, which the Greeks also, not surprisingly, viewed as the center of the earth, hence the *omphalos*, or “navel stone” that was associated with the site. As the story goes, it was here that Apollo, god of prophecy, chose to found his greatest sanctuary, which included not only the oracle, but also a theater and spaces for the quadrennial athletic games that rivaled the Olympics (Apollo’s games were called the Pythian Games). Unlike most other Greek oracles, the Delphic oracle appears to have been used mostly for civic consultation, as opposed to private, and was open both to *hellenes* (Greeks) and to *xenoi* (non-Greeks). Indeed, the oracle

continued to be used by the Romans until the early fourth century.



The material, below, includes a documentary, which provides an overview of the Delphic oracle and its connection with Greek history, and readings that examine the evidence for oracles, their uses, and meanings. You will see that not only is it challenging to make sense of the oracles themselves, it is equally challenging to determine how the Greeks viewed the oracles and those who delivered them (both the *Pythiai* and the interpreters, namely the *manteis* and the *chresmologoi*). As often with the ancient Greeks, we are left with many more questions than answers, which is fitting for a people who understood that there are few definitive answers in this world.



Tasks: Complete the assignments, below, then go to the Blackboard course page. Don't forget that you've also been assigned primary source reading: *Greek Religion*, V. Warrior, Chapter 5. Take the Module Test and contribute to Discussion Topic 6. You have TWO WEEKS to complete this Module.

NB: The Module Test will involve questions from the documentary on Delphi (below) *and* Readings 1-3. Discussion Topic 6 refers to the assigned reading from the sourcebook (Chapter 5).

This chapter includes the links to the assigned material (see below). When you click the links, you may have to log in with your CSU library ID and password. PDF copies of all of the readings are available in the One Drive folder (see the left-hand menu of the course Blackboard page for the link to One Drive).

Documentary: Delphi: Why it Matters (BBC: 57 minutes)*

Reading 1: "Oracles", I. Rutherford in *State Pilgrims and Sacred Observers in Ancient Greece* (2013)

Reading 2: "Oracles for Sale", H. Bowden in *Herodotus and His World* (2003)

Reading 3: "Delphic Oracles as Oral Performances", L. Maurizio, *Classical Antiquity* 16.2 (1997)

* If you have issues with the documentary link, [click here](#) for Films on Demand and use the search bar

Chapter 8: Iamata and Healing Cult



*Asclepius with his daughter Hygieia (behind) and a female patient,
votive relief, Piraeus, c. 350 BC*

Chapter Introduction

The final section of this course examines healing cult, the *iamata* inscriptions from Asclepius' sanctuary at Epidaurus, and anatomical votives used in some healing sanctuaries. There were several divinities associated with preventative and curative medicine, such as Athena Hygeia and Zeus Hypsistos, but the primary gods were Apollo and, especially, his son Asclepius, who began as a hero but came to be worshipped as a god. The majority of healing sanctuaries were dedicated to Asclepius and named after him, the Asclepieia. The greatest of all of these was at Epidaurus, located on the northeastern side of the Peloponnese in mainland Greece.





As this chapter's readings describe, the major parts of the healing process were incubation (sleeping) and epiphany (when the god appears to the patient, typically in a dream or waking vision). Various literary and epigraphic sources describe this process, such as Aristophanes' play *Wealth* and the famous *iamata* ("miraculous healings") inscriptions from Epidaurus. We also see this process reflected in stone relief sculptures, such as those found at the Asklepieion on the southern slope of the Athenian acropolis.

The sources, below, include a short documentary on Asclepius and a lecture about the site of Epidaurus and the history of Greek healing cult. The readings provide more detail about healing epiphanies, the related inscriptions, and the various types of anatomical votives found at Asklepieia in Corinth and Attica. While these anatomical models together express the diseased body as dismantled, they also reflect the hope that by healing a part, the person will once again become whole.



Tasks: Complete the assignments, below, then go to the Blackboard course page. Don't forget that you've also been assigned primary source reading: *Greek Religion*, V. Warrior, Chapter 6 pp. 107-112 (Incubation and Healing) and Chapter 14 pp. 258-260 (14.23-14.27). Take the Module Test and contribute to Discussion Topic 7. You have **TWO WEEKS** to complete this Module.

NB: The Module Test will involve questions from Readings 1-3. Discussion Topic 7 refers to the assigned reading from the sourcebook.

This chapter includes the links to the assigned material (see below). When you click the links, you may have to log in with your CSU library ID and password. PDF copies of all of the

readings are available in the One Drive folder (see the left-hand menu of the course Blackboard page for the link to One Drive).

***Documentary: Asclepius: the Greek god of medicine (YouTube, 9:50 min.)**

***Lecture: Epidaurus Revisited: The History of Health (Prof V. Lambrinoudakis; YouTube; 29:06 min.)**

** The documentary and lecture are included for background information. Although you will not be tested on them, you should watch them first so that you are better prepared to understand the reading material.*

Reading 1: “Healing Epiphanies”, G. Petridou, *Divine Epiphany in Greek Literature and Culture* (2016)

Reading 2: “Dream Healing in Asclepieia in the Ancient Mediterranean”, L. Cilliers and F. P. Retief in *Dreams, Healing, and Medicine in Greece*, ed. S.M. Oberhelman (2013)

Reading 3: “Fragmentation as Metaphor: Anatomical Votives in Classical Greece, 5-4th centuries BC”, J. Hughes, *Votive Body Parts in Greek and Roman Religion* (2017)