

## Exploring ancient Greek religion



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# Introduction

The ancient Greeks did not have a term equivalent to the English word 'religion'. However, their world was populated by numerous figures they both recognised and worshipped as divinities. Among these figures was [Amphiaraos](#) (pronounced am-fi-ah-RAY-os), an ancient Greek hero who was later worshipped as a god and popularly associated with healing through the medium of dreams. But there was no sacred book (like those which exist in many religions today) which told the ancient Greeks what to believe about Amphiaraos or how to communicate with him. How, then, did people and communities know how to worship Amphiaraos?

In this free course, you will explore this question by looking at textual and visual evidence relating to Amphiaraos' sanctuary, which was located at a town called [Oropos](#), in northeast [Attica](#). You will engage with this material to learn about some of the different ways the ancient Greeks interacted with Amphiaraos, both individually and as part of their community.

## Study note: glossary and pronunciation guide

As you study this course you may come across some key words or terms with which you are unfamiliar. We have therefore produced a pronunciation guide and glossary to help you. Clicking on terms which feature in **bold text** will take you to the pronunciation guide, where you can listen to audio recordings of the words featured. Clicking on terms which feature in **bold text and are underlined** will take you to the glossary where you will find definitions of those terms. Alternatively, hovering the cursor over the glossary entries within the text will show you the definition.

Before you get started we would really appreciate a few minutes of your time to tell us about yourself and your expectations for this course, in our optional [start-of-course survey](#). Participation will be completely confidential and we will not pass on your details to others.

## Learning outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- develop awareness of the rich and complex relationship between politics and religion in the ancient Greek world
- understand how to uncover personal experiences in the study of ancient religions
- feel confident in working with both ancient texts and visual source material to answer questions about ancient Greek religion
- use Amphiaraos' sanctuary as a case-study for understanding the broader political and personal aspects of ancient Greek religion.

# 1 Religion in the ancient Greek world

The sanctuary of Amphiaraos, which lay about 55 kilometres (35 miles) northeast of the centre of ancient Athens, was just one of an enormous number of shrines and temples built by Greek-speaking communities across the ancient Mediterranean. Such buildings formed a focus for religious activities in the ancient world and provided ways for the inhabitants of ancient Greece to connect with their deities, that is to say the gods and heroes that they worshipped.



**Figure 1** The Parthenon on the Acropolis, in Athens, Greece.

But what does 'religion' in the world of ancient Greece signify, and who were the gods that they worshipped? To kick off your studies on this course, you'll begin with two introductory activities. First, you'll think about what religion means to you, and then you'll consider what, if anything, you may already know about Greek deities. You don't need any prior knowledge, though, so don't worry if you don't yet know anything about ancient Greece, or Greek religion!

## Activity 1

 Allow around 5 minutes for this activity

Take a few minutes to think about what the word 'religion' means to you. Then jot down four or five key words or phrases which spring to mind.

*Provide your answer...*

## Discussion

There is no right or wrong answer to this activity. Your four or five words/phrases will depend a lot on your own personal experiences and interests. You may have thought about a particular faith with which you are familiar, for example, or a set of rituals, places and objects associated with certain religious activities. You may have even thought about religion in terms of a particular recipient of worship or in relation to the types of peoples who commit their lives to serving a religious order.

## Study note: a note on dates

You will notice that this course uses the abbreviations 'BCE' and 'CE' when dating events, texts and objects. These abbreviations stand for 'Before the Common Era' and 'Common Era'. You may be familiar with an alternative method of referring to dates as 'BC' ('Before Christ') and 'AD' (*Anno Domini*, Latin for 'in the year of our Lord'), and you may find that the authors of other things you read on the topics

discussed here use instead BC and AD instead of BCE and CE. Remember that BCE years count backwards – therefore the eighth century BCE is earlier than the seventh century BCE.

## 1.1 Sacred places and the Greek gods

Now that you've had time to consider what the term 'religion' means to you today, you may be wondering what it meant to the ancient Greeks. This question is a little tricky to answer because, as noted earlier, the ancient Greeks didn't have a word for 'religion'. However, that doesn't mean that they completely lacked thoughts or actions which fall under this category.

Like many religions today, the ancient Greeks had sacred places, objects, people and gods associated with religious beliefs and behaviour. For example, people often visited temples (such as that of the goddess **Aphaia** on the island of **Aegina**, depicted in Figure 2) to pray and make offerings to their divinities, and such visits would have consisted of a series of expected actions and performances deemed appropriate for the occasion.

However, unlike many religions today, there was no central book or text guiding the ancient Greeks how to go about their daily worship. This absence means that there is no direct ancient source which outlines what the ancient Greeks believed in. As you will learn in this course, though, there are other pieces of ancient evidence which shine light on this complex matter.



**Figure 2** Temple of the goddess Aphaia at [Aegina](#), c.500 BCE.

## Activity 2

 Allow around 5 minutes for this activity

What, if anything, do you know about ancient Greek gods? If the answer is 'nothing at all', don't worry! Otherwise, make a note of four or five key words or phrases.

Provide your answer...

### Discussion

Again, there is no right or wrong answer here. Depending on what knowledge you have already about ancient Greek gods, you may have noted down the names of some major divinities, such as [Zeus](#), [Poseidon](#) and [Athena](#) – or, indeed, simply observed that the ancient Greeks had lots of gods and goddesses. You may even have seen some images of, or perhaps visited, a particular Greek temple or sanctuary, or have some memory of seeing a particular divinity in a modern context (such as a film, book, video game or part of a museum exhibit).

Something which you might find interesting about the nature of gods and goddesses in the ancient Greek world is that, although they were numerous, each divine figure commonly had their own special qualities (in other words, they could be thought of as 'the god/goddess of X'). Quite often, though, the special quality that a **deity** possessed overlapped with those of other gods or goddesses. For example, if a particular divine figure was associated with bringing about a good harvest, that did not necessarily mean that only that divine figure had such a capability. Indeed, the ancient Greeks had a large number of divinities to whom they could turn in times of need.

## 1.2 The cult of Amphiaraos

In this course, you will be thinking in depth about the figure of Amphiaraos, whose **cult** site (that is, the main location where he was worshipped) at Oropos was popularly associated with healing by the late fifth century BCE (see Map 1). However, Amphiaraos was not the only divinity associated with this quality: there were more 'popular' figures who shared this same attribute. The most famous god associated with healing was arguably [Asklepios](#), who had a major cult site at [Epidavros](#) in the [Peloponnese](#), among other places (see Map 1).



Map 1 Map depicting key religious sanctuaries of the Greek Aegean.

### Study note: names of Greek places and people

Many Greek names have more than one English spelling. For instance, you will find Asclepius as well as Asklepios, Aphaea as well as [Aphaia](#) and Herodotus as well as Herodotos. The reason is that there are different conventions for transliterating words from Greek into the English alphabet.

In this course, 'Hellenised' spellings are generally used, for example, 'k' rather than 'c', 'ai' rather than 'ae', and 'os' rather than 'us' at the end of names: Asklepios, Aphaia, Herodotos. These 'Hellenised' spellings closely reflect the way these names were spelt in ancient Greek. Elsewhere, you will often find modern authors and translators using 'Latinised' spellings, however: 'c' rather than 'k', 'ae' rather than 'ai', and so on (Asclepius, Aphaea, Herodotus).

At Asklepios' sanctuary at Epidauros, temple officials aimed to promote the healing capabilities of the god to visitors by setting up stone **inscriptions** which recorded the experiences of individuals and the cures they received. These cures contain several fantastical elements and recount miraculous tales of Asklepios' healing of both humans and even objects. Although we do not have comparable tales from the [Amphiareion](#) which describe Amphiaraos' medical expertise, we do have text-bearing dedications (that is, religious objects often erected within religious settings to honour a divinity – such as the one depicted in Figure 3) which clearly relate to acts of healing. Such evidence, which

you'll have the opportunity to explore later in this course, can help us to learn more about the activities of individuals who visited the god's sanctuary to seek a cure.

