CLAS 3700: Uncovering Greek Religion: Cults, Festivals, and Sanctuaries in the Ancient World

Instructor: Professor Jason Harris (Classical and Mediterranean Studies)

Location: Athens, Greece

Dates: May 6-May 29, 2020

This course introduces students to the history, archaeology, art, and architecture of ancient Greece from the Bronze Age to the end of the Roman Empire by studying these subjects through the lens of ancient Greek religion. At its very heart, this course will analyze the development and diversity of the Greek religious experience: its gods, its rituals, its temples. Nevertheless, we also will evaluate the significance of Greek religion in other aspects of ancient Greek society, including social and political themes, especially as no division between church and state existed. Thus, how did Greek religious practices influence traditional divisions within Greek society, and how did they transcend or cross these boundaries? How did rituals and cults provide stability and direction to the development of the Greek city-state?

We also will study other areas of Greek culture deeply affected by religion, including the economy, the military and athletics. We will study how Greek religion both changed and held on to its past links, from the Mycenaean period to the Classical Age to the early years of Christianity. This continuity of religion for millennia is a fascinating subject of study. Furthermore, while the worship of the Greek pantheon was a defining factor for ‘Greek-ness’ in antiquity, the Greeks often incorporated gods from other ethnic groups into their worship. Did this inclusivity of other cultures within the Greek religious experience translate into other areas of Greek life?

Through on-site visits, we will begin our study of sanctuaries and religion through an introduction to ancient Greek architecture, i.e. the various forms and structure of temples and sanctuaries. We also will study intensively on-site and in museums other types of archaeological material, including pottery and sculpture, to analyze the significance of the visual in Greek ritual and culture. We also will incorporate other types of source materials, including literature, epigraphy, and numismatics, to best understand religious experiences. Most importantly, we will study other processes to understand how we actively reconstruct the past through conscious and unconscious biases, including excavation and preservation. We will be visiting various types of museums throughout Greece, including newer museums (e.g. Acropolis Museum, Archaeological Museum of Thebes), to study how museums also are a tool in presenting the past.

FEES: Cost is approx. $8,929.00