

The Study of Ancient Religions, Fall 2017 (15 ECTS-points)

Course content

This course, which begins the program, introduces the students to methods and theories in the study of ancient religion and to the development of Religion in the Roman Empire in its relation to society in the period during which Judaism, Christianity and Islam emerged. This is important because the Graeco-Roman culture of this period is in itself a constitutive element of European culture, society, identity and history. It is also essential since the knowledge and skills thus acquired by the student will constitute the foundations for subsequent discussions in other modules of the program.

Christianity arose in the context of a society where religion played an important part. Religion was both a concern of the state, a matter of private piety and the focal point for more independent associations and institutions. Being polytheistic, the ancient religious world was fundamentally pluralistic, though there also existed limits to what was acceptable in religion. Christianity was shaped by this religious world through a subtle dialectic whereby it both took over and continued essential aspects of this world and defined itself in contrast to 'paganism'. Judaism as well went through a decisive formative phase in the context of the Roman Empire. Islam took shape in a self-conscious relationship to the type of religion that had been developed by Jews and Christians in the ancient world.

To understand the emergence of the three monotheistic religions, it is therefore necessary to know something about the soil from which they grew – the religion and society of the ancient Mediterranean world under the Roman Empire.

The course covers the following topics concerning Roman religion:

- Religious institutions in the Mediterranean region under the Roman Empire
- The political and social uses of religion in antiquity
- Religious associations and their relationship to the state
- Freedom, compulsion and the extent of religious tolerance in antiquity
- Religious conflict in antiquity
- The policies of the Roman state towards Jews and Christians

The course will also give an introduction to different methodological and theoretical approaches to the study of ancient religions. The following topics will be emphasized:

- Subjectivity and objectivity in the study of religion
 - How to approach ancient textual and archaeological sources

- Comparing religions
- Polytheism and monotheism as theoretical concepts
- Myth and history
- Sacred space
- The meaning and function of sacrifice

Time period

The compact seminar is in Rome September 17th (arrival) September 29th (departure), 2017; a more detailed programme will follow

Exam: Paper to be submitted by October 16, 2015 (the question for the exam will be announced on October 9).

Responsible teachers and institution

Aarhus University

Anders-Christian Jacobsen

Birte Poulsen

Learning outcome

On completion of the course the student will have attained the following:

Knowledge:

Good familiarity with the nature, variety and functions of religion during the period of the Roman Empire.

A basic knowledge of theories that can illuminate our understanding of ancient religions.

Skills:

The ability to appreciate the transformation of religion caused by the monotheistic religions, as well as to recognise important structures and ideas that were taken over by these religions. The ability to do an in-depth study of a specific topic in the area covered by the course and to present this study in a written

paper.

The ability to interpret ancient religions analytically, and to compare salient features with other religions.

General qualifications:

The ability to work independently in the area of ancient religion. The ability to communicate one's knowledge in written and oral form. The ability to think about culture and religion using general categories.

Prerequisites

The same as for admission to the program as such.

Course activities

This introductory module of the program will be taught at Rome, at the Norwegian Institute and at various archeological sites.

The teaching will combine:

- Compact seminar, including field-excursions.
- Tutorials.

Examination form

This module is examined through a fixed written exam in which the student is given seven days to write a paper of between eight and ten pages (19200-24000 characters including spaces and including references, but excluding bibliography) on a subject, question or material provided by the responsible teacher.

Required reading

Approximately 2000 pages of secondary scholarly literature and primary texts from antiquity read in translation; to be announced