

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 27 (23:59), 2017 (the question for the exam will be announced on October 20).

Responsible teachers and institution

Aarhus University

Anders-Christian Jacobsen

Birte Poulsen

Objectives, learning outcomes

The student will acquire:

- Knowledge of theories related to the understanding of ancient religion.
- Knowledge of the nature, variety and functions of religion during the period of the Roman Empire.
- The skills to compare salient features in different religions; to understand issues related to continuity and change in religious life as the Graeco-Roman world (including Europe and the Near East) becomes dominated by monotheistic religions; and to adopt a critical stance towards modern theories applied by scholarship to study such developments.
- The skills to reflect on the consequences of methodological and theoretical choices as well as on the consequences of the choices made by other scholars in relevant fields.
- The skills to communicate acquired knowledge of the subject matter, as well as theoretical and methodological insights, in writing.
- The skills to identify, understand, and apply relevant scholarly methods, and to be able to describe and discuss these methods theoretically.

Teaching

The teaching will combine:

- Compact seminar, including field trips (at the Danish Institute and at various archaeological sites).
- Tutorials.
- E-learning.

Syllabus

Approximately 2000 pages of secondary scholarly literature and primary texts from antiquity read in translation.

Examination

Examination in this module is a fixed written test, in which the student is given seven days to write a paper of between ten and twelve pages (24000-28800) characters including spaces and including references, but excluding bibliography) on a subject, question or material provided by the teacher.

Prerequisites

The same as for admission to the program as such.