

# Religion and the City: Temples

## Learning Objectives:

- To understand the layout of temples and their use by worshippers
- To understand the roles and responsibilities of priests and the purposes of sacrifice



## Introduction

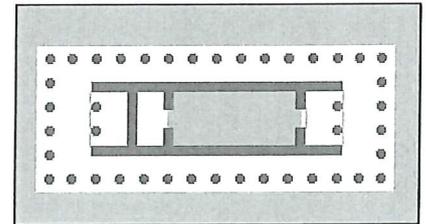
Temples were an important part of ancient religion in both Greece and Rome. Any city could have multiple temples, as each would in most cases be dedicated to a different god, though one particular god would often be more important to a specific city. Temples were meant to look imposing and beautiful, and were often placed in prominent parts of the city, thus demonstrating the importance of religion to this world. Extravagant scenes would often be portrayed on their facades, usually illustrating significant stories from mythology, perhaps of particular relevance to the city in question.



*An example of a Roman temple: the Maison Carrée in Nîmes, France.*

## Greek and Roman Temples

Greek and Roman temples shared a lot of things in common, especially design. They both had columns around the edges of the temple, an encased interior, a pediment, and were adorned with a variety of sculptures. The diagram on the right shows a typical temple that could be either Greek or Roman. The greyed-out part in the middle is the *naos* in Greek (literally 'temple') or the *cella* in Latin (literally 'small chamber'). This refers to the temple's inner chamber. Here is where the cult statue was housed, often a god, but for the Romans this could also be an emperor as several were worshipped as gods after their death. It would be prominently displayed in the centre of the temple, usually seated or standing. There would be an altar in front of the statue where offerings to the god could be left. Worshippers would leave a variety of different offerings, ranging from precious stones, to weapons and food and drink. The primary purpose of the temple was as a home for a god. It needed to make the god feel welcomed and comfortable, given their role as a protector of the city. To this end, there would be a dedicated staff, a priest and attendants, who would see to it that the god received everything that was required.

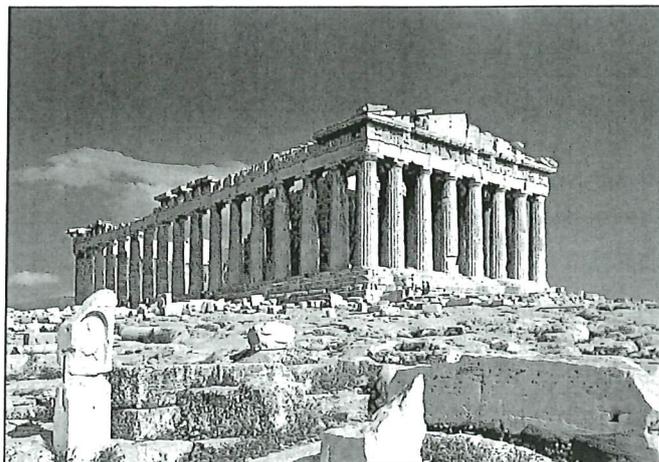


*Temple layout*

## Greece

### The Parthenon

The Parthenon was a large and imposing temple on the Acropolis of Athens, Greece. The Acropolis is the fortified rocky outcrop that rises above the city of Athens. This made the Parthenon even more imposing as it could be seen from afar. It was built during the height of Athenian power, when it commanded influence over a swathe of territory in the Aegean Sea, with many cities under its control. This particular temple was constructed on a greater scale than usual, clearly intended as a show of Athenian might and glory. It was dedicated to

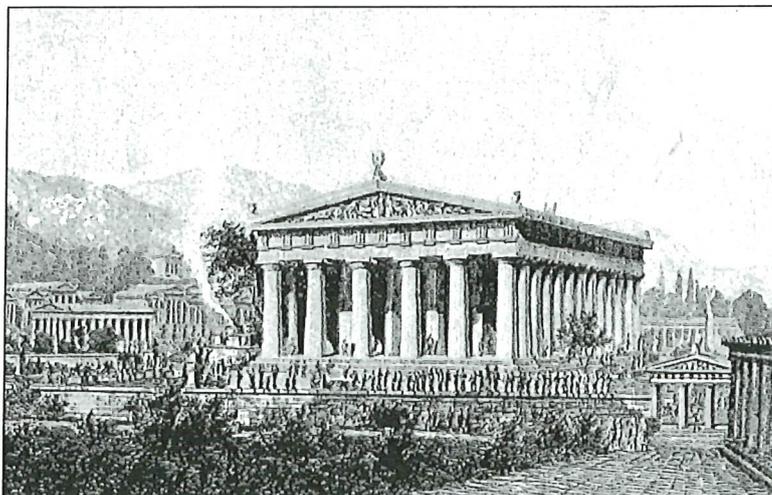


*The Parthenon*

Athena, the patron goddess of the city. The size also meant that there was space for more statues on its pediments, almost twice the number of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia. In addition, while most temples only had some of their metopes carved, the Parthenon had all 92 of its metopes carved. In contrast, there were only 12 carved metopes at Olympia. Making the Parthenon grander than the temple at Olympia could well have been intentional, as the Athenians wanted their new-found power to be clearly known, and how better to achieve this than to build a temple greater than that at Olympia, which housed a statue that was one of the seven wonders of the world? The Parthenon's exterior was decorated with stories from myth and history that were relevant to the Athenians. To the Athenians, the building particularly represented their victory over the Persians, who had invaded in the years preceding the construction of the Parthenon.

### The Temple of Zeus at Olympia

The Temple of Zeus at Olympia on the Peloponnese (southern Greece) was another impressive Greek temple. Unfortunately, only ruins remain today of this once-proud temple. This temple was dedicated to Zeus, and it is fitting that what was for a long time the largest and most famous temple in Greece was dedicated to the king of the gods. The interior of the temple was dominated by a large and imposing statue of the god himself and was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The temple was built from the spoils of a war won by the locals, and so the dedication itself can be seen as a thank you offering to Zeus for the victory. The pediments again depicted scenes from mythology, one that was relevant to the local area, and one that was a more general and famous Greek myth – the battle between the mythical Centaurs and Lapiths. Within the temple, metopes depicted the 12 Labours of Heracles.



*Artist's impression of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia.*

*Note that this is a later artist's impression provided for illustrative purposes and to support understanding. In your exam you will be looking at primary Greek and Roman sources only.*

## Religious Roles

There were several types of religious figure in Ancient Greece.

The *hiereus* or *hiereia*, the closest equivalent word that we have is 'priest' or 'priestess', was the person involved with '*hiera*'. This word can refer to a number of different things associated with the sacred, such as rituals and sacrifices. *Hiereis* were attached to a particular sanctuary or temple and would perform the rites related to their specific location as well as overall overseeing its maintenance. They would also perform animal sacrifice. The importance of a particular *hiereus* was determined by the significance and prestige of the god and cult he served.

The *mantis*, or seer, was another religious role, but, unlike the *hiereus*, was not attached to a specific place. Instead, the *mantis* would perform his function wherever it was required. This function particularly revolved around divination and prophecy. To this end, he would also oversee and perform sacrifices, but only he was able to interpret the entrails of the sacrificed animal and so determine the will of the gods. The importance of a particular *mantis* depended on his ability to make reliable prophecies.

## Animal sacrifice

The sacrifice of animals was quite common in the ancient world and was primarily used for one of two purposes. The first was as an offering to the gods, perhaps as a thank you for something the god had been perceived as doing, or to entice the god's aid in a forthcoming matter. The second was to interpret the will of the gods; this would be done by reading the entrails of the sacrificed animal, which in the Greek world could only be properly done by a *mantis*. These two purposes could, however, be combined. If asking the god's advice or help with something, the sacrificed animal's entrails could be used to determine the god's response and/or how likely it will be that the activity would be a success.

There is a Greek myth about the origins of sacrifice. The story goes that the gods and mortals had a meeting to decide how a sacrifice would be divided. The titan Prometheus killed an ox and in one pile he put all the meat and fat, while in the other he put the bones, presenting both to Zeus in separate bags for him to choose. Zeus choose the bag of bones as it seemed the larger one. Realising he had been tricked, he hid fire from humanity in retaliation. Prometheus would later give fire to humanity, the story with which he is most commonly associated. This myth is quite unusual as it explains the origins of a particular custom.

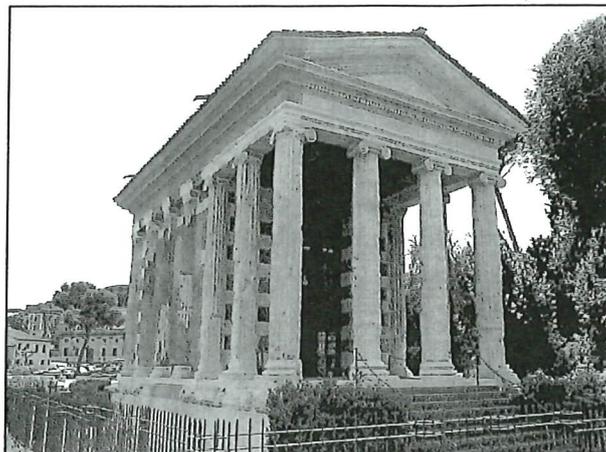
## Rome

As religion was important in many aspects of life, it featured heavily in the architecture of Roman cities. Temples became not only centres of worship, but also places of social gatherings and a mark of Roman rule. The latter was particularly the case of temples of Jupiter. As both the ruler of the gods and the protector of Rome, Jupiter was in many ways the most important god for the Romans, but more so as a symbol of Rome. Therefore, the Romans would build a large temple to him in a newly conquered city (or enlarge an existing one) to show their strength and domination of that city. Normally, the temple would be given a prominent location in the city that was easily visible and accessible to all its citizens and showcased the might of Rome.

The fact that the temple served as much (if not more) as a link with the city of Rome as for purely religious purposes is shown by the sorts of activities that would occur at the temple. A variety of official celebrations would be held here; for instance, the annual celebration of the founding of the city of Rome. The holding of a festival that was clearly dedicated to the centre of the Roman Empire in such a prominent location of Pompeii served to further indicate the control of Rome in this city. It offers a clear example of how the Romans used religion to exert political control over their empire.

## The Temple of Fortuna Virilis

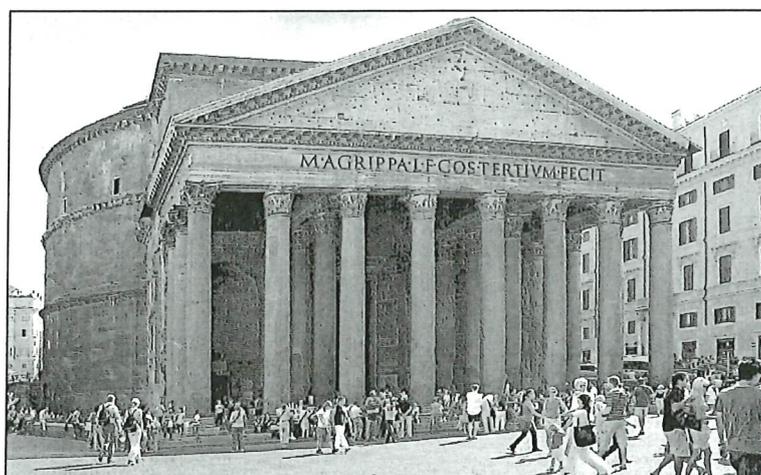
The Temple of Fortuna Virilis (literally 'manly fortune') is a temple in Rome and one of the best preserved of all Roman temples. It is also called the Temple of Portunus, the god of the keys, doors, and harbours. However, the exact function of this temple is not certain. It was referred to as Fortuna Virilis until the rediscovery of a river port near the temple, when its purpose was assumed to relate to that – hence Portunus. The reason for the uncertainty is that the temple's dedication has not survived to the modern day, and as there were many different temples in Rome and our written sources were not specific enough in their descriptions, divining its purpose has been in large part an assumption based on the limited evidence available.



*Temple of Fortuna Virilis*

## The Pantheon

The Pantheon is in Rome and is among the best preserved Roman buildings. Its name gave rise to the suggestion that it was dedicated to all the gods, but it could also have been used as a location for the Roman Emperor's public appearances, helping cement the notion of the Emperor's divinity, something that was increasingly focused on as the Roman Empire developed, with cults to some emperors involving their treatment as gods. For example, according to one source, the Pantheon at one point housed statues of Venus and Mars alongside Julius Caesar – who was later declared a god by his eventual successor, Augustus. The temple has a unique design as behind the typical front there is a dome, a testament to Roman engineering.



*The Pantheon*

## Religious Roles

Religion was greatly integrated into social life in the ancient world, and so it should not be a surprise that it played an important role in the state, especially in politics. Just as a Christian king might use the favour of the Church to his advantage, officials in the ancient world would often seek divine approval for their actions. This is why the Roman position of Pontifex Maximus, the chief priest (effectively like the Pope today), was a highly sought-after one. In fact, it was so important that it became the norm that an emperor would also be the Pontifex Maximus rather than allowing another to hold such an important position. This was important as it was up to Roman priests (called pontiffs, and in particular the Pontifex Maximus) to interpret the signs of the gods. This obviously meant that cunning politicians could interpret such signs to their own advantage. This is where Christianity and Roman religion diverge, for while proof of belief is crucial in the former, in the

**Pontifex Maximus** – The chief of the Roman religion, based in the city of Rome. He would have both religious and political power, and so this was a very important and highly coveted role. During the republic, the holder of this role was elected by the assembly of the people, for life. Under the Roman Empire, the emperor would normally hold this role.

**Forum** – The central location in a Roman city, this open space would be a centre of public life, ranging from the buying and selling of goods, to political meetings, public announcements and religious festivals.

**Haruspex** – These were diviners who acted like religious advisors, whose primary role was to interpret omens and so determine the will of the gods. This would usually entail looking at animal entrails following a sacrifice.

latter it was far more important to be seen taking part in religious activity in public than it was to be seen as a fervent believer in the gods. This is why leading politicians would always ensure they led the most important sacrifices, for example, to show their active participation in religion, and, by extension, their commitment to the people of Rome.

## Animal sacrifice

The word 'sacrifice' most often comes with connotations of killing animals as offerings to the gods. However, this was not necessarily the case in the Roman world. The word 'sacrifice' comes from the Latin 'sacrum', meaning sacred. Therefore, a sacrifice was the act of making something sacred. In Rome, many different things were offered as sacrifices, from animals to plants, and from cakes to incense. In most cases, the thing being sacrificed simply had to represent life in some way.

### The Sacrificial Ritual

The ritual of a sacrifice was a very important routine that had to be followed carefully. If any part of it was performed incorrectly, not only would the whole sacrifice have to be repeated from the start, but an extra one would have to be made in order to atone for the mistaken one.

1. A priest (*pontiff* or *pontifex*) would lead the ceremony. He would have his head covered, usually with a hood. This was intended as a way of warding off evil.
2. In the case of an animal being sacrificed, it would first have its head sprinkled with some wine and bits of a sacred cake made out of flour and salt. Incense and wine were also offered on a fire on an altar or tripod.
3. Then, the animal would be stunned with a mallet or an axe.
4. The animal would next have its throat cut. It was important for this to be a quick and clean process as it was necessary for the victim to seem willing to give its life for the community.
5. Next, it would be disembowelled and have its entrails examined by a *haruspex* (person who interpreted omens). If the entrails were bad, this was a bad omen and meant that another offering would need to be made.
6. The vital organs of the animal were burnt as offerings to the gods, while the rest was cut up and eaten.
7. While this was going on, the priest would be saying prayers while a musician played a flute in order to drown out any ill-omened noises.

If there was a special occasion, having to repeat the whole ceremony due to an error would be an embarrassment, and so an extra sacrifice was made the day before in order to make up in advance for any potential mistakes.

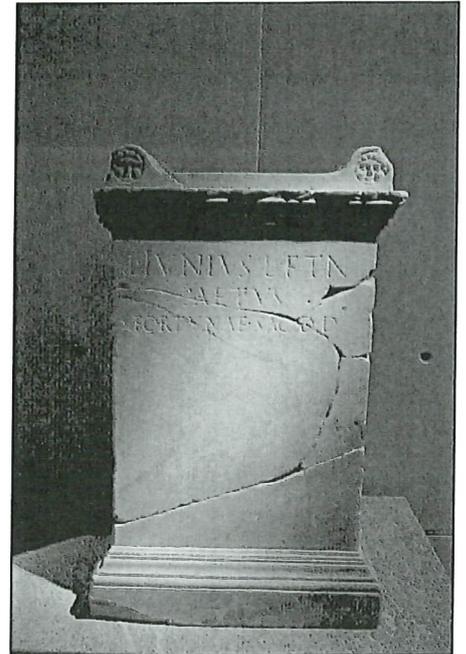
Sacrifices were an important part of Roman religion and would take place as part of a variety of events, and not just religious ones. While sacrifice was still a big part of religious festivals, it also featured in weddings and funerals, for instance. In all these cases, the aim was the same: either to gain the favour of the gods or to thank the gods. Sacrifices were seen as a gift to the gods given in exchange for the granting of a request. Depending on the god or goddess in question, a different sacrifice might be made. In the case of animals, for instance, a male one would be sacrificed to a god and a female one to a goddess. The colour of the animal was also important: a white one would be chosen for a god of the heavens, while a black animal would be chosen for a god of the underworld. In addition, sacrifices to gods of the heavens would be performed in daylight and in full view of the public. Each god or goddess also had their preference of animals. For example, sacrifices to the god of war, Mars, would normally



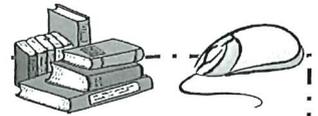
*A Roman relief depicting a sacrifice*

involve an ox, a ram and a boar. Another form of sacrifice was called a libation. This was the simplest form of sacrifice and involved a liquid offering – usually unmixed wine or perfumed oil – which would be poured over an altar as an offering to a god.

Sacrifices would be held for all sorts of events, from religious festivals to weddings and funerals. People would also make sacrifices on their own when making personal requests of the gods. However, the things that were requested of the gods had one thing in common. People prayed for things they wished for in the present world, and not for access to a good afterlife. Material requests would be common; for instance, for wealth, or for the success of enterprises, be it military victory, winning political office or gaining the affection of a man or woman. Health and safety are other examples of the sorts of things that people prayed for. In some cases, people would request something and promise to pay the god back in the future. For instance, a sailor may encounter a storm and pray to Neptune to deliver him safely to his destination and in return he would make a sacrifice to him when he reached land. It was considered very important to fulfil such a promise as failing to do so would risk the wrath of the gods. This is interesting in that it suggests an exchange-based relationship between people and gods. If you wanted something, you had to be prepared to give the appropriate god something in return.



*Example of a simple altar (ara), which was often the focal point of a Roman sacrifice*



## Independent Research

There are many examples of Greek and Roman temples left in the world. Research one or two of the following and each one's particular uses and layout:

1. Temple of Augustus, Pula
2. Temple of Hercules Victor, Rome
3. Temple of Apollo, Pompeii
4. Temple of Hera, Olympia
5. Temple of Artemis, Corfu

## Consolidation Questions

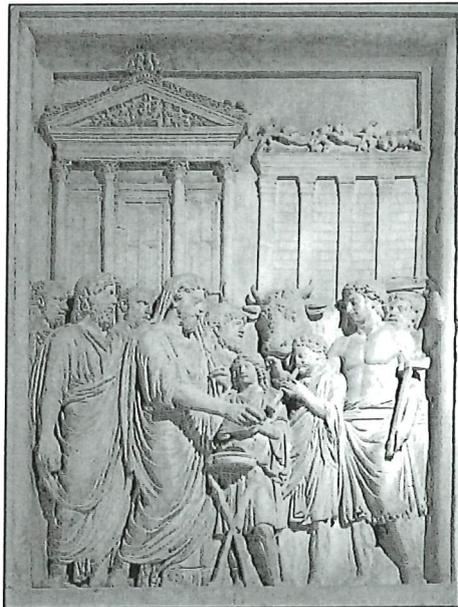
- a) What was the *naos* or *cella*?
- b) What was the main purpose of a temple?
- c) Why were animals sacrificed?



## Source Questions

Classical source-based units include **unseen sources**. These are sources you are not expected to have seen before as they are not on the prescribed list. However, you will be expected to discuss them using the skills you have.

- 1) Look at the source below.



Now answer the following question:

**Identify two details about elements of Roman religion.**

- 2) Read the source below.

*But once upon time, while they waged long wars with fighting weapons, they abandoned the Parental Days. This did not go unpunished; for it is said that it was from that omen that Rome grew hot with the pyres of the dead outside the city. In fact I scarcely believe this: they say that our ancestors came out of their graves and uttered groans during the silent night, and they say that through the city streets and the wide fields howled ugly spirits, a ghostly crowd. After that, the honours they had neglected were given to the tombs, and the prodigies and funerals came to an end.*

*Extract from Ovid Fasti, 2.533-570*

**What does this tell us about the importance of sacrifice in Roman religion?**

