Panel: “Culture and Society in the Ancient World”

Melissa Norton

Title: “Hidden Away: The Origins and Persecution of Roman Mystery Cults”
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Melissa Norton, a native of Fort Wayne, is a history and women’s studies major at IPFW. She transferred to IPFW in the summer 2014 from Cottey College in Nevada, Missouri. While at Cottey College she received her Associates in Arts degree. Always interested in history, she decided to earn her baccalaureate degree in history. While attending IPFW, she became interested in women’s studies and will double major in both history and women’s studies. She has received a Ron Venderly Scholarship and a Linda C. Fox Scholarship to assist in continuing her studies. She was elected by COAS faculty to be one of the student representatives for the 2015-2016 COAS Student Affairs Committee.

Abstract

Mystery cults were the religious cults within the Greco-Roman world that were secretive in nature but offered their followers the notion of life after death. Mystery cults that threatened Roman political life and the state religion faced suppression and persecution. The mystery cults of Bacchus and Isis were the cults that the Roman government attacked the most. The persecution happened for entirely different reasons: the Bacchus cult was condemned for its loose morals which included orgies, murders, and perjury, while the Isis cult was persecuted for political reasons. The persecution of the Bacchus cult allowed the Roman government to have more control over the religious sphere, which allowed it to later persecute the Isis cult.

The Roman Senate felt that the Bacchus followers were against Roman principles that had been strictly followed for centuries. They did not follow Roman beliefs about the status of women in society. Women in traditional Roman thought were considered unequal to men. However, in the Bacchus tradition women held offices and were in positions of authority, which Roman authorities found threatening. The Bacchus cult persecution helped the Roman Senate gain power over religious factions, and this power was passed on to the emperor when the imperial form of political power developed.

Octavian (hereinafter Augustus), the first Roman emperor, persecuted the cult of Isis, which had its origins in Egyptian society. He especially targeted this cult due to the war he fought with Antony and the Egyptian queen Cleopatara. Augustus was of the mind that the Egyptians and their culture were barbaric, and anything to do with them was beneath the Roman people. After Augustus was triumphant in battle he wanted to return the old gods and goddesses such as Jupiter, Juno, and Neptune to their former glorious position in the Roman republic. According to traditional Roman belief, these gods and goddess created the republic of Rome and helped it thrive. Augustus felt that by reviving worship of the former gods and goddesses the people would believe the Republic would endure and survive. He forbade the cult of Isis from having a presence within the religious boundary of the city, pushing out the rites and temples of the cult.
Emperor Tiberius continued the cultural purification within Rome that included destroying temples of and the execution of priests.

While the cults of Bacchus and Isis were persecuted, the cult of Cybele survived and thrived. Cybele was one of the first mystery cults invited into the Roman world and never threatened by Roman authority. The reasons the Isis and Bacchus cults were suppressed and mistreated were because the Roman leadership at the time felt Roman traditional society was being threatened. Romans believed that the gods and goddesses helped build Rome into the powerful empire it was and that religious tradition and purity would continue to help Rome flourish.

**Bibliographical Note**

In researching for this paper, I focused primarily on the ancient Roman authors Titus Livius (known as Livy) and Suetonius. These two sources are recognized as primary sources in Roman history. My secondary sources relied on modern day notable ancient history historians such as Sarolta Takács, R.A. Bauman and J. North. I looked at many different sources when writing this paper including a translated German book by Jörg Rüpke, who is a German comparative religion scholar.