

Lesson 3: From Pagan to Christian

Brief Lesson Overview: In this lesson, students will understand how the Roman Empire transitioned from Paganism to Christianity. After a brief review of the previous lesson, students will engage with various primary sources. As these primary sources are presented and discussed, students will utilize a timeline to demonstrate major points in the Pagan to Christian shift. Students will then engage in a statue analysis, which will demonstrate similarities between Paganism and Christianity that will subsequently prepare them for their final assessment.

Objectives: Analyze the importance of religion in the life of an Ancient Roman
Determine two ways in which Christianity borrowed from Paganism
Explain two reasons why statues were important to Romans and Christians

Common Core Standards:

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1](#)

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2](#)

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

Activity 1: Review of Previous Day (5-10 minutes)

- Have students join their groups from the previous day's word wall activity. Give the students some time to recall their words. Choose some of the words on the wall, and ask groups to explain to the class why their word was associated with the given theme. Clarify any misconceptions students may have via direct instruction.

Activity 2: Primary Source Analysis and Timeline (25-30 minutes)

- Ensure that students are aware of the daily objectives
- Keep students in their small groups or formulate new groups (four groups are needed), distribute the timeline, and give each group one of the four primary sources (modified versions are available).
- Each group will be tasked with answering the two guiding questions for each source, as well as providing a brief summary of their source for their classmates.
- Have groups discuss their primary sources in the following order for the sake chronology: Plutarch, Cato, Tacitus, and St. Ambrose. First, allow the Plutarch group to summarize their reading and answer their questions. In accordance with the first objective, have students write on the first set of lines of their timeline, "The Romans were superstitious, and gods were an important part of their government and daily lives." Students are to then draw a symbol or picture that represents their understanding of the primary sources in the box on the timeline.
- Have students move to the next section of the timeline and write, "When Rome became an Empire, emperors proclaimed themselves as gods." Remind students of the

Deification of Caesar reading from the previous day, and have the students draw a picture to help them remember this idea.

- Have the group who read Tacitus to summarize and answer their questions. Turn to the timeline and have them write, “Because Christians refused to worship the Emperor, they were considered a threat and persecuted.” Repeat the drawing process.
- Next, on the timeline have students write, “Christianity grew in popularity so much that it was in the emperor’s interest to become Christian.” Explain to students that the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity not only for personal reasons, but also for political reasons. Repeat the drawing process.
- Have the St. Ambrose group summarize and present their questions. Have the student write, “The Church becomes so powerful, it rivals the emperor.” Repeat the drawing process.
- Conclude this lesson with a brief explanation of how Christianity borrowed from Paganism. Points that can be raised include the repurposing of Roman temples into Christian churches (i.e. the Pantheon), the placement of Christmas and Easter on important Pagan holiday times, the similarity of saint worship and polytheism, the use of symbols and monuments (i.e. statues) to convey meaning to its followers.

Activity 3: Statue Analysis (15-20 minutes)

- Students will work independently and with a partner for this activity. Students will view two videos available at: _____. The first statue analysis is of Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius at the Capitoline Hill. Three questions are posed during the video:
 1. What do you think the ancient Romans thought when they saw this statue of their leader?
 2. Do his clothes look military or everyday use to you?
 3. How might the cowering enemy change how people saw the statue?

Please allow the students to view the video once, give them the questions, and allow them to watch the video again, focusing on the questions. Students should work independently to answer the questions, then engage in a pair and share with one other student before allowing the students to share with the entire class. Based on these questions, students should conclude the statue conveys power to people, and, though Marcus is featured in non-military clothing, Roman power is still apparent by the submission hand gesture and the missing cowering enemy.

- Next students will view the statue of St. Paul at St. Paul’s Outside the Walls. Three questions posed during the video are:
 1. Why do you think it was important to give Paul objects to hold?
 2. Why would Christians want to emphasize Paul’s own death?
 3. How does the statue make you feel, and how might the Catholic Church want you to feel?

Repeat the process from the previous video. Based on these questions, students should conclude that because illiteracy was widespread, objects were important indicators of who the statue represented, Christians emphasized Paul's death as a sign to ultimate faith and allegiance to God, or, at that time, to the Catholic Church. Answers may vary regarding the final question. Students could conclude the statue has a solemn look about it, conveying the serious tone of the Catholic Church.

- The lesson will then focus on comparing the two statues. Questions that could be considered include:

What feelings do the statues convey?

What was the Roman Empire or Catholic Churches agenda in creating these statues?

Why were statues so common in both Roman and Christian times?

What does the location of the statues say about their importance?

Based on these questions, students could conclude that both Christians and Pagans used statues to convey power to the masses, how saints were a relic of paganism that utilized the identification of certain gods or saints with certain attributes, and how statues served as a means of mass communication to a widely illiterate audience.

Exit Ticket – Assessing the Objectives (5 minutes)

- Remind student of the three objectives presented at the beginning of class. Ask the students which of the objectives they understand best and which objective is most unclear. Also, have them explain why the objectives were clear/unclear to them.

Plutarch, Life of Numa, ix-xiv, xix-xx:

The original constitution of the priests, called Pontifices, is ascribed unto Numa, and he himself was, it is said, the first of them; and that they have the name of Pontifices from potens, powerful, because they attend the service of the gods, who have power and command over all... The office of Pontifex Maximus, or chief priest, was to declare and interpret the divine law . . . he not only prescribed rules for public ceremony, but regulated the sacrifices of private persons, not suffering them to vary from established custom, and giving information to everyone of what was requisite for purposes of worship or supplication.

(Modified) The original group of priests were call Pontifices who were originally created by King Numa, who was the first Pontifice. The word Pontifice comes from the word power because the Pontifices serve the gods, who have power over everything. The chief priest's, called Pontifex Maximus, job was to interpret the law of the gods, make the rules for public religious ceremonies, help with sacrifices by making sure they are done correctly, and telling everyone the purposes and importance of worshipping the gods.

1. What did Roman priests, or Pontifices do, and do you think what they did made them important?
2. Who was the first Pontifice, and where did the word Pontifice come from? Why is this significant?

From: William Stearns Davis, ed., Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources, 2 Vols. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912-13), Vol. II: Rome and the West, pp. 9-15.

Cato the Elder: *The Harvest Ritual*, c. 160 BCE

Before the harvest the sacrifice of the pig must be offered in this manner: Offer a sow as *porca praecidanea* to Ceres before you harvest spelt, wheat, barley, beans, and rape seed. Offer a prayer, with incense and wine, to Janus, Jupiter and Juno, before offering the sow. Offer a pile of cakes to Janus, saying, "Father Janus, in offering these cakes to you, I humbly pray that you will be propitious and merciful to me and my children, my house and my household." Then make an offering of cake to Jupiter with these words: "In offering you this cake, O Jupiter, I humbly pray that you, pleased with this offering, will be propitious and merciful to me and my children, my house and my household." Then present the wine to Janus, saying: "Father Janus, as I have prayed humbly in offering you the cakes, so may you in the same way be honored by this wine now placed before you." Then pray to Jupiter thus: "Jupiter, may you be honored in accepting this cake; may you be honored in accepting the wine placed before you." Then sacrifice the *porca praecidanea*. When the entrails have been removed, make an offering of cakes to Janus, and pray in the same way as you have prayed before. Offer a cake to Jupiter, praying just as before. In the same way offer wine to Janus and offer wine to Jupiter, in the same way as before in offering the pile of cakes, and in the consecration of the cake. Afterward offer the entrails and wine to Ceres.

(Modified) Before you harvest your farm, you must sacrifice a pig like this: Offer the pig to the goddess Ceres, but before you sacrifice the pig, say a prayer to the gods Janus, Jupiter, and Juno. Offer some cake to Janus and say, "Father Janus, in offering these cakes please bless and be merciful to my family, my house, and everything I have." Then offer some cake to Jupiter and say, "O Jupiter, in offering these cakes please bless and be merciful to my family, my house, and everything I have." Then offer the wine to Janus and say, "Father Janus, I humbly offer you this cake and wine so that you will be honored." Offer the wine to Jupiter too and say, "Jupiter, I humbly offer you this cake and wine so that you will be honored." Now sacrifice the pig and remove the non-usable parts for your offering. Make another offering of cake and wine to Jupiter and Janus and say the same prayer as before. Last, offer the non-usable parts of the pig and some wine to Ceres.

1. Why would Romans want to make a sacrifice before the harvest?
2. What does the length of the prayer tell us about the importance of the gods to the Romans?

Livy, The History of Rome, by Titus Livius, trans. D. Spillan and Cyrus Edmonds, (New York: G. Bell & Sons, 1892).

Tacitus, The Great Fire of Rome

"...neither human resources, nor imperial generosity, nor appeasement of the gods, eliminated the sinister suspicion that the fire had been deliberately started. To stop the rumor, NERO, made scapegoats--and punished with every refinement the notoriously depraved CHRISTIANS (as they were popularly called). Their originator, CHRIST, had been executed in Tiberius' reign by the Procurator of Judaea, PONTIUS PILATUS (governor from 26 to 36 A.D.). But in spite of this temporary setback, the deadly superstition had broken out again, not just in Judaea (where the mischief had started) but even in Rome. All degraded and shameful practices collect and flourish in the capital. First, NERO had the self-admitted Christians arrested. Then, on their information, large numbers of others were condemned--not so much for starting fires as because of their hatred for the human race. Their deaths were made amusing. Dressed in wild animals' skins, they were torn to pieces by dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be set on fire after dark as illumination.... Despite their guilt as Christians, and the ruthless punishment it deserved, the victims were pitied. For it was felt that they were being sacrificed to one man's brutality rather than to the national interest."

(Modified) Everyone thought the Great Fire of Rome was started on purpose, and to stop this rumor the Roman Emperor Nero decided to blame and punish the new religious group known as Christians. The Christian's founder, called Christ, was crucified during the reign of Emperor Tiberius under the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate. But even though their founder had been killed, the Christian problem had spread all the way to Rome. The city of Rome always had had problems with many different kinds of religious groups. First, Nero decided to arrest the Christians. Then, because of what the Christians had told the Roman police, many Christians were condemned to death, not because they started the fire, but because they hated the human race. Their deaths were made into entertainment. They were dressed up as wild animals and torn to pieces by dogs, crucified, or made into human torches to light up the night. Even though they were guilty of being Christians and deserved to be punished, people felt bad for those who were executed. People thought Christians were sacrificed because of Emperor Nero's brutality rather than for the good of Rome.

1. Why would Emperor Nero want to blame the Christians for the Great Fire of Rome?
2. What did the reading say about how people reacted to the punishment of the Christians, and how do you think Christians reacted?

The Annals of Imperial Rome Book XV, chapter 47

St. Ambrose Humiliates Theodosius the Great

The Emperor, who was full of faith, now took courage to enter holy church where he prayed neither in a standing, nor in a kneeling posture, but throwing himself upon the ground. He tore his hair, struck his forehead, and shed torrents of tears, as he implored forgiveness of God. Ambrose restored him to favor, but forbade him to come inside the altar rail, ordering his deacon to say "The priests alone, O Emperor, are permitted to enter within the barriers by the altar. Retire then, and remain with the rest of the laity. A purple robe makes Emperors, but not priests. . ." Theodosius meekly obeyed, praising Ambrose for his spirit, and saying "Ambrose alone deserves the title of "bishop."

(Modified) The Emperor, who was full of faith, now took courage to enter holy church where he prayed neither in a standing, nor in a kneeling posture, but throwing himself upon the ground. He tore his hair, struck his forehead, and shed waterfalls of tears, as he begged forgiveness of God. St. Ambrose forgave him, but forbade him to come on the holy altar, ordering his deacon to say "Only the priests, O Emperor, are allowed to walk on the altar. Walk away, be quiet with the rest of the people. A purple robe makes Emperors, but not priests. . ." Theodosius quietly obeyed, praising Ambrose for his spirit, and saying "Ambrose alone deserves the title of "bishop."

Who holds the power in this reading and why?
How does this reading illustrate a major shift in power?

William Stearns Davis, ed., Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources, 2 Vols. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912-13), Vol. II: Rome and the West, 298-300.

From Pagan to Christian

Name _____

Date _____

Essential Question: How much has Rome, as a world intellectual center, contributed to emerging national and global identities of different peoples over time?










