A Semiotic Approach to Ancient Greek Religious Accessories

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Ancient Greek religious worship left behind many physical remnants that modern scholars have used to piece together an image of ancient life. Because of the great temporal distance between the scholars and the ancients, it is often difficult to accurately understand the full breadth of ancient life. Particularly, scholars have extreme difficulty when trying to study an ancient’s personal understanding of the world around him. Ancient Greek literature and myth create a starting point for modern examinations of this subject. However, it is problematic to accept the personal opinions of mythic individuals as fact. Particularly in a religious context, the line between myth and reality is often ambiguous. In order to understand the way by which ancients viewed their religious accessories, this piece shall take into account both the mythic beliefs of the time and modern methodologies and theories. This examination will ultimately yield support for the argument that semiotic theory, the modern theory of signs, aligns most thoroughly to ancient perspectives on religious accessories.

The term “accessories” will be used in this essay to refer to the objects which were involved in ancient Greek religious rituals and practices. This can take the form of statues, altars, tablets, or even a temple itself. In this investigation, the subject matter will be limited to the cult statues involved in state religions and the golden tablets used in the Bacchic mysteries. The application of semiotic theory to these statues reflects the mode by which many Greeks viewed the statues: as indices to far off deities. This application reflects the structure of Greek life, which was heavily influenced by the limits of ancient Greek geography, science and history. These
limits created a void that was necessarily filled with the realm of the myth—a far distant past recorded in Homeric works.

Many scholars such as Verity Platt, Deborah Steiner, and Adria Haluszka endeavor to explain the Greek treatment of state and mystery cult accessories. Haluszka’s semiotic approach aligns with the themes that constantly arise when studying Greek religion; namely, abstraction and ambiguity. Both Platt’s and Steiner’s main arguments break from these themes. Instead, their theories are based on a certainty that is somewhat anachronistic when compared to the uncertainty of ancient life. Platt argues that a cult statue was the physical embodiment of the deity, whereas Steiner argues that the cult statue acted as a vessel into which the deity could enter. As will be made apparent, in the realm of Greek religion nothing was guaranteed or certain—not even the presence of the deity. Semiotic theory attains its value not only from its logical connections forged from man to deity, but also from the void it leaves for the inexplicable and uncertain.

Looking at cult statues and gold tablets through semiotic theory is a departure from the usual investigations of these pieces. From an art historical perspective, the style and context of the accessories sheds light on their purposes. In this way, we can see how the artist of the cult statue instilled hints of life into the figure by mimicking breath or movement.\(^1\) We can glean evidence of this by looking at vase paintings, which often depict cult statues. In one that depicts the fall of Troy, we see Cassandra running to the foot of the Athena statue with Ajax right behind her.\(^2\) In this chaotic scene, Athena’s spear and shield are raised, almost as if she is taking part in the battle. Though this does provide important information, it does not adequately explain how the individual Greek understood the relationship between the accessory and the deity.

\(^1\) Steiner 2001: 29.
\(^2\) Ferrara, Museo Nationale di Spina: 5081.
The application of semiotic theory to ancient Greek religious accessories is relatively new. Its application to the Bacchic gold tablets is especially untried. This theory puts concrete vocabulary to an idea that has previously been considered. The idea functions along the same lines of a memento, which is an object that brings to mind a far off being. This thought then forms a mental connection to the deity proper. Additionally, when applying semiotic theory to both ancient Greek cult statuary and mystery cult tablets, the usual dichotomy of state and mystery religions is weakened. When applied to both types of religious accessories, semiotic theory shows how both function according to the same line of logic. Though the purpose of worship differed, both cults offered connection to the gods through physical accessories.

When ancient man was beseeching the gods for help, he often situated himself in the place where the deity was most likely to hear him. This, of course, would be the temple that housed the cult statue. Though scholars discuss direct observation of the statue, we find that most prayers and sacrifices occurred outside this temple and not in front of the statue at all. However, the statue more than likely could be seen from outside. Following the same reasoning that connects a deity to a statue to a supplicant, we can easily add another link in the chain: the temple or altar. In other words, a man’s prayer before a temple is transferred to the statue of the deity and then to the deity proper. Charles Peirce, often referred to as the father of semiotics, breaks down this relationship to three parts. The statue or temple functions as the representamen, a symbol for an object or being. This outside representamen then inspires an inner interpretant, or idea, of the object in the mind of the viewer. With cult statues, this would be the idea of the deity, heavily influenced by myth. Finally, this interpretant coincides with the object proper—the actual deity that exists outside of the human realm.

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For the Bacchic gold tablets, this explanation is a bit more complicated. The gold tablets function largely as markers: the followers of the Bacchic mysteries wore them and were buried with them so that they might enjoy a more pleasant afterlife. As Bacchus had traveled to the underworld and returned, an alternate mythic cycle and coinciding mystery cult developed that ensured his knowledge gained from this trip could aid mortals when they died.\(^4\) The gold tablets marked an individual as an initiate of this mystery cult. There is no evidence that these accessories were prayed to or given offerings like cult statues were. One could argue that they were used as markers to connect one to the deity whenever an individual was wearing it. As initiates of the mystery cult carried these tablets with them constantly, the individual was continuously a beneficiary of this connection and vice versa. This differs from the manner of state cult worship, which fosters a connection between man and deity only when the individual can go to the temple and statue. However, both connections are similar because they are based on the proximity between individual and accessory. When an individual carried a Bacchic gold tablet, there were still representamens, interpretants and objects. However, these connections are constantly cycling because the tablet is constantly near the supplicant.

The proximity of an individual to the tablet when he or she is not actively participating in Bacchic ritual provides the same benefits as the ritual itself. There are no indications that these tablets functioned as vessels and contained the gods, therefore, the arguments like those of Steiner and Platt do not hold up when applied to religious accessories other than statuary. Drawing fundamental differences between statues and these tablets is based on a western assumption that people connect more strongly to anthropomorphic or dramatically framed ritualistic statuary. Additionally, Steiner’s and Platt’s arguments assert that the Greeks attained divine contact with a great degree of certainty. These theories are therefore dissimilar in form to

\(^4\) Graf and Johnston 2007: 74-84.
the composition of other Greek levels of thought. Thus our efforts to understand the ancient perception of religious accessories which were used to enhance one’s communication to the divine reveal the necessity of a theory that endeavors not to draw anachronistic or egocentric assumptions. Semiotic theory appeases these needs.
Chapter 2: Previous Methodologies and Theories Applied to Religious Accessories

In the past, scholars have examined religious accessories of the ancient Greeks from an artistic standpoint. Artistic observation of a religious accessory can explain production processes, styles, cultural references, and more. This method has proven particularly helpful in our understanding of ancient Greek culture throughout their history. These scholarly techniques depend on artistic observations, without incorporating literary analysis.

This art historical methodology does not go beyond the facts that artistic observation can provide, and, therefore, cannot elaborate on the way by which ancients perceived these religious accessories. This chapter will also address theories that can fill in some of the gaps the other methods have left behind. Particularly the theories of Deborah Steiner and Verity Platt will be examined for their abilities to explain the personal understandings of ancient Greeks towards temples, statues, and other accessories involved in their rituals. These viewpoints aid in scholarly observations of religious accessories because of their inclusion of textual support in their argument. The artistic observations go no deeper than what can be seen by the modern eye. Through incorporating literary evidence, we can create a firm basis for understanding the mental connections ancient man perceived between deity and accessory. However, as we shall find, these two theoretical approaches pose problems to our understanding of Greek religious thought because of certain anachronistic inclusions and contradicting ideas.

2.1 Art Historical Method
As has been mentioned, religious accessories can include everything from an altar, a temple, a cult statue, offerings, tablets, and more. Art historical analysis tends to be the earliest observations we find of religious accessories. In particular, this methodology focuses on the styles and techniques employed in the creation of ancient Greek religious accessories. Despite this methodology’s ability to explain the artistic characteristics of these pieces, it does not explain their use or function.

2.1.1. Temple Architecture

The art historical method is particularly powerful when examining religious accessories in their exemplary forms. In temples, for example, it is easiest to understand and categorize the style of pieces that are considered the height of their orders. We see this in the Temple of Zeus at Olympia that dates to ca. 470-457 BCE. This temple is interesting to examine from an art historical perspective because of the techniques the artists employed. To start, art historians note that this temple is an example of the fully mature, Doric style temple that existed in the mid-fifth century BCE. The mature Doric style is indicated by the inclusion of the canonical, six by thirteen column layout.\(^1\) Additionally, the incorporation of the opsithodomos and columns in antis are components of the Doric “ideal.” The sculptural works added to the temple also elaborate on the temple’s style. The pedimental sculpture, one of the most valuable extant sources for early Classical work, contain two scenes: the Centauromachy on the west side and the horse race of Pelops on the east side.\(^2\) When examining the figures of each scene, we find that the bodies and clothing have a thick, rubbery quality. This quality, though less abstract than

\(^{1}\) Coulton 1977: 112.
\(^{2}\) Boardman 1985: 36.
the Archaic sculpture before this time, still detracts from the naturalism of the piece. Some of the drapery displays a lack of knowledge in how fabric would naturally fall on a human figure. This style, often referred to as the Severe style, indicates a desire to naturally show the human anatomy both at rest and during movement. However, artists have not mastered the depiction of weight and complex poses at this point in time. By artistic observation, scholars are able to determine the progression of style and technique that occurred throughout Greece. Although these methodologies do enable modern viewers to understand the process of creating religious accessories, they do not elaborate on how these pieces were perceived by individuals once they were complete.

2.1.2. Sculpture

When looking at figural sculpture, art historians look at the techniques the sculptor used to heighten the viewer’s appreciation for the artistic work. Archaeological evidence allows scholars to track the centuries of artistic developments, largely based on trial and error, in the realm of figural representation. As we saw in temples, the statues that are highlighted in modern art historical texts are often only those of exemplary quality, often leaving out the pieces that aided in their developments. Before we look at any specific examples, however, we must examine the various types of divine statuary.

Throughout ancient history, deities were often represented in two modes: iconic and aniconic. Iconic statues, as the name suggests, were anthropomorphic representations—deities fashioned after the human form. Aniconic statues were exactly the opposite: sculptures of

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3 Boardman 1985: 38.
4 Boardman 1985: 38.
5 Steiner 2001: 89.
deities that did not resemble the human form. These statues were made of naturally occurring and minimally altered elements, like a log or stone. The connection between the divinity and the aniconic statue was, therefore, forged not by a visual representation, but by the deity’s connection to that particular material. Some scholars, as will be discussed below, argue that ancient Greeks had trouble believing that a divinity could share a connection to an overt man-made object.

Although sources suggest that aniconic images were more often the focus of religious devotion, these are not addressed as often in art historical studies. The anthropomorphic representations prove to be more fruitful in scholarship because of the direct effort ancient artists put into their creation. As we can see, this methodology tends to omit objects that do not fit into the category of “art.” Furthermore, because aniconic statuary can take the form of unaltered and degradable material, archaeologists have a hard time finding and identifying them. Thus this methodology primarily applies to the statues of deities fashioned after the human form.

For example, artists instilled hints of life in cult statues to mimic breath and movement, such as a distended chest or open mouth. In other accounts, classical art historians examine how the cult statue was presented to mimic the epiphanic qualities of deities in myth. These are the moments when the deity physically manifests him or herself to a mortal. A certain aspect of divine encounter that was perhaps difficult to communicate artistically was the awe and fear that mortals experienced. Immense size, precious material, and certain masking effects might have been utilized to mimic this impression. For example, the chryselephantine Parthenos statue of

6 Steiner 2001: 81.
7 The popularity of iconic images is challenged in Donohue 1988.
8 Steiner 2001: 29.
10 Henrichs 2010: 128.
11 For example, Demeter’s epiphany in Hom. Hymn Dem. 182.
Athena displays some of these epiphanic qualities mentioned (Figure 1). Its towering height immediately calls to mind the awe-inspiring entrances told in myth. Additionally, the gold and ivory used in this statue emphasizes the otherworldly perfection that deities were believed to have. Another example exists in the large, masterfully rendered cult statue of Zeus in the temple at Olympus, which is mentioned above. The sculptor, Phidias, fashioned the chryselephantine sculpture in a more naturalistic style compared to the pedimental sculpture on the temple. As these examples show, ancient artists were experimenting with figural naturalism. In this way, we can understand the ancient Greek artistic process that went into the creation of religious accessories. However, these observations once more do not elaborate on the personal experiences of the ancients who viewed them.

Examining religious accessories by means of artistic and contextual observation and research can provide important information for modern understanding of ancient Greek religious accessories. Without this work, modern understanding of the skills, technology, and visual ideals of the ancients would be greatly limited. However, we find that certain gaps of information exist when examining religious accessories solely from these perspectives. First, certain accessories that lack artistic characteristics can be left out of studies or deemed unimportant. In addition to this, scholars sometimes overindulge in their application of mythic beliefs to the reality of ancient Greek mortal life. Although myth does give us important information on some religious thought, scholars must maintain a separation between both worlds. The rules that were believed to exist in myth were not necessarily those of the real ancient world. Scholars must also keep in mind that an artistic representation is just that, a representation, not a factual recording. Finally,

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13 See Demeter’s entrance to the palace of Eleusis in Hom. Hymn Dem. 188.
14 Boardman 1985: 33.
there are very few clues gleaned from these outlooks that explain ancient perceptions on the connections between deities and religious accessories.

2.2. Art Theory

The gaps of information left by art historical methodologies are partially filled by the work of art theorists such as Verity Platt and Deborah Steiner. These scholars both provide theories relating to the connection that exists between man and god by means of religious accessories. Platt and Steiner primarily focus on religious statuary. Their examinations display the important benefits of incorporating literature into this analysis in order to interpret the purpose and function of cult statues.

2.2.1. Embodiment Theory

This theory, promulgated by Verity Platt, argues that when ancient man viewed a statue, he believed he was seeing the deity proper.\textsuperscript{15} Her argument is based on the distortion that surrounds divine experience in myth and literature. Largely, she equates ancient man’s experience of religious accessories—primarily focused on cult statues—with the epiphanies documented in myth.

Platt argues that by viewing the cult statue, man was recreating the epiphanies of myth, leading to the deity embodying the statue.\textsuperscript{16} Platt’s continuously refers to a blurred line between the divine and mortal realms that increases the likelihood of this perceived occurrence. Her textual support comes from Parmenion’s epigrams, which were collected into the Anthology of

\textsuperscript{15} The name “Embodiment Theory” is not used by Platt herself; rather, the term is used in this paper to refer broadly to Platt’s arguments.

\textsuperscript{16} Platt 2011: 77.
Philip of Thessalonica. The poet analyzes the artistic work of Phidias and Polyclitus. He notes that the former is known for absolute naturalism in sculpting deities, revealing all parts of them, and the latter is known for keeping some of the facets of the deities a mystery, shying away from pure naturalism. Platt argues that this strain between the natural and the abstract is at the core of the Greeks’ understanding of cult statues and divine epiphanies. In other words, the increased level of naturalism Phidias employed while carving his divine subjects enhanced the realism of its anthropomorphic qualities, connecting them to the figures of the deities described in Homeric myth. However, this simultaneously drew attention to the great human craftsmanship, or technē, of the work and thereby the piece’s derivation from the mortal realm instead of the divine realm. This strain is paramount to the embodiment theory, again highlighting the indistinct line between the divine and mortal realms. Parmenion’s poem shows that one solution to this was to leave some of the divinity’s characteristics more abstract, or hidden—as Polyclitus did. In Platt’s solution to this conflict, she argues that the importance of viewing this epiphanic image superseded the need to realistically view the statue as man-made, resulting in the viewer’s “ritual commitment” to interpret the statue as a deity. However, it is difficult to accept that this suspension of disbelief would not affect the religious participant's worship in a detrimental way.

Platt also calls on ancient votive reliefs to support her argument. One from the shrine of Asclepius dating to the fourth century BCE shows an epiphanic scene between a god and worshippers. As this scene chronicles an everyday scene—recording mortals and a statue—naturalism does not distort the piece. Thus, Plat argues, this scene shows that ancient man believed that when he viewed the divine sculpture, man was repaid with a divine presentation, or

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18 Anth. Plan. 81. Small poetic verses dating to the first century CE written by Parmenion, one of which documents Phidias’ statue of Hera.
epiphany. In this ritualized setting, the realms of man and mortal overlap through the act of reciprocity—a characteristic that is seen throughout Greek culture. Though a compelling argument, we cannot definitively say if the scene described was meant to be an actual or symbolic occurrence.

However, Platt notes that ancient man believed divinities could not be contacted solely by mortal accessories—these must be “framed by divine modes of transmission.” This is where ritual comes into play, which fuses mortal and divine realms in a single place. Through hymns, blessings, sacrifices, and more, the man-made accessories become infused with the presence of the deity. The statue becomes the god.

While well-supported, Platt’s argument paradoxically incorporates a large degree of certainty into an argument based on blurred boundaries and ambiguity. Her larger argument is based on the idea that once a statue is consecrated through ritual, it presents to mortal man the epiphanic experience described in myth. As an epiphany involves a deity revealing himself or herself to man—existing in the same temporal and spatial realm together—Platt argues that the same was believed to occur when man worshipped a cult statue.

Platt’s argument relies on a certainty that the deity is present, revealing himself directly to mortals. This contradicts the nature of Greek life and religion, which leaves voids for the misunderstood or tragic aspects of life. Platt’s rendition of ancient personal belief might harden the tragic effects of life if a Greek individual beseeched a deity directly, sharing the same physical space, yet still did not receive aid. In myth, divine revelation usually brings with it a divine blessing or curse. Man does not exist in the same space as a deity without some effect; hence why mortals in myth tended to avoid the unreliability of divine attention. If nothing were

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22 Platt 2011: 53.
to come of this experience, one would think the deity was absent, as often occurs in mythic supplications to deities.\textsuperscript{23} Therefore, receiving divine indifference in recompense for directly interacting with a deity does not align with Greek religious thought.

Platt’s argument about the blurring of boundaries in ritualistic settings, however, does align to the porous structure of ancient Greek life. This ambiguity existed due to the ancient states of transportation, communication, record keeping, and science. Platt aptly states, “ambiguity is a ‘strategic’ device unconsciously employed to maintain the system’s potency.”\textsuperscript{24} It is the acknowledgement of the unknown that allows for much of Greek life to function. Many ancient events could not be explained, so ancient man had to cope by accrediting these occurrences to that which by definition could never be understood by man: the divine.

\textbf{2.2.2. Vessel Theory}

This theory gains its title from the observations of scholars such as Deborah Steiner, who liken the relationship between a deity and a religious accessory to a vessel being filled.\textsuperscript{25} Again, we find a theory that only applies to religious statuary. Steiner compares this type of relationship to Hesiod’s myth of Pandora. Pandora was a vessel, molded and fashioned by the gods, and filled with various gifts and abilities from each deity.\textsuperscript{26} Along this line of reasoning, Steiner argues that ancient man was contemplating the differing relationship between deities and their shell-like cult statues.\textsuperscript{27} Similar to Platt, the deviation from the artistic point of view is seen here by Steiner’s

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{23} We find examples of this in the Homeric myths of Ajax and Kassandra, Zeus and Sarpedon, and more.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Platt 2011: 75.
\item \textsuperscript{25} This theory is never labeled the “vessel theory” by Steiner herself; rather, this term is solely used in this paper as an indicator of Steiner’s greater theory.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Hes. \textit{Opera et Dies} 62-83.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Steiner 2001: 79.
\end{itemize}
integration of myth into the analysis. Indeed, she insists that both images and texts are invaluable to the other.\textsuperscript{28}

To understand Steiner’s greater argument, her views on the differing functions of representation must be addressed first. Steiner draws a distinction between two types of representations: the \textit{eikon} and the \textit{eidola}. An \textit{eikon} functions as a link to the absent original because of deep, shared characteristics. An \textit{eidola}, on the other hand, functions only as a visual representation of the absent original, with no deeper linking characteristics. An \textit{eidola} was appreciated more for its beauty of craftsmanship than anything else. Despite the differences between these two types of representations, Steiner notes that both of these purposes often existed within one statue. The ability of a statue to both impress visually and connect the viewer to an absent reality is seen in victory statues, which simultaneously call to mind the appearance of the athlete as well as call attention to the aesthetics of the piece.\textsuperscript{29} When applied to Steiner’s opinions on religious statuary, it becomes apparent that the connection to the deity and the method of connection were both equally as important to ancient man.

As we see in myth, deities take on many disguises to hide their true identities from man—with the purpose of either testing man or shielding man from the dangerous force of divine revelation. Demeter famously disguises herself from the king and queen of Eleusis in the \textit{Homeric Hymn to Demeter}. After Persephone is taken from her, she goes into mourning disguised as an old crone. She originally takes on this form to avoid her divine duties. When she meets the king and queen of Eleusis, this disguise becomes necessary to shield the mortals from the power of her true form. However, the mortals still perceive a great power in the visitor. Upon her entrance, Demeter, “filled the whole indoors with divine light. She [Metaneira] was seized by

\textsuperscript{28} Steiner 2001: xi.
\textsuperscript{29} Steiner 2001: 20.
a sense of *aidos*, by a holy wonder, by a blanching fear.” The force of Demeter’s divinity permeates through her disguise, hinting at her true identity. Her disguise soon becomes a test, however, when the queen of Eleusis spies on the crone as she takes care of the infant prince. Demeter had been placing the child into the hearth fire to burn away his mortality so that he will live forever. However, the queen misinterprets this action and rushes in. Demeter, now revealing her divinity, reacts in anger and punishes the Eleusinians: “Ignorant humans! Heedless, unable to recognize in advance the difference between future good fortune and future bad…you have made a big mistake, a mistake without remedy.” Demeter is insulted by the humans’ inability to both recognize her as divine and trust her actions. When she does reveal her true form, all of the Eleusinians suffer. Demeter’s disguise has a progression of purposes throughout this single myth, displaying how deities used ambiguous forms for their individual purposes. Along this line of reasoning, Steiner argues that ancient man perceived a cult statue as another disguise that the deity could take on at will. This disguise is then used not only to conceal the uncontrollable force of the divine, but also to contain it.

From here, Steiner’s argument addresses the two forms of ancient religious statuary: the iconic statues and the aniconic statues. Steiner notes that aniconic images were more suited for worship because of the ambiguity of their forms. She argues that these more closely resembled the imperceptible disguises deities undertake in myth to hide their identities. These non-human

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31 *Hom. Hymn. Dem.* 244.
33 Steiner 2001: 81.
34 Steiner’s argument is idiosyncratic to many of the mythic examples, which continuously refer to the divine anthropomorphic forms that deities employ. The “legions” of examples that Steiner notes in her work come from Gordon 1979, Donahue 1988, and Freedburg 1989; She notes that aniconic images are the “proffered mode of action” for deities, but there is not support listed for this claim. Both anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic disguises are seen abundantly in myth. However, this does align with Platt’s argument mentioned above.
forms then served both to contain the force of the deity as well as to test the mortal’s ability to discern the divine presence within it. We see ancient examples of this helpfully documented by Pausanias in his *Descriptions of Greece*. In Megara, for example, he remarks on a small pyramid that is known to be Apollo Carinus. Many such religious accessories are noted during Pausanias’ travels.

As a whole, we find that there are distinct parallels from aniconic and iconic statues to *eikon* and *eidola*, respectively. We then come to Steiner’s discussion of the *xoanon* and the *agalma*, which relate to the above terms in an analogous fashion (Table 1). The *xoanon* is a cult statue that shares a direct link with the deity proper and has an aniconic or semi-iconic form. The *agalma* is an often awe-inspiring representation of the deity, more appreciated for its aesthetic qualities than for its sanctity. These can often exist in the same temple or sanctuary at a time,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Terms that imply a deep, substantial bond between statue and deity.</th>
<th>Terms that imply a purely aesthetic, shallow resemblance between statue and deity.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aniconic</strong>: statues of deities that are not anthropomorphic, but stylistic and abstract figures.</td>
<td><strong>Iconic</strong>: statues of deities that are anthropomorphic and strive to resemble the human form.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eikon</strong>: an object that shares deeply ingrained characteristics with the absent original.</td>
<td><strong>Eidola</strong>: an object that resembles the outer form of the absent original.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Xoanon</strong>: cult statue that directly connects to the deity, harboring the absent divinity’s essence.</td>
<td><strong>Agalma</strong>: a cult statue that mimics the awe-inspiring look and presentation of the divine form.</td>
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35 Steiner 2001: 81.
36 Though Pausanias’ travels occurred in the second century CE, his documentations of Greek religious accessories still prove helpful when arguing the timelessness of the coexistence of aniconic and iconic statues.
37 Paus. 1.44.2.
38 Steiner, 2001: 103
each appreciated for their differing purposes.\textsuperscript{39} Steiner argues that the \textit{agalma} functioned as an outer representation of the divinity’s properties, which was experienced by nothing more than an individual’s active viewing of it. The \textit{xoanon}, on the other hand, was an internal containment of the divinity’s essence that required more ritualistic actions to connect with it.\textsuperscript{40} This approximate alignment of terms gains meaning when we apply it to two very famous Athenian statues of Athena: the Parthenos and the Polias. These two statues existed on the Athenian Acropolis, and both represented the goddess Athena. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the iconic Athena Parthenos statue sculpted by Phidias between 447-448 BCE mimics the opulent epiphanic qualities that are recounted in myth.\textsuperscript{41} This aesthetic relationship calls to mind the idea of the fully-revealed deity, but does not foster a true connection between man and deity. The Polias, on the other hand, shares a deeper connection to the deity partly because of its ambiguous aniconic form and its unknown, potentially mythical, time of creation. This statue was the centerpiece of the Panathenaic festival, and was ritualistically washed and dress during this time.\textsuperscript{42} This figure is made of olive wood, supposedly from the mythic piece that fell from the sky.\textsuperscript{43} Again we see how aniconic forms gain power through the material from which they are made. However, because this material degrades easily we do not know if this is true. This piece is assumed to have been life-size, as the statue was dressed in a peplos fashioned for the human form.\textsuperscript{44} Neils argues that this piece started out as a relatively neutral and undetailed form, but that the

\textsuperscript{39} As in the example of the two Hera statues at the Argive Heraion (Steiner 2001: 103).
\textsuperscript{40} Steiner, 2001: 104
\textsuperscript{41} Neils 1992: 132.
\textsuperscript{42} Neils 1992: 120.
\textsuperscript{43} Paus. 1.26.6.
\textsuperscript{44} Neils 1992: 121.
Athenians later added certain symbolic elements of Athena in later years, such as the aegis and helmet.\textsuperscript{45} Despite these additions, the statue was still non-figural.

When examining the two different Athena sculptures, it becomes necessary to address why there was a need for two statues. To start, it must be noted that lack of evidence and contradicting literature makes the distinction hard to elucidate. Scholars such as C.J. Herrington advocate that the Athena Parthenos and Polias represented different aspects of the deity and thus were worshipped in accordance to the mortal’s need.\textsuperscript{46} Herrington argues that this is supported by the place on the Acropolis in which the statue was placed, which he believes symbolically represented the different roles of Athena. However, this is in dispute because of the varying testimonials that place both the Polias and the Parthenos in many different places on the Acropolis. Additionally, the Parthenon acted as an Athenian repository, and thus was not a consecrated site of mortal-divine communication.\textsuperscript{47} This supports the argument that the Parthenos did not function as a cult statue, as the Polias did. Instead, the Parthenon and the Athena Parthenos were admired for their aesthetic qualities and themes of victory.

Similar to Platt’s argument, Steiner’s stance relies on a great degree of certainty that is incongruous to the rest of ancient life. Steiner argues that a statue could be filled with the divinity’s essence upon consecration. This consecration could take the form of washing, feeding, anointing, talking to, dressing, and parading around the statue.\textsuperscript{48} She gains support for her argument by noting that priests often filled a hollow cavity within the statue with various liquids or objects, as noted in the Greek Magical Papyri.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{45} Neils 1992: 123.
\textsuperscript{46} Neils 1992: 124.
\textsuperscript{47} Neils 1992: 134.
\textsuperscript{48} Steiner 2001: 114
\textsuperscript{49} Steiner 2001: 119.
This constant connection between man and deity fostered by a vessel-statue is debunked by some of the very sources Steiner pulls on to support her argument. Although there is definite proof that this view of religious statuary did exist, we often find such proof in the ancient work that is dismissing this point of view. Steiner initially quotes Heraclitus who mocks the individuals who believe that a statue is filled with a deity. He likens this to “chattering with houses, not recognizing what gods or even heroes are like.”\(^{50}\) Although Steiner is correct in using this as proof of the vessel theory’s existence, the main purpose of this statement is to highlight the great degree of discomfort and unfamiliarity that surrounded this theory. The idea that the deity would be dwelling within the statue, to be addressed whenever the mortal saw fit, clearly does not align with the ambiguity of divine will seen in myth. Despite these contradictions within Steiner’s argument, we find that her secondary observations on the power of aniconic statues do align with the indeterminate quality of Greek life. These statues were perhaps worshiped more fervently in ancient times because they allowed for a degree of uncertainty within their representation. This underlying ambiguity of cult statue worship parallels the overall cultural and technological development of the ancients.

\(^{50}\) Heraclitus B5 DK; Steiner 2001: 79.
Chapter 3: Semiotic Theory

The method of viewing statues in this chapter, much like the last two modes, is supported by ancient texts and archaeological discoveries. The semiotic approach of examining religious accessories challenges the ideas of scholars such as Platt and Steiner who assert that there is an intrinsic, physical connection between the religious accessory and the deity. Semiotic theory presents these accessories as mental pointers to the absent deities. Charles Peirce, who addresses semiotics as it relates to all types of connections, perhaps most famously explains this approach. When combining this Peircian method to ancient religious accessories, we find that scholars such as Adria Haluszka argue for this method’s application due to the variation of interaction between man and accessory that it affords.¹ Haluszka, much like the scholars in the last two chapters, primarily addresses statuary. However, this method can easily be applied to all items that are integrated into religious ritual and devotion.

3.1. The Birth of Semiotics: Charles Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure

The term “semiotic” has become more commonplace in modern society, with its constantly broadening mediums of signs. However, there were two late nineteenth-century scholars who paved the way for the current examination of this field: Charles Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure. Neither of these men were art historians or classicists: Peirce was a physicist and logician and Saussure was a linguist and psychologist. Even though these men were developing similar theories, they never collaborated or shared ideas during their lifetimes.²

¹ Haluszka 2008: 480.
Despite their differences, both men’s work on the nature of connectivity between objects and their culturally determined mental concepts offer widespread applications.³

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Charles Peirce defined logic as semiotic.⁴ He insisted that this logic, as a function of man, is both flawed and infinite because of the constant flux that the individual human psyche undergoes. This logic then leads to a process of “abstractive observation,” which man uses to understand his or her surrounding world.⁵ This involves a three-part process that includes observation of an object, a representamen, and an interpretant. This triadic relationship then presupposes that signs cannot exist without each part. The object is a specific subject, item, or idea from which the individual is removed in either space or time. What does exist in the same spatial and temporal realm of the individual is the representamen. The representamen functions as an indicator to the individual observing it. Upon the observation of this external pointer, the individual forms an internal, mental idea called the interpretant. This internal idea then fosters a connection to the original object.⁶ Peirce defines a “sign” as a “representament with a mental interpretant”⁷ However, it is important to note that the sign only represents the original object. It does not actually provide direct contact with the object.

Another scholar whose ideas form the basis of modern semiotics is Ferdinand de Saussure. Whereas Peirce wanted to use semiotics to define logic, Saussure thought that

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semiotics defined language. As noted, neither Peirce nor Saussure shared their theories with each other. As such, Saussure labeled his work on signs “semiology.”

Saussure believed that noises only functioned as language when they communicated ideas, relying on a system of signs to do so. Saussure’s theory is very similar to Peirce’s, but Saussure’s theory only defines two parts of the loop. The significant (signifier) is the sign itself, which we can understand as equivalent to Peirce’s representamen. The signifié (signified) is the meaning of the sign, parallel to Peirce’s interpretant. The signifié is an individual’s inner concept of the object, not the object itself. In fact, Saussure does not label the absent object at all, though he does recognize its existence.

Saussure’s main argument insists that one’s inner signifié was subject to the language one spoke. He believed that one’s language highly influenced the choices individuals made in interpreting the world around them. An example of this might be a picture of what English-speakers know as a dog. English-speakers would immediately call to mind the interpretant of “dog,” the mental idea of the image-word pair. On the other hand, French-speakers would think chien, and Italian-speakers would think cane. Therefore, these signs are arbitrary, as these three words for a dog have no intrinsic connection to the idea of a dog. Language is, after all, entirely man-made and has been continuously open to differing developments based on evolving cultural landscapes. With this in mind, every language has its own unique set of signifiers and signified.

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11 Except for the rare cases of onomatopoeia, perhaps. Culler 1986: 29.
12 It is important to note that there is a large distinction between languages, based on more than simple random words assigned to various verbs, nouns, articles and more (nomenclature). From language to language, words can have several different meanings. “Languages do not simply name existing categories; they articulate their own.” However, these “categories” are arguably arbitrary. Culler 1986: 31.
Although the naming may be arbitrary, the mental connection from signifiers to signified is quite real for speakers of the same language.

One main theme runs through both of these theories. We find that a semiotic system of recognition works in a closed loop of meaning. In other words, signs refer to shared concepts within a cultural unit.\(^{13}\) If one exists outside of this cultural unit, the connection between the sign and the signified is incomplete. The creator of a sign—whether it be an ancient sculptor or a modern toy-maker—fashions the sign with a particular group of viewers in mind. The creator knows exactly what concept the sign should bring to mind. For example, a vase with the painted figure of a muscular man holding a club and wearing a lion-skin cloak would have immediately been recognized by the ancient Greeks as Herakles, the son of Zeus. However, individuals unexposed to this Greek concept would not naturally understand the signified figure. This method of communication is based on shared cultural understanding, much like an “alphabet” of signs, and is therefore hyper-reflexive.\(^{14}\)

In the realm of statuary, the ancient individual knew a cult statue held some sort of connection to the deity because of the statue’s setting and aesthetic characteristics. However, to modern viewers who are far removed from the closed loop of cultural concepts, this recognition of the sign’s meaning does not occur immediately. Through careful study, scholars can learn some of this “alphabet,” but they do not exist in the same time or place as these concepts. Therefore, they can never possess the original scope of their meaning.

A solid definition of “sign” can be created from an amalgamation of both theorists’ vocabularies. For the purpose of this study, a sign is henceforth defined as a significant that connects an individual to the original, absent object by means of a mental signifié. When

\(^{13}\) Solomon 1988: 15.

\(^{14}\) These “alphabets” are also referred to by scholars as “myths.” Not to be confused with stories of deities and heroes, these myths provide a framework for understanding signs. Solomon 1988: 16.
applying semiotic theory to the realm of religious accessories and their connections to the gods, we find that the model works quite well. The object from which man is far removed aligns with the deity proper. As the gods dwell in a realm separate from the mundane sphere of mortal life, there are very few times when the deities and man share temporal and spatial conditions. The term significant can be applied to the religious accessory itself, which functions as an indicator to the absent object. Finally, this theory adds the previously unconsidered idea of the signifié to the man-statue-deity connection. By means of this theory, scholars are provided with concrete vocabulary for man’s inner mental process as he regards the religious accessory and connects it to the deity.

These distinctions allow for a continuously cycling process that connects man to the divine. This cycle consists of three parts: [1] a connection exists between a statue and god based on aesthetic and material qualities (significant), [2] man perceives this statue and the responding idea of the god is brought to the man’s mind (signifié), [3] this idea connects to the deity proper (object). However, this cycle from significant to signifié to object is only activated when man perceives the religious accessory, which can only be done by close proximity. Additionally, this theory allows for a degree of uncertainty because the god is not called into the mortal realm. When we apply semiotic theory to the realm of religious accessories, we enter into the subject matter and main argument of Adria Haluszka.
3.2. Semiotic Application to Greek Religious Accessories

Adria Haluszka seeks to combine Peirce’s theories with her own examination of rituals outlined in the *Greek Magical Papyri (PGM)*. She references the many practices that were used to create a connection between the deity and the religious accessory, primarily focusing on statuary and engraved pieces. The distinction between these two types of religious accessories is based both on the methods by which they are “consecrated” and on how they function.\textsuperscript{15}

The spells in the *PGM* endow the religious accessories with a power Haluszka labels as “divine efficacy.”\textsuperscript{16} Instead, the *PGM* notes that this connection is fostered by placing papyri inside the object with written spells or names inscribed on them. Additionally, the *PGM* calls for statues to be crafted from particular materials to further enhance the connection between statue and god.\textsuperscript{17} Despite all of these intricate directions, Haluszka notes there are no direct references to these spells animating a statue or filling it with the deity.\textsuperscript{18} Instead, Haluszka argues that these materials and pieces of papyri each function as an *ousia*. The *ousia* is the “essence” of an absent object, not to be confused with the object proper. This can function as, “a pointer which establishes a symbolic relationship between two points, of which one is the object referred to and the other is the sign.”\textsuperscript{19} Thus, Haluszka draws a parallel between the *ousia* embedded a religious accessory and the *significant*. These indices point to an absent deity who is being represented by the statue, engraving, or other accessory without “specifying the exact nature of the relationship between the entity and its representation.”\textsuperscript{20} This ambiguous connection, as mentioned by

\begin{itemize}
\item[16] Haluszka 2008: 483.
\item[17] Haluszka 2008: 484.
\item[18] Haluszka 2008: 487.
\item[19] Graf 1997: 140.
\end{itemize}
Peirce’s theory, allows for a great degree of uncertainty within man’s interaction with the statue. Notably, this connection does not bring the deity proper into the mortal realm.

The appearance of the term *ousia* in *PGM* suggests a narrow applicability due to the marginal quality of this source. We see many examples of binding this *ousia* to objects that represent an individual to whom the “magician” or his customer wishes to do harm.²¹ This overly mystical connotation subsequently skews our modern understanding of such practices. Thus, it is very often left out of ancient religious scholarship. However, the term’s parallelism to Peirce’s *index* implies that the *ousia* simply functions as a tie between the absent individual or god and the observer of the *ousia*’s container. Although this sounds similar to the vessel theory, we must remember that the *ousia* is not the *object*. In this sense, Haluszka is endeavoring to pinpoint the exact point of connection between statue and deity by means of this essence. When looking at this concept from this technical perspective, we find that Haluszka’s argument applies to elements of Greek religion other than those outlined in the *PGM*.

By applying this idea to religious accessories, we can elaborate on the universality of semiotic theory. Continuing with the example of the two cult statues of Athena on the Acropolis, we find that each functions according to the Peircian model. The aniconic statue of Athena, or the Polias, housed in the Erechtheion, provides a strong connection between man, statue, and god—correlating to the triadic relationship of the *interpretant*, *representamen*, and *object* (Table 2). Assuming the *ousia* was ritualistically attached to the statue, when man worshipped this statue through prayer, sacrifice, and offerings, one was indirectly connected to the deity proper. Indeed this statue is a fascinating example because of the festival that surrounded it. The Panathenaia was an annual festival honoring the patron deity of Athens. During this time maiden

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²¹ *PGM* IV 296-466.
priestesses wove a peplos and dressed the Polias in it.22 The object was Athena, separate from the mortal realm. The statue was the representamen, acting as a reminder of Athena’s existence to the onlookers. Where the Peircian model convincingly differs from Haluszka’s is in the former’s inclusion of the interpretant. This inner realization, one’s thoughts of the deity, is distinct from both the deity proper and its signifier. Thus, the inner interpretant in this example is the individual’s inner concept of the goddess Athena.

Table 2: Alignment of the Semiotic Vocabulary of Peirce, Saussure, and Haluszka. Included is Van Arsdale’s choice of terms used for the sake of simplicity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaning:</th>
<th>Peirce</th>
<th>Saussure</th>
<th>Haluszka</th>
<th>Van Arsdale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The sign, or religious accessory.</td>
<td>Representamen</td>
<td>Significant</td>
<td>Signifier</td>
<td>Significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thin inner idea of the absent reality; one’s mental concept of the deity.</td>
<td>Interpretant</td>
<td>Signifié</td>
<td>(Neither acknowledged nor labeled.)</td>
<td>Signifié</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The deity proper.</td>
<td>Object</td>
<td>(Acknowledged but not labeled.)</td>
<td>Signified</td>
<td>Object</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although Haluszka does not reference Saussure’s work on this subject, we find that remnants of his theory appear in the aforesaid mentioned ideas of the “signified” and the “signifier.” Haluszka’s version of the “signifier” still pertains to the sign, or the religious accessory. However, her use of the term “signified” relates to the absent object, not the individual’s inner concept, as Saussure would insist.

This gap in Haluszka’s argument does create some problems when modern viewers attempt to interpret ancient cult statues by her system. Just as Steiner’s and Platt’s methods seem to leave out specific cultural inclinations, so too does Haluszka’s argument fail to accommodate the differences between the mindsets, or cultural “alphabets,” of the ancient viewers and the

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22 Hooper 1963: 4
modern viewers. A final weakness in Haluszka’s argument lies in her dependence on the *Greek Magical Papyri* as her main source of evidence. Though very informative, the *PGM* are notoriously idiosyncratic to both the time period and culture from which it came.

Despite these issues, Haluszka’s argument gains support through its own ambiguous nature. If ancient man approached a cult statue and saw it as a sign of the deity, neither as a vessel nor as a deity incarnate, he would be viewing the statue in accordance to modern semiotic theory. According to this theory, man would see a statue and believe that it shared a connection to the deity proper. Through this line of communication, man could send his prayers, sacrifices, and other offerings to the deity. Man was not in the same realm as the deity either temporally or spatially. The uncertain nature of this connection aligns with the general structure of ancient Greek life as a whole.

As is continuously referred to here, Greek culture had voids of understanding because of its developmental context. In other words, the status of this ancient culture’s technological, medicinal, scientific, and communicative developments left many aspects of everyday life undefined or misunderstood. These voids were partially filled with religion. Yet religion is filled with distant deities of inconceivable power—creating voids of understanding within religion itself. Deities could rarely be truly understood—similar to the certain everyday events in ancient life. These subsequent voids were filled with personal belief: how an individual or group chose to believe they were contacting the divine. From here three options were available to man: the embodiment theory, the vessel theory, or the semiotic theory. The first two theories fill the voids completely and leave no room for ambiguity within themselves. These theories include certainties about the contact between man and deity and the successful transmission of man’s

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23 It is important to note that there is no evidence that this theory existed in the ancient Greek civilization; this is a modern application of a model used to clarify to a modern audience the mindsets of the ancients.
prayers. Semiotic theory, however, has apparent voids created by the distance that exists between the statue of the deity to the deity proper. There is no certainty of contact, no way to confirm the communion is actually occurring. These voids, in combination with the capricious characters of deities in myth, help clarify why misfortune still occurs. Indeed, it can be argued that faith according to the embodiment or vessel theories is continuously undermined by the very nature of the connective belief. If a man believes that he is physically close to the deity yet his prayers and sacrifices still remain unanswered, one’s faith would diminish quickly.

Semiotic theory’s application to religious accessories gains further support in that it protects the mortal individual from the overpowering presence of the deity proper. By means of this tethered connection between statue and deity, the individual can communicate with the deity without harming himself. As myth implies, involving oneself with the gods can often be perilous for mortals. Facts such as these are gleaned from ancient literature and art in order to understand the culturally formed viewpoint that influenced ancient man’s perceptions of religious accessories. For example, when viewing a statue of the god Dionysus, it is important to consider the various myths surrounding the deity. As mentioned in previous chapters, Dionysus was known for his tests and epiphanies in myth. In the *Homeric Hymn to Dionysus*, the deity lets himself be captured by pirates in order to test them. He punishes the pirates who did not see through his mortal guise by turning into a lion and running them off the ship, and rewards the individual who recognized his divinity.24 Thus when examining a statue, both ancient and modern viewers have to keep in mind the various guises the deity might be employing, which was done both for the safety of the mortals and the amusement of the god. Additionally, artists and ancient viewers pulled on the imagery of myth to portray the character. The *Homeric Hymn*

to Dionysus also records that as the divinity lets his status be known, “a vine spread out both ways along the top of the sail with many clusters hanging down from it, and a dark ivy-plant twined about the mast…and with rich berries growing on it.”25 In this way we can understand that images of grape vines are integral to Dionysus, supporting his role as god of wine. Such images of vines can be seen in many artistic representations of him, particularly in vase paintings.26 Thus, semiotic theory fuses together the accessory and the myth that surrounds its subject, providing a point of view that both adheres to ancient cultural awareness and partially translates this awareness to viewers of today. This theory becomes particularly important when we face alternative religious accessories that are both object and text in one.

By examining religious accessories through semiotic theory, based on either logic or linguistics, one finds a type of religious belief that aligns with ancient understanding of all the other realms of life. The connection among man, sculpture, and deity was dependent on many intermediate cultural concepts that greatly affected ancient man’s perception of this connection. As modern scholars, there is no way to reform this ancient “alphabet” of cultural concepts entirely. However, through centuries of artistic, archaeological, and textual study, we can make fairly dependable assumptions. Even without this accumulated modern understanding, we can still recognize the structure of belief that existed to accept these concepts. This three-part cyclical structure composed of the significant, the inner signifié, and the object brought ancient man into a distant yet active state of communication with the divine.

Chapter 4: The Bacchic Gold Tablets

When comparing the differing perspectives on ancient religious accessories, embodiment theory, vessel theory, and semiotic theory all gain support from ancient myth, historic accounts, and the archaeological record. However, the former two theories function primarily in the area of state cult statues, leaving out of their consideration the roles of alternative religious accessories. As a result, further support for semiotic theory arises from its applicability to the realm of mystery cult accessories.

Ancient mystery cults, often overlooked because of their “mystic” and “magical” associations, did not function as alternatives to the state cults of antiquity. This viewpoint perhaps stems from the more modern monotheistic necessity to choose one mode of religion over another. Rather, as we shall see, the rituals of mystery cults simply provided benefits for different parts of ancient man’s life, which state cults did not offer. As such, the religious accessories associated with these rituals do not exist in a realm of their own, but in the same category as state cult statues.

Among the many ancient mystery cults, the Bacchic mysteries stand out in this study because of the form that their religious accessories took: small, inscribed, gold tablets.¹ These tablets functioned as indicators, marking individuals as initiates of this mystery. In this way, an

¹ For the sake of simplicity, the term “Bacchic” is chosen to denote this mystery cult. The cult is also referred to as the Orphic mysteries and the Dionysian mysteries. See, Graf, Fritz. “Dionysian and Orphic Eschatology: new texts and old questions.” Edited by Thomas A. Carpenter and Christopher A. Faraone, The Masks of Dionysus, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Walter Burkert and Wilhelm H. Wueellner, Orphism and Bacchic mysteries: new evidence and old problems of interpretation, (Berkeley: The Center, 1977).
initiate was believed to achieve a happier afterlife, a benefit of the *katabasis* of the god Bacchus, or Dionysus.²

Through examination of the inscriptions on the Bacchic gold tablets in depth, the popular scholarly opinion that mystery cults were disorganized, local, or magical practices will be undermined. Additionally, this will underscore the gold tablets’ legitimate place in the arena of religious accessories which has been previously limited to statuary. This will be done primarily through the use of social network analysis (SNA). This method will assess the widespread canonical stories attached to this cult and thereby emphasize its prevalence in ancient society. The result of these analyses will reveal the concrete and canonical nature of the Bacchic mystery cult that spread over great geographic and temporal distances. Additionally, we will examine the historic events that occurred at the time when these gold tablets began to appear. This will provide valuable insight into the harmonious relationship between the state cults and the mystery cults of antiquity. In this way, the necessity of using a theoretical viewpoint that does not draw distinctions between these two areas of Greek religion will be highlighted. This need is fulfilled by semiotic theory.

### 4.1. Mystery Cults

Mystery cults in the ancient world were by no means particular to fifth-century Greece, the time in which the Bacchic mysteries became increasingly popular. We find such mysteries of Isis, Mithras, and Magna Mater all throughout the ancient world, from Egypt to the Near East.

² *Katabasis* is the word for a hero’s or god’s journey to the underworld, usually a round-trip visit involving the visitor’s desire to save a dead loved one or gain some knowledge from the deceased. For example, when Odysseus travels to the underworld to see Tiresias in *Ody.* XI.
and over to Rome. Additionally, these mystery cults were by no means relegated to one specific time period, but continued to develop and grow in influence for centuries. Although these mystery cults were very organized in their rites, rituals, and beliefs, they continued to evolve as they came into contact with different cultures. This in particular holds true to the development of the Bacchic mysteries, which is discussed below. Throughout all mysteries, a few central facts seem to hold true. Mystery cults require participatory events, which affect the initiate directly. Most people are familiar with rites of passages, which permanently alter an individual’s relationship with society. Initiations and rites in mystery cults similarly altered the individual. Instead of affecting one’s relation to society, these events strictly altered an individual’s relationship with a deity and offered whatever benefits this close connection may afford. Another facet that mysteries share is secrecy. Unlike the events of a state cult, which were all open to public view, the events of a mystery cult were purposefully kept secret. Additionally, mysteries offer some connection to the realm or gods of death so as to ensure a more favorable afterlife. Death, itself a dark and unknown mystery, was something for which people desired comfort. While state cults sometimes ensured a happy life, they were not designed to affect one’s shade in the underworld. Plutarch noted that when faced with death, many people “think that some sort of initiations and purifications will help: once purified, they believe, they will go on playing and dancing in Hades in places full of brightness, pure air and light.” Reflecting this idea, the rites of mystery cults were often held at night or in dark, secluded areas like caves.

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3 Whereas the Mithraic mysteries date to the first few centuries AD, the cult of Magna Mater dates all the way back to the Neolithic period. Burkert 1987: 6.
8 Burkert 1987: 8.
Because of the secrecy surrounding mystery cults, it is often difficult to assess the particular effects the rituals had on the psyche of ancient man. However, it appears that an overall desire to understand death occurred, though not necessarily in a linear way. When examining the sporadic developments of mystery cults, one must ask exactly what was fostering this desire to understand death in a different way than was already provided by earlier mystery cults. Some religious theorists such as E.B. Tylor might posit that this is an organic religious ascension—that it is natural for man to question life and death and further the development of religion as time goes on.\(^9\) However, with these theories men such as Tylor are attempting to push the origins of Christianity deeper into history. Inspection of the historical events and the cultural context surrounding the development of the mystery cult will provide an unbiased position from which to examine this form of religion.

4.2. The Eleusinian Mysteries

This context begins with the development and rites of the Bacchic mysteries’ forbearer, the Eleusinian mysteries. Although the Eleusinian mystery cult did not directly lead to the creation of the Bacchic mysteries, we shall see that the many similarities between the two suggests that the latter had integrated certain facets from the older, more establish mystery cult. According to the *Homer Hymn to Demeter*, this mystery cult is revealed to the people of Eleusis when Demeter finally finds her daughter, Persephone, who had been abducted by Hades.\(^10\) When Demeter locates Persephone and an agreement is made between Demeter and

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\(^10\) There is a debate among scholars about the relationship between the *Homer Hymn to Demeter* and the Eleusinian mysteries. Though this debate will not be examined further, see, Richardson 1974, Alderink 1982, Clinton 1974.
Hades, Demeter grants the mortals a gift. In addition to allowing the crops to finally grow, she also:

 taught [the lawgiver kings] the sacred service, and showed them the beautiful mysteries . . . the solemn mysteries which one cannot depart from or enquire about or broadcast, for great awe of the gods restrains us from speaking. Blessed is he of men on earth who has beheld them, whereas he that is uninitiated in the rites, or he that has had no part in them, never enjoys a similar lot down in the musty dark when he is dead.  

Persephone’s eventual return to the realm of the living pleases Demeter so much that she decides to make the curse of mortality less formidable. Persephone becomes the queen of the underworld, yet returns to the celestial divine realm for part of every year. Her position as one of the rulers of the underworld denotes a certain amount of knowledge and familiarity with death. The cult that was created out of this mythic experience would thus impart some of this knowledge to initiates and foster a connection to Persephone. These “blessed” individuals, in order to gain this more enjoyable afterlife, have to take part in the initiation and rites of the cult.

Because of the secrecy surrounding the mystery cult, the literary evidence documenting the cult’s practices is scarce. Therefore, the modern research on the rituals of this mystery cult is mostly based on conjecture. Some believe that the rituals symbolized the mythic trials of Persephone. Such acts may have included a ritualized searching for Persephone—played by a priestess impersonating the goddess. Physical wanderings or circling through a darkened area were also part of the mystery cult’s practices, which were meant to imitate the lost and

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12 Even in his Description of Greece, Pausanias writes, “My dream forbade the description of the things within the wall of the sanctuary, and the uninitiated are of course not permitted to learn that which they are prevented from seeing” (1.38.7).
disorienting feelings believed to be a part of a shade’s existence in the underworld. In this way, initiates were symbolically experiencing death in order to receive knowledge and favor when they had to face it in actuality. Although we cannot argue specifics about the rituals of this mystery cult, we do know that there was an initiation process, or *teletai*. This practice, which state cults do not include, allowed those who took part in them to gain the special privileges of Demeter and Persephone’s knowledge. Information on these secret rites can be gleaned both from the architecture of the Eleusinian sanctuary and from literary hints. For example, the main building of the complex included seating on three sides, similar to a theatre. Thus the ritualized area perhaps took on the same dramatic function.

Literary evidence also suggests that the mystery cult’s rituals consisted of three parts: things done (*dromena*), things shown (*deiknumena*), and things spoken (*legomena*). In addition to the references of *deiknumena*, small vessels have been found in the sanctuary that were perhaps filled with ceremonial objects—perhaps the “things shown”. There are also accounts that describe the festival’s procession of the *hiera*, or sacred objects, from the Athens to Eleusis, and then back again at the end of the festival. Although there is debate about the time frame of this procession, we find evidence to support that the new initiates accompanied these *hiera* on their journey. In both cases, these physical objects functioned as *significants*, pieces that facilitated connections between man and deity through mental *signifié*.

The Eleusinian mystery’s clear connection to Athens, already noted by the procession of *hiera* between the two cities, suggests that this mystery cult was perhaps a hybrid of traditional

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16 Evans 2002: 246.
17 Evans 2002: 239.
state and mystery cult practices. Pausanias wrote about the ancient—and perhaps partially
mythical—war between the Eleusinians and Athenians. He recounts the reconciling agreement,
writing, “the Eleusinians were to have independent control of the mysteries, but in all things else
were to be subject to the Athenians.”¹⁹ As Eleusis was governed by Athens until the conquest
Philip II of Macedon, the Eleusinian mystery cult was arguably analogous to a state cult of
Athens. Held at Eleusis every year, the Eleusinian festival was the most popular pan-hellenic
festival until emperor Theodosius disbanded it in the fourth century CE.²⁰ Although large in
scale, this mystery cult was fixed in location. The Eleusinian mysteries could not be worshipped
in any other city. Therefore, if an individual wanted to reap the benefits of Persephone’s
experience, they had to journey to Eleusis. The Eleusinian mysteries combined its otherworldly
concerns and benefits with the typical city-state oversight that we see in state cults. Additionally,
the festival included both the private teletai and a public festival. During this time, non-initiates
could make the usual offerings and sacrifices seen in state cult practices. This amalgamation can
arguably suggest that the Eleusinian mystery cult was intermediate between state cults and the
Bacchic mysteries, which were not subject to a city-state. This breakdown of the traditional
dichotomy of state cults and mystery cults even further emphasizes the necessity of a theory that
bridges all of these gaps.

4.3. The Bacchic Mysteries

The Bacchic mysteries were based on a variation of the ancient myth of Dionysus.
Dionysus’ connection to the underworld is strong because of his mythic journey to retrieve his

¹⁹ Paus. 1.38.3.
mother, Semele, from Hades.\textsuperscript{21} Thus, he was already considered somewhat of an advocate of the dead before the variant myth came into existence. This myth bares the mark of a potential mystery cult. However, his exposure and connection to the underworld was perhaps too brief to warrant a true, deep understanding of Hades that could be passed on to initiates. The initiators of this cult perhaps recognized the importance of connecting the Bacchic cult’s mythic cycle to that of the Eleusinian cult.

In this way, an alternative myth of Dionysus came about, connecting Dionysus to the myth of Demeter and Kore. In this alternative myth, Dionysus is the son of Persephone and Zeus, and often referred to as Zagreus.\textsuperscript{22} This mother-child relationship mimicked that of Demeter and Persephone, giving the myth a familiar structure and therefore more credibility.\textsuperscript{23} The Eleusinian story was then pulled into the next generation of gods. According to this myth, Zeus decides to pass the throne on to Dionysus. However, the Titans grow angry at this choice, capture Dionysus, and dismember him.\textsuperscript{24} Here the creators of the myth decided to alter Dionysus’ connection to the underworld, sending him there as one of the dead. But in order for the myth to be successful, Dionysus had to return. There are many differing accounts of how Dionysus was reborn, the most compelling of which is through the help of Semele.\textsuperscript{25} After Dionysus was dismembered, Athena rescues his still-beating heart. Zeus places this within Semele and the god is reborn.\textsuperscript{26} In addition to this, Zeus incinerates the Titans for their deeds and from their ash

\textsuperscript{21} Graf and Johnston 2007: 74.
\textsuperscript{22} Edmonds 1999: 36.
\textsuperscript{23} Graf and Johnston 2007: 75.
\textsuperscript{24} Graf and Johnston 2007: 69.
\textsuperscript{25} This version of the myth perhaps gains some credibility because of Dionysus’ previous reputation as the “twice born” god: once from Semele, and again from the leg of Zeus. In the new version of the myth, Dionysus being born first from Persephone and again from Semele diminishes the differences between the old myth and the new. Alternate recorded versions of this “rebirth” involved aid from Rhea, Demeter, or Apollo. See Graf and Johnston 2007: 75-80.
\textsuperscript{26} Graf and Johnston 2007: 78.
humanity is born. Because of this, man is tainted by the actions of the Titans—perhaps explaining why human existence could be so difficult. Despite the often bleak prospects of life, man could reap the benefits of Dionysus’s underworld experience.

4.4. Time and Context

The next question to address is when this mythic variation came about. According to W.C.K. Guthrie, fifth-century Greece was “an age in which the established beliefs were being called in question.” The “established beliefs” refer to the Homeric myths of tradition, which support the state cults of the time. This is not to say that mystery cults made state cults obsolete by any means, merely that Greeks began filling in the gaps that the state cults left untouched—like the afterlife. We find examples of just such questioning in the third book of Plato’s Republic. In his work, Plato records the theorizing of Socrates, who questions the bleak outlook perpetuated by Homer’s works. Plato notes:

“And again if he believes in the reality of the underworld and its terrors, do you think that any man will be fearless of death and in battle will prefer death to defeat and slavery?”

Socrates disagrees with the propagation of this depressing view of death, saying it would cause the warriors of the future to submit dishonorably to slavery rather than to die nobly in battle. This sort of questioning is at the core of fifth-century philosophical developments. The Homeric tradition represented the canon of Olympic deities’ effects on man for centuries. As noted earlier,

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27 Graf and Johnston 2007: 86.
28 As noted in discussion of E.B. Tylor, this paper is seeking to avoid any discussion of proto-Christianity in the Bacchic Mysteries; the “original sin” that is implied in this myth will not be further discussed. See, Edmonds 1999.
29 Guthrie 1950: 256.
30 Plato Rep. 3.386b.
31 Here Plato is referencing the lamentation of Achilles to Odysseus, who would prefer to be the lowest servant on earth rather than the king of the dead (Hom. Od. 11.488-492).
epiphanies in myth rarely herald blessings for the average man, but rather visit some sort of harm on them instead. Not only do we see this in the above-mentioned Homeric Hymn to Demeter, but we see similar instances in the myths surrounding Dionysus. In Euripides’ Bacchae, we see the god testing the mortals of Thebes. For Pentheus, king of Thebes, his lack of participation in the deity’s festival leads to disastrous results. Even if a deity wanted to intervene to help a mortal, Zeus or the Fates often prohibited them. The scarcity of their interference in life was elevated in death. Even Achilles, one of the most famous warriors of myth, does not enjoy his afterlife. In the Homeric tradition, the gods only worked to affect the afterlives of the serious blasphemers.

Sarah Iles Johnston specifically addresses the Bacchic mysteries’ time of creation by searching for the first appearances of the altered version of the Dionysian myth. This comes in the form of Plato’s mid-fifth century recording of Pindar’s threnodies, in which he writes, “Persephone accepts the atonement for ancient grief.” This can be inferred to mean that the mysteries are used to appease Persephone’s loss of Dionysus. On top of this, Bacchic gold tablets mark the graves of Bacchic initiates beginning ca. 400 BCE. Taking into account that the mythic cycle and mysteries were around in a less predominate form before this, Graf and Johnston assert that the early fifth century was the date of the cult’s inception. Accepting the early fifth century as the time when the mystery began and seeing physical evidence of it appear in the late fifth century, one fact becomes clear: there was somewhat of a gap between the creation of the  

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32 In the midst of the Bacchic frenzy, Pentheus’ mother thinks that Pentheus is a wild animal and tears him apart (Euri. Bacchae 1301-1420).
33 We see this when Zeus wants to save his son Sarpedon from battle during the Trojan War, but is reminded by Hera that he should not go against the Fates (Hom. Il. XVI 426-461).
34 We see in the Odyssey that Tantalus is cursed with eternal hunger and thirst, with water and fruit perpetually out of his reach (Hom. Od. 11.583 ff.).
Bacchic mysteries and the beginning of the large-scale popularization of the tradition. With this in mind, the next step is to examine the historical events of the time between the two aforementioned occurrences. This will reveal important information about the cause of the widespread increase in Bacchic mystery initiates beginning in the end of the fifth century. With this in mind, when addressing fifth-century Greece scholars must consider war: both the Persian and the Peloponnesian.

The Persian Wars included two main invasions: the first by Darius on Marathon, and the second by Xerxes on Salamis, Plataea, and Mycale. The Athenians largely repelled the Persian forces at the battle of Marathon in 490 BCE, with some help from Plataea. Herodotus recounts the huge victory the Athenians achieved over this massive foreign army, claiming that the Athenians lost a small number of men whereas the Persians lost thousands. This was a great bolstering moment for the Athenians, establishing their might on a grand scale. When Xerxes launched the next wave of battles, most of the Greek mainland united to fight off the invading ‘barbarians.’ During these battles, the Greek martial tactics proved to make the Persian numbers somewhat obsolete. In this way, the Persians were eventually repelled and once again the Greeks were victorious.

The Persian Wars ushered in a time of pseudo-imperialism, particularly on the part of Athens. Although Sparta played a large role in the wars, Athens gained power afterwards because of the formation of the Delian League. Originally intended to build up funds in order to

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37 Some scholars believe that the myth had been around for centuries before this, streaming into Greece from Thrace. However the lack of archaeological evidence to support this claim makes it difficult to accept these scholars’ arguments. Additionally, it is hard to believe that this mythic variation existed for so long without permeating into the art or Homeric or Hesiodic writings as is the case for many other gods such as Hephaestus and Aphrodite. See, Cornford 1969: 52; Graf and Johnston 2007: 69.
38 Mikalson 2003: 5.
39 Claughton 2008: 38.
create a navy, Athens gained most of the profits from this league, as they were the primary shipbuilders of the mainland.\footnote{42 Tritle 2004: 1.} As such, Athenian power grew immensely. Although the city-state was a creation of Archaic Greece, the imperialistic trends of the larger Classical city-states undoubtedly put even more emphasis on state cult participation. Indeed, the entire Athenian Acropolis, which was sacked by the Persians during the war, was restored during this time period—mostly funded by the Delian League’s money. Pericles, who was in charge of this massive restoration project, also extended this refurbishment to the sanctuary of Eleusis, further emphasizing Athenian control of the cult there.\footnote{43 Keller 1988: 30.}

If we contend that mystery cults and state cults were two sides to the same coin, an increase in state cult grandeur could arguably usher in an increase in mystery-cult popularity as well. Additionally, the increased death toll of war undeniably put the inevitability and mystery of death at the forefront of the ancient mind. This perhaps caused individuals to turn to salvation—if not in this life, then the next.

However, it can be argued that the Persian Wars were not as spiritually scarring for the Greeks as the Peloponnesian Wars for one critical reason; in the Persian Wars, Greeks were fighting foreigners. There was a clear demarcation of “us” and “them.” As shown above, in the years after the Persian wars Athens began to abuse its fiscal and hegemonic position that it procured during the wars. Sparta, and many smaller city-states, soon took issue with this. Thucydides recounts much of the war in detail in his History of the Peloponnesian War. His history recounts gruesome tales of life and death throughout the wars. He tells stories of people being thrown off walls, prisoners being put to death, and more. Particularly devastating was the plague that hit Athens. He states that this sickness exceeded all previous cruelties that had been
visited on the Athenians.44 Between 430-427 BCE, Athens lost one-third of its population due to this plague.45 Classical Athens’ imperial status clearly began to crumble during this time of great war. As such, its state cults no doubt suffered as well. We can also infer that the amount of horror and devastation felt by both sides would have had a significant impact on afterlife beliefs. Indeed, scholars who study Thucydides’ writing note that even his language carries the mark of trauma similar to that of the soldiers who fought in the great modern wars.46

The events of the war were devastating for both sides, and with constantly switching allies, there was no firm distinction between “us” and “them” among the smaller allies of Sparta and Athens.47 Every battle was killing men from city-states that had once been allied in the fight against Persia. Arguably the trauma that this war inflicted on the Greek people resounded into every part of their lives. This increased contact with death correlates with the increase in membership of the Bacchic mysteries. This is perhaps due to the fact that the Bacchic mystery cult was not fixed to a single geographic location nor governed by a specific city-state, as was the case for the Eleusinian mystery cult. As such, the widespread victims of the war-time tragedies could observe a religion in their own cities which would help assure a happier life after death.

4.5. The Gold Tablets: Measuring the Prevalence of the Bacchic Mysteries

The previously mentioned Bacchic gold tablets have been found in graves from Rome to Asia Minor, all with carved messages or names on them and marking the individual as an initiate of the Bacchic mysteries. If large scale acceptance and participation in the Bacchic mysteries

44 Thuc. Hist. ii. 50.
45 Tritle 2004: 5.
46 Tritle 2004: 22.
47 Tritle 2004: 11.
was occurring because of the horror the Greeks witnessed during the fifth century, then we would expect to find a widespread distribution of these tablets. This large spread of Bacchic mystery initiates was also facilitated by the fact that, unlike the Eleusinian mysteries, this cult did not exist solely in one location. Despite the great distances that separate these gold tablets, the Bacchic mysteries were not a loose connection of beliefs shared throughout the ancient world. Instead, this was a canonical religious cult that had a set of rites, rituals, and recitations. This mystery cult was just as influential in the religious lives of certain Greeks as state cults were. As this contradicts the usual interpretation of Greek mystery cults, strong support for this claim is needed.

At this point, we can visually compare maps of the Peloponnesian War’s battles and sites of the Bacchic gold tablets and see strong similarities (Figure 2 and 3). This supports the idea that the Bacchic mystery cult traveled around much of the ancient Greek world due to war-time panic, bringing with it a uniform set of rituals wherever it went. The geographic outliers can be explained by the difficulty of travel to these far off places, such as Crete, which would naturally take time to reach. For more powerful, quantifiable support for this interpretation, we will employ social network analysis on these gold tablets based on phrases they share in order to evaluate the strength of their similarities.

The first step in this process is to catalogue the amount, locations, and dates of the 39 gold tablets listed by Graf and Johnston (Table 3). Though there are only a small number of gold tablets, their reoccurrence suggests that initiates of the Bacchic mysteries regularly carried and were buried with such tablets, and therefore we can expect that many of these tablets are undiscovered or were looted for their material. Because of this importance, we once again find the need for a theory that can explain the connection between man and god via religious artifacts.
without excluding any abnormal finds, such as these gold tablets. Of the 39 tablets, 18 date to the early fourth century BCE, just after the Peloponnesian War ended. The other half of the tablets are scattered all around the ancient world and date to as late as the third century CE. As mystery cults were popular until the Christian emperors disbanded them, the breadth of time to which these tablets are dated is not unusual. Though the amount of tablets dating to the fourth century suggests that there was a definite initial surge in the Bacchic mysteries’ popularity at this time, death and warfare were never truly removed from this civilization as different empires struggled for supremacy.

Social network analysis (SNA) provides measurable connections, or ties, between objects sharing similar characteristics, or nodes. When applying SNA to these objects, a graph is rendered that provides visual interpretation to the strength of the ties. This strength can be evaluated by the thickness of the line. If a line is very thick between two nodes, this means that they share many similarities. In this study, the similarities we are examining among the Bacchic gold tablets are based on shared phrases inscribed on their surfaces. As the Bacchic mystery cult was designed to impart knowledge unto the initiate, which had been given to man by Dionysus, it would logically follow that these lessons would be composed of a fixed set of facts or blessings. As a result, we shall find strong, quantifiable connections among the Bacchic gold tablets despite their geographic and temporal distances. This supports the notion that this mystery cult was as developed and canonical as a state cult.

The inscriptions on the Bacchic gold tablets consist of either mnemonics or proxies. Mnemonic tablets were those that helped the dead remember the information the cult had given them about the underworld. Most of the time, this takes the form of a map of the underworld. In order to retain one’s memory and avoid becoming another listless, wandering shade, one had to
avoid certain lakes, take certain routes, and introduced oneself to the deities of the underworld. A prime example, Tablet 2, is from a grave in Petelia:

You will find to the left of the house of Hades a spring
And standing by it a white cypress.
Do not even approach this spring!,
You will find another, from the Lake of Memory,
Cold water pouring forth; there are guards before it/
Say, “I am a child of Earth and starry Sky,
But my race is heavenly. You yourselves know this.
I am parched with thirst and am dying; but quickly
Grant me
Cold water flowing from the Lake of Memory.’’
And they themselves will grant you to drink from the sacred spring.
And thereafter you will rule among the other heroes.
This is the work of Memory. When you are about to die
To die …write this
…enwrapped…darkness. 48

Proxies, on the other hand, took the form of introductions to the rulers of Hades, marking them as initiates in a much more concise way. These tablets thereby functioned to garner the benefits promised by the mystery cult without directly stating what the shade should or should not do. These take the simple form similar to this: “Dexilaos initiate” (Tablet 21). 49

Though these messages took different forms, their functions were the same. Additionally, as both types of tablets are found at the beginning and the end of the mystery cult’s existence, we can conclude that both types were part of the cult’s established structure.

The first step to analyzing the connections among tablets is to catalogue all of the known gold tablets by noting their location, time period, and messages (Table 3). To analyze the connections among the tablets based on shared phrases, an additional table is made to highlight those that display those messages (Table 4). Because Proxies usually just list the name of the

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deceased, they are considered a shared phrase within themselves. This information is then entered into the social network analysis software (using Gephi Graph Visualization and Manipulation software 0.8.1 beta). This software then produces the visual network mentioned above, giving important information on the tablets’ similarities just by the general appearance of the mass (Figure 4). Here, we can estimate by a glance that there is high connectivity among tablets. The graph does not have a specific center to which the majority of the nodes connect, indicating that there is no main tablet that the other tablets imitate. Rather, the inscriptions on the tablets all developed from a relatively even and similar communication of Bacchic teachings, crossing great distances in both space and time. The increase of line thickness connecting some of the nodes, indicating that some tablets are more similar than others, unsurprisingly occurs most often when the tablets are found in the same cities like those from Thurii (Tablets 3-7), Eleutherna (Tablets 10-15), and Aigion (Tablets 20-22). The ties to examine carefully are those between tablets with great geographic distance between them yet a high degree of connectivity. For example, the tablets from Pharsalos (Tablet 25), Entella (Tablet 8), Petelia (Tablet 2), and Hipponion (Tablet 1) share equally strong degrees of connectivity. More than 500 miles separates Pharsalos from Entella, the two most distant sites. Thus we find that strong canonical structures are seen throughout the Bacchic tablets despite great distances.

Social network analysis allows us to quantify the strength of these connections. The amount of connections each tablet has is quantified by running a weighted degree distribution test (Figure 5). The average weighted degree is 14.588, which suggests a high level of connectivity among the 39 nodes. From this, we find further support for the canonical aspects of the Bacchic mysteries. We see that the canonical structure of the tablets’ messages are also
preserved over several centuries (from the 4C BCE- 2C CE), suggesting that the messages and the benefits of the Bacchic mysteries appealed to many over the course of Greek history.

### 4.6. The Gold Tablets: Application of Semiotic Theory

All of this analysis supports the argument that the Bacchic mysteries functioned in the same religious arena as state cults. As such, the Bacchic gold tablets were as important to cult worship as statues were. Therefore, theorists must make the break from the usual modern dichotomy between mystery and state cults and accept a theory that encompasses accessories involved in either form of worship. It is both unnecessarily complicated and anachronistic to assume that ancient man regarded the physical accessories of state cults and mystery cults differently. Both a statue of a deity and a tablet ritualistically inscribed with the deity’s knowledge function to foster a connection between man and deity, simply for differing purposes. The function and purpose of a religious accessory must then remain necessarily separate in the mind of modern scholars in order to understand the mindset of ancient man.

Nowhere in the study of these tablets is there evidence to support that ancient man viewed these tablets either as an embodiment of a deity or as a vessel for one. It is easy to understand how these two theories might apply to anthropomorphic or semi-anthropomorphic statuary because of our willingness to ascribe a “presence” to the human form. Indeed, these two theories can even be reasonably applied to aniconic statuary because a connection fostered between the deity’s myth and the material used for the statue. However, when approaching religious accessories that deviate from statuary, we find that both the vessel theory and the embodiment theory have no foundation for applicability.

From what has been presented of the Bacchic gold tablets, we find that the value of an initiate’s tablet exists both in its inscription as well as in its connection to the deity. The
mnemonic tablets record knowledge of the underworld provided by Bacchus, affording a constant connection between man and deity because of this communication. Proxy tablets further emphasize this point, as their only purpose is to mark the individual as an initiate. This individual is granted a continuous connection to the deity, which does not disappear once the ritual is over—as is the case of state cults. Though a cult statue functions as a conduit for communication between man and deity, this connection is severed once the individual leaves and travels away from the statue. A gold tablet that is carried by an initiate in both life and death provides the same connection to the deity, but with a higher degree of constancy.

Semiotic theory easily applies to both cult statuary and Bacchic gold tablets. We find that the object for both accessories is the distant god to which the accessory points. For the Bacchic gold tablets, this is Dionysus. The term significant then align with the cult statue and gold tablet themselves. Thus every religious accessory that endeavors to connect man to deity can be classified under this term. Again, the signifié is the personal idea of the deity to which the accessory connects. Though this term’s application to the Bacchic gold tablets is not as straightforward as it is with cult statues, it does adequately relate if we keep in mind that the semiotic triadic relationship only activates when the individual perceives the religious accessory. For the individual observing a cult statue, an immediate idea of the deity comes to mind and fosters the connection between man and god yet disappears once he departs from the statue. Any thoughts this individual may have of the deity once he leaves the ritualized area of the temple and its statue no longer function as a signifié because the significant is absent. For the man carrying a Bacchic gold tablet, any time the individual contemplates his connection between himself and Dionysus the semiotic cycle progresses because the significant is always near him. When this individual dies and has the tablet buried with him, it was believed that the purpose of
this connection comes to fruition. In this way we find that the physical and mental processes involved in relating oneself to a deity through a statue or a tablet differs not in form or function, but in continuity. Despite this constant connectivity, within the semiotic approach, there is no outward indication as to whether the deity is present with man. This once again aligns with the ambiguity of ancient life, for the confirmation of this communication exists only after death.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

Past scholarship on ancient Greek religious accessories has laid the groundwork for the increased understanding of such accessories that semiotic theory provides. Each methodology and theory provides another layer of understanding. As such, scholars are able to understand the artistic, cultural, and personal dimensions of an ancient Greek religious accessory.

Art historical analysis creates clearly delineated categories of art based on time period, style, subject matter and more. This methodology can inform modern scholars on how such art pieces are created and how they fit into the larger cultural narrative. This type of analysis, however, does not incorporate the literary evidence of the time period. In this way, the function and cultural reception of these art pieces cannot be completely understood. The way by which ancient Greeks viewed religious accessories is also undeveloped through this method.

Scholars such as Deborah Steiner and Verity Platt endeavor to define ancient man’s perception of these pieces by integrating the literature absent in the above approach. By applying myth and literature to these art pieces, we can understand their function and role in ancient Greek life. Steiner’s “vessel theory” and Platt’s “embodiment theory” all draw strength from literary sources, however often the reputability of these literary choices can be questioned. Furthermore, both theories define man’s connection to the god as a definite, understandable, and direct relationship. During a time when technology limited popular understanding of the world, it is unlikely that ancient man would be certain that a god was present within or as the statue in front of him.

Semiotic theory insists on an increase in distance between man and deity. Proponents of this theory also integrate myth into their analysis in order to understand the full scope of the ancient man’s experience of the gods. As this theory is based on the idea that ancient man
connected to the deities by way of signs, it is much more similar to the distant human-deity relationship that we see in myth and literature. The epiphanies that are noted in the Homeric tradition did not represent reality to those living during the Archaic, Classical, or Hellenistic periods. These events were understood to be singular to the heroic past. Additionally, as mentioned, the high degree of unexplained voids in ancient Greek life necessitated a religious belief that endeavored to fill some of them—yet could not fill all of them. In other words, the ambiguity of the human-deity connection that is created by the distance between the two aligns with the ambiguity of ancient Greek life as whole. The degree of certainty, which Steiner and Platt apply in their theories, does not coincide with the worshippers’ indefinite structure of life.

Steiner’s and Platt’s arguments are also weakened by their exclusion of religious accessories other than cult statues. Though Steiner broadens the scope by including both aniconic and iconic imagery, there is no indication that she believes any other ancient Greek religious artifact functioned according to her theory. Platt similarly does not apply her embodiment theory to alternative religious accessories. As any object or building that helps foster a connection to the divine is defined as a religious accessory in this paper, the turn toward semiotics was necessary.

This is especially true when we consider the Bacchic gold tablets. Though many scholars have addressed the purpose of these pieces, it is hard to understand how their ancient owners perceived them. An ancient Greek man clearly felt some sort of connection from himself to the deity when this he was wearing this piece; otherwise there would be no reason to keep the object on his person instead of a shrine. The individual only received this tablet when he became an initiate of the Bacchic mysteries. This mystery cult provided a deep relationship to the god Bacchus and his mother Persephone, Queen of the Underworld.
When examining all of the details of this mystery cult and its practices, we find that there are strong parallels between state and mystery cults. As such, it is evident that the dichotomy of these two types of religious worship is unnecessarily distinct. Semiotic theory interprets the religious accessories of both cults in the same way. The only difference is the level of exposure a mortal has to the accessory.

Semiotic theory as it applies to ancient Greek religious accessories does not include the certainty that the god is sharing a physical space with a mortal. The entire process of viewing an accessory by way of this theory is based off of the individual’s desire to communicate with the distant deity, and hope the message gets through. Through recognizing the statue as a *significant* of the deity, the individual is able to connect the deity by way of an inner, mental connection—or the *signifié*. This process then incorporates the individual man’s psychological process into the experience. As Saussure mentions, each of these psychological processes is different based on the cultural disposition of the viewer. Semiotic theory then attempts to bridge the gap between modern and ancient viewers of religious accessories in order to understand how these pieces can connect two distant beings.
Appendix 1: Images and Charts

Figure 1: Modern Full-Size Replica of *Parthenos*, in the Parthenon, Nashville, Tennessee
Figure 2. Battles of the Peloponnesian War (Chardon World History Text Book Online).

Figure 3: Geographical Locations of Tablets
### Appendix 2: Social Network Analysis Charts and Graphs

<table>
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<th>Tablet number</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>City, all in graves unless noted diff.</th>
<th>Approx. Date</th>
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<td>400 BCE</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Petelia</td>
<td>4C BCE</td>
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<td>Thurii 1</td>
<td>4C BCE</td>
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<td>Thurii 5</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Sicily</td>
<td>Entella; in field but pos. once a cemetery</td>
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<td>Rome</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 A</td>
<td>Mainland Greece</td>
<td>Pelinna</td>
<td>4C BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 B</td>
<td>Mainland Greece</td>
<td>Pelinna</td>
<td>4C BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Mainland Greece</td>
<td>Pherae 1</td>
<td>350-300 BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Mainland Greece</td>
<td>Pherae 2</td>
<td>4-3 C BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Mainland Greece</td>
<td>Thessaly, unknown</td>
<td>4C BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Mainland Greece</td>
<td>Amphipolis</td>
<td>4-3C BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Mainland Greece</td>
<td>Pella/Dion 1</td>
<td>4C BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Mainland Greece</td>
<td>Pella/Dion 2</td>
<td>4-3C BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Mainland Greece</td>
<td>Pella/Dion 3</td>
<td>4-3C BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Mainland Greece</td>
<td>Pella/Dion 4</td>
<td>4C BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Mainland Greece</td>
<td>Methone</td>
<td>4C BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Mainland Greece</td>
<td>Europos</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Mainland Greece</td>
<td>Vergina (Aigai)</td>
<td>Hellenistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Mainland Greece</td>
<td>Hagios Athanasios (near Thessalonike)</td>
<td>Hellenistic, looted from grave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Uncertain location; Asian Minor</td>
<td></td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Numbers, Locations and Approximate Dates for Tablets
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phrase</th>
<th>Tablets that have it</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bodies of water and their markers</td>
<td>1,2,8,25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Cypress near lake not to drink from</td>
<td>1,2,8,25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Cypress near lake to drink from</td>
<td>10,11,12,13,14,16,18,29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guards asking questions</td>
<td>1,2,8,25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Eucle and Eubouleus”</td>
<td>5,6,7,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joining the gods</td>
<td>5,6,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Lightning”</td>
<td>5,6,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proxies</td>
<td>15,17,20, 21, 22,23,24,28,30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>”I am son of Earth and Starry Sky“</td>
<td>1,2, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 18, 25, 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;innititates&quot;</td>
<td>1, 28, 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;fell into milk&quot;</td>
<td>3,5, 26, 26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Shared Phrases
Weighted Degree Report

Results:
Average Weighted Degree: 14.588

Figure 5: Weighted Degree Distribution
**Bibliography**


