Classical Greek religion in Assassin's Creed: Odyssey: A video game as an archaeological case study

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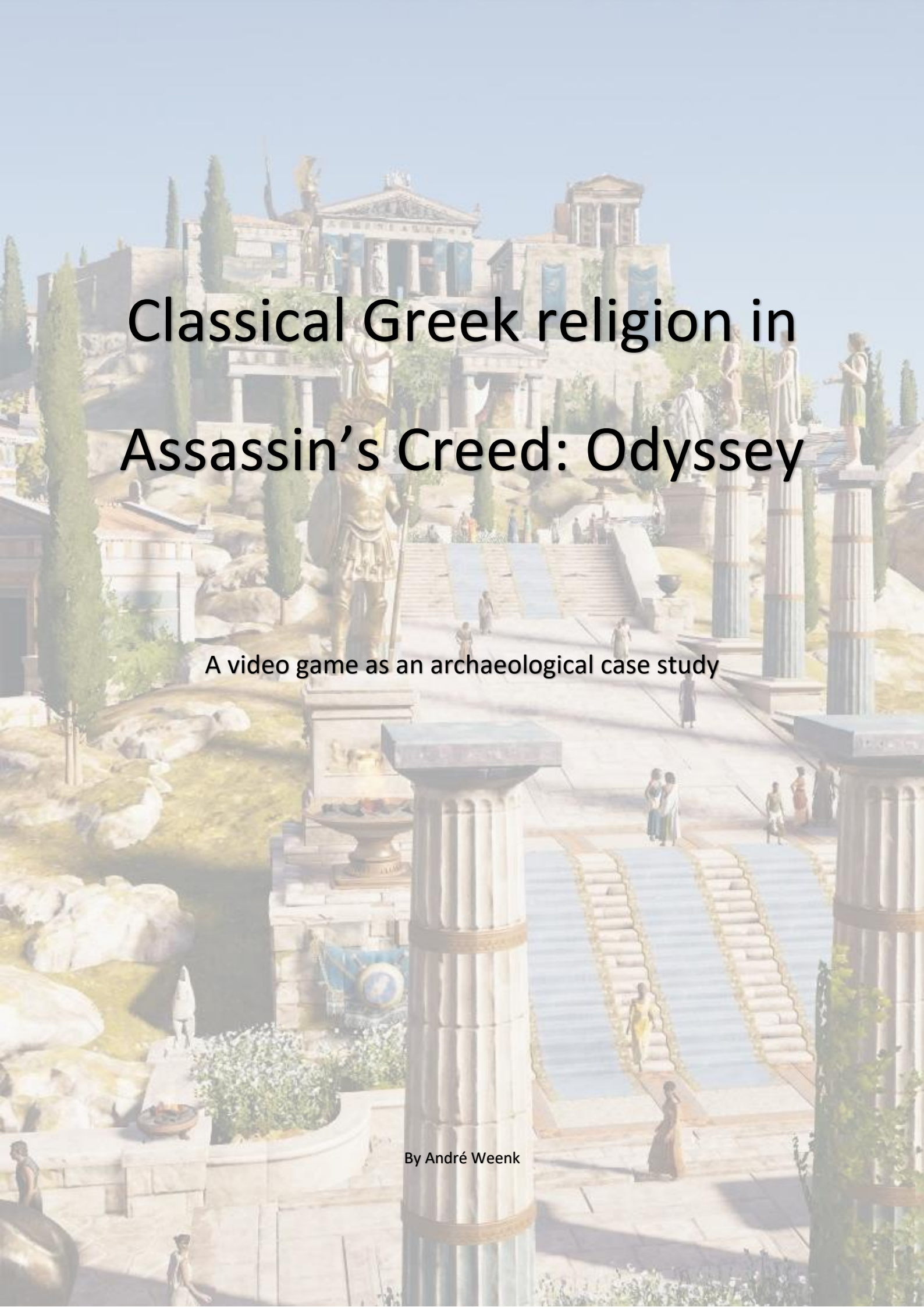

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Figure 1. The Akropolis in Assassin's Creed: Odyssey. View from the lower part of Athens, towards the top. Screenshot by André Weenk.

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1. Introduction

Many people who are not familiar with *Assassin's Creed* or are not into video games in general, may not realize the extent of success that these games have. Over the 15 years since its inception, the *Assassin's Creed* franchise from game developer *Ubisoft* hovers around 10th place for best-selling video game franchise in terms of total amount of games sold, ahead of series like *Need for Speed* and *The Legend of Zelda* (Jaisrani, 2022). When looking at the total revenue of *Assassin's Creed* compared to that of other mainstream media franchises, it is on par with the likes of *The Hunger Games, Mission: Impossible* and *Game of Thrones* at over $4 billion ("List of Highest-Grossing Media Franchises," 2021).

As an Archaeology student with a passion for video games, the *Assassin's Creed* series is a match made in heaven for me. The role-playing video game elements combined with historical settings based on real-world events and people are the perfect ingredients for an archaeologist's dreams. Ubisoft released their eponymous first instalment, *Assassin's Creed*, back in 2007 for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 consoles. I had neither of those at that moment (instead, we had a Nintendo Wii at home), so it wasn't until 2012, when Nintendo collaborated with Ubisoft to launch their brand new *Assassin's Creed III* game for Nintendo's new Wii U console, that I saw my opportunity to join in on the action.

This thesis, however, is focused on the third most recent game in the series: *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (from here on out I will refer to the game as just '*Odyssey*') from 2018. Here players can run, ride and sail across Classical Greece during the time of the second Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta around 430-420 BCE. The developers have drawn a lot of inspiration and knowledge from history and archaeology in order to provide an authentic representation of antiquity, whilst making the game look and feel immersive, colourful and vibrant. With *Odyssey* catering to both the video game and classical archaeology elements, I have decided to research the portrayal of several of these elements from an archaeological perspective.

Since researching all of the archaeology that is portrayed in this game would either make it too superficial or extremely unmanageable, I have decided to select one particular aspect as my primary research focus: religion. Over the past decades, extensive debates have taken place on the role of religion within archaeology and how such mostly immaterial subject could and should be studied through archaeology. The Archaeology of Religion is a field within archaeology that uses archaeological material data to study religion, ritual and cult in past societies, its specifics I will address in Chapter 1. There is an abundance of religious elements from Classical Greece that show up in the archaeological record; think of temples, statues and other religious buildings, but also burial sites, graveyards, shrines and smaller objects like figurines, tablets and clothing. The non-material religious elements like speech, singing, dancing and the structure of religious organizations are equally

important but have to be garnered through other means than archaeological material data such as textual research, oral tradition or perhaps through the studying of contemporary Greek cultural practices. Ubisoft has re-created all of these in *Odyssey*, which begs the question: to what extent are these aforementioned elements present within the game and how is the concept of religion in this video game portrayed? *Odyssey* will serve as a case study, used to research this application of Classical Greek religion through the lens of the Archaeology of Religion.

To answer these main questions I have started off by researching the Archaeology of Religion to familiarize myself with the field of study and to gain a deeper understanding of the subject. In the second chapter I will discuss this topic and cover a number of research questions. What is the Archaeology of Religion and what are the (material) elements left to us that constitute the data set of this archaeological subfield? What did religion look like in Ancient Greece and how was it structured, both public and private? What was the role of mythology in Ancient Greek society? By setting this general idea of the Archaeology of Religion as a base, it has allowed me to research the game with this in mind. In addition to this I will also briefly address 'archaeogaming', the term used to describe the intersection between the worlds of video games and archaeological academia. Introducing these topics will provide a theoretical base for a more in-depth discussion in chapter 4.

In the third chapter I will discuss the video game side of my research. I will shortly introduce *Assassin's Creed* as a franchise and talk about the premise of the story, after which I will go more in-depth in *Odyssey* to cover the Classical Greek religion within the game. Through playing the game from this perspective I was able to research it like a case study to find out how these religious elements are represented. Which of these elements are present and which are not? What role does religion play within the game? To which level of detail have the developers gone to provide authentic representations of real-world features? How is important historical information conveyed? How do certain limitations and artistic interpretation influence the result and is that necessarily a bad thing? Answering these questions gives a great idea of how the developers have used the Archaeology of Religion to shape their environment and story.

The fourth chapter will be used to further discuss these things, as well as explore some other related topics. How problematic are the encountered differences in the accuracy of the portrayal of religious elements? How is the timeless issue of violence in religious spaces handled and which problems can arise from that? At the same time, it is equally fascinating to not only explore how *Odyssey* uses archaeology itself, but also how information is conveyed outwards. Shedding some light on matters that bind the world of video games to academia and other modern-day subjects is essential to gain a deeper understanding of issues that transcend what, at first glance, might appear as 'just a game'.

The goal of my research is to show the significance of the way Ubisoft portrayed religion within this digital ancient Greek world and how this relates to actual archaeology through the lens of the Archaeology of Religion. Due to their unique premises for the *Assassin's Creed* series, Ubisoft can be made an example of towards researchers of this subject. Looking at an interpretation of archaeological data through an intermediary party like a video game in this case, is extremely interesting. Especially a game like *Odyssey*, which will appeal to the imagination of many people because of the well-known characters and events, can be used as an extra vessel to carry knowledge and information (whether for good or for bad) alongside its gaming experience.

2. The Archaeology of Religion and an introduction to Archaeogaming

Since *Odyssey* is situated in ancient Greece around 430-420 BCE, the first objective is to identify the state of Greek religion at that time. As will become clear, this process is a complicated one, marked by changes, influences and adaptations over centuries of time. A definition for an Archaeology of Religion, which encompasses the way these spiritual concepts can be studied through material manifestations, has long been hotly debated, and admittedly will not be solved in this thesis. Regardless, I will try my utmost to shed a generalized light on the matter, after which the history of Greek religion can be addressed. Both of these substantial items form the base to the rest of my research. Being a nigh direct representation of Classical Greece, *Odyssey* displays a host of religious elements, meaning that it is crucial to briefly introduce many of them; from large temples, and smaller altars, to paintings and song. I will conclude by introducing the concept of archaeogaming, the term used to describe the overlap between the worlds of video games and that of academia, as it essentially forms the backbone of this thesis.

2.1 Defining religion and its relation to archaeology

As a basis of research it is important to establish a theoretical framework of this study. Religion is a massive topic on its own, defined by the Oxford dictionary as "a system of faith based on the belief in the existence of a particular god or gods, and the activities that are connected with the worship of them, or in the teachings of a spiritual leader" ("Religion", n.d.). The use of certain terminologies and the study of religion through archaeology has been hotly debated over the years. Much of this debate was addressed in 2004, when, in his book 'Archaeology, Ritual, Religion', Timothy Insoll aimed to accept, reject and/or combine the plethora of definitions of religion that were present up until that particular moment within the field of archaeology, and coined his own overarching definition of an 'Archaeology of Religion' as being "the superstructure into which all other aspects of life can be placed' (Insoll, 2004, p. 13). While I believe that this is of an extremely inclusive and general nature, it did provide rise, importance and a proper term to a field within archaeology that was at that time still immensely underdeveloped and misunderstood. Many an archaeologist had provided their own interpretation of terms such as 'religion' and 'ritual' within archaeology, and there was no consensus over universal definitions and whether or not such mostly immaterial subjects were able to be properly studied through archaeology.

Generally, religion and religious practices were (and still are) predominantly studied through written sources like holy texts, historical books and epic poems; the idea of applying archaeology was leading to enormous criticism, as for instance illustrated by Christophers Hawkes through his 'Ladder of Inference' (Petts, 2011, p. 41; Rowan, 2011, p. 6). This concept describes how religious matters are

the most troublesome to study through archaeology, especially in situations where literary works are absent, emphasizing the difficulty of accessing and interpreting religious aspects solely based on material evidence. As a result, archaeologists would often avoid using the word 'religion' altogether, replacing it by 'ritual' in many occasions, not realizing that their definitions cannot always be used interchangeably, as well as the fact that 'ritual' was just as much as unclear as a term (Mylonopoulos, 2014, p. 329; Rowan, 2011, p. 2). And even in modern language the terms 'religiously' and 'ritually' are often ascribed to the performing of activities in a strict manner or at certain times, even though they are not religious in nature, nor take place in any ritualistic setting. This further underscores the importance of recognizing that a clear description of terminology is crucial for future research.

Over these last few decades archaeologists have seen the value and importance that archaeological research can provide for the study of religion in past societies. In a similar fashion as religion, other invisible constructs such as familial relations or economic systems cannot be physically observed; rather we study them through humans and their interactions with material culture that reflect these theoretical complexes. This is exemplified by the need for humans to materialize the divine through built environments, inscriptions and religious artefacts, in fact suggesting there are actually unique benefits to applying archaeology to the study of religion (Jensen, 2013, p. 14; Rowan, 2011, p. 1). In their Companion to the Archaeology of Religion, Rubina Raja and Jörg Rüpke coin the term 'lived ancient religion'; this is based on the concept of 'lived religion' by Meredith McGuire, through which she aspires to describe and analyse contemporary religion by shifting focus away from institutionalized system. However, she fails to acknowledge how individuals might convert these practices that are instigated by institutionalized religion, thereby providing their own identity to them. Instead, lived ancient religion specifically recognizes the role that material elements play in establishing connections between the human and superhuman, opening up new methods of approaching religious practices through archaeology (Raja & Rüpke, 2015, pp. 3–4).

However, it is and always will be crucial to exercise caution when working with archaeological data. It is important to recognize that the knowledge derived from archaeology is primarily an interpretation of the discovered artifacts and contexts. The nature of archaeological investigation inherently involves piecing together fragments of the past, and this process relies on the expertise and judgment of the archaeologist. Therefore, acknowledging the interpretive nature of archaeological findings is essential in order to avoid unwarranted assumptions or claims about the past. Theories based on archaeological data are susceptible to being proven false when new discoveries are made that disprove or change ideas that up until that point were believed to be certainties (de Polignac, 1994, p. 3).

The researching of Classical Greek religion has often been of a very structuralist nature, aimed at categorizing facets in a binary way: male and female, nature and culture, public and private, etc. While there are definitive benefits to providing this classifying structure, it leaves very little room for a grey area or a middle ground, which is where it clashes with archaeological research, especially due to the fact that for the longest time archaeology was underutilized in the studying of religion (Jost, 1994, p. 81). It is important to realize that religion and religious practices are fluid; they often overlap and blur, rather than being allowed to be forced in categorical boxes (Insoll, 2004, p. 8). For example, classifications of different sanctuaries used to be made solely based on whether or not visible monumental architecture was present in certain sacred spaces; these would then be referred to as 'public' or 'official', the others 'private'. Similarly, different types of categories would be assigned to sanctuaries ('urban', 'rural' etc.). However, more recently it has been suggested to let go of these strict classifications; there have been cases of sanctuaries fulfilling multiple roles: the one at Delphi, for example, was used both as a more global, 'Panhellenic' sanctuary as well as the local sanctuary of the city of Delphi itself (Scott, 2015, p. 229).

As such, the Archaeology of Religion has established itself as an interdisciplinary field of research that requires basic methodology and material knowledge from the archaeologists and basic knowledge of the history of religion from anthropologists, historians and scholars of religion, in order to provide a combined perception of religion and religious practices in the past.

2.2 History of ancient Greek religion

The area we call Greece today was a territory that provided a base of interaction between the mainland (Hellenic) Greeks and peoples and cultures from other parts of the Aegean that entered these lands during the Bronze Age. 'Ancient Greek religion' can be defined as the amalgamation of thoughts and practices of these non-Hellenic peoples of Greece, and peoples from the Aegean islands, Crete and Anatolia from the Bronze Age to the Roman Period. It was a synthetic result of the blending of these cultures, which continued to evolve constantly until the fourth century CE, when the majority of Greek people converted to Christianity (Larson, 2013, p. 136).

Unlike today, there was no nation-wide centralized religious authority, which meant that religious practices were regulated at civic level. Since there was no organized 'religion', these religious beliefs and practices developed independently to some extent. As Larson puts it, these slight differences can be perceived as being akin to language dialects; regional variations shared many common features and could be understood mutually, but there was a chance of them growing progressively diverse upon isolation (Larson, 2013, p. 136). As a common factor, most ancient Greeks recognized the twelve Olympian gods and goddesses, as evidence of worship to them (in combination

with other, lesser gods and regional variants) was found all across the Greek world. As opposed to the monotheistic Christianity, for example, ancient Greek religion was polytheistic in nature (μόνος/mono = "one", πολύ/poly = "many", θεός/theos = "God"). The complete collection of all gods within a system is then called a pantheon (πᾶν/pan = "all", or "whole"). Due to aforementioned regional differences, the selections of gods that made up local pantheons would differ from place to place, resulting in multiple pantheons (consisting largely of the same gods, but different configurations) at the same time. According to Parker, polytheisms characteristically change over time (Parker, 1996, p. 152), resulting in the creation of new gods, new associations between existing gods, or identifying old gods in new manners; in turn, this will reflect in the specific religious thoughts and therefore in cult practices.

Gods like Zeus, Hera and Poseidon were already widely worshipped during the Bronze Age, but with the collapse of Mycenaean civilization (between 1200-1050 BCE) several major changes to the pantheon occurred. Some deities were forgotten, while others were gradually absorbed or morphed into the personae of major Olympian gods (e.g., Apollo and Athena). Although epic poems from as early as the Iron Age suggest a Panhellenistic religion and a widely recognized core group of Olympic gods, other deities continued to achieve Panhellenistic recognition after the eight century (Larson, 2013, p. 137).

One of the primary factors that facilitated this blending and developing of religious systems across the ancient Greek world was Greece's position within the economic network. Being a historically important agent in trade throughout the Mediterranean (not only in material goods, but language, thoughts and ideas as well), the Mycenaean Greeks came in contact with plenty of other cultures, which in turn was extremely influential in the development of Greek religion (Noegel, 2007, p. 28). Their massive trade network exposed them to not just the Minoan culture from Crete (which becomes easily identifiable early on in the material record), but also introduced them to Egyptian, Hittite and Phoenician deities. Some examples include the discovery of two bronze Levantine statues in Phylakopi on the island of Melos, and the Assyrian figurines from a worship to Hera on the island of Samos.

The Greek Dark Ages (ca. 1100 – 800 BCE) that followed were highlighted by the collapse, destruction and abandonment of many Mycenaean cities, and, while evidence suggests that some parts of the Greek world, such as Lefkandi, were much wealthier and more widely connected during this same time (Larson, 2013, p. 138), the majority fell into a period of decline that also included religious regression. However, periods of intense exchange soon followed, allowing for rapid changes in religious practices; these coincide with the rise and fall of the *polis* (Greek city-state) system during the Archaic and Classical periods (ca. 800 – 500 BCE and 500 – 323 BCE, respectively). Directly following

the Dark Ages, this period is characterized by a flourishing of not just religion, but also culture, economy, philosophy and mathematics, the basis for western civilization. All these factors provided a relatively stable framework for a centralized Greek polytheism while it lasted. Within this *polis* system, every city-state possessed their own distinctive pantheon. Depending on one's ancestry, ethnicity, neighbourhood and (to a lesser extent) personal preference, one would worship a certain selection of deities. The moment the Hellenistic monarchs replaced these *polis* governments, even more changes occurred at an accelerated tempo. Additionally, with Alexander the Great's conquests in the eastern part of the Mediterranean, new divine personae were introduced to the Greek pantheon, encouraging the developments of private religious activities at the cost of the institutionalized, organized religious system (Noegel, 2007, p. 31).

The Greek pantheon was formed over centuries of ever-changing stories and influences. The core of what we now know as Greek Mythology was shaped by the poets, who refined and widely spread the role of gods in all sorts of human affairs, including love, death and destiny (Larson, 2013, p. 140). Our contemporary understanding of the mythology primarily originated from Hesiod's *Theogony* (written in the 8th Century BCE), which describes the conception of the cosmos and the subsequent creation of the heaven, earth, and underworld and the gods that inhabited these places. He did not try to represent "the" Greek religion, but rather attempted to systematize the multitude of religious ideas amongst the Greek people, including certain important Near East elements. These gods were anthropomorphic figures with distinct, yet somewhat overlapping functions. As these deities developed not in isolation but in relation to each other, they shared an abundance of intertwining characteristics, sympathizing with some, and opposing others. Around this network of divine relations origin stories were created to try to explain occurrences in the natural world around the ancient Greeks.

Most Greek gods were assigned aspects of human culture, characteristics and psyche, combined with several natural elements. Demeter, for example, was the goddess of growth, care, and nourishment as well as agriculture, grain, and the harvest. Athena and Ares both were gods of war; Athena was the goddess of reason, intelligence, and strategic warfare, while Ares was the god of courage, violence, and bloodshed. The chaotic component in these similar elements puts him in close relation, yet stark contrast to the orderly Athena. However, it is crucial to note here that there is inherent danger in trying to perceive gods in very static and overarching terms. While these might be the primary descriptions, one runs the risk of overgeneralizing gods and misunderstanding the subtle nuances in myths and cults on the local level (Pirenne-Delforge & Pironti, 2015, p. 41). As noted before, gods can be conceptualized as networks; fluid and dynamic, rather than just a combination of characteristics, which would be a static sum. By ignoring local adaptations to their persona, and

instead describing them at a panhellenic level, one runs the risk of resorting to their generic, canonical descriptions ('god of the sea', 'goddess of marriage' etc.). In reality these deities might locally be revered for a subset of their network of characteristics, while leaving the rest of their persona and interrelations intact and potentially available for other use cases.

Characteristic of the Archaic and Classical Greek belief is the idea that one's individual path of life is a predetermined fate, visualized as a thread spun, woven and cut by the *Moirai*, the personified trio of Fates that controls every individual's lifecycle (Larson, 2013, p. 140; Pirenne-Delforge & Pironti, 2015, p. 43). Importantly, while often being referred to as the 'goddesses of fate' it must be noted that the *Moirai* are not considered to belong to the pantheon of gods. They act on a slightly lower level, but are god-like in their influences, and while not directly controlling life or death themselves, they instead regulate all actions in-between. In religious practices three levels of reverence to these divine beings can be distinguished: the individual level, where one might pray for their personal well-being and longevity, the familial level, meant to protect the line of kinship over multiple future generations, and the communal level, wishing for prosperity for entire *polis*-level communities in hopes of preventing civil wars and other catastrophes.

2.3 Material remains and religious practices

Since one cannot look inside past people's minds to directly study thoughts and beliefs, archaeologists will always rely on examining the remains that were left behind as the result of human interactions with these materials, in order to study them for their religious purposes (Insoll, 2004, p. 19; Renfrew, 1985, p. 12). Thoughts about religion in ancient Greece are easily linked to the classical images of grand temples and marble statues, and while it certainly is the case that temples are the most characteristic material identifier of ancient Greek religion due to their ability to display immense importance, power and wealth, it is critical to recognize that these materialistic elements are not strictly necessary in order to produce a religious or ritualistic space (Mylonopoulos, 2014, p. 330). Many of these sites began as, or existed forever as, simple open spaces where sacrifices, feasts and other communal activities took place. Over the last few decades, there has been increased interest in not just studying the material remains themselves, but also connecting the physical structures to these natural surroundings, looking for importance and meaning in the contexts between the two (Scott, 2015, p. 228). We must realize that the total scope of religion comprises of more than merely the buildings and artefacts. Where temples and sanctuaries were often solely studied for their art, architecture and archaeology, religion used to be studied mainly through epigraphic texts and literary works. It is important to corroborate archaeological work with that of anthropologists and theologists in order to more fully understand ancient religious behaviour.

Now that the premises of Greek religion and its studying through archaeology have been addressed, I will dive deeper into the physical elements and several different types of religious or ritualistic practices. As mentioned above, temples are among the most significant indicators of ancient Greek religion. The widespread availability of temples can be seen as the result of a slow process of evolution over a long period of time that started with relatively simple rooms where religious practitioners would share their meals and worship deities. These early versions of religious buildings would usually contain a communal space like a hearth in its centre and an (often physical, but sometimes abstract or even non-existent) image of the revered god displayed against the back wall (Mylonopoulos, 2014, p. 330; von Hesberg, 2015, pp. 320–322, 324). With the development of the *poleis* during the Archaic Period, their temple structures also gradually grew in both size and wealth, many of them reaching well over 30 metres in length. Additionally, new large temples were erected with the express goal of displaying a magnificent image for everyone to admire. In turn, these public temples were then made examples of for local communities, where smaller sanctuaries were developed for local practices (von Hesberg, 2015, p. 323); the increase in quality and quantity of temples and their divine images sometimes leading to confusion among archaeologists trying to determine which of these was the primary god of the temple. This trend of wealth continued into the Classical Period; the marble and gold statues like the ones from the Parthenon in Athens and the temple of Zeus in Olympia called for adaptations to the temples' interiors due to their immense size (von Hesberg, 2015, pp. 324–325). Up until that time it was highly unlikely to have different architectural types of columns present within one complex; in these unprecedented situations, however, it became popular practice to more or less encapsulate the divine image within another, separate row of columns or walled structure, almost becoming a separate room within the larger temple; the contrast in styles with the exterior emphasizing the grandeur and reverence.

In terms of exterior architecture, one might expect to see the temple adorned with depictions of ritualistic behaviour, perhaps as a means of displaying practices from its users or advertising them to the outside world; on the contrary, however, with the notable exception of a very few specific cases such as the friezes of the Parthenon, most sculptures on the exterior of temples depict mythological scenes, rather than ritual ones (Mylonopoulos, 2014, pp. 344–345). Whether these were constructed for storytelling purposes or purely decoration is still up for debate, but it is interesting to note the decision to go for religious motives (albeit mythological ones) when decorating was the primary goal.

Along with monumental remains the total archaeological dataset also encompasses smaller artefacts, including anything from statues, tools and human remains to even micro-remains like charcoal and other botanical residue. Whichever the deity of a religious place would be, physical images of that deity were often present in order to perform ritualistic practices. Whether they were

giant marble statues, self-knitted dolls or simply a drawing or imprint on another object, votive objects could take on many shapes and sizes (Jensen, 2013, p. 318). Clothing, on the other hand, like other perishable materials, is extremely challenging to study archaeologically. And even when, under the luckiest of circumstances, pieces of clothing are encountered in archaeological contexts, they are often in very bad shape. In every other case, archaeologists must rely on other sources as proxies for research; painted vases, for example, whether found within the same religious context or elsewhere, can depict ritualistic scenes, aiding in the identification of religious clothing. However, these bring their own difficulties as well; in most portrayals, figures can be seen wearing identical garments, whether those are simple loincloths or elaborate robes. Only in very few instances do some dress in simple and others in elaborate clothing, raising the question whether the distinct clothing could simply illustrate the status of the individual as much as it could their actual worn garments, and that these robes were depicted purely in order for them to be identified as priests (Karine Rivière, 2017, p. 21). Regardless, with plain clothing showing up way more frequently in these images, and uniformity being so prevalent, it is believed that portrayals of religious practices would often tend to hide social differences through clothing, whether this was the case in actual ritualistic practice or not.

Whereas early archaeological excavations tended to only focus on the distinct and strikingly beautiful artefacts, it has become clear that the 'regular' remains prove to be just as useful as sources of information. Without any clear reference to the use of certain objects, however, it can still remain extremely difficult to differentiate 'regular' ones from religious or ritualistic ones in their usage (Barrett, 2015, p. 115). Colin Renfrew mentions this difficulty in trying to distinguish between these two different types through archaeological means and poses the question whether this would even be realistic (Renfrew, 1985, p. 15). In order to provide the best possible projection of these objects from the past, archaeological context is key. Three major components of context can be distinguished when studying an artefact: the matrix (its direct surroundings), the provenience (its exact location in three-dimensional space), and the associations (any spatial relationships between the object and other features) (Barrett, 2015, p. 119). This broadened scope, the development in knowledge and techniques, and the focus on interdisciplinary research have allowed archaeologists to paint a vastly more complete picture of objects in ancient religious environments.

2.4 Aspects of ritual

As I have established before, the definition of 'ritual' within archaeological research has been vague; in this section the term 'ritual' will refer to all actions taking place within religious spaces, such as prayers, (animal) sacrifices or any other behaviour with a means of divine interactions with gods. In his 1985 compendium, Colin Renfrew points out that the total scope of rituals includes several

different elements (Renfrew, 1985, p. 16). First of all, it encompasses actions meant to provide some sort of relation between a human and a deity. Depending on the specific situation, these could be performed anywhere between being in complete solemn silence to being accompanied by singing, dancing and even taking hallucinogens.

Next comes the element of location. Whether they were open spaces somewhere in nature or massive temples dedicated to specific gods, locations set for ritualistic activities had a massive significance. As mentioned before, rather than categorizing ritual spaces and landscapes in a rigid manner, it is nowadays considered immensely desirable to contextualize them in order to understand the relationship between religious places and their (natural) surroundings. Having sanctuaries located around the edge of a *polis*' territory, for example, may indicate the value that was placed on certain natural occurrences (Dignas, 2007, p. 166). An Asklepion (sanctuary dedicated to Asklepios) was often placed outside a city's boundaries and close to natural water sources, due to the usage of water for practices related to purification and healing. Thus, a deity's characteristics determined the location of its attributed sacred space, and subsequentially its relation to the *polis*. Additionally, natural phenomena such as thunderstorms and earthquakes were regarded as divine signs, in the eyes of ancient Greeks showing proof for some sort of link between the natural and the supernatural (Kindt, 2021, p. 198). Further evidence of this is the fact that animals were thought to be enchanted manifestations of the divine within the physical landscape, exemplified in a multitude of mythological stories wherein Olympian gods take on animal forms to visit and interact with humans (Bremmer, 2021, p. 108). This notion of looking for valuable signs in nature is detrimental to the relationship between ritualistic practices and the environment.

The final element is that of worship, which can be regarded as an addition to the aforementioned element of relation; it can be seen as a reciprocal relationship with a deity (asking for health, wealth, or success granted to you as a reward for offerings, gifts or performances). For example, if you were to make a long and arduous maritime journey, you would pray to Poseidon and make some sort of valuable offer or donation to gain his favour, hoping to prevent storms and rough seas, while also making an offer to one of the wind gods for a fortunate breeze in your sails. The idea of people having direct interactions with gods was far from surreal, due to the fact that religion was so very interwoven into society (Bonnechere, 2007, pp. 145–146). This also explains why many rituals were accompanied by prayers, hymns and song; these are the foremost manners in which one might interact with a deity through the means of the voice (Furley, 2007, p. 118).

Consulting a divine power could take both an active and a passive form; revelations could, for example, come spontaneously through one's dreams, or one might actively ask for spiritual guidance through an oracle. The most famous example of the latter being the oracle of Delphi, where one would

seek to interact nearly directly with the god Apollo, as he would speak through a medium (the high priestess of the temple of Apollo: the *Pythia*) (Kindt, 2015, p. 270). Although an intermediary party was the one exclaiming the words, the god Apollo himself was the recognized agent and was regarded as being directly responsible for whatever was said (Deeley, 2019, p. 227). This and other oracles were regarded as prophetic, famously providing answers in a mysterious and cryptic manner, such as when Croesus of Lydia consulted the oracle of Delphi to ask whether he should go to war against the Persians. The oracle responded that if he would do so, he would annihilate a powerful empire; not realizing this could also imply his own army, he rallied to battle and was defeated.

One aspect of worship that is without any doubt more straightforward to research through archaeology is that of animal sacrifice. Alongside the fact that these sacrificial rituals were prominently available in artworks, the animal remains themselves were deposited with far greater care than those that merely served for food purposes. It is interesting to note that whatever the origin of the animal was (wild, domesticated, or acquired through war or trade), it still belonged to the realm of the profane (Méniel, 2015, pp. 155, 163). It was through their killing and ritualistic offering that they would acquire their religious meaning and character, which in turn caused their unique procedures as meat for feasts or upon burial. While evidence for several different species of animals was found, the primary ones used for sacrificial purposes were cows, pigs, sheep and goats. And as much as sacrificial offerings were regarded as ritualistic obligations towards the gods, they were just as much economic risks to the people (Bremmer, 2007, pp. 133–134). One could not always permit to part ways with something as valuable as a cow, even under the guise of divine offering; it is therefore that we see primarily sheep and goats in the ritualistic sacrificial archaeological record. Modern research methods can reliably extract scientific information about the animals in question: its species, approximate size and age, and even to some extent the cut marks on the bones; the latter helping to identify which tools might have been used and whether the meat would have been eaten after the offer was made.

2.5 Introducing Archaeogaming

Since it is the overarching theme of the next chapter (and in essence this entire thesis) the final theoretical point to cover is that of archaeogaming: in very broad terms this is the concept of the overlapping spheres of archaeology and that of video games. In a modern world where a large portion of current adults grew up with different kinds of computer devices, over 2.5 billion people (yes, nearly a third of the current total human population) play video games, indicating how significant and influential the video game industry is at this moment. It is no wonder then that mainstream media companies, similar to radio and television producers have done over the last century or so, are now using this relatively recent digital medium to convey historical information.

Due to its recency, there is an understandable amount of vagueness surrounding the scope of archaeogaming and its place in academia, not in the least because it did not originate within academia itself, but rather emerged as a result of an online blog by Andrew Reinhard on links between archaeology and video games (Politopoulos & Mol, 2023, p. 114). This intersecting plane is comprised of several different forms and can include a plethora of applications. For example, the actual physical excavation and studying of video games and other gaming materials as archaeological artefacts, like the situation Reinhard illustrates in the introduction to his book 'Archaeogaming' where he describes the excavation of hundreds of thousands of video games from a landfill, after they were purposely dumped there by game maker *Atari* 30 years before. Another example he provides further on is one from the video game *Destiny*, where developer *Bungie* decided not only to recast one of their main voice actors, but also had the new voice actor re-read all of the lines from his predecessor, thereby completely erasing these previous contributions; a concept known as *damnatio memoriae* (condemnation of memory) in archaeology, used to describe how some rulers would demand all images and recorded stories of their predecessor to be destroyed in hopes of them not being remembered (Reinhard, 2018, pp. 23; 42).

Several video games have direct links to the profession of archaeology, such as *Jagex*' Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) *RuneScape*, which released its 'Archaeology' skill in 2020. Using Archaeology to excavate dig sites around *RuneScape*'s world, the player will uncover and restore artefacts, solve riddles and ultimately learn about the history of several of the in-game lore's main 'cultures'. Albeit in a much more simplified way, and littered with magical elements, the core representation of the real-life profession of archaeology is one of the closest around. The definition of Archaeogaming that I will be using in the remainder of this thesis, however, is that of the portrayal of the actual archaeological and historical past within video games, in this case in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*. With the theoretical framework established, I will now into the practical element of my research. I have attempted to phrase everything as comprehensively as possible for those that might not be familiar with video games.

3. Religious elements within *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*

This chapter will focus on the video game *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, which can be regarded as the case study for my research. Now that I have covered the Archaeology of Religion and its many facets, I can apply the theoretical knowledge to this practical case. Since many people may not be familiar with the *Assassin's Creed* games, I will first shortly summarize the main premise of the series as a base for understanding. I will then delve into the Classical Greek religious elements that are displayed within *Odyssey*; from mythological elements, to the virtual representations of temples, altars and other religious artefacts, to the performance of rituals. Based on my findings from chapter 2, I will be able to corroborate the accuracy and authenticity of these elements, comparing the way they are displayed to the literature. This will then provide the basis to a more critical discussion regarding several potential issues, which will follow in chapter 4.

3.1 Assassin's Creed

As the main character in any *Assassin's Creed* game you are a part of the seemingly timeless conflict between two huge, secretive organizations: the Assassins and the Templars. Both of these are derived from contemporary, real-world, religious organizations: the *Asāsiyyūn* (the Islamic Nizari Isma'illi order that lived in Iran and Syria) and the *Knights Templar* (a Catholic military order founded to protect Christians on their pilgrimages to the Holy Land). Both of these were active in the 12th and 13th century and played huge parts in the Christian-Islamic battle for control over Jerusalem and the Holy Land during the Crusades. The *Knights Templar* also had an enormous financial infrastructure all over Christendom, believed to be the basis to modern-day banking (Barber, 2006). Combined with their rather abrupt and mysterious disbanding in 1312 AD, this led to all kinds of myths and legends, in turn leading to the pseudohistorical belief that the organizations operate "in the shadows" to this day. The game developers have used this notion to suggest that the battle between the Assassins and Templars was not limited to the age of the Crusades, but rather stretches all throughout history, including the present. The Assassins fighting for a society of equality and freedom, the Templars fighting for a society of control and order.

In Ubisoft's alternate universe, the modern-day Templars have developed the Animus, a coffin-like machine that can read the user's DNA, projecting it in a 3 dimensional world onto a screen, allowing you to relive experiences from that person's ancestors. The main character is a descendant of past Assassins and is kidnapped by the Templars and is forced to use the Animus to aid in their search for powerful artefacts that will allow them to seize control over the world. These artefacts are held by several notable people throughout history, the search for them creating a narrative around recognizable historical names, places and events.

The period in time *Odyssey* is placed in (430-420 BCE) was incredibly impactful in Greek history. It was near the end of the reign of Perikles, one of the country's most successful and well-liked leaders, under which Athens entered its golden age. Great thinkers, writers and artists flocked the city during this time. It was the home of Herodotus (ca. 485 – ca. 425 BCE, the 'father of history'), Socrates (ca. 470 – 399 BCE, the 'father of western philosophy'), Hippocrates (ca. 460 – 370 BCE, the 'father of modern medicine') and Phidias (ca. 480 – 430 BCE, master sculptor and architect, responsible for the statues of Zeus at Olympia and Athena on the Akropolis, for example), among many others. In the realm of video games about ancient Greece, in my opinion there might not be a more perfect period to address; yet there are very few games that do. Perhaps the niche that the Assassin's Creed series has taken within (archaeo)gaming has discouraged other developers from exploring the possibilities.

To give an idea of how *Ubisoft* handles this: all the aforementioned people, as well as the famous landmarks and events such as the Peloponnesian War are present within the game, in most cases meant to be interacted with and having playable story lines connected to them. The virtual world is a replica of mainland Greece and its islands, scaled down for practical (and limitational) purposes. As one can imagine, in order to make this work properly, enormous responsibility is placed on the developers to portray them to a high degree of accuracy and/or authenticity. For explanation purposes, I will make a distinction here between 'foreground' and 'background' elements. The former are often specifically named within the game, are famous in archaeological and/or historical sources and are by many people well-recognized aspects of Classical Greece; the latter can also be named, but serve mostly a secondary role, to fill the environment and breathe extra life into the gaming experience. In order to provide a more realistic feel, a plethora of background elements are added into the game and characters can be seen performing mundane actions everywhere; walking around, speaking Greek with each other, working jobs or fighting little conflicts.

3.2 Religious elements within Assassin's Creed: Odyssey

The Classical Greek landscape was filled with temples and statues, many clearly visible from long distances away, in a way very similar to churches, mosques and other religious buildings nowadays; the virtually shaped world is no different. Figure 3 is a screenshot of the in-game representation of Athens, with its clearly recognizable Parthenon and other temple structures on top

Figure 2. Athens in Assassin's Creed: Odyssey. The city and its clearly recognizable Akropolis with Parthenon. Screenshot by André Weenk.

of the Akropolis in the centre of the city. While most buildings themselves are of proper proportional size compared to your human character avatar, the cities and overall landscapes have been scaled down substantially so as to reduce the digital size and additionally to improve accessibility when travelling around the space. Apart from these adaptations, nearly every person, event and location from the past seems to have been recreated with great regards to what they would have been like.

Even though I am merely researching the religious aspect of these Classical Greek depictions, that still leaves a plethora of elements to cover. One aspect that can be felt all throughout the game is mythology, and it seems that the developers were really keen on pushing the idea that the Greek gods and their different characteristics were interwoven in the everyday life in Classical Greek society. The landscape is littered with temples and statues dedicated to Olympian gods, and in dialogues with other characters sentences such as "May Apollo guide you on your way" or "By Zeus!" are often exclaimed. Apart from this, several fantastical and fictional elements have been implemented as well; in the game you have two companion animals, an eagle named Ikaros and a horse named Phobos, both of those names being nods to well-known mythological stories. Multiple infamous characters

make their appearance as opponents in extremely challenging combat fights, including but not exclusively, the Minotaur, Medusa, and the mighty beasts from Herakles' tasks.

Another mythological aspect that is prevalent is that of fate. Throughout the continuous adventures of your character in *Odyssey*, an overarching story is playing out; and while you have some influence over certain decisions in dialogues (sometimes resulting in changes in relationships with other characters or even other people's deaths), you feel constantly as though you are on a path to an eventual endgame. This is similar to how the idea of the *Moirai* (discussed in section 2.2) would have been manifested in Classical Greek beliefs. Likewise, albeit in a perhaps slightly more meta-gaming fashion, one could perceive the whole idea of 'visiting' an ancestor's experience an expression of fate, with the notable exception that their life lies completely in the past. In both of these situations, however, you would have the feeling of agency and control, while at the same time heading towards a known ending. Having mentioned these, the main focus of my research will be on the more mundane aspects of religion and their archaeological authenticity.

3.2 Delphi, the Temple of Apollo and the Pythia

In order to keep this with as little bias as possible, the aspects I will discuss have been 'selected' fairly at random, as I encountered them during some time playing the game. The only one that unequivocally deserves to be covered is the city of Delphi, since it encompasses every single one of the primary elements (person, event, location) while also playing a pivotal role within the game's story. Very few elements make direct appearances within the story of the game; most are part of the open world, where they can either be interacted with as part of side quests or collectibles, or they serve as pure background elements in order to make the environment feel lively. Similar to many other *Assassin's Creed* games, the reasons why certain aspects exactly become part of the narrative and general foreground within the games, is mainly predicated on them being well-known and popular with the general public. Where the exact line is drawn between foreground and background is primarily up to *Ubisoft* as the developers.

Delphi was an ancient site in the province of Phokis in northern Greece, with a direct religious purpose through its main structure: the Temple of Apollo. As I briefly introduced in chapter 2, one could come to this temple to consult the god Apollo through the Pythia, the high priestess of the temple. Within the game's storyline you interact with the Pythia yourself, and you discover that she is directly under the control of a cult that seeks to influence the people that come to her for advice, in order for the cult to gain power and wealth (NamelessDreadx37x, 2018). The inherent danger with taking a priestess' words as being directly from a god, and subsequently recognizing the god as the

responsible agent, rather than the woman, is (regardless of the exact context of the story in *Odyssey*'s case) very well portrayed.

3.3 Temples within *Odyssey*'s landscape

Within the boundaries of the game and its limitations (both in world size as well as digital memory size), *Odyssey*'s temple structures closely resemble their historical, real-life counterparts. They are enormous in size and radiate a gigantic amount of power and wealth, for all nearby to admire; they are primarily dedicated to a single god, indicated by an in-game tag on the map and by several images of that god within its confines. Most temples contain one large statue, an altar with offerings, and items of wealth deposited close-by, all of these generally being validated by the literature on temple architecture and usage from this period in Greece's history, as discussed in section 2.3. Below, in figures 3 and 4, I have provided images of the Grand Temple of Apollo on the island of Delos, with both an exterior and interior view, in order to get an idea of what these temples look like within the game. For additional images of similar views, Appendix A contains screenshots of the Asklepion in the city of Amphipolis in Makedonia, and the Temple of Poseidon and Temple of Zeus on the island of Korfu.

Figure 3. The Grand Temple of Apollo on Delos in Odyssey. Exterior overview of the temple, showing its surroundings. Screenshot by André Weenk.

On first glance, the decorations are elaborate and plentiful, both on the exterior and interior: golden and marble statues, mosaic floors, and frescoes on the walls that make the temples feel alive and in use, in contrast to the often bare, broken down archaeological remains in modern Greece.

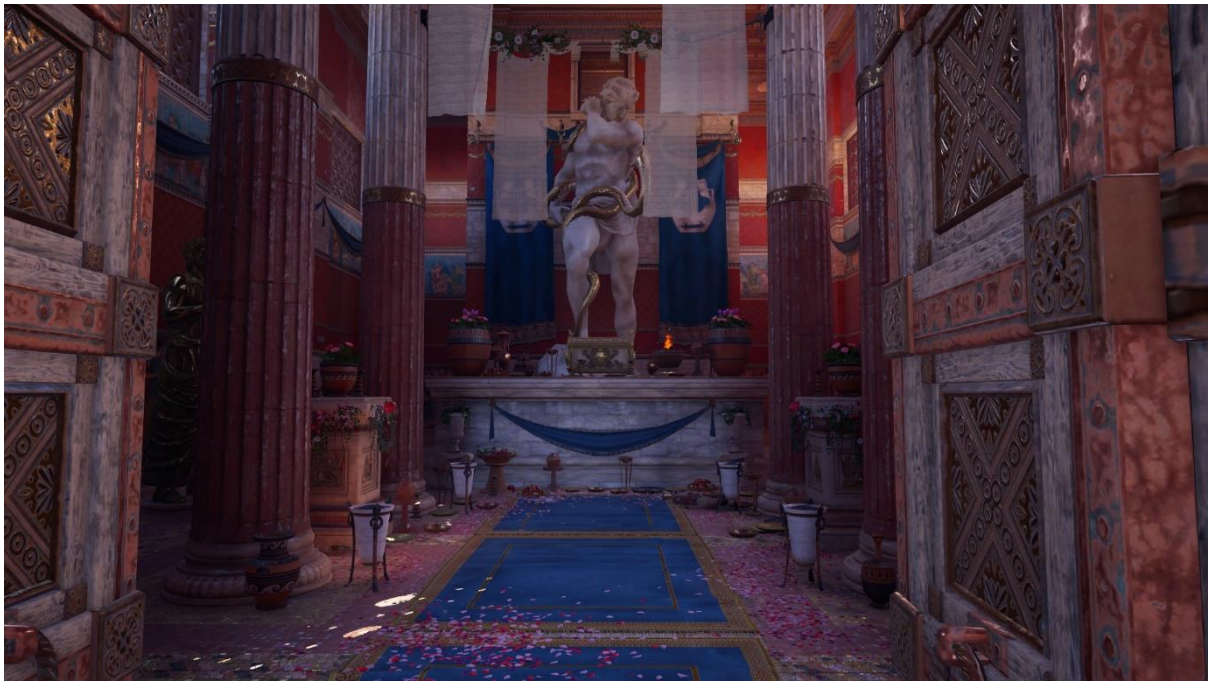

Figure 4. Interior view of the Grand Temple of Apollo. The image of the god Apollo, in the form of a colossal marble statue, is clearly present in the back. Screenshot by André Weenk.

However, upon observing more closely, one can quickly recognize repeating patterns everywhere. Most casual players will likely miss this, and even when noticed, perhaps regard it as a non-issue. There can be multiple reasonable explanations surrounding the decisions for these duplicates, which I will discuss in chapter 4.

Despite this digital realm being an explorable open world, its many religious elements cannot be interacted with in a religious or ritualistic manner. This makes sense, since the main focus of the game is centred around a fixed narrative that does not include any performance of religious or ritualistic actions. Instead they serve another purpose, which requires a brief explanation: if one were to rush through the story of the game, and only perform the strictly necessary actions required to finish the main storyline, the game would take perhaps around 20 hours. However, like many other role-playing games (RPGs for short), there is a plethora of side activities, collectibles and other distractions to be found within the game. This is where these temples' main purpose comes into play: they all have some sort of 'completionist' element to them. Whether it is an enemy to defeat, a powerful item to find, or a riddle to solve, (or perhaps a combination of some or all of these) all large temples have an optional objective attached to them. On one hand this is an amazing way to draw attention to different significant temples all throughout the ancient Greek world (should one choose to explore this), on the other hand it is very much in conflict with a religious space's actual condoned behaviour. In chapter 4 I will cover the various benefits and critiques regarding these issues.

The only reference to actual religious or ritualistic practices comes in the form of non-player characters (NPCs for short; the digital, computer-controlled 'people' that walk around the world) that

can perform these behaviours, as well as the presence of objects in sacred spaces. These NPCs are programmed to perform certain actions to provide livelihood and authenticity to what the ancient world would have been like. In these religious spaces characters can be seen praying and dancing near altars, hands raised to the sky, mouthing Greek hymns and prayers to the gods. Several different religious verses can be heard, such as the Orphic hymn to Artemis (*Orphic Hymn to Artemis*, 2010):

ἣ κατέχεις ὀρέων δρυμούς, ἐλαφηβόλε, σεμνή,
πότνια, παμβασίλεια, καλὸν θάλος αἰὲν ἐοῦσα·

Which roughly translates to:

You dwell in the mountains and forests, hunter of deer, revered,
Mistress, queen of all, beautiful scion forever to be

Even without speaking Greek and being able to confirm the actual sayings and their meanings, having these hymns performed in close proximity makes it feel much more immersive.

3.4 Smaller religious elements

Alongside the monumental temples, smaller objects are strewn across the environment. Statues of gods, heroes or leaders, temples the size of a room, and altars with animal offerings on them, among many others. Most of these elements are unnamed, they often are not direct references to well-known locations, cannot be interacted with by the player and have no objectives tied to them; they purely serve a background role. Regardless, much attention to authenticity has been paid to portray these elements in a realistic manner, such as votives that correlate to the god in question; an example shown in figure 5. As I mentioned in section 2.4, animal sacrifices were among the most prevalent ritualistic practices in ancient Greece. The exact scope of these rituals within *Odyssey*, with entire dead animals, covered in blood, just laying on altars, might be severely exaggerated versions of portraying offerings, but the insinuations towards their commonality are positive nonetheless. It is fascinating to see that *Odyssey* nearly exclusively

Figure 5. Close-up of an altar. Votive objects representing Zeus (who sometimes would assume the shape of a bull) can clearly be identified. Screenshot by André Weenk.

boasts smaller slaughtered animals such as sheep and pigs; there surely are situations where cows, deer or other large animals can be seen, but they are predominated by archaeologically correct sacrifices.

Similar to the large temples, religious activities can be seen performed by NPCs at these smaller locations as well. Figures 6 and 7 show such activities at an altar somewhere in the environment, where several people are performing a ritualistic offering to the gods, pouring some sort of liquid on a fire on top of an altar, while saying prayers and motioning with their arms to the sky. A slaughtered sheep can be seen on the ground next to the altar.

Figure 6. NPCs performing rituals. Computer-controlled characters interacting with an open altar in the environment, lifting their arms up to the sky in prayer. Screenshot by André Weenk.

Figure 7. NPCs making an offering. One of the robed figures can be seen pouring liquid onto the flames as an offering to the gods. Screenshot by André Weenk.

In this case, the characters wearing fairly regular clothes are bystanders, whereas the fully robed priest figures can be observed performing rituals. With the lack of archaeological knowledge and uncertainty from other sources discussed in section 2.4, it is safe to say that both of these clothing options are valid as there seems to have been place for either, depending on specific situations. It is interesting to note, though, that *Ubisoft* have decided to use clothing as an identifier of status or function in most ritualistic situations.

3.5 Connecting the religious spaces to the environment

The discussion around religious spaces and their relationship to their direct surroundings, and the various degrees of attention given to this matter by archaeologists, is a critical issue. In the case of *Odyssey* this critique seems fair. In section 2.4 I explained the high degree of importance that natural surroundings had to the ancient Greeks. However, to *Odyssey*'s players, the temples' locations within the game have no meaning; there is nothing that ties a specific temple or statue to their location, no indication towards some sort of religious significance to those particular spots. This context has to be derived from additional information provided by the game, such as additional tooltips or other in-game hints, that suggest why a location was important. An example of this is the island of Chios, where a tribe of so-called 'Daughters of Artemis' are located, separated from the rest of society. From interacting with these characters, their relationship with Artemis, animals and the hunt becomes clear.

In this case, due to the fact that every location is a direct representation of an actually existing situation, there was no incentive for the developers to consciously consider creating such connections between religious spaces and the environment. Should they have created their own, completely separate, universe **based on** Classical Greece, this certainly would have been more applicable. Visibility, however, is one of the aspects that do stand out quite substantially. Temples and sanctuaries are not only in highly visible locations, but they stand out from their direct surroundings, often literally on higher grounds, drawing attention to their magnificence, almost reaching for the gods themselves.

4. Critical evaluation and the conveying of information

In this final chapter I will more critically address my findings from the previous chapters. There are several problems that clearly have arisen through the manner in which religion is portrayed, as well as several controversial connotations that have been made. Even with all the resources available to them, *Ubisoft* are forced to make decisions regarding the portrayal of religious elements that might jeopardize their accuracy. While an argument can be made that this can be regarded as sloppy or untruthful, I want to show that this is not necessarily the case. Then, the very realistic, seemingly timeless issue of religion and violence is one that an RPG such as *Odyssey* (where combat is a crucial element) will not and cannot avoid. One can look at this in rather extreme regards from both sides of the discussion, especially when considering that the game promotes fighting within religious spaces. However, I will argue in favour of the game developers, justifying their decisions
as well as cover the way *Ubisoft* handles conveying historical and archaeological information regarding religion themselves.

4.1 The accuracy of the portrayal of religious activities

Throughout the previous chapter I've expressed several notions regarding the accuracy and authenticity in the way Classical Greek religion is portrayed. It is essential to realize that whichever way one might look at *Odyssey*, it is meant first and foremost as a video game. Whatever religious elements are displayed in whichever way, the game is not meant to be a 100% accurate playable historical simulation of the past. This shows, for example, in the duplicate elements found across the

Figure 8. First statue of Aphrodite. Screenshot by André Weenk.

Figure 9. Second statue of Aphrodite. Screenshot by André Weenk.

Figure 10. Thrid statue of Aphrodite. Screenshot by André Weenk.

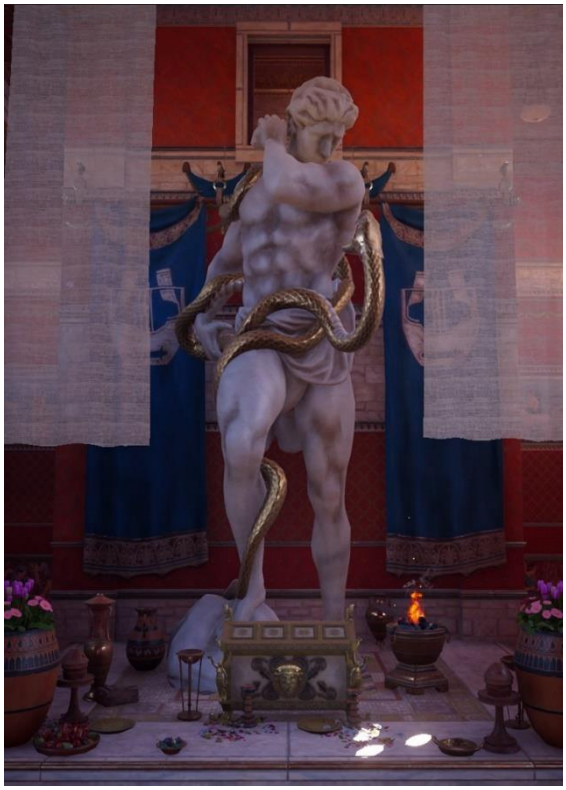

Figure 12. First statue of Apollo. Forward-facing image in the temple on Delos. Screenshot by André Weenk.

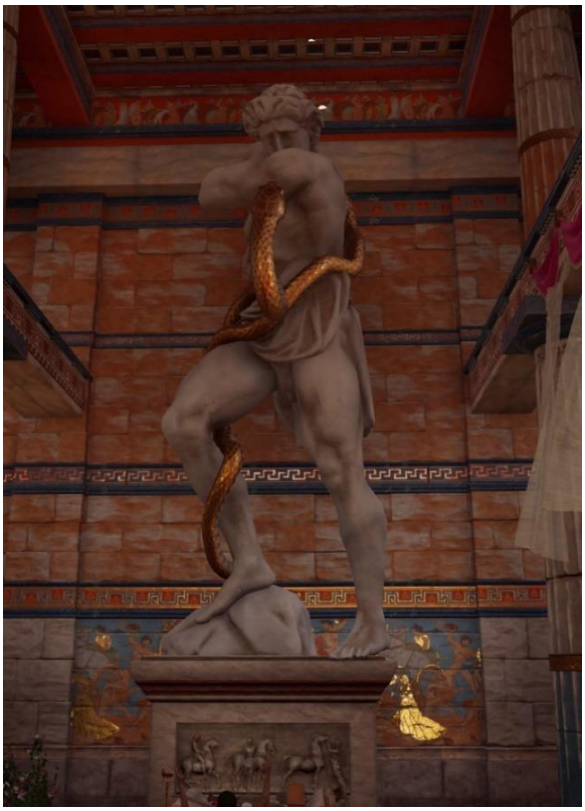

Figure 11. Second statue of Apollo. The image is twisted 45 degrees, from the temple in Korinth. Screenshot by André Weenk.

world, where exact copies of character models are used in many locations. There are several different temples dedicated to Apollo which contain the exact same statue of the god with exactly the same bodily position. Statues of Aphrodite can be found all across the landscape, and identical models are used to portray her, from the Peloponnesian southwest to the far eastern islands. The motifs used for decorating the interior (in the form of paintings) and the exterior (in the form of friezes) of temples is copied to a very high degree; not just within the temples themselves, but between different temples as well. To illustrate this, figures 8, 9 and 10 show three different statues of Aphrodite in three different locations. Even though slight variations, in the form of different items placed in her hands, are introduced to make them appear more unique, the base models are identical. Similarly, figures 11 and 12 depict the statues of Apollo from two different temples, their identical stature and pose clearly being visible despite the 45 degree turn. Finally, figures 13 and 14 illustrate the repeating mural elements within temples. One from the temple of Apollo in Korinth, the other from the temple of Herakles on Thasos. Not only does the pattern repeat itself within the temple, but between these two locations a well.

As the literature has shown, religious imagery is extremely personal to the revered deity as well as the local community, and while it spoke of regional variations between divine images, it is quite evident that these examples are not considered to be representative of that. However, there are clear

Figure 13. Murals inside the temple of Apollo in Korinth. One of the patterns that is repeated throughout different temples in the game. Screenshot by André Weenk.

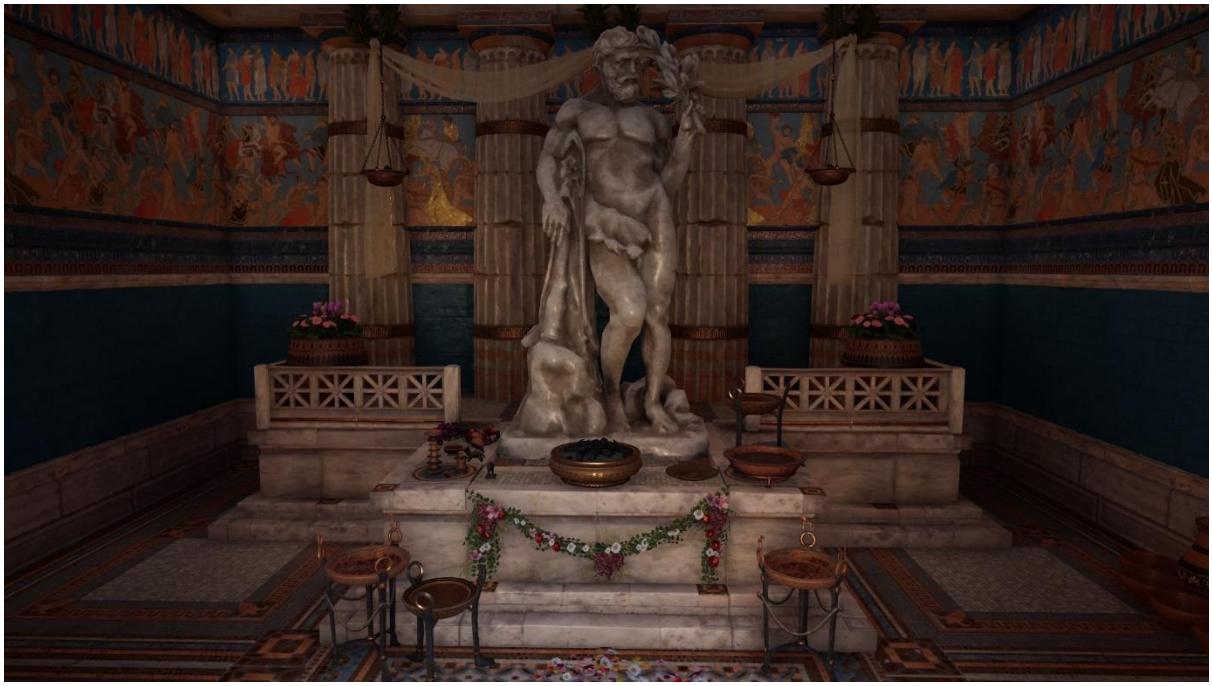

Figure 14. Murals inside the temple of Herakles. The same pattern in a different location, and with a different deity. Screenshot by André Weenk.

explanations as to why these make sense. Having to create a template for such character models only once saves enormous amounts of time, space and money in the creative process. Being able to finetune some tiny details (such as colours and textures), and placing them within different environments, will still allow for 'unique' depictions of each image. In my opinion, their purpose in religious context is not tainted by their copyability.

4.2 Religion and violence

As the name implies, being a stealthy killer is part of the core identity of the Assassin's Creed series, and the games are subsequently known for their (albeit oft wonky) combat elements. Violence in general is readily abundant all throughout the gaming industry; in that regard Assassin's Creed games are no different. But the addition of religious motivation for said violence can trigger endless discussion. With two secretive, powerful organizations with opposing ideals fighting for control within this universe, associations with religiously incentivized violence lurk around the corner. This method of narrative unavoidably supports a 'good guy vs. bad guy'-scenario, where, as the main character and powerful agent belonging to one side of the argument, you feel validated in inflicting pain and death on the other party. From both perspectives (that of the aggressor/oppressor, or that of the victims/conquered) in situations of religious differences, one could justify their righteous intentions for exacting force on the other in the name of religion (Lincoln, 2013, pp. 203–204).

Additionally, temples and other religious spaces often contain valuable items in the form of materials or monetary currency (see section 3.3). You can easily obtain these for personal gains, inevitably sparking the debate on the consequences of looting from religious spaces. From the perspective of ritualistic practices, valuable materials are used as one end of a reciprocating agreement between a human and a deity. In return for offering something of value to a god, you wish for return value in the form of protection, health or fortune for yourself. The idea of looting valuable items from a religious context directly contradicts this perceived high regard and respect these people must have had. Moreover, the fact that obtaining valuable items is an oft used completionist element, not only means that such actions are possible, but in fact are encouraged; clearly a problematic issue in regards to authentic religious behaviour. As Kathryn Meyers Emery and Andrew Reinhard pose it: "Is it possible that games like Indiana Jones or Uncharted may be a motivation for looting or incorrect interpretations of other cultures, or inspire violence and destruction of the past?" (Meyers Emery & Reinhard, 2015, p. 144).

With *Ubisoft*'s motto for the Assassin's Creed's series being "history is our playground", it becomes evident that, whilst delivering historically accurate characters, events and locations, having personal agency over the course of action is pivotal to the gaming experience. This sense of control over your decisions is something greatly valued, but does it justify certain decisions? Freedom plays huge part in *Odyssey*'s sentiment, but it does not comply with authentic, respected religious behaviour. However, in my own experience, this association between sacred spaces, valuable items, violence and looting has clearly been missing. It wasn't until this research that this notion clicked. It is fairly easy to regard every location that has these completionist objectives (whether these are

religious in nature or not) as a game within the game; can I recover the items without being spotted? Can I solve the riddle and get out without having to fight? And if a fight does break out, am I strong enough to defeat the enemies? This completionist aspect of the game, along with all sorts of abilities and skills to employ, easily allow you to dissociate from this notion of resorting to violence in the name of a religious organization or within a sacred space. And this, to me, is the bottom line; being able to dissociate violence from religion (and from video games in general) is key to understanding the value, beauty and importance of religious practice, whilst not being withheld by whichever elements the game provides you. Or, worded in a way every gamer can relate to, especially regarding the excruciating commonality of ascribing real-life acts of aggression to violence in video games: the number of people I have killed in video games? Thousands. The number of people I have killed in real life? ZERO.

4.3 Communicating religious information

With Ubisoft's commitment towards historical authenticity comes some sort of responsibility. Not only have they created a virtual world based on historical people and locations, but they have given them their supposed character and identity as well. Ubisoft has not only realized this themselves, but seem to have embraced it; even more so over the last few iterations of Assassin's Creed games. For people who know the basics to Greek religion and mythology already, or at least are interested to some degree, experiencing the fully restored temples and statues from famous locations, the references to mythological stories, and the other religious elements within *Odyssey* can be regarded as a form of embodiment of what used to be mere imagination. For those that are unfamiliar, it can be their way of becoming acquainted with them. Several different teaching elements have been implemented to aid this transfer of knowledge, transcending the idea of these being 'just video games'.

For example, the in-game world map shows several different kinds of locations of interest; where to start new quests, where to buy or sell items, etc. To this, a completely separate selection layer is added, called ‘Historical locations’. By toggling this option, all icons are replaced by other ones that indicate well-known locations, providing some historical information. An example of this can be seen in Figure 15, where the tooltip of a Temple of Zeus provides some additional knowledge on the evolution of temples.

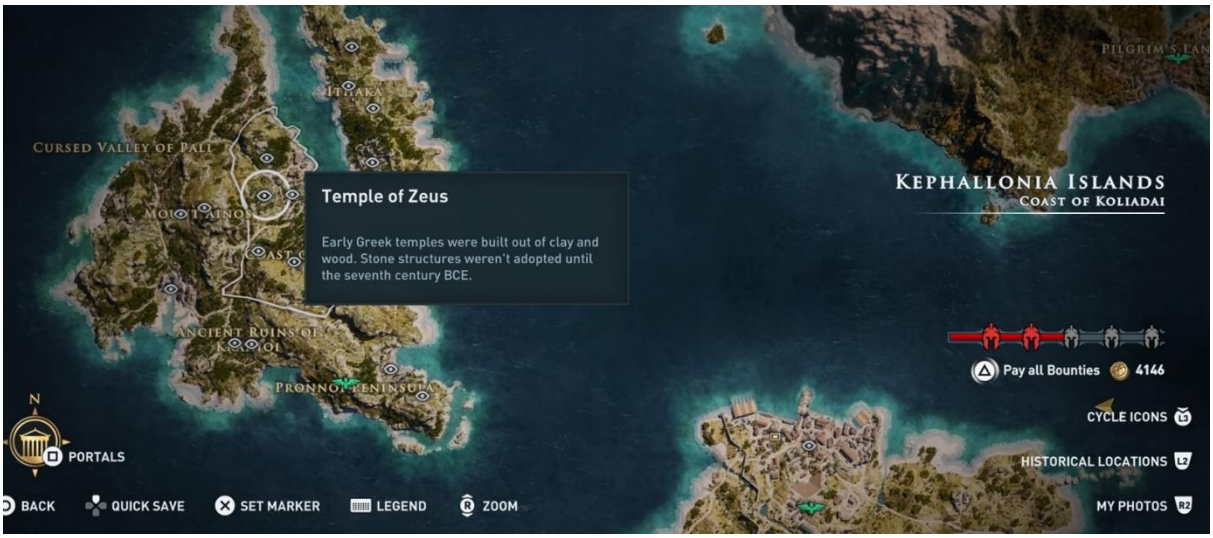

Figure 15. Detail of the in-game map. The 'Historical locations' tooltip provides extra information to places of interest around ancient Greece. Screenshot by André Weenk.

The Assassin’s Creed games have all had a database of information present to some extent. In the earlier games this would be in the form of a tab in the game’s menu where information around historical figures, locations and events was stored as you encountered them, but in *Assassin’s Creed: Origins* (which takes place in ancient Egypt) this was transformed into a full-fledged ‘Discovery Tour’, which made its return in *Odyssey*. Within the Discovery Tour you can freely run around as you would in the normal game world, but all gaming elements have been removed. Its main focus is to serve as a three-dimensional guide through noteworthy locations to provide the player with historical information and context to the real-life activities that once took place. These informational tidbits are fully narrated and are supported by archaeological sources and literary works, as well as other historical adaptations such as paintings or sculptures. The same completionist elements are present here too, where visiting specific tooltips provides small rewards, and optional quizzes can be taken to prove you have learnt from these teachings. In the end, whether it is through realistic historical depictions in a fantastical story, or a virtual reality tour around the archaeological remains, *Ubisoft* have realized that they are both users of information, as well as a source of information; something which they seem to have fully embraced and are committed to contributing to science communication.

5. Conclusions and perspectives

Assassin's Creed: Odyssey is a video game, not just inspired by, but based on, and located in a virtual representation of, the Classical Greek world; drawing from, and in turn relying on, the historical and archaeological records for its portrayal. Essential to Classical Greek society was the way religion was interwoven into their every thought and action. With tremendous amounts of respect and fascination for nature and the rest of the natural world around them, the Greeks developed mythological ideas in order to explain natural phenomena and materialize the immaterial. Religious spaced were appropriated, temples were erected, and all sorts of ritualistic practices took place.

As (some of) these materials withstood the tests of time, archaeologists have tried to 'revert' them back into the thoughts and beliefs that conceived them, thereby hoping to better understand past societies. While the adequacy of the application of archaeology to the field of religion and ritual has been hotly debated for decades, recently more and more faith into its validity is given due to new insights and improvements in tools and techniques. With the evolution of the digital environment, the gaming industry slowly made its way into academic research, evolving into its very own field of archaeogaming, a subset within the overarching spheres of digital archaeology. While still in its relative infancy, archaeogaming has developed massively over its 10 years since its conception, providing its own unique addition to the world of academia.

Within this realm, I have used *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* as a case study to research ancient Greek religion through a rather unusual medium, a video game. Whereas most game developers create their own environments and histories, and are therefore fully in charge of the authenticity of their portrayal, *Ubisoft* has entered a slippery slope by recreating stories (albeit mythological and epic in nature) an existing world. Or have they? Due to their unique premise around the *Assassin's Creed* series, revolving around the idea of having agency and influence over events that happened in the past, they allow themselves to slightly bend the rules of authenticity. This does not mean that the game has been distorted out of proportion; the amount of leeway provides a fine balance between historical accuracy and fantastical interpretation.

In order to research a subject as complex as religion through a medium in which religion is, on the one hand, a tiny part of the total scope of projection, and on the other hand, present all throughout, I have started out by roughly defining how archaeologists study such a complicated, immaterial subject through the material record in the first place. The terms 'religion' and 'ritual' for the longest time had not even been properly defined, resulting in mismatching terms and overall vagueness in a field that relies so much on being precise (however challenging that might be due to the constant need for interpretation). The thoughts and beliefs of ancient Greek religion encompasses an amount of time that spans from before the Bronze Age, through a process of adaptations and

amalgamations, up until around 320 BCE, as this is the period described within *Odyssey*. By this time, the Olympian Gods were well represented through monumental architecture and statues of marble and gold, but just as important were the local and small-scale variants, differing very slightly from region to region, depending on the characteristics valued by its local population.

Several elements, visible in the archaeological record, were important in ritual practice: relation, location, and worship. By nature, all manner of religious practices were performed to establish a connection with divine powers, due to their aforementioned perceived presence in natural occurrences. These deities, each with their own set of characteristics, skills and relationships, were believed to animate certain locations, hence the erection of material culture in spaces that were deemed to be inhabited by respective gods. The main method of communicating with the gods was through a reciprocal relationship, by which one would gift something (often material) of value to a god, in the hopes of receiving something else (often immaterial) of value in return.

While *Odyssey* unfortunately does not directly allow players to perform ritualistic practices themselves, attention to this matter is given in the form of non-player characters (NPCs). In the majority of role-playing games (RPGs), NPCs are present to provide the sense that these virtual worlds are 'inhabited'; it is easy to imagine that even virtual representations of large cities will feel extremely uncanny the moment no other characters are present anywhere. In *Odyssey* NPCs have been programmed to act as if they lived in Classical Greece; some can be seen working in the fields, others are fishing at sea, and, most importantly for this research, some can be witnessed performing ritualistic activities. Whether it is through exclamations in dialogue, praying at statues or offering at altars, *Ubisoft*, using NPCs, has recreated the notion that religion was everywhere, and with everyone, as an integral part of Classical Greek society.

This does cause several important issues to arise, especially where the world of RPG-gaming meets that of historical simulation. Some elements, such as extreme violence or looting, are simply not suited for religious spaces (not implying these would never occur, but rather insinuating that, even more so than in religious environments nowadays, it was 'not done'), yet they are extremely prevalent in *Odyssey*. This ties back to the idea of reciprocal relationships with the gods, and it would have been seen as awfully condemning to interfere with them by taking valuables that were meant in exchange. Ultimately, however, I can only conclude that, similar to other video games of violent nature, players are able to dissociate this strong link of violence from religious spaces, while at the same time appreciating the perceived wealth and power dedicated to the gods.

Lastly, *Ubisoft* has embraced the idea that their portrayals of the ancient world, can be equally valuable as a source of information towards the outside world. Unlike most other games, ones set and drenched in actual historical people, locations and events, can easily be considered in the scope of

science communication. Their Discovery Tour allows players to explore the historical and archaeological elements of the virtual world in their own pace, accompanied by bits of information and links to sources. It is through elements like this, that *Ubisoft* seems to realize not only the importance of using sources for their depictions, but also **being** a source at the same time.

While my research answers the rather general questions posed at the start, the game is simply too large to completely fathom every aspect of religion, and it would be impossible to capture every single detail included in the representation of religion. In hindsight, I could have picked a region, a city, or even one single religious space as the scope of my case study. I am quite sure I have missed (probably even very obvious) some manifestations, due to the sheer size of *Odyssey*'s world, but I feel nonetheless accomplished in my goal to describe which religious elements are present, how they compare to their real-world counterparts, and which interesting issues arise from these notions. With my research, I hope to bring the worlds of video games and academia that little bit closer together, playing my part in its rapidly expanding process, as there is clearly much more to uncover.

6. Abstract

This thesis examines the role of ancient Greek religion and its portrayal in the video game *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*. While the studying of religion through archaeology has been a topic of debate for decades, new developments and insights highlight that the value of the material record is of such magnitude that it warrants substantial consideration. Through the history of Greek religion and its material and immaterial manifestations in ritualistic practices, this research compares the digital representations to their real-world counterparts. Monumental architecture in the form of large temples represent the wealth and power of Classical religion; small secluded altars provide a sense of privacy and intimacy.

While mostly adhering to physical likeliness and the often correct display of religious behaviour by background characters, it is nonetheless evident that several critical issues arise as well. The timeless problematic matter of religion-fuelled violence is not shied away from, in fact to a large extent even encouraged to engage with. Religious elements are, for whichever reason, to a large extent exactly copied all throughout the world. And while some of these issues persist, most of them will elude the general player, allowing for *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* to become what is what meant to be in the first place, a video game; meant for players that either identify with the Classical Greek world, or just to play for fun.

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List of Figures

Appendix A

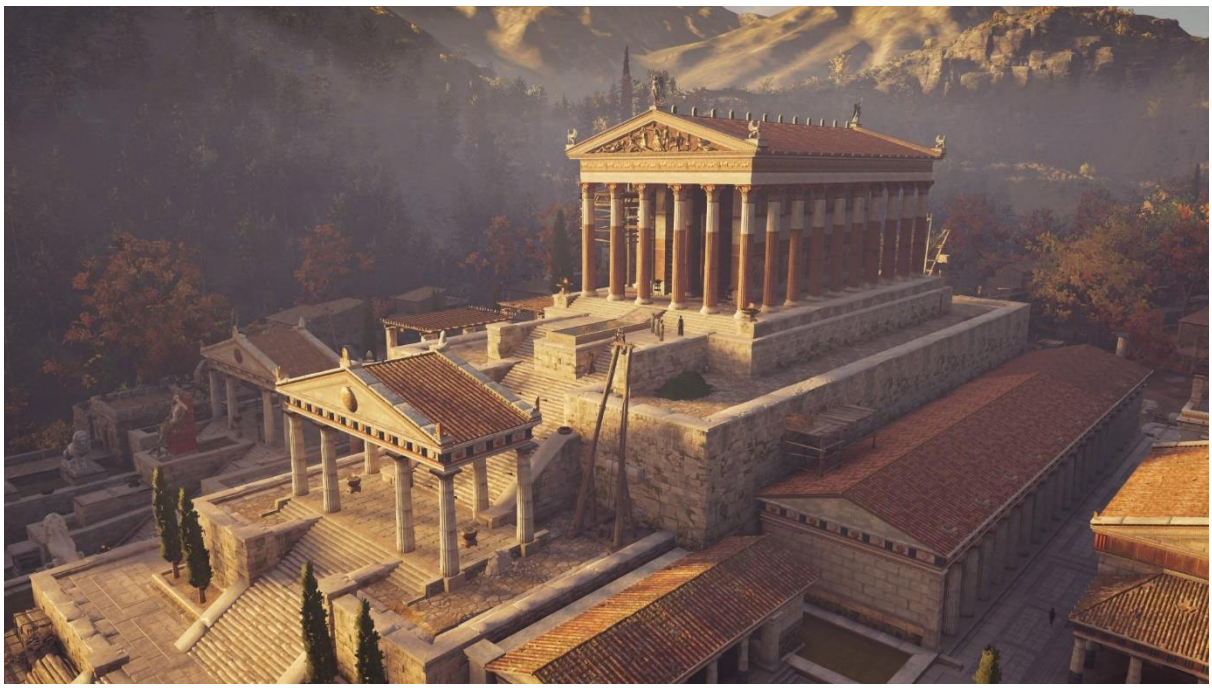

Figure 16. Exterior of the Asklepion. Showing the location of the temple in its surroundings. Screenshot by André Weenk.

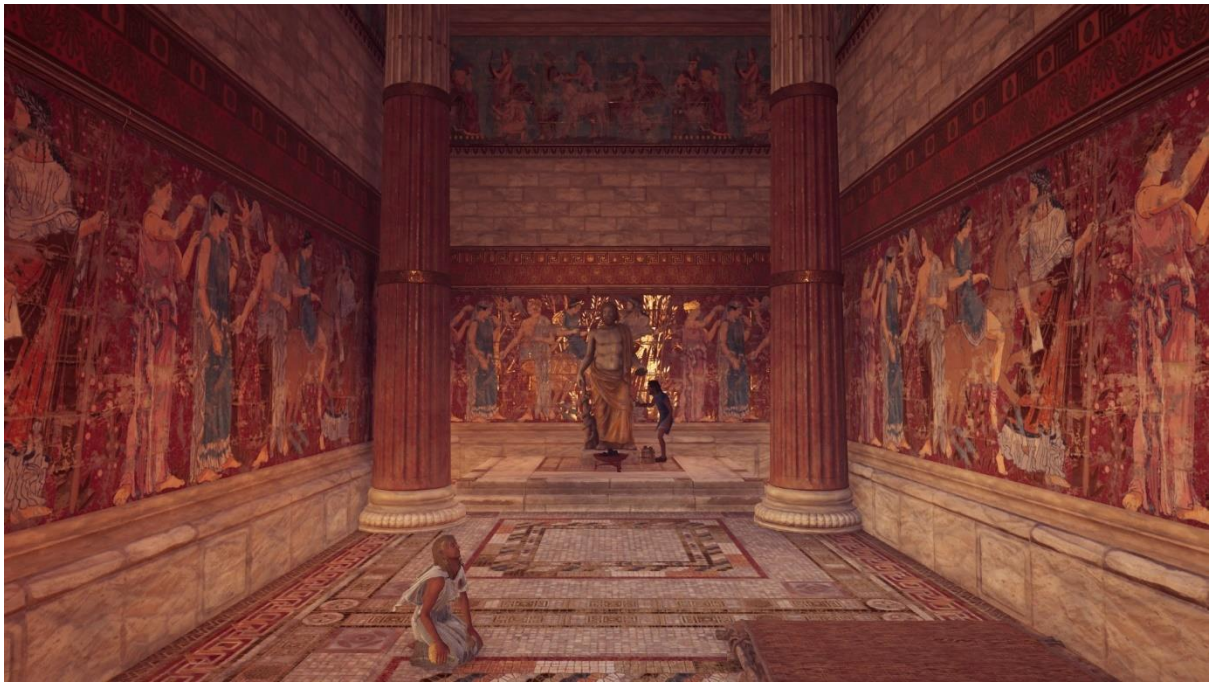

Figure 17. Interior of the Asklepion. Non-player characters can be seen praying and cleaning the statue of Asklepios, respectively. Screenshot by André Weenk.

Figure 18. Exterior of the Temple of Poseidon. The location of the temple and its surroundings, close to water as one would expect from a temple dedicated to the god of the sea. Screenshot by André Weenk.

Figure 19. Interior of the Temple of Poseidon. Interesting to note the lack of evident imagery of Poseidon here, recognizing that this did not necessarily have to be the case. Screenshot by André Weenk.

Figure 20. Exterior of the Temple of Zeus. Little indicates that this temple is dedicated to the leader of the gods. Screenshot by André Weenk.

Figure 21. Interior of the Temple of Zeus. A statue of Zeus clearly visible in the back, containing his characteristic staff and lightning bolt. Screenshot by André Weenk.