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The Socio-Linguistics of Ancient Greek Identity: The Meaning of 'Myth'

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THE SOCIO-LINGUISTICS OF ANCIENT GREEK IDENTITY: THE MEANING OF 'MYTH'

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In Ancient Greece, myth and ritual served as methods by which people developed a sense of belonging. Myths were not merely fantastic stories, but they and their accompanying rituals were regarded as the speaking of ultimate truths by the Ancient Greeks. Indeed, myth and ritual formed the very basis for Greek religion. The linguistics of the word 'myth' itself provides a background that explains the origin of later sources of Greek identity. 'Myth', derived from the Greek verb *muô*, 'I have my eyes closed, I have my mouth shut', sets up the context of Greek religion by establishing a dichotomy of the sacred, or 'marked' sphere, versus the secular, or 'unmarked' sphere. The sacred sphere is one of exclusivity: a closed group within which there is a sanctity and openness vis-a-vis outsiders to the group. Initiates of this 'marked' sacred group are described as *mustes* in Ancient Greek. This concept provides the basis of the later ideology that inclusion and group identity are central to the Greek *polis* 'city-state' itself. Thus, the socio-linguistics of 'myth' actually serves as the basis of establishing how people identify themselves as a group.