

Mystic Cults in Magna Graecia

EDITED BY GIOVANNI CASADIO AND PATRICIA A. JOHNSTON

University of Texas Press  *Austin*

This book has been supported by an endowment dedicated to classics and the ancient world and funded by the Areté Foundation; the Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation; the Dougherty Foundation; the James R. Dougherty, Jr. Foundation; the Rachael and Ben Vaughan Foundation; and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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Printed in

First edition, 2009

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University of Texas Press

P.O. Box 7819

Austin, TX 78713-7819

www.utexas.edu/utpress/about/bpermission.html

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

ISBN 978-0-292-79927-1 (library e-book); ISBN 978-0-292-74994-8 (individual e-book)

Mystic cults in Magna Graecia/edited by Giovanni Casadio and Patricia A.

Johnston. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-292-71902-6 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Magna Graecia (Italy)—Religion. 2. Mysteries, Religious—Italy—Magna Graecia. I. Casadio, Giovanni, 1950- II. Johnston, Patricia A.

BL793.M34M97 2010

292.070937'7—dc22 2009019434

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Abbreviations

Journal titles throughout are abbreviated according to *L'Année philologique*, unless listed below.

Aesch. = Aeschylus

Ag. = Agamemnon

Cho. = Choephoroe

Eum. = Eumenides

PV = Prometheus Vincetus

Sept. = Seven against Thebes

Supp. = Suppliants

Anec. Graeca = *Anecdota Graeca*

ANRW = *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*

AP = *Palatine Anthology*

Ap. Rhod. Argon. = Apollonius Rhodius *Argonautica*

Apul. Met. = Apuleius *Metamorphoses* Aristoph. = Aristophanes

Ach. = Acharnians

Av. = Birds

Eq. = Equites

Nu. = Nubes

Th. = *Thesmophoriazusae*

Aratus Phaen. = *Phaenomena*

Arist. = Aristotle

Phys. = Physics

Prob. = *Problemata*

Rhet. = Rhetoric

Aristid. = Aelius Aristides

Or. = Orations

Ath. = Athenaeus

Bacch. = Bacchylides

Beazley, ABV = J. D. Beazley, *Attic Black-Figure Vase Painters* (1956)

Callim. = Callimachus

CCCA = *Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque*

Cic. = Cicero

Amic. = *De amicitia*

N.D. = *De natura deorum*

Tusc. = *Tusculanae disputationes*

Verr. = *In Verrem*

CIG = *Corpus inscriptionum Graecorum*

CIL = *Corpus inscriptionum Latinarum*

CIMRM = M. J. Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum*

Religionis Mithriacae, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1956-1960)

Clem. Alex. = Clement of Alexandria

Paed. = *Paedagogus*

Protr. = *Protrepticus*

Strom. = *Stromateis*

CVA = *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum*

Dio Cass. = Dio Cassius

Diod. Sic. = Diodorus Siculus

Diog. Laert. = Diogenes Laertius

Dion. Hal. = Dionysius Halicarnassus

Ant. Rom. = *Roman Antiquities*

Eleuth. = Eleutherna (Orph. fr. 478-480 Bernabé = 32b I-III Kern and 482-483 Bernabé)

Ent. = Entella (Orph. fr. 475 Bernabé)

Epigr. Gr. = G. Kaibel, *Epigrammata Graeca ex lapidibus conlecta* (1878)

Eur. = Euripides

Ba. = *Bacchae*

Cret. = *Cretans*

Cyc. = *Cyclops*

El. = *Electra*

Hel. = *Helen*

HF = *Hercules furens*

Hipp. = *Hippolytus*

IA = *Iphigenia at Aulis*

IT = *Iphigenia among the Taurians*

Or. = *Orestes*

Phoen. = *Phoenissae*

Tr. = *Trojan Women*

FGrH = *Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*

Firm. Mat. *De err. prof. rel.* = Firmicus Maternus *De errore profanarum religionum*

Hdt. = Herodotus

Hes. = Hesiod

Theog. = *Theogony*

WD = *Works and Days*

Hesych. = Hesychius

Hipp. = Hipponion (Orph. fr. 474 Bernabé)

Homer *Il.* = *Iliad*

Od. = *Odyssey*

Hor. *Sat.* = Horace *Satires*

Hymn Dem. = *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*

IG = Inscriptiones Graecae

IGBulg. = Inscriptiones Graecae in Bulgaria repertae

IGDOb. = L. Dubois, Inscriptions grecques dialectales d'Olbia du Pont (Geneva, 1996) Iulian. Or. = Julian Orations

LIMC = Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae Lucian

Cat. = Cataplus

DD = Dialogi deorum

Dial. Mort. = Dialogi mortuorum

Peregr. = De morte peregrini

Lycophr. = Lycophron

Macrobius Sat. = Saturnalia

Malib. = Malibu (Orph. fr. 484 Bernabé)

Mart. Epigr. = Martial Epigrams

OF = Orphic fragments

Orph. fr. B = A. Bernabé, Poetae Epici Graeci Testimonia et fragmenta, pars. II, fasc. 1, Orphicorum et Orphicis similium testimonia et fragmenta (Monachii and Lipsiae, 2004).

Orph. Hymn. = Orphic Hymn

Ovid Met. = Metamorphoses

Parm. = Parmenides

PCG = R. Kassel and C. Austin, eds., Poetae Comici Graeci (Berlin and New York, 1984)

PBonon. = Bononiae Papyrus

PDerveni = Derveni Papyrus

Pel. = Pelinna (Orph. fr. 485-486 Bernabé)

Pet. = Petelia (Orph. fr. 476 Bernabé = 32a Kern)

Petronius Sat. = Petronius Satyricon

PGM = K. Preisendanz, Papyri graecae magicae: Die griechischen zauberpapyri, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1928-31)

PGurob = Gurob Papyrus

Phars. = Pharsalus (Orph. fr. 477 Bernabé)

Pher. = Pherai (Orph. fr. 493 Bernabé)

Philostr. = Philostratus

Imag. = Imagines

VS = Vitae sophistarum

Pind. = Pindar

Nem. = Nemean Odes

O. = Olympian Odes

Pyth. = Pythian Odes

Pl. = Plato

Crat. = Cratylus

Gorg. = Gorgias

Leg. = *Laws*

Phdr. = *Phaedrus*

Phd. = *Phaedo*

Rep. = *Republic*

Tim. = *Timaeus*

Pliny NH = *Natural History*

Plot. = Plotinus

Plut. = Plutarch

Alex. = *Alexander*

Amat. = *Amatorius*

Def. orac. = *De defectu oraculorum*

Is. Os. = *De Iside et Osiride*

Lyc. = *Lycurgus*

Mor. = *Moralia*

Mul. Virt. = *De mulierum virtutibus*

Quaest. conv. = *Quaestiones convivales*

Sup. = *De superstitione*

Thes. = *Theseus*

PMG = D. L. Page, *Poetae Melici Graeci* (1962)

Porph. = Porphyry

Antr. = *De antro nympharum*

De abst. = *De abstinentia*

Procl. = Proclus

H. = *Hypotyposis*

PSI = *Papiri Greci e Latini, Pubblicazioni della Società italiana per la ricerca dei papyri greci e latini in Egitto*

RE = A. Pauly, G. Wissowa, and W. Kroll, *Real-Encyclopädie d. klassischen Altertumswissenschaft* (1893-)

RGVV = A. Dieterich, R. Wünsch, L. Malten, O. Weinreich, and L. Deubner, *Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten* (1903-)

Rom. = Roma (Orph. fr. 491 Bernabé = 32g Kern)

Sen. = Seneca

Ep. mor. = *Epistulae morales*

De benef. = *De beneficiis*

Sext. Emp. *Math.* = Sextus Empiricus *Adversus mathematicos*

Simplic. *in Cael.* = Simplicius *In Aristotelis de Caelo Commentarii*

Soph. = Sophocles

Ant. = *Antigone*

El. = *Elektra*

OC = *Oedipus at Colonus*

OT = *Oedipus Rex*

Tr. = *Trachiniae*

Stat. *Silv.* = *Stattus Silvae*

Suet. *Aug.* = *Suetonius Augustus*

Symm. *Ep.* = *Symmachus Epistles*

Tertullian *De cor.* = *De corona militis*

Themist. *Or.* = *Themistius Orations*

Theophr. *Char.* = *Theophrastus Characters*

ThesCRA = *Thesaurus cultus et rituum antiquorum*

Thuc. = *Thucydides*

Thur. = *Thurii* (Orph. fr. 487-490 and 492 Bernabé = 32f-cd and 47 Kern, quoted with the number of the fragment of Bernabé)

TrGF = *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, ed. Snell (vol. 1) and Radt (vol. 4) (Göttingen, 1977)

Tzetz. *Chil.* = *Tzetzes Historiarum variorum Chiliades*

Verg. = *Vergil*

Aen. = *Aeneid*

Ecl. = *Eclogues*

G. = *Georgics*

Vitr. = *Vitruvius*

Xen. = *Xenophon*

Hell. = *Hellenica*

Xenoph. = *Xenophanes*

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

GIOVANNI CASADIO AND PATRICIA A. JOHNSTON

The definition of “Magna Graecia” has varied from the time the Greeks first settled the coastal regions of Italy—sometimes including the area from Campania to Sicily, at other times excluding significant portions of this territory.¹ But this area has always been home to the mystic cults and traditions that preceded and accompanied Christianity, including the Sibyl of Cumae, the worship of Demeter and Persephone (her abduction took place in Sicily), Dionysian and Orphic cults, and other cults such as those of Cybele, Isis, and Mithras. In June 2002 and 2004 symposia were held by the Vergilian Society and Brandeis University at the Villa Vergiliana in Cuma, Italy, on the topic, “The Cults of Magna Graecia.” The purpose of these symposia was to examine the evidence in the material remains and surviving literature related to cults of Greek, Oriental, and Egyptian origin in southern Italy and the religious perceptions of these practices in Rome. It was believed, as Vergil implies, that those who have been initiated into the mystery cults enjoy a blessed (*fortunatus*) situation both in life and after death—a basic belief in the mystery cults that was later adopted by Christianity.²

Why “Mystic” Cults? Historical and Critical Perspectives

In introducing the papers collected in this volume, one must inevitably consider the degree to which these cults, particularly the so-called mystery cults, often referred to as “mysteries,” can properly be viewed as religiohistorical phenomena. We must also recognize the existence of a certain tension between the evidence pertaining to these cults as practiced at the “local” level, and their practice in the more “central” metropolises (such as mainland Greece, especially Attica, Anatolia, and Egypt), for example, by taking into consideration the links between the cults and the geographical and ecological realities.

Mysteries and the Orient are inherently intriguing. They have always held a remarkable appeal even for the most traditional students of the ancient world. Before World War II, two interpretive approaches dominated the arena. One was historical, propagated by Richard Reitzenstein (1861-1931),³ who envisaged an Iranian origin of all the saving gods, including the Judaeo-Christian messiah, and Franz Cumont (1868-1947),⁴ who interpreted Mithraism as the mystical offspring of Persian religion. The alternative model was phenomenological, based on the pattern of the “dying-and-rising gods” (gods prevalently of oriental origins), formulated by James G. Frazer (1854-1941) and developed by British and Scandinavian adepts of the Myth-and-Ritual School. “‘Mystery’ was taken to be the essence of oriental religiosity.”⁵ In spite of its painstaking erudition, broad comparative perspective (including Christians and Australian aborigines), and characteristic awareness of historical dynamisms, even the groundbreaking work of Raffaele Pettazzoni (1883-1955) paid homage to these clichés. Now, however, Pettazzoni’s historical reconstructions are seriously impaired by progress in philological research.⁶ As in other domains of the history of ancient religion, Arthur Darby Nock (1902-63) was perhaps the most brilliant and constructive actor in reassessing the evidence and theories about the mysteries. A useful synthesis of the work done in the period after Cumont is provided by Vermaseren (1981) in a collection of monographs on the individual cults by eminent specialists, completed by Carsten Colpe’s invaluable introduction.

More recently, Ugo Bianchi (1922-95) gave a tremendous impetus to the research on mystery cults (and related phenomena) in ancient Mediterranean cultures and the Roman Empire. His primary merit was that of gathering specialists of various disciplines (philologists, archaeologists, epigraphists,

orientalists, historians of religions) who were not previously accustomed to converse together, and of convincing them—despite a certain reluctance—to share their data and interpretations on a common terrain. Four scholars who participated in Bianchi's historic conference on Mithraism in Rome in 1978, and also in his conference on the soteriology of oriental cults in the Roman Empire in 1979—Beck, Gordon, Sfameni Gasparro, and Casadio—also participated in the Cumae 2002 symposium, and thus were in a position to reflect on changes and/or persistence in the focus of the research. One of these witnesses aptly recalls:

The most useful recent typology of Greco-Roman mysteries as forms of personal religious choice is that of Bianchi and others. Three modes are distinguished: “mystery” proper, an entire initiatory structure of some duration and complexity, of which the type (and in many cases the actual model ...) is Eleusis; “mystic” cult, involving not initiation but rather a relation of intense communion, typically ecstatic or enthusiastic, with the divinity (e.g., Bacchic frenzy, or the *kybeboi* of Cybele); and “mysteriosophic” cult, offering an anthropology, an eschatology, and a practical means of individual reunion with divinity—the primitive and original form is Orphism, ... Hermeticism and Gnosis, though these are late Egyptian and Judaeo-Christian forms of religiosity. Bianchi himself has sought to provide an element of thematic unity by adapting Frazer's “dying-rising god” typology; these cults are all focused upon a “god subject to some vicissitude.” This tack has rightly been criticized, but the scheme has heuristic value without it.⁷

It is perhaps helpful to report Bianchi's definitions in his own terms, because there every single word is the result of a long-lasting, careful analysis of historical data. For the term *mystic* he understands

the concept and the experience of a lively participated interference between the divine, the cosmic and the human realms, and this both in the sense of a participation of some divinities to *vicissitudes* and fates, “human” in character (disappearance and return, death and life, etc.), and in the sense of a participation of human beings in a destiny and a vicissitude relating to the “divine” (attainment or restoration of divine or celestial conditions of immortality, happiness and totality). (Bianchi 1979: 5)

The category of mystic cults and deities (as opposed to the Olympic cults and gods, untouched by any vicissitude in their Olympic serenity and immortality) can be further specified in two more restricted types: cults to be properly called *mystery religions*, which are centered on a sanctuary and a precise form of gradual initiation and esotericism (the prototype is the cult of Demeter and Kore at Eleusis, on which are based the mysteric forms of the cults of Isis or Cybele), and cults conventionally denominated *mysteriosophical*, in which “the initiatic element consists mostly of a *sophia* and a *gnosis* (initiation through ‘reading,’ doctrine, ‘knowledge,’ illumination—from Orphism down to Hermeticism and gnosticism)” (Bianchi 1979: 7).

Another clear distinction between “mystic” in the broad sense of the word (including the fertility cults of the ancient oriental religions in which the female element is stable, albeit sympathetic with the crisis of the male god, as in the couples Isis-Osiris and Cybele-Attis) and the more specific categories of “mysteries” and “mysteriosophies” may be found in the consideration that mystic cults in general “concern the country with whatever lies in it (fields, animals, and human collectivity represented by its king), while the mystery and mysteriosophic cults also concern (or only concern, in the case of mysteriosophy) human individuals” (Bianchi 1979: 9).

Certainly, as Bianchi himself acknowledged at the end of his 1979 conference, dedicated to the oriental cults (see his “Epilegomena” in Bianchi and Vermaseren 1982: 917-929, which is pervaded by a sense of disillusion), the “historical typology” for which he had always pleaded is a kind of chimeric. Robert Turcan, one of the most prestigious scholars present at the 1979 meeting, had already recommended in the “final document” of the proceedings the avoidance of any generalizations. He pointed out, for example, that the god Mithras does not seem so mystic, in the sense that he does not suffer any *pathē* or crisis, and, in any case, in its drama no goddess plays any role; and in Mithraism, afterlife salvation is connected with salvation in this life, “dans une continuité et une solidarité biocosmiques” (Bianchi and Vermaseren 1982: xvii). A certain vein of skepticism vis-à-vis the

rigidity of certain typologies can also be seen in a survey of the literature on the mysteries as a historical category.⁸ How extremely precarious it is to fix boundaries between mystic-orgiastic practices, mystery cult, and mysteriosophic (or “Orphic”) religiosity is evident from subsequent research carried out by Casadio and others in the field of the Dionysus cult.

Bianchi’s two conferences resulted in a fervid stream of initiatives, reinterpretations, and criticisms, the repercussions of which have been wide and long-lasting. One of the first fruits was a synthesis article written by Kurt Rudolph for *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (1987), from which the assessment of some basic topics concerning the typology of the mysteries and their historical developments will here be drawn.

Mysteries in general entail special initiation ceremonies that are esoteric in character and often connected with the yearly agricultural cycle. Usually they involve the destiny of the divine powers being venerated and the communication of religious wisdom that enables the initiates to conquer death. They were part of the general religious life, but they were separate from the public cult that was accessible to all; for this reason, they were also called “secret cults” (*aporrhēta*). Because of the obligation of strict secrecy, we now know little more about the mysteries than what was occasionally passed on as “reliable” information by the ancient sources, including ancient Roman literature. Our historical knowledge is limited because of the polemical and/or apologetic interpretations that color the accounts given by Christian writers such as Clement of Alexandria and Firmicus Maternus.

We do have relatively sound information about the general structure of some of the ceremonies, such as those of Eleusis, Samothrace, Isis, and Mithras. We know that processions and public functions (sacrifices, dances, music) framed the actual celebration, which was held in closed rooms (*telestērion*, *spelunca*, temple) and usually comprised two or three acts, consisting of the dramatic action (*drōmenon*), including the “producing and showing” of certain symbols (*deiknumena*), and the interpretation (*exēgēsis*), consisting of communication of the myth (*legomena*) and its attendant formulas. The sacred action (*drōmenon*) and the sacred narrative (*legomenon*, *mythos*, *hieros logos*) were closely connected. We know relatively little about the central ceremony, that is, the initiation proper. Consequently we can only interpret it hypothetically. It would appear that the heart of the celebration was intended to link the initiate (*mystēs*), through word and performance, with the destiny of the divinity or divinities and thereby to bestow the basis for some kind of better hope (*agathē elpis*) after death. This interpretation is also suggested by burial gifts for the deceased (e.g., the “Orphic” gold plates from southern Italy, discussed in this volume by Edmonds and Bernabé). The ancient human problems of suffering, death, and guilt undoubtedly played an important part in the efficacy of the mysteries. The idea of rebirth can be documented only in later Hellenism. There is no evidence, however, of a unitary theology of the mysteries common to all the mysteries, since the discrepancies in their origins and historical developments, including even later philosophical explanation of their *logos*, were too great to allow that.

The historical and phenomenological problem of the origin of the mysteries remains unresolved. Repeated attempts have been made to move beyond the apparently outdated nature-myth theory. Ethnologists in particular have repeatedly focused on the mysteries and interpreted them as survivals of ancient “rites of passage,” a theory maintained especially by Mircea Eliade and Angelo Brelich. Both interpretations merge in the traditional idea that the origin of the mysteries is to be sought in some stage of primitive agricultural development. The Hellenistic mysteries of Isis have been influenced by the Eleusinian mysteries of Demeter and Persephone (Kore). In any case, all our ancient informants confirm the view that the so-called oriental mysteries in general took their character

primarily from the Eleusinian mysteries and became widespread only as a result of Hellenization. Within the confines of this overview, therefore, we must begin with the ancient Greek mystic (in the narrower sense of the term, as opposed to the more inclusive term, “mystic,” as defined above by Gordon and Bianchi) cults, particularly those of Eleusis and Dionysus/Orpheus, and move on to related oriental cults, namely of Cybele and Mithras.

The Greek mysteries were from the outset cults of clan or tribe. They can in many cases be traced back to the pre-Greek Mycenaean period and were probably ancient rituals of initiation into a clan or an “association.” The most important were the mysteries of Eleusis, which in fact provided the pattern for the idea of mysteries. The independent town of Eleusis became an Athenian dependency in the seventh century BCE and thereby acquired, especially from the sixth century on, a pan-Hellenic role that in the Roman imperial age attracted the attention of Rome. Augustus, Hadrian, Marcus Aurelius, Commodus, and Gallienus chose to be initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries. The mythological background for the Eleusinian mysteries was provided by the story of the goddesses Demeter and Kore, preserved in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*. The pair was presented as mother and daughter. Their relationship developed in a gripping manner the theme of loss (death), grief, search, and (re)discovery (i.e., life). The interpretation of the story as purely a nature myth and specifically a vegetation myth is actually an old one and can appeal to ancient witnesses for support (see below); nonetheless, it is oversimplified precisely because it loses sight of the human and social content of the myth.

The public ceremonies of the annual Eleusinian ritual are well known to us and are confirmed by archaeological findings. The director was the hierophant, who from time immemorial had been a member of the Eumolpides, a noble family that had held the kingship of old. The Kerykes family filled the other offices. All classes, including slaves, were admitted to the cult. According to degree of participation, a distinction was made between the *mystēs* (“initiate”) and the *epoptēs* (“contemplator”); only the latter was regarded as fully initiated. But this distinction was not original; it came in when the Eleusinian mysteries were combined with the mysteries of Agrai on the Ilissos (near Athens) in the seventh century BCE. The Lesser Mysteries at Agrai took place annually in February (the month Anthesterion) and were regarded as a preliminary stage leading to the Greater Mysteries held at Eleusis in September (16-20 Boedromion). Sacrifices, libations, baths, ablutions, fasts, processions (especially bringing the “holy things,” the cult symbols, to Eleusis), and torches all played an important role in both feasts. The center of all activity was the ceremony, which was not open to the public. It was held in the “place of consecration” known as the *telesterion*, which is not to be confused with the temple of Demeter at the same location.

Perhaps more important for our purposes were the Dionysian mysteries, about whose character and date of formation there is no agreement among the specialists. As is well known, Dionysus was an unusual god who represented a side of Greek life long regarded as un-Greek—a view that has caused interpreters many difficulties. His *thiasos* (“company”) was probably originally an association of women that spread throughout Greece, especially the islands, and carried on a proselytizing activity by means of itinerant priestesses. There was no one central sanctuary, but there were centers in southern Italy (Cumae), Asia Minor, and Egypt. Ecstatic and orgiastic activity remained characteristic of this cult as late as the fourth century CE and only after the Classical age assumed more strictly regulated, at times esoteric, forms, as can be seen from the laws of the *Iobacchoi* community at Athens, where the cult of Dionysus (Bacchus) had become a kind of club. The myth of Dionysus had for its focus the divine forces hidden in nature and human beings; these forces were enacted in ecstatic nocturnal celebrations that showed traits of promiscuity (compare the companionship of maenads and satyrs in the myth, and of course pejorative accounts in later sources) and took place in the open air.

As Jiménez shows in her chapter here, the myth of Dionysus was at an early stage combined with Orphic mysticism. The hope of another world that was promised and confirmed in the rites is well attested by burial gifts (gold plates) from Greece and southern Italy. Even after death, the initiate remained under the protection of the god. Orphic mysticism is a difficult phenomenon with which to deal. Often it is not easily distinguished from the Dionysian mysteries. It is certain that at an early date, Orpheus was credited with being the founder of the Eleusinian, Dionysian, and Samothracian mysteries. Orphism therefore had no central sanctuary. It seems to have been more of a missionary religion that, unlike the official cults, devoted itself to the theme of the immortal soul (*psyche*) and its deliverance from the present world. It had an ethical view of the relation between initiation and behavior. A way of life that was shaped by certain rules served to liberate the soul or the divine in human beings. The anthropogonic and cosmogonic myth that provided an explanation of the hybrid human condition also showed the way to redemption; thus cosmology and soteriology were already closely connected. As a result, Orphism broke away from the religion of the *polis*, not only because it possessed holy books that contained its teachings, but also because the idea of the immortality of the soul made the official cult superfluous. Greek philosophy, beginning with Pythagoras (see Drew Griffith's contribution here) and Plato, gave a theoretical justification for all this.

Mysteries of Cybele, the great mother-goddess (*Magna Mater*) of Anatolia, are attested on the Greek mainland and islands from the third century BCE. Oddly, little mention is made of Cybele's companion Attis in the early period, although some inscriptions and depictions place Attis with Cybele as early as the fourth century BCE in the Piraeus and Thrace⁹ (where an even more common male companion is Hermes, along with Hekate/Persephone). The mythological relation is attested by Catullus in his Poem 63 (first century BCE),¹⁰ and by Pausanias in the second century CE, the earliest written witnesses to the connection. We know nothing about the structure and content of these mysteries; perhaps they were an imitation of the Eleusinian mysteries. In any case, the Roman cult of Cybele, who was worshiped on the Palatine from 204 BCE on, was not a mystery religion. Beginning in the second century CE and down to the fifth century, the literature speaks of the mysteries of *Magna Mater* or *Meter Megale* but tells us no more about them. On the supposition that we are not dealing simply with a misleading terminology, these mysteries may have focused on the ritual castration of novices (*galli*) and the deeper meaning of this practice. With regard to Attis, inscriptions from Pessinous in Asia Minor dating from the first century CE speak of the "initiates of Attis" (*Attabokoi*). The initiation involved an anointing of the initiates (see Firm. Mat. *De err. prof. rel.* 22, 1); there is also reference to a kind of sacred meal (eating from a tambourine, drinking from a cymbal). The meaning of an accompanying formula is uncertain in the version given by Clement of Alexandria (*Protr.* 15): "I have entered the *adyton* [bridal chamber?]." Firmicus Maternus has a simpler version: "I have become an initiate of Attis" (*De err. prof. rel.* 18.1). At the end of the fourth century CE, the cult of Cybele and Attis also included baptism in bull's blood (*taurobolium*). This ceremony had developed out of an older sacrifice of a bull performed, in most cases, *pro salute imperatoris*, which is attested from the middle of the second century (as in a recently discovered Beneventum *taurobolium* inscription) onward.¹¹ It was supposed to bring renewal to the initiates; only a few inscriptions interpret the renewal as a "new birth." The baptism was, in these cases, a one-time rite and perhaps was intended to compete with Christian baptism. Cybele was in all respects responsible for her people's well-being in peace and in war, as goddess of fertility and as goddess of the mountains and mistress of wild nature, symbolized by her attendant lions.

The Hellenistic cult of Isis in late antiquity undoubtedly involved secret initiatory celebrations. We learn something about them from Apuleius's famous novel, *Metamorphoses*, or *The Golden Ass* (second century CE). Greek influence is especially clear here: it was only through the identification of

Isis with Demeter (attested in Herodotus 2.59) and the Hellenization of the cult of Isis that the latter came to include mysteries (first attested c. 220 BCE on Delos). In this form it spread, despite occasional opposition, throughout the whole civilized world of the time, reaching Rome in the first century BCE. It became one of the most widely disseminated oriental cults of late antiquity, especially from the second century BCE on. Isis became the great thousand-named, universal goddess (*panthea*) who had conquered destiny and was invoked in numerous hymns and aretologies that display a remarkable Greco-Egyptian atmosphere and tone (see the chapters by Brenk, Caputo, and Johnston below).

This successful Hellenization was probably due to the introduction of the cult of Sarapis under Ptolemy I, son of Lagus (305-283 BCE), when this novel Greco-Egyptian cult (*Sarapis* combines *Osiris* and *Apis*) was celebrated with both an Eleusinian priest (Timotheos, a Eumolpid) and an Egyptian priest (Manetho) participating. Isis, Thoth, and Anubis were naturally linked with Sarapis (Osiris). The well-known story of Isis, Osiris, and Horus (Harpocrates) acquired its complete form only in Greek and in this version was probably a product of Hellenism (Osiris being assimilated to Adonis). The ancient Egyptian cult of Osiris was originally connected with the monarchy and displayed the character of a mystery religion only to the extent that the dead pharaoh was looked upon as Osiris and brought to Abydos not simply to be buried but also to be greeted by the people as one restored to life in the form of a new statue in the temple. The hope of survival *as* or *with* or *like* Osiris was the predominant form that the hope of another world took in ancient Egypt, and it continued uninterrupted in the Greco-Roman period; it provided a point of attachment for the mysteries of Isis.

The cult of Isis had its official place in the Roman festal calendar (beginning in the second century CE) and comprised two principal feasts: the Iseia, which was celebrated from 26 October to 3 November and included the *drōmenon* of the myth, with the “finding” (*heuresis, inventio*) of Osiris at its climax; and the sea-journey feast (*Navigium Isidis, Ploiaphesia*) on 5 March, the beginning of the season for seafaring, of which Isis had become the patron deity. According to Apuleius (*Metamorphoses* 11), the actual mysteries began with preliminary rites such as baptism (sprinkling), ten-day fast, and being clothed in a linen robe. At sunset the initiates entered the *adyton* for further ceremonies to which only allusions are made: the initiate made a journey through the lower world and the upper world (the twelve houses of the zodiac, which represented the power of destiny) and was vested as the sun god (*instar solis*); the initiate was *renatus* (“reborn”) and became *sol* (“the sun”) — in other words, experienced a deification (*theomorphosis*). He thereby became a “servant” of Isis and “triumphed over his destiny (*fortuna*).” In addition to a consecration to Isis, there was evidently also consecration to Osiris, but we know even less about this ceremony. In the Roman period, Isis and Demeter sometimes merge but still retain their powers, as P. A. Johnston and R. J. Clark demonstrate in their examinations of Vergil’s *Georgics* and *Aeneid*.

The cult of Mithras in the Roman imperial age, like that of Isis, was not originally oriental but was a creation of Hellenistic syncretism. It is true that the name of the god Mithras is Indo-Iranian in origin and initially meant “contract” (*mithra, mitra*) and that some Iranian-Zoroastrian elements are recognizable in the iconographic and epigraphic sources; these facts, however, do not point to a Persian origin of the cult. No testimonies to the existence of Mithraea in Iran have as yet been discovered. On the other hand, the vast majority of these sanctuaries have been found in the Roman military provinces of central and eastern Europe, especially in Dalmatia and the Danube Valley. The Mithraeum at Dura-Europos on the Euphrates is the most eastern. It was built by Roman soldiers from Syria in 168 CE, rebuilt in 209 CE, and expanded in 240 CE. It was thus not the creation of a native community. The “Parthian” style is simply a matter of adaptation to local tradition and no proof of an Iranian origin of the mysteries.

According to Plutarch (*Life of Pompey* 24), Mithraea were introduced into the West by Syrian pirates in the first century BCE. This report may have a historical basis because the veneration of Mithras in Syria, Pontus, and Commagene is well attested, though no reference is made to any mysteries of Mithras. It is likely that soldiers from this area, where Greeks and Orientals came in contact, brought the cult of Mithras to the West in the first century CE. In the second century CE, however, the cult was transformed into mysteries in the proper sense and widely disseminated, until finally Mithras was elevated to the position of Sol Invictus, the god of the empire, under Diocletian (284-305 CE). As in the case of the cult of Isis, the Hellenistic worshipers of Mithras transformed the foreign god and his cult along lines inspired by the awakening individualism of the time, with its rejection of the traditional official cult and its longing for liberation from death and fate.

We are poorly informed about the myth and rites of the Mithraic mysteries. We have mainly a large mass of archaeological documents that are not always easy to interpret. The Mithraic mysteries took place in small cave-like rooms that were usually decorated with the characteristic relief or cult statue of Mithras *Tauroctonus* (“bull-slayer”). In form, this representation and its accompanying astrological symbols are Greco-Roman; its content has some relation to cosmology and soteriology, that is, the sacrifice of a bull is thought of as life-giving. Other iconographic evidence indicates that the god was a model for the faithful and wanted them to share his destiny: birth from a rock, combats like those of Herakles, ascent to the sun, dominion over time and the cosmos. Acceptance into the community of initiates (*consecranei*) or brothers (*fratres*) was achieved through consecratory rites in which baptisms or ablutions, purifications (with honey), meals (bread, water, wine, meat), crownings with garlands, costumes, tests of valor, and blessings played a part. There were seven degrees of initiation (Corax, Nymphus, Miles, Leo, Perses, Heliodromus, Pater), which were connected with the planetary deities and certain symbols or insignia. Surviving inscriptions attest the profound seriousness of the mysteries. Also worth noting is the close link between Mithras and Saturn (Kronos as god of the universe and of time (Aion, Saeculum, Aevum); Saturn is the father of Mithras and the one who commissions him, whereas Mithras is in turn connected with the sun god (Sol, Apollo).

Mystic cults of Greek, Egyptian, Persian or Phrygian genealogy all have in common certain familiar resemblances that converge in a definite typology. This typology is based on two categories, one pertaining to the deities involved in the mythic-ritual pattern, that of the Mediterranean “dying and rising gods,” the other pertaining to the human actors, that of “initiation” (in Greek, *myesis* or *telete*). Both categories have been seriously challenged, the first one since the pioneering researches of Pieter (Pieter) Lambrechts (1910-74) in the 1950s, so that it has now become commonplace to assume that it is a product of modern imagination.¹² The attempts to deconstruct the second category are more recent but no less surreptitious. In a recent collection, *Initiation in Ancient Greek Rituals and Narrative* (Dodd and Faraone 2003), one of the two editors maintains that current perspectives in “critical theory” (namely American rumination on French postmodernist and deconstructionist ideas) have ultimately rendered the usage of the category irrelevant, “since it reveals it to be merely a tool for the production of false consciousness.”¹³ This view is largely based on the “genealogy of scholarship” (on the topic “initiation”) devised by Bruce Lincoln in the concluding chapter of the above-mentioned book.¹⁴ Lincoln’s argument is clearly dictated by an ideological agenda: if an interpretive paradigm sounds unsympathetic with “correct” political views, its banishment from the academic discourse is surely welcome. From a scholarly point of view, on the contrary, a paradigm should be disposed of if it sounds unsatisfactory in comparison with the historical data. So, if, for historically based arguments, the usefulness of the concept of initiation as an explanatory paradigm for a range of religious and nonreligious phenomena of antiquity is questionable,¹⁵ its suitability cannot be objected to when it is used in relation to cults (like the ancient mysteries) that contain rites

that in classical antiquity were recognized as *teletai* or *initiationes*.

Similar considerations can be developed to show the hermeneutical suitability of the type of the “deity subject to change or vicissitude” (to use Bianchi’s terminology, which is more adherent to historical realities than the Frazerian ill-reputed model of the dying/rising god that is, in any case, its recognizable ancestor). The facets of this suffering, quasihuman demon (not necessarily a male: its characters are present even in such female acolytes as Kore, Leukothea, or Ariadne) are easily recognizable in the divine actors of the mystery cults examined above (see further examples in Johnston’s contribution to this volume). More important, this notion is of an emic type; that is, it involves an analysis of cultural phenomena from the perspective of the participants in the culture being studied (as opposed to the etic type, which reflects the perspective of the outsider). This notion of *daimōn* (to use the corresponding Greek term) has manifested itself since the beginning of Greek theological and historical reflection. First, the Ionian poet and philosopher Xenophanes of Colophon (c. 570-480) declared the affinity between the cult of the Greek Leukothea, who was worshiped with funeral dirges (*threnoi*) but was considered a deity (and therefore, for the Greeks, immortal), and the cult of the Egyptian Osiris, who was ritually mourned by his worshipers (as befitted a dead god) but was at the same time honored as a very high-ranking god.¹⁶ This ability to perceive religious phenomena cross-culturally, which earned Xenophanes the mantle of “precursor of comparative ethnology,”¹⁷ is certainly connected with his experience as an Ionian citizen who since birth had been familiar with the beliefs and customs of the other peoples of Anatolia: the Lydians, the Carians, and the Median-Persian dominators. One century later, Herodotus (*fl.* 450 BCE) does not hesitate to call *mysteria* the rites of Osiris enacted by the Egyptians on a lake to commemorate the god’s sufferings (*pathē*). He notices the analogy (actually the *homology*, inasmuch as he envisaged a common origin, namely a transmission of the rite from Egypt to Greece) between Osiris’ mourning ritual and the *teletē* of Demeter “that the Greeks call Thesmophoria” (*Hist.* 2.171). In fact, he is first induced to call the Osirian ritual *mysteria* because of the similarity between the mourning for Osiris in the Khoiak festival and the dirge for Persephone in the Eleusinian mysteries. Then, for an association of ideas, he mentions the Thesmophoria, another Demetriac ritual, which, though not *mysteria* in the strict sense of the word, were shrouded in the atmosphere of secrecy and taboo particularly associated with such cults.¹⁸ (See Gasparro’s contribution in this volume for more details.)

It thus becomes clear that the experience of *pathē* (or *pathēmata*) is the characteristic trait shared by these Greek and Egyptian divine pairs in the myth and in the liturgical enactment.¹⁹ *Pathos* at the same time means “change” (affecting the ontological level) and “suffering” (affecting the ethical level of the divinity) and can be aptly rendered with a polysemic term like “vicissitude.” This characteristic of experiencing a *pathos*, or rather a sequence of *pathē*, is shared by other ancient deities who bear family resemblances to Osiris and Persephone. Apparently this category of gods “subject to vicissitudes” (a vicissitude embodies the tension inherent in the seasonal drama, as stressed by Johnston in the introduction to her contribution) was not invented by modern scholars (either Frazer or Bianchi), but was individuated much earlier by the Greek writer Plutarch (c. 46-120 CE), a historian and theologian with a keen comprehension of religious dynamisms.²⁰ Starting from his (middle-Platonic) speculations on the *daimones*, he individuates a class of gods intermediate between the Olympian, unaffected attitude of the celestial deities like Zeus, and the quasi-human precariousness of the heroes. In *De defectu oraculorum* (10.415A), his spokesman Cleombrotus of Sparta assesses clearly this category of *daimones* or demigods “midway between gods and men” and, in a style that would be fitting to modern supporters of the theory of the Eastern origins of basic traits of Greek culture (such as M. L. West and W. Burkert), draws a genealogy of the doctrine of the common

fellowship of gods and men (mediated by the “race of *daimones*”),

whether this doctrine comes from the magi of Zoroaster, or whether it is Thracian and harks back to Orpheus, or is Egyptian, or Phrygian, as we may infer from observing that many things connected with death and mourning in the rites (*teletai*) of those lands are combined in the ceremonies celebrated there as *orgia* and *drōmena* [technical terms for ritual components of the mystic cults]. (Plut. *Def. orac.* 10.415A)

Phrygian and Egyptian *logoi* recur again in connection with the poems of Orpheus in a passage of the *Daedala* (fr. 157, 1 Sandbach). Further, Attis is probably the Phrygian god alluded to in *De Iside Osiride* 69.378D-F, where the set of resemblances between the Greek and oriental suffering gods is clearly established:

Among the Greeks also many things are done that are similar to the Egyptian ceremonies in the shrines of Isis, and they do them at about the same time. At Athens the women fast at the Thesmophoria sitting upon the ground, and the Boeotians move the hall of the Goddess of Sorrow (*Achaia*) and name that festival the Festival of Sorrow, since Demeter is in sorrow (*achos*) because of Kore's descent to the underworld. ... The Phrygians, on the other hand, believing that the god is asleep in the winter and awake the summer, sing lullabies for him in the winter and in the summer sound the reveille, after the manner of Bacchants.²¹ (Plut. *Is. Os.* 69.378D-F)

The role of the seasonal drama (a role that is nonetheless obstinately denied by a number of influential contemporary historians) in the *imaginaire* of the mysteries is explicitly stressed by Plutarch in the subsequent chapter of the treatise:

The season of the year also gives us a suspicion that this gloominess is brought about because of the disappearance from our sight of the crops and fruits that people in days of old did not regard as gods, but as necessary and important gifts of the gods contributing to the avoidance of a savage and bestial life. At the time of year when they saw some of the fruits vanishing and disappearing completely from the trees, while they themselves were sowing others in a mean and poor fashion still, scraping away the earth with their hands and again replacing it, committing the seeds to the ground with uncertain expectation of their ever growing up again and giving a fruit, they accomplished many things similar to the ceremonies enacted by those who bury and bewail their dead. (Plut. *Is. Os.* 70.378F-379A)

The synergism between vegetal and human life could not be established in a clearer or more suggestive way.

In 1987, Walter Burkert produced a work (*Ancient Mystery Cults*) that has since become one of the more frequently read books on the ancient mystery cults. Notwithstanding some flaws, which have been highlighted by critics,²² the book presented for the first time a kind of “comparative phenomenology of ancient mysteries” (Burkert 1987: 4) rather than a collection of monographs on the single cults, as his predecessors had done.

Robert Turcan's 1989 manual (*Les cultes orientaux dans le monde romain*) comes closer to Cumont's approach. Consequently, instead of declaring his distance from Cumont and other scholars (from Ernest Renan to Maarten Vermaseren) who had the model of the “oriental religions” as their frame of reference, he simply states that it is more exact to refer to “religions of oriental origin or Graeco-oriental religions.” Turcan has no preference vis-à-vis any methodology in vogue; he simply pleads for the avoidance of generalizations based on the oriental mirage or an idealized mysticism in favor of empirical research (his motto is “comparing for distinguishing, distinguishing for understanding”). He does not refrain from typologies as such, only from applications to historical phenomena that—in his view—do not fit the type involved. He recognizes, for example, the legitimacy of the category of the “suffering gods” (including Dionysus, Attis, Osiris, and Adonis), but he excludes from it a god such as Mithras, who is only “operating in this world” (Turcan 1989: 336).

John North's short but insightful 1992 essay, “The Development of Religious Pluralism,” is important because, in the best British polemical vein, it challenges current general views about the

mysteries that Burkert (1987: 3 and 51-52) has upheld in a most determined way. North claims that Burkert's statement that mysteries were from beginning to end Greek in their attitudes and never offered their adherents any alternative to the civic religion of their contemporaries or any space for subversion of the normal ancient way of life (as Christians did, undeniably) is simply untrue. Like many contemporary ancient historians in the Oxbridge lineage who are familiar with a strong social-scientific tradition, North holds that the most solid criteria for establishing the potential for change of a religious movement are to be found "in terms of the social/religious behavior of groups and their members rather than in the nature of the beliefs or aspirations they held" (North 1992: 184). Having fixed these criteria (autonomy, commitment, separateness with regard to values, rituals, dietary rules) he proceeds to demonstrate that religious groups like the "Bac-chists" and the "Mithraists" broke the rules of the established paganism and roused a conflict with the authority of family and state. Thus these groups were in a position, at least potentially, to start a revolution in religious life in the same way the Christians did. Notwithstanding both a certain overstatement in his handling of historical data and a kind of sociological rigidity, North raises an issue that is well founded and of relevance also for the methodology of comparison in the history of ancient religions. In this volume, Richard Gordon pursues similar concerns, with further innovations.

In the proceedings of the international conference of Montpellier (Moreau 1992—which provided *inter alia*, a useful bibliography on initiation in general and initiation in Greece in particular), only a few contributions deal with initiation in Greek mystery cults, and all of these have to do with Dionysus. There Casadio seeks to date the initiation ritual attested in the Lernaean cult back to the Classical age. Turcan instead denies that full-fledged mysteries of Dionysus existed in Greece before the Hellenistic-Roman age and (rightly) refuses to assign this characteristic to the orgiastic-ecstatic procedures of the bacchants in archaic and classical Greece.²³

The old evidence and the new theories have been aptly summarized by Zeller, Gordon, and Turcan in three entries in encyclopedias that appeared almost contemporaneously in subsequent years. The first one is the work of a New Testament scholar, Dieter Zeller,²⁴ who has a remarkable insight into issues of comparison within the field of the religions produced by Hellenistic syncretism (including, historically, Christianity). His contribution distinguishes itself for the thorough analysis of the evidence focused on the individuation of traits related to a doctrine of salvation (he recognizes his debt to Bianchi's school and adopts his terminology of the *dio in vicenda*, "god subject to vicissitude"), a synopsis of the general characteristics common to all (or some) mysteries with emphasis on mythic and ritual structures, and a balanced assessment of the thorny issue of the relationship with early Christian sacraments (Baptism and the Eucharist).

Whereas Zeller's article has appeared in a theological encyclopedia that, because of its subject matter, tends to be unfamiliar to ancient historians, Richard L. Gordon, an expert in Mithraism and an extremely astute interpreter of ancient world religious phenomena in general, contributed a pithy article on the same subject for the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*,²⁵ the standard reference work for all classical scholars. Gordon firmly refused the (Christiano-centric) model of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* and adopted without reservation the three-pronged typology devised by Bianchi. Consequently, he characterized the hopes of the mystery cults in general, and the Eleusinian cult in particular, as decidedly mundane, in contrast with the world-rejecting, dualistic attitudes of the Orphics or other mysteriosophic circles.

The third of these publications²⁶ is important both because it is signed by Robert Turcan, an unparalleled authority in the field, and because it appeared in a prestigious lexicon that, as indicated by its own title— *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, referring to the interrelationship of antiquity and Christianity—is a reference tool to be used by students of both classical antiquity and

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