

Mystery cults of the Greco-Roman era

1. What is a mystery religion or mystery cult?

The word mysterious refers to a secret - something that is under lock and key. The Mystery cults kept their teachings and religious rites secret from those outside the cult. Admission to such a worship community, was usually carried out through special initiation rites. The so called mystes were only admitted if they swore to keep silence. Surely this is why the word mystery today in general means "secret".

On the other hand the sillaba "My" comes from "Linear B", the writing of Mycenae ... Mycenae that was the culture of the people with the myth of the beautiful Helena and trojan war ... and refers to the consecration of a dignitary (die Weihe eines Würdenträgers). So myth, myste and mystery are from a family of words and mysterious worship can also be understood as the sacred consecration of a myth and a deity.

2. When and where did these mystery cults take place?

Probably this form was used to initiate priestesses and priests already in Sumer Mesopotamia at least 5000 years ago. I could not find prove for this yet but certainly in egypt the pharoes (4-3000 years ago) went through an initiation inactment of the myth.

The main and well known period where the practice was very widely spread was from 600 BC to 300 AD, in ancient Greece and in the Roman Empire. These cults extended to all areas of influence of these cultures. So for example in Cologne in Germany was a main temple and cult centre of the goddess Isis.

Between 300 and 400 AD the Catholic Church persecuted and extinguished the mystery cults. We know of 6000 people that were killed but probably this figure is still much higher.

3. What were they called and where did they come from?

Some mystery schools are

<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Arcadian cult of Despoina● Cult of Attis● Cult of Cybele● Mysteries of Isis or Isiac● Cult of Trophonius● Dionysian Mysteries	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Eleusinian Mysteries● Mithraic Mysteries● Orphic Mysteries● Sabazios● Samothracean Mysteries● Serapis
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In this era there were many cults that celebrated their mysteries. To illustrate here some important examples:

a. The mysteries of Isis and Osiris ...

... It is the founding myth of the pharaonic empire of Egypt. On the walls of the small of the three pyramids of Giza (2750 **bc**) are hieroglyphic writing describing ritual procedures for the enactment of the myth. Thus the origins of these mysteries go as far as 5 thousand years back. --- [Osiris](#) --- video documentary

In Abydos there is a temple where only the mysteries of Osiris were implemented.

With such a long history the myth did undergo many changes and transformations.

One of the latest changes was due to the Pharaoh Ptolemy Soter I (3rd century BC) creating the god Serapis, mythologically uniting the gods Osiris and Apis of Egypt and the Greco-roman Zeus, Dionysus, Hades to have a unified god for the people. The same he did with Isis, he did not change her name but also synthesized the goddess Isis with Demeter, Kybele, Astarte and Aphrodite. Serapis became the god who had to die so that nature could be reborn and Isis is the great Mother Goddess.

In 37 AD César Calígula makes the Isis Serapis cult the state religion and includes its festivities in the official calendar of the Roman Empire. Out of them the 2 most important festivities were:

March 5 - the opening of naval activities with the powerful protectress Isis.

And from October 26 to November 3 - the mysteries of Isis and Serapis.

"Metamorphosis" is the name of the book written by Lucio Apuleyo from the Roman era. It is the only known work that describes a participation in a mystery cult. Lucio

writes about his initiation into the mysteries of Isis. After his participation Lucio becomes the hierophant or priest of Isis.

b. Cibeles or Magna Mater of Phrygia ...

... was venerated throughout the ancient world and today in 2018 there is the statue of the goddess and with all the attributes of her myth in one of the most important plazas of Madrid - in the "Plaza Cibeles".

She is the oldest goddess of Asia Minor. There are figurines of her as far back in history as in Catal Hüyük 8 thousand years ago. Some say that she is even older, that worshipping her goes back as far as the time of the so-called "Venus de Willendorf." She is "the mother of the gods". According to Greek mythology, it was Cibeles or another name Rea who initiated Dionysus into his mystery cult.

Historian Bettany Hughes affirms that today she is still worshiped in India under the name of Durga Ma.

In 205 BC, Rome had lost the Second Punic War, the Roman authorities consulted the books of the Sibyl (clairvoyant) and she prophesied that, if they bringy "Cybele" the "Magna Mater" of Phrygia to Italy, to Rom, they would recover their good luck. So the Romans brought her to Rom escorted by five [Quinquereme](#). After they really did win the all following wars.

Her mysteries were celebrated in Rome during 12 days in March the main public event occurred on the place where today the Vatican is located. She is a divinity of the life-death-rebirth cycle linked to the resurrection of her son and lover Attis.

c. The mysteries of Dionysus or Bacchus

Recently in the palace of Malia in Crete, a tablet written in "Linear B" of Mycena was found, there was a mentioning of a god called Diwunosos, this was written 3400 years ago and is the oldest evidence we have about Dionysos.

The mysteries of Dionysus did not have a fixed place, they were celebrated in different places. In Pompeii in Italy in the so-called "villa of the mysteries" there is a very well conserved fresco illustration of the initiation of a young woman. The frescos are so well preserved, thanks to the famous volcanic eruption of that time.

With Dionysus came a religion of salvation to Greece. He was a lord of life and death. For the celebration of the cult the "Mystai" congregated at places high up in the hills. The mystes were only women, who mainly by means of dance entered into

a state of ecstasy.

The most important documentation we have about this cult is called "The Bacchic" by Euripides. There it is said: "We must celebrate with the soul in Thiasos".

d. the Orphic Mysteries ...

... they were celebrated from 600 BC and were founded by Pythagoras from an even older cult. Participation was open for men and women.

Orpheus traveled to the kingdom of the dead and he in this way acquired his power.

Participation in the mysteries promised an immortal life of the soul. That is why they buried the initiates with gold plates in their mouths where they declared their faith with specific phrases. Numerous of these sheets have been found instructing the dead person what to do and say when he or she came to the kingdom of the Persephone.

According to Orphism, human beings are born from the ash of the Titans who were extinguished by the ray of Zeus. Before that, the titans had torn Dionisos in pieces in the form of a bull and had eaten it.

The Orphics were explained what the human being is ... as follows: His body comes from the titans and is perishable. But the soul comes from God and is eternal, it has not been born, nor can it die. The souls have a premortal existence, but because of some fault they have committed, they have been banished from the circle of the blessed and have entered the earthly world of the bodies of animals and humans until a progressive purification saves them from the "generation circuit" and thus being able to return to the divine existence.

"Who knows if life is not a death and what we call death is called life there?"

So that the soul can free itself from these chains, Orpheus shows the soul the path of ascesis. Unlike the Dionysian cult, the Orphics refrained from eating meat and bloody sacrifices and looked after the health of their body.

The cults of Eleusis, Dionysus and Orpheus are mythologically very interrelated.

e. The Eleusinian Mysteries ...

... they were an enactment of the myth of Demeter and Persephone.

The oldest of the Temples of Eleusis, located about 30 km northwest of Athens, is 3,500 years old and is from the era of Mycena. The myth tells that Demeter says her name is Dozo and that she comes from Crete. So it is very probable that the origin of the Eleusinian mysteries go as far back as to the ancient culture of Crete, the Minoans.

Participation in the Eleusinian mysteries was open to all men, women and slaves if they could speak Greek and had not killed their mother. Eg Caesar Nero was not admitted because he killed his mother.

In Eleusis, up to 4000 people a year were started, it was a very important event in the cultural calendar of ancient Greece.

Eleusis is known as THE mysterious cult.

4. Common elements of the various Mysteries

the myth = Hieros Logos = the holy history ... was represented theatrically to make it visual.

The Presence of a Priest, Priestess or Priesthood

Dressing in a sacred way - also with masks

Music, flowers, garlands were used for decoration.

Sacred objects that are revealed

A special cult meal

They also often used: alcohol (wine), drugs (Kykeon - mothercorn - halucigen), sacred sex (hierogamos) to generate an altered state.

5. What was the purpose?

A common aspect was that the initiators had to go through darkness and danger until the symbolic death to break the structure of the personality of the person and open it for something permanent new.

The day after was seen as a new birth even with astrological implications. For example, for the mistes the rebirth of Osiris-Serapis was equivalent to the rebirth of themselves. Some cut their hair with a bald head, received a tattoo, new clothes, special and sacred objects, etc.

In various documents, explicit objectives were spoken: the joy of meeting the deity, help in death: going through the 7 portals of the universe, being able to leave the sadness of Hades to the Elysian fields, etc.

Old writers like Plutarch say that the soul must be touched to reach another level of consciousness and that afterwards, life was recorded differently. Another purpose was THE EPOPTeia - having had the Vision.

In definitively it was a profound and transforming experience.

I think it is important to mention that a person of antiquity could be initiated without problem in various cults.

6. Later influence

Some scientists are convinced, that the Catholic church has the form of a light .. mystery cult. Using much of the symbolism but without a major secret event.

The ancient mystery schools were a subject of fascination for 19th and early-20th century German and French classical scholars. This literature had an enormous influence on European culture in the late 19th century. Psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung borrowed metaphors from this literature to reframe his theories and the charismatic movement which was based on them.

For this reason you find e.g. 'ode of joy' with words like 'brothers in Eleusium' and Paris most famous street is called *Champs-Élysées* Eleusian fields

7. Sintesis

The mystery cults were individual options in the a polymorphic polytheism. The mystes were able to get out of a banal reality and with ancient rituals, with their rhythm of life and death they produced in the soul a peculiar experience of experiential resonance, which had the ability to create a new and lasting meaning of life.

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