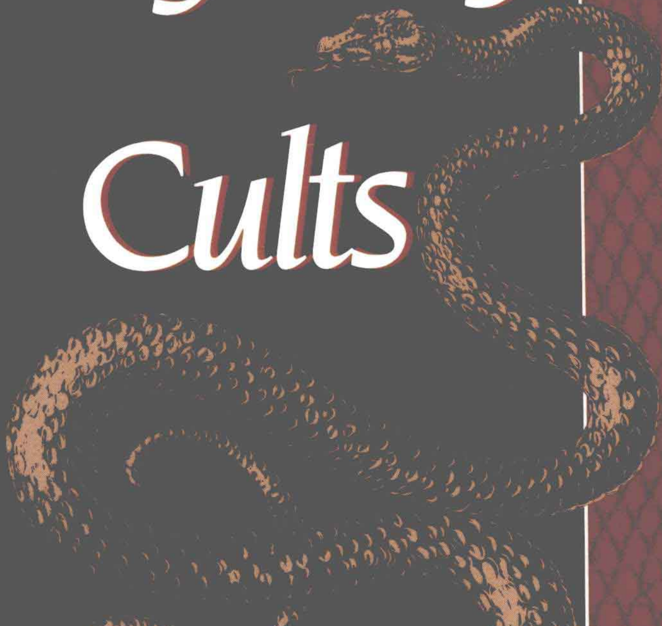
Ancient Mystery Cults



Walter Burkert

Ancient Mystery Cults

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To Zeph Stewart
ΜΑΙΕΥΤΙΚΩΙ ΚΑΙ ΕΛΕΓΚΤΙΚΩΙ

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Preface

This book is based on four Carl Newell Jackson Lectures presented at Harvard University in April 1982. In preparing the text for publication I tried to preserve the distinct articulations of the lecture format and to resist adding an amorphous mass of bibliographical references and reports of controversies. This is meant to remain a readable account, not a thesaurus; the aim is to give a perceptive view of ancient mystery cults with some graphic details and adequate documentation, and thus to provoke thoughts rather than bury them in an avalanche of material.

My thanks go first of all to the Department of the Classics at Harvard University and its former chairman, Zeph Stewart, for the invitation that brought about these lectures and for the generous hospitality that made them develop in a most stimulating atmosphere. I wish to thank Zeph Stewart as well for his unceasing help in producing the final version of this book. Albert Henrichs also deserves thanks for his help in reviewing the manuscript. Thanks are due as well to Nancy Evans, Brown University, for correcting the English, and to Eveline Krummen, University of Zurich, for expert help with documentation and preparation of the manuscript.

Walter Burkert
Zurich, June 1986

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Introduction

THE WORD *mysteries* conveys the fascination of secrecy and the promise of thrilling revelations. Even those not well acquainted with mysteries may associate them with the concept of orgies. This book contains no revelations of this kind; instead it aims at the methodical interpretation of scattered and often frustrating evidence about forms of religion that have long been extinct.

The term "mystery religions of late antiquity" has become well known. It is commonly used with reference to the worship of Isis, of Mater Magna, and of Mithras in particular. These phenomena have drawn special attention from classicists, historians of religion, and theologians since the beginning of this century, with two great scholars, Richard Reitzenstein and Franz Cumont, setting the pace.[1] Interest is bound to continue as long as the emergence of Christianity remains a central problem in the study of antiquity and in the history of mankind. The postwar decades have been marked by vast collections of documents, mainly archaeological, still reflecting Cumont's work; most prominent is the prodigious series *Etudes préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'empire romain,* founded by Maarten J. Vermaseren.[2] Mithraic studies were patronized for a while by the Shah of Iran.[3] Vast surveys have been provided recently in the series *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt.*[4] The sheer mass of evidence has sometimes threatened to obscure the basic issues. In recent years, however, the critical discussion of principles and concepts has been advanced, especially by Italian scholars. As a result, a gradual erosion of Cumont's and Reitzenstein's positions is taking place.[5] Nevertheless, there remain some stereotypes or preconceptions in the study of the so-called mystery religions that must be challenged, since they lead to half-truths at best, if not to downright misunderstandings.

The first stereotype is that the mystery religions are "late," that they are typical of late antiquity, that is, the Imperial or possibly the later Hellenistic period,[6] when the brilliance of the Hellenic mind was giving way to the irrational, heading as it were for the dark Middle Ages. However, although it is correct to state that the cult of Isis was definitively installed in Rome under Caligula and that the monuments for Mater Magna–Taurobolium and the Mithraic caves are concentrated in the second to fourth centuries A.D., still what represented the mysteries proper for pagan antiquity, the cult of Eleusis, is known to have flourished without interruption from the sixth century B.C. onward, and the most widely spread type of mysteries, those of Dionysus-Bacchus, appear just slightly later in the documentation. Even the Mother Goddess is established in Greek cult, from Asia Minor to southern Italy, by the archaic period.[7]

The second stereotype is that the mystery religions are Oriental in origin, style, and spirit. The standard work of Franz Cumont has the title *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism,* and the no less influential book of Richard Reitzenstein, *Hellenistic Mystery Religions,* defines "Hellenistic" in just this sense: it means Oriental spirituality in a Hellenized form.[8] But even though it is evident that Mater Magna is the Phrygian Goddess for both Greeks and Romans, and that Isis is Egyptian and Mithras is Iranian, the institution of mysteries cannot be traced to either Anatolia, Egypt, or Iran; rather, they seem to reflect the older model of Eleusis or Dionysus, or both.[9] Yet these cults have received less attention than those of Meter, Isis, and Mithras, probably because they lack the "mysterious" Oriental touch. The term "Oriental" betrays the perspective of Westerners; ancient Anatolia, Egypt, and Iran were separate worlds, each in its own right, even if all of them are situated more or less east of Western Europe.

The third stereotype is that the mystery religions are spiritual, that they are indicative of a basic change in religious attitude, one that transcends the realistic and practical outlook of the pagan in a search for higher spirituality.[10] In this view, the mystery religions are considered religions of salvation, *Erlösungsreligionen,* and thus preparatory or parallel to the rise of Christianity. In a way this would make Christianity just another—indeed, the most successful—of the Oriental mystery religions. Now it is true that some ancient Christian writers were struck by certain similarities between Christian worship and mysteries, and they denounced the latter as devilish counterfeits of the one true religion.[11] Certain Gnostic sects seem to have practiced mystery initiations, imitating or rather outdoing the pagans,[12] and even orthodox Christianity adopted the mystery metaphor that had long been used in Platonic philosophy: to speak of the "mysteries" of baptism and the Eucharist has remained common usage.[13] Yet this does not imply that Greek mysteries by themselves should be seen as predestined to move toward Christianity. The constant use of Christianity as a reference system when dealing with the so-called mystery religions leads to distortions as well as partial clarification, obscuring the often radical differences between the two. Ernest Renan once said, "If the growth of Christianity had been halted by some mortal illness, the world would have become Mithraic."[14] Most scholars today agree there never was a chance for that, since Mithraism was not even a religion in the full sense of the word.

In this book a decidedly pagan approach to the ancient mysteries is followed, which abandons the concept of mystery *religions* from the start. Initiation at Eleusis or worship of Isis or Mithras does not constitute adherence to a religion in the sense we are familiar with, being confronted with mutually exclusive religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Whereas in these religions there has been much conscious emphasis on self-definition and on demarcating one religion as against the other,[15] in the pre-Christian epoch the various forms of worship, including new and foreign gods in general and the institution of mysteries in particular, are never exclusive; they appear as varying forms, trends, or options within the one disparate yet continuous conglomerate of ancient religion.

What is attempted with this approach could be called a comparative phenomenology of ancient mysteries. For reasons of economy the following inquiries will be restricted to five of these: the mysteries of Eleusis, the Dionysiac or Bacchic mysteries, the mysteries of Meter, those of Isis, and those of Mithras. There were others as well, some of them quite prominent,[16] but these five variations will suffice to indicate the range of differences as well as the constants in diversity. This approach may be criticized as ahistorical. What is covered is a period of about a thousand years, and shifts, changes, and revolutions were constantly occurring at the social, political, and intellectual levels. Yet there were traits of identity maintained through continuous tradition, and it is important to keep sight of these in studying the ancient mystery cults.

For orientation, a few basic facts about these five variants should be recalled. The mysteries of Eleusis[17] were devoted to the "Two Goddesses," Demeter the grain goddess and her daughter Persephone, locally called Pherephatta or just "the Maiden," Kore. These mysteries were organized by the *polis* of Athens and supervised by the *archon basileus*, the "king." For the Athenians these were the Mysteries *tout court*, and it was largely the literary prestige of Athens that ensured their lasting fame. Inscriptions and excavations in addition to literature and iconography provide abundant documentation. The well-known myth depicts Demeter searching for Kore, who has been carried off by Hades, the god of the netherworld. Kore finally comes back, if only for a limited period, to Eleusis itself. There the Athenians celebrated the great autumn festival, the Mysteria; the procession went from Athens to Eleusis and culminated in a nocturnal celebration in the Hall of Initiations, the Telesterion, capable of holding thousands of initiates, where the hierophant revealed "the holy things." There were two gifts that Demeter bestowed on Eleusis, so people said: grain as the basis of civilized life, and the mysteries that held the promise of "better hopes" for a happy afterlife. These mysteries took place exclusively at Eleusis and nowhere else.

Dionysus, the god of wine and ecstasy, was worshiped everywhere; every drinker in fact could claim to be a servant of this god. The existence of mysteries proper, of personal and secret initiations with the promise of eternal bliss in the beyond, has recently been confirmed by the gold tablet of Hipponion, mentioning the *mystai* and *bakchoi* on their "sacred way" in the netherworld.[18] Yet there is no local center for Bacchic mysteries, in contrast to Eleusis; they seem to have appeared everywhere from the Black Sea to Egypt and from Asia Minor to southern Italy. Most famous or rather infamous became the Bacchanalia in Rome and Italy, brutally suppressed by the Roman senate in 186 B.C.[19] The most fascinating artistic document of Bacchic mysteries is the frescoes of the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii, dating from the time of Caesar. Evidently there was great variety in Bacchic mysteries. The myth of the dismemberment of Dionysus is sometimes connected with these mysteries, but we cannot be sure that it was applied to all of them. A special problem is the interrelation of Bacchic mysteries with books and groups of people called "Orphic," as if originating from Orpheus, the mythical singer.[20]

The Mother Goddess from Asia Minor is commonly called Magna Mater today, although in proper Latin the name is Mater Magna, or, with the full title, Mater Deum Magna Idaea.[21] Perhaps it is best to call her just Meter, as did the Greeks. The cult of a Mother Goddess in Anatolia can be traced to long before the invention of writing, back to the Neolithic epoch; for the Greeks her Phrygian name, Matar Kubileya, became most influential. She was called Kybeleia or Kybele in Greek, but mostly just "Mother of the Mountain," sometimes with the addition of a special mountain's name: Meter Idaia, Meter Dindymene.[22] What provoked the most attention and awe in this cult was the institution of eunuch priests, the self-castrating *galloi* who had their home especially at Pessinus; their representative in myth is Attis, the *paredros* and lover of the Mother, who is castrated and dies under a pine tree. This cult was brought to Rome in 204 B.C. during the Hannibalic war, by the command of oracles, and later spread from there. Different forms of personal and secret rites, of *teletai* and *mysteria,* existed in cults of Meter.[23] The most spectacular form was the *taurobolium,* known to have existed from the second century A.D., where the initiand, crouching in a pit covered with wooded beams on which a bull was slaughtered, was drenched by the bull's gushing blood.[24]

Among the many Egyptian gods, the Greeks had given special prominence to Isis and Osiris from the archaic age onward.[25] The identification of these two with Demeter and Dionysus seems to be established from the start.[26] The Ptolemaic epoch added Sarapis, that is, Osiris-Apis,[27] though he gradually had to give way again to Isis. Sanctuaries of the Egyptian gods with Egyptian or Egyptianizing priests were established in many places. The big temple of Isis at Rome was founded under the rule of Caligula. The myth of Osiris, killed and dismembered by Seth, mourned, searched for, found and reassembled by Isis, who then conceives and gives birth to Horos, is well known, especially through Plutarch's book *On Isis and Osiris.* The mysteries of Isis are described in the most extensive mystery text we have from pagan antiquity, the last book of the *Golden Ass* of Apuleius.[28]

Mithras is a very old Indo-Iranian deity, attested from the Bronze Age onward and worshiped wherever Iranian tradition came to dominate. His name means "the middle one" in the sense of "treaty," "promise of allegiance." Yet the characteristic mysteries of Mithras are not in evidence before 100 A.D.; how they were founded and what their exact relation is to Iranian tradition are both problems that remain unsolved.[29] The cult was held in subterranean "caves" where small groups of men met for the initiations and for sacrificial meals in front of the depiction of Mithras slaying the bull, which always occupies the apse of the "cave." There were seven grades of initiation. Mithraic iconography is surprisingly uniform, with many symbols, but the concomitant myth is not transmitted in literature. The cult of Mithras is closely associated with the Roman legions, the worshipers having been recruited mainly among soldiers, merchants, and officials of the Roman empire.

Sound methodology requires that clear definitions stand at the beginning of research; in the study of religions, however, a satisfactory definition may rather be the final outcome. Nonetheless, it is useful to discuss the ancient and modern terms to be applied in this book, and the characteristic phenomena designated by these terms. In modern languages the word *mystery* is mainly used in the sense of "secret," a usage that goes back to the New Testament.[30] In fact, secrecy was a necessary attribute of ancient mysteries, manifesting itself in the form of the *cista mystica,* a wooden basket closed by a lid.[31] But this definition is not specific enough. Not all secret cults are mysteries; the term does not apply to private magic or to elaborate priestly hierarchies with restricted access to the sacred places or objects. It is also quite misleading to associate mysteries with mysticism in its true sense, that is, the transformation of consciousness through meditation, yoga, or related means. It is only through a complicated development of Platonic and Christian metaphors that the word *mystikos* finally acquired this meaning, apparently not before the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite.[32] More revealing is the established Latin translation of *mysteria, myein, myesis* as *initia, initiare, initiatio,*[33] which brought the word and the concept of "initiation" into our language. Following this line, we find that mysteries are initiation ceremonies, cults in which admission and participation depend upon some personal ritual to be performed on the initiand. Secrecy and in most cases a nocturnal setting are concomitants of this exclusiveness.

Initiations are a well-known phenomenon often discussed by anthropologists. They are found in a wide range of settings, from the most primitive Australian tribes to American universities. There are many different forms of initiations, including puberty rites, consecration of priests or kings, and admission to secret societies. From a sociological point of view, initiation in general has been defined as "status dramatization" or ritual change of status.[34] Seen against this background, ancient mysteries still seem to form a special category: they are not puberty rites on a tribal level; they do not constitute secret societies with strong mutual ties (except in the case of Mithras); admission is largely independent of either sex or age; and there is no visible change of outward status for those who undergo these initiations. From the perspective of the participant, the change of status affects his relation to a god or a goddess; the agnostic, in his view from outside, has to acknowledge not so much a social as a personal change, a new state of mind through experience of the sacred. Experience remains fluid; in contrast to typical initiations that bring about an irrevocable change, ancient mysteries, or at least parts of their ritual, could be repeated.[35]

Etymology does not contribute toward the understanding of the Greek terms. The verbal root *my(s)-* seems to be attested in Mycenaean Greek, possibly for the initiation of an official, but the context and interpretation are far from clear.[36] It is more important to note that the word *mysteria* conforms to a well-established type of word formation to designate festivals in Mycenaean as well as in later Greek.[37] For Athenians, *Mysteria* was, and remained, one of the great festivals of the year. There is slight archaeological evidence, and great enthusiasm among scholars, for Mycenaean antecedents of the Eleusinian cult.[38] The word *mystes* used to designate the initiate is of a type that is seen to evolve in

Mycenean Greek.[39] The verb *myeo,* "to initiate" (in the passive, "to receive initiation") is secondary and indeed much less used than *mystes* and *Mysteria.* The seminal role of Eleusis in the institution and designation of mysteries is thus confirmed even from the linguistic point of view.

A word family that largely overlaps with *mysteria* is *telein,* "to accomplish," "to celebrate," "to initiate"; *telete,* "festival," "ritual," "initiation"; *telestes,* "initiation priest"; *telesterion,* "initiation hall," and so forth. Its etymology, which seemed to be clear, has been lost again on account of the Mycenaean evidence.[40] It is evident that this word family is much more general in meaning; usually it does not suffice to identify mysteries proper, but can be used for any kind of cult or ritual.[41] Such a term becomes specific, however, when used with a personal object and with a god's name in the dative: to perform a ritual on a person for a specific god is the same as to "initiate" this person; *Dionysoi telesthenai* means to be initiated into the mysteries of Dionysus.[42]

Another general word for "ritual" that enjoyed wide currency in the context of mysteries is *orgia.*[43] Both *teletai* and *orgia* become more specific in this connection by the added stipulation of secrecy. Two adjectives, *aporrheta* ("forbidden") and *arrheta* ("unspeakable"), seem to be nearly interchangeable in this usage,[44] hinting at a basic problem inherent in the "secret" of mysteries: a mystery must not be betrayed, but it cannot really be betrayed because told in public it would appear insignificant; thus violations of the secrecy that did occur did no harm to the institutions,[45] but protection of the secrecy greatly added to the prestige of the most sacred cults. This terminology was indeed in constant use to refer to and characterize the mysteries that are the subject of this book. The festival of Eleusis is *ta Mysteria* as such, but it is equally well called an *arrhetos telete,* and the main building in the sanctuary is the Telesterion.[46] *Teletai* is used with a certain preference with regard to Dionysus, but *mystai, mysteria,* and *myeo* also occur as early as Heraclitus; *mystai* and *bakchoi* are found in the Hipponion tablet.[47] Similarly, there are various *teletai* in the worship of Meter, but *mysteria* are also attested at an early date; the taurobolium is a *telete* for a *mystipolos*.[48] In his Isis-book Apuleius generally speaks of *mysteria* but also uses the term *teletae*.[49] As for Mithras, "the mysteries of Mithras" seems to have been the normal designation, but these were *teletai* as well.[50]

It should be noted that in most cases there exist forms of a "normal" cult alongside the mysteries, that is, worship for the noninitiated, independent of possible candidacy for *myesis* or *telete*. There were yearly festivals at fixed dates; private offerings were invited and accepted without restriction—only Mithras constitutes a special case. The interrelations between private initiations and official festivals are complicated and far from uniform. At Eleusis, initiation (*myesis*) normally culminated in the autumn festival called Mysteria; the initiation of Apuleius, on the other hand, was not linked to a fixed festival date but determined by divine command through dreams; still, the *initiati* as a body took part in the yearly procession of Ploiaphesia at Corinth.[51] In sanctuaries of Isis the resident clergy would execute a painstaking daily service for the Egyptian gods from morning to night. In Rome, Mater Magna had her great festival in the spring, but the reported dates of taurobolia are unrelated to calendrical events. In any case, mysteries are seen to be a special form of worship offered in the larger context of religious practice. Thus the use of the term "mystery religions," as a pervasive and exclusive name for a closed system, is inappropriate. Mystery initiations were an optional activity within polytheistic religion, comparable to, say, a pilgrimage to Santiago di Compostela within the Christian system.

In the ancient world, then, mysteries were anything but obligatory and unavoidable; there was an element of personal choice, an individual decision in each case. Initiation was not inescapably prescribed by tribal or family adherence. Although there was, of course, some pressure of family tradition, youths could resist their parents, as the novelistic account about the Roman Bacchanalia illustrates.[52] Herodotus writes with regard to Eleusis: "Whoever of the Athenians and the other Greeks wishes, is initiated," and with regard to the Scythian king Skyles at Olbia: "He conceived the wish to be initiated to Dionysos Bakcheios."[53] It was his private desire to be initiated; there were signs to warn him, and he could have stopped. Of course there was direct invitation, there was propaganda from the initiation priests as well: "It is worthwhile to acquire this knowledge."[54] But many would hesitate. Hence the picture of Oknos, Hesitation personified, plaiting a rope which his donkey eats away;[55] the uninitiated never reach consummation, *telos*. Some would take this seriously while others would remain indifferent; there was no unquestionable authority as to *teletai*. "Those who wish to be initiated have the custom, I believe, to turn first to the 'father' of the sacred rites, to map out what preparations have to be made"—this is the description of the procedure in Tertullian.[56] Of course, there were means to refuse unpromising candidates as well. Priests of Isis could have recourse to dream oracles, as the case of Lucius-Apuleius shows.

This role of private initiative is obviously linked to the state of society that had evolved by the sixth century B.C., with emphasis on the discovery of the individual;[57] it is hardly a coincidence that the first clear evidence of mysteries proper comes from this epoch—whatever the festival Mysteria may have been in the Mycenaean period. It is also characteristic that the advocates of rigorous state or tribal control were generally suspicious of private mysteries. Whereas Plato in his *Laws* was willing to allow some tolerance, Cicero the Roman and Philo the Jew advocated repression of private cults.[58] But for those who took part in the chances and risks of individual freedom that had come into existence in the Hellenic world, the mysteries may have been a decisive "invention": cults which were not prescribed or restricted by family, clan, or class, but which could be chosen at will, still promising some personal security through integration into a festival and through the corresponding personal closeness to some great divinity. Mysteries were initiation rituals of a voluntary, personal, and secret character that aimed at a change of mind through experience of the sacred.[59]

I

Personal Needs in This Life and after Death

MYSTERIES ARE A FORM of personal religion,[1] depending on a private decision and aiming at some form of salvation through closeness to the divine. This finding has often prompted scholars to look for a deeper, "truly religious," spiritual dimension, and they cannot be said to be totally mistaken. Yet there is a danger that searching for the beyond means overlooking what is nearest and most obvious. There is another form of personal religion—elementary, widespread, and quite down-to-earth—that constitutes the background for the practice of mysteries: it is the practice of making vows, "votive religion," as it has been called. "Those who are ill, or in danger, or in need of any kind, and conversely when people attain some kind of affluence"[2]—such individuals make promises to the gods and usually fulfill them by offering more or less precious donations. This phenomenon is so common that it is seldom discussed in any depth. The practice has far outlived the ancient world; indeed, it has survived to the present day even in Christianity, where Protestant or rationalistic expurgations have failed to suppress it.

In the study of pre-Christian antiquity, every archaeologist and historian of religion is familiar with the mass of votive objects that usually identify a sanctuary, whether it is oriental, Minoan-Mycenaean, Greek, Etruscan, Roman, or belong-