Katharina Waldner

The (Re)construction of Religious Experience in Ancient Mystery Cults

Introduction

Ancient mystery cults are viewed as a relatively uniform phenomenon not only by modern critics, but by the ancients also. In antiquity, different terms have been used to describe these cults: mystēria, derived from the Attic festival of the Mysteria in Eleusis, attested since the 7th century BCE; but also teletaí (sg. teletē) and órgia, both of which had a much broader definition to begin with, which it is possible to render as mere ‘ritual’ or feast. Since both terms were much used in the description of mystery cults, however, both came to be used as synonyms for mystēria in later Greek usage. In Latin we also find loan words mysteria and teleta, in addition to initia (‘beginnings’), which was incorporated into the language in Hellenistic times.

The uniqueness of this category of cult which has been noted by both ancient and modern observers is most easily described by regarding a distinct feature of the ancient term in its usage. The verb mýein which is often employed in the context, as much as synonymous, though less specific, téléin were used in connection with a personal object and the name of a deity (mostly in the dative form). (The Latin equivalent is the verb initiare). We thus find expressions like Dionysōi telesthēnai (Hdt. 4,79,1), telein toi Dionysioi (LSAM 48,18), tā mystēria mýesthai and so forth, which are normally translated as “to be initiated to Dionysos”, “to initiate to Dionysos”, “to become initiated in a mystery cult”, using the latin initiare as a modern technical term. Anyone initiated into a mystery cult was required to keep whatever he or she experienced during their initiation secret. The possibility to be initiated into the mystēria of a specific deity or a number of deities was given from the 7th century BCE onward until Theodosius prohibited pagan cults at the end of the 4th century CE. There are essentially

---

2 Hom. H. ad Cererem (650-550 BCE); for the history of Eleusis, see Clinton 1974; Mylonas 1961; archaeological evidence (continuity from Mycenaean times onward?): Cosmopoulos 2003a.  
3 Cf. the discussion by Calame 1991, esp. p. 202, who lays stress on the fact that there were almost no exact Greek terms for our modern notion of “myth” and “ritual”. Instead the Greeks used a rich vocabulary to designate a religious festival as a whole (e. g. hortē, pannigrîs etc.) or to designate singular types of common rituals (e.g. thyria, pompē, aγōn).  
4 LSJ s.v.; Calame 1991, 202 with reference to Pindar, Ol. 3, 41 (telē as “ceremonies for gods”) compared to Athenaios 2, 40d, who writes that teletaí means “feasts (hortai) in the tradition of the mysteries”. But we can find the usage described by Athenaios from Herodotus (e.g. 2,171,2; 4,79,1) onward.  
5 SEG 29, 799.  
6 Burkert (1987),8f. cf. also e.g. Hdt. 8.65 (ho boulomenos myeitai.)  
8 Nondisclosure since Hom. H. ad Cererem attested.
three organizational forms of mystery cults to be found: Larger sanctuaries, whose organization was at least in part guaranteed by the public, i.e. the polis; itinerant religious specialists and private personae offering their ‘initiations’ both in private and in public; and cult associations (thiasoi) which expanded rapidly during Hellenistic and Imperial times. Mystery initiations are consequently to be viewed as fundamental a phenomenon of the religious history of the Mediterranean as are sacrificial rituals or temple building. In regarding mystery cults in isolation from public religion, using the term “mystery religions”, this important aspect is quite lost. With a view to ancient terminology and marked off against an understanding which has long since become obsolete in viewing mystery religions as ‘late’ and ‘Oriental’, Walter Burkert defines these cults as follows:

“Following this line, we find that mystery cults 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”.

Ancient mystery initiations were, says Burkert, the exception to the modern sociological term of initiation. While van Gennep, Eliade and others defined initiation as “status dramatization” or “ritual change of status”, no “visible change of social status” can be made out for ancient mysteries. Any change was defined not in social, but personal terms:

“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.”

Burkert also notes that initiations into ancient mystery cults could always be repeated: Theophrastus pokes fun at this phenomenon in his Characters (16,12) by painting the superstitious man as being initiated every single month, which clearly contradicts the modern term of initiation as a unique change of status. It is actually possible to show that the ‘classic’ modern

---

10 The most influential use of the term “Mysterienreligionen” goes back to Reitzenstein 1927 (1st ed. 1910); Burkert 1987, 2-3 states that in this tradition there are three stereotypes concerning ancient mystery cults: mystery religions are “late” (1), “Oriental” (2), and they are “spiritual” (transcending the practical outlook of daily pagan religion) and often considered as “Erlösungsreligionen” which made them the forerunner of Christianity.
11 Burkert 1987, 7f.
12 Burkert 1987, 8.
13 Ibid.
term ‘initiation’, which scholars of Religious Studies slowly discard\textsuperscript{14}, is, in fact, a Christian one. I will return to this point at the end of my paper.

It is far more interesting for the topic of our conference, however, to stress the terms “personal” and “experience” which Burkert emphatically returns to at the end of the introduction to his study “Ancient Mystery Cults”:

“Mysteries were initiation rituals of a voluntary, personal, and secret character that aimed at a change of mind through experience of the sacred.”\textsuperscript{15}

According to Burkert, it is no accident that mystery cults started developing during the 6\textsuperscript{th} century BCE, since this was an era of “the discovery of the individual.”\textsuperscript{16} Private mystery cults were always under scrutiny by the “advocates of a rigorous state or tribal control” and repeatedly persecuted as suspect. For all those, however, “who knew how to employ the risks and chances of individual freedom”, mysteries were a “decisive invention”\textsuperscript{17}. At the same time, Burkert tries to show the normalcy of the phenomenon within polis-religion in contrast to those who claim to see a special ‘spirituality’ in the individual dimension of the mysteries. Initiations were more or less nothing else but one option among many offered by ancient polytheistic religious practices. Since all mystery cults promised – in different ways – an improvement of living conditions, mystery cults are to be compared to the other highly individualized practice of votive offerings\textsuperscript{18}.

Although an analogy to votive religion may contribute much to our understanding of mystery cults, we must be careful not to lose sight of the dimensions of individual experiences and personal transformations, which Burkert rightly stresses. A chapter on “The Extraordinary Experience” offers an overview over relevant texts, mostly taken from philosophical discourses\textsuperscript{19}. We may therefore be under the impression that this is in fact a continuous literary-philosophical tradition, from Plato and Aristotle to Plutarch and Proclus, which was completely severed from any historio-sociological developments within the religious practice called mystēria. It appears to be a major challenge to combine the ancient discourse on myst-

\textsuperscript{14} Cf. e.g. Lincoln 2003; Graf 2003.
\textsuperscript{15} Burkert 1987, 11.
\textsuperscript{17} Burkert 1987, 11.
\textsuperscript{18} Burkert 1987, 12-29.
\textsuperscript{19} Burkert 1987, 89-114.
terry cults as religious experiences with a socio-historic analysis of religious practices. In this paper I want to employ the question of individualization and individuation as defined by Jörg Rüpke to bridge the gap between philosophical discourse and religious practice. This I will attempt to do in two steps.

First, I will look at the oldest literary texts on mystery cults from Archaic and classical times (7th to 5th c. BCE), trying to find any hints that the participants at these cults attempted to express their individuality in, or by means of, these cults. The focus will not only be on ‘regular’ participants, but just as much on the religious specialists offering these teletai. In proceeding in this manner, I hope to be able to also incorporate the philosophical discourse, representatives of which competed with those offering initiations into the mysteries, since philosophy also offered individuals a chance for happy and successful lives and an undaunting view of death20, doing so by the application of the ‘theoretical’ knowledge of philosophy. Are the actions of individuals (including the writing of philosophical texts) to be understood as practices aimed at a heightened individualization of certain people? If so, why was such a religious construction of individualization attractive in this era?

The second part of my paper will discuss the era central to our conference, Hellenism and the Imperial Age. While the relationship between philosophy and ritual practice was marked by a distinct element of competition during the Archaic and Classical Age, this element was not as marked during Hellenistic and Imperial times. This may be shown by regarding the discourse on mystery rituals centered on individual religious experiences. A heightened interest of souci de soi during Hellenistic and Imperial times – including the handling of emotions (páthê)21 – may have changed the way religious rituals were viewed. The same holds true for what Guy Stroumsa stresses, that during the Imperial Age religion became an element of individual and collective identity in quite a new way22. Philosophers and other intellectuals often held priestly offices23. This was, on the one hand, of course connected to con-

21 Sorabji 2000; cf. also Konstan 2006. It is very difficult to describe the exact meanings of the term páthos. According to Harris 2001, 84 the meaning “emotion” is a relatively late development (around 420 BCE). Konstan 2006, 4 states that in classical Greek páthos refers in a very general sense “to what befalls a person, often in the negative sense of an accident or misfortune, although it may also bear the neutral significance of a condition or state of affairs”. In Greek terms like “fear”, “anger”, “love”, “pity” are called páthê, but according to the results of Konstan’s analysis we should not take this as an argument to translate páthos straightforward by “emotion”. According Aristotle’s most extensive treating of páthê in his Rhetoric, every páthos is accompanied by pain and pleasure; in his view which is concerned with the art of persuasion páthê are those things, “on account of which people change and differ in regard to their judgments” (Konstan 2006, 27). Cf. also Fortenbaugh 2002.
23 The most prominent example is of course Plutarch; for more evidence cf. Bendlin 2006, 190.
siderable political prestige, but also offered the chance to connect religious practices to philosophical discourse. This probably has its clearest expression in the oracular texts compiled, perhaps even written by intellectual priests. The description of emotional experiences during mystery rituals might be seen as a part of this development. Is it then to be assumed that Hellenistic and especially imperial philosophers understood ritual experiences — like those of mystery cults — to be a natural part of their idealized cultured personalities (the *pepaideumé-nos*)? If so, one might not be wrong in saying that ritual religious experiences (especially those made in mystery, oracular and healing cults) was an important part of the ‘individualation’ of members of the Imperial elite.

2) Ancient Mystery Cults: A Way to Express Religious Individuality?

Renate Schlesier describes the meaning of the oldest Greek mystery cults overall correctly as ‘messages’, this message being: “There is ritual access to a privileged relationship with the gods that every man is free to chose, granting a better lot in the afterlife to you than to other mortals. [...]” The oldest references are passages of the Homeric Hymn to Demeter (written between 650 and 550 BCE), relating the founding of the Mysteries of Eleusis. After Demeter has been appeased after the rape of her daughter, she once again brings forth fruit from the earth, and gifts the ritual of the mysteries to the people of Eleusis (Homeric Hymn to Demeter, 471-485):

> Straightaway she sent up the harvest from the land with its rich clods of earth. And all the wide earth with leaves and blossoms was laden. Then she went to the kings, administrators of themistes, and she showed them—to Triptolemos, to Diokles, driver of horses, [475] to powerful Eumolpos and to Keleos, leader of the people [lāoi]—she revealed to them the way to perform the sacred rites, and she pointed out the ritual to all of them—the holy ritual, which it is not at all possible to ignore, to find out about, or to speak out. The great awe of the gods holds back any speaking out. [480] Olbios among earth-bound mortals is he who has seen these things. But whoever is uninitiated in the rites, whoever takes no part in them, will never get a share [aisa] of those sorts of things [that the initiated get], once they die, down below in the dank realms of mist. But when the resplendent goddess finished all her instructions, they [Demeter and Persephone] went to Olympus, to join the company of the other gods.

24 Bendlin 2006, 190-192.
25 It is worth mentioning that an observer in antiquity, Marcus Aurelius, counts mysteries together with dream visions and miraculous healing in those religious practices by which human beings could be most certain of attaining the care of the gods (in Fronto 3,10, p. 43,15 v.d. Hout).
28 Translation by Gregory Nagy [http://www.uh.edu/~cldue/texts/demeter.html (17.08.2009)].Greek text in the appendix (nr. 1).
This ritual was taught to the kings of Eleusis. In historical times two priestly families, the Eumolpids and Kerykes where responsible for the rites and held the privilege to initiate. The administration of the sanctuary, however, was in the hands of the polis Athens, maybe even from the very beginning. The valuable religious gift presented to the people by Demeter is, which is most interesting, described in the negation in the Hymn to Demeter: it is not possible to speak of it. You will see something, and whosoever has seen it, is blissful (òlbios); this bliss is to be seen in contrast to all those who have no part in it. An extreme form of individualization (in the sense of demarcation from others), which incorporates a socialization within a group of initiates. The hymn, a piece of ritual poetics, doesn’t speak of the content of that special bliss, thus offering the opportunity to initiates to apply their special knowledge of the cult in reading or hearing the poem. More explicit mention is made in poetry, which is not as strongly connected to religion, e.g. in a fragment of Sophocles (frg. 837):

Since thrice fortunate are those among mortals who have seen these rites before going to Hades; for they alone have life there, while others have every kind of misery.

We know that the rituals in Eleusis were open to all, free men and slaves, men and women; all that was required was to raise the – albeit almost negligible – sum to buy a piglet which was sacrificed at the start of the ritual. In choosing to be initiated into the mysteries of Eleusis you also chose a certain way of looking at death, as we can find it described e.g. in the Panegyricus of Isocrates (or.4.28)

When Demeter came to our land on her wanderings after the rape of Kore she became well-disposed towards our ancestors through their services, which only the initiated may hear about; and she gave them two gifts, the greatest there are – the fruits of the earth, which are the reason why we do not live like beasts, and the mystic rite (teletê), which leads its participants to have more agreeable expectations about the ending of their lives and all eternity.

Such “more agreeable expectations” are by no means natural when remembering the beliefs put forth in archaic poetry, thoroughly discussed by Sarah Iles Johnston with a view to mysteries. It is remarkable that Pindar and Plato put forth concepts of the afterlife which propound a judgment in the afterlife for crimes committed during in this life. To this may possibly, though not necessarily be connected the concept of the transmigration of souls (metempsycho-

---

29 Clinton 1974; Burkert 1987, 37. The annualy elected basileis held the general supervision over the mysteries and a board of epistatai was charged with finances.
30 Translation by Lloyd-Jones 1996.
31 Translation by Usher 1990.
sis) which has also been known at least since the early 5th century. In Solon we find the earliest certain evidence of the notion of inherited guilt. Reward is just as possible: by leading ethically pure lives (in one or many reincarnations) or by cleansing punishments (which include the possibility of multiple reincarnations), anyone may live happily in the afterlife, just like heroes did. Johnston suggests a reading of these notions as reactions to the epics – though admitting that this has to remain an “informed guess” due to the fragmentary nature of the sources. The majority of people thus live on in Hades after death, without special pains or joys. Reward or punishment affects only certain people, mostly exalted personae, i.e. heroes, which are in some way connected to the gods (mostly by birth) reach the Isles of the Blessed after their deaths. And only hardened criminals like Tantalus are tortured by eternal punishments. The new notions differ considerably. They allow anyone to hope for a post-mortem existence in the realm of gods and heroes. The price was, however, a stiff one: new notions like this, which Johnston regards as “an increasing awareness of the individual and an increasing concern with questions of personal responsibility”, also lead to increasing fear and anxieties. A ritual like the one in Eleusis offers certain help. The following part of the Hymn to Demeter is interpreted by Johnston as saying that certain rituals in Eleusis are enough to escape punishment in the afterlife. Hades tries to pitch the idea of marital bliss with him in the underworld to kidnapped Persephone by pointing out the honors, i.e. sacrifices, that await her here:

I will not be an unseemly husband to you, in the company of the immortals.
I am the brother of Zeus the Father. If you are here,
you will be queen of everything that lives and moves about,
and you will have the greatest timai in the company of the immortals.
Those who violate dikê– will get punishment for all days to come
—those who do not supplicate your menos with sacrifice,
performing the rituals in a reverent way, executing perfectly the offerings that are due.”

It is possible, though, that dikê here implies a moral conduct beyond the fulfilment of religious duties to Persephone. A passage in Plato’s Republic shows that people did discuss the worth and un-worth of rituals eliminating individual misconduct. Plato’s critical remarks about the mysteries (teletai) of itinerant specialists also stress the desire for rituals similar in form and function to those at Eleusis.

---

34 Cf. Burkert 1962, 98-142; Graf/Johnston 117-120.
39 Translation by Gregory Nagy [http://www.uh.edu/~cldue/texts/demeter.html (17.08.2009)]. Greek text in the appendix (nr. 4).
Begging priests and seers go to rich men’s doors and make them believe that they, by means of sacrifices and incantations, have accumulated a treasure of power from the gods that can expiate and cure with pleasurable festivals any misdeed of a man or his ancestors, and that if a man wishes to harm an enemy, at little cost he will be enabled to injure just and unjust alike, since they are masters of spells and enchantments that constrain the gods to serve their ends… And they produce a hubbub of books of Musaeus and Orpheus, the offspring of the Moon and the Muses, as they affirm, and these books they use in their rites, and make not only ordinary men but states believe that there really are remissions of sins and purifications for unjust deeds, by means of sacrifice and pleasant entertainment for the living, and there are also special rites for the defunct (teteleutesasi), which they call functions (teletai), that deliver us from evils in that other world, while terrible things await those who have neglected to sacrifice. (Republic 364b-365a)

Such itinerant specialists were without a doubt responsible for the emergence and diffusion of the so-called Bacchic mysteries which spread throughout the ancient world since the 5th century BCE. These had the advantage of not being tied to a certain location and being able to adapt to the special needs of small groups and individuals due to the lesser degree of formal organization. Graf/Johnston as well as Burkert assume that competing “craftsmen of the sacred” had their individual brands of teletaí most probably modelled on the example of Eleusis. This with respect not only to rituals but just as much to the myths which were related, especially the tale of Dionysus’ rupture and his restitution. The so-called Orphic Tablets which have been found in graves dating from the 5th century onward belong in this context. They contain directions for the conduct of the soul in Hades. Here, they were supposed to reveal themselves by certain passwords and not drink from the Fount of Oblivion, but of Mnemosyne, i.e. memory. Their goal also is a blissful existence after death. Here an example found in a tumulus grave in Thurii, dating from the 4th c. BCE.

But as soon the soul has left the light of the sun, Go to the right […] being careful of all things. “Greetings, you who have suffered the painful thing (pathōn to pāthēma); you have endured this before. You have become a god instead of a mortal. A kid you fell into milk. Rejoice, rejoice.” Journey on the right-hand road To holy meadows and groves of Persephone.

---

40 Translation adapted from W.C. Greene by Graf/Johnston 2007, 144.
41 Burkert 1987, 33f. Johnston in Johnston/Graf 2007, 66-92 calls the itinerant specialist a “bricoleur” of myths and rituals. Burkert 1987, 24 calls it a “striking fact” that after the persecution of the Roman Bacchanalia in 186 BCE “the itinerant initiation priest seems to have totally disappeared from Bacchic mysteries”. (This kind of itinerant practitioners was also characteristic of the teletai of Meter.)
42 For the evidence and reconstruction of the myth, see Johnston in Graf/Johnston 2007, 66-80.
43 Texts and translation now easy available in Graf/Johnston 2007, who call them “Bacchic gold tablets” which seems more appropriate. As Plato says in Republic 364b-365a (Text nr. 5) itinerant practitioners often relied on “books of Orpheus” and certainly there might have been groups of adherants of the “Orphic way of life”. But there is no evidence for a regular connection of teletai, the gold tablets, and Orphism; see Graf 1974; Schlesier 2001; Graf/Johnston 2007, 165-184.
44 For the tradition of the fount of oblivion, see Graf/Johnston 2007, 117-120.
45 Translation by Graf/Johnston 2007. (Greek text in the appendix nr. 6.)
Renate Schlesier points out that a higher claim to exclusiveness is made here, despite the affinity to Eleusis\textsuperscript{46}. The dead who have been buried in this way not only have secret knowledge, they aim to be gods themselves, as the example shows. Other texts exhort the dead to reveal themselves with the words “I am a child of Earth and starry Sky” … “but my race is heavenly”. \textsuperscript{47} A divine kinship is propounded, recalling also the notion current during the Hellenistic age that the souls of the dead rise up to dwell among the stars, as is shown in a grave inscription for the fallen of Potidaia “Ether took their souls, earth their bodies” (432 BCE)\textsuperscript{48}. But the Orphic tablets do not put forth common notions. “Tell Persephone the Bacchic One released you” says one of them.\textsuperscript{49} What marks out the people buried in this way is not first and foremost the hope of a continued existence after death but a certain closeness to the divine, promising “salvation” or “deliverance”. This closeness is established by a unique or repeated act of initiation with the aid of religious specialists. This holds true not only for the Eleusinian and Bacchic mysteries, but just as much for those of Mater Magna, Isis, and Mithras, to name only the best-known.

In this way, individualization by demarcation towards individuals of the same culture becomes possible. Any initiation also means a socialization into the group of all those who were initiated into the same cult. The inner connection within this group varied in terms of degree and locale, i.e. distribution\textsuperscript{50}. However, it always presented an alternative form of society in contrast to \textit{polis} or family. This alternative form may well have been viewed in terms of competition by other groups, by \textit{polis} or family as well as by philosophical schools\textsuperscript{51}. One of the Bacchic tablets may thus speak of a “sacred road” on which the most glorious \textit{mýstai} and \textit{bácchoi} travel, but all directions and acclamation refer to only one person, in the singular. The few texts and images portraying initiation rituals confirm this. The possibility to exalt in terms of initiation or even religious specialization may well have been attractive and useful during the 6\textsuperscript{th} and 5\textsuperscript{th} c. BCE when \textit{tyrannis} and democracy shifted socially and politically unwanted or obsolete forms of oligarchic competition into the area of religion, offering certain compensations. In reaction, the religious area became intensely politicized\textsuperscript{52}. Particularly, the

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{46} Schlesier 2001.
\bibitem{47} Graf/Johnston 2007, nr. 2 (line 6f.); cf. nr. 10 (line 3), nr. 5 (line 4); nr. 6 (line 3) etc.
\bibitem{48} Habermehl 1996.
\bibitem{49} Graf/Johnston 2007, nr. 26 a,b (line 2).
\bibitem{50} Cf. Burkert 1987, 43f. clearly rejecting the often used term “Mysteriengemeinde” as implying a far closer solidarity then was common in groups of \textit{mýstai} of pagan cults.
\bibitem{51} It is interesting that our most ancient and clear evidence for the notion of initiates as a group is found in Plato’s seventh epistle where he compares it with the group of philosopher friends (ep. 7, 334b7). It is no surprise that the philosopher friends were seen as the more reliable form of social group.
\bibitem{52} On 5\textsuperscript{th}-century Athens, cf. e.g. Furley 1996; Garland 1992.
\end{thebibliography}
trials of the priestesses of foreign or private *teletaí* in Athens\(^{53}\) make us assume that a political interpretation might be the much better explanation for the evolution of religious individualization than the rather global phrase of “discovery of the individual” in archaic Greece\(^{54}\). Though we must also bear in mind that philosophy, not religion, is usually credited for this “discovery”. It is not surprising, then, to find the discourse about the effects of mystery rituals on the individual within philosophical discussions.

3) The *pathos* of mystery initiation: A way of religious individuation?

Since ancient authors for the most part adhered to the command of silence when it came to describing the actual rituals of the different *teletaí*, our knowledge is necessarily fragmentary. One common mark, however, were the strong sensual impressions made on the initiand by employing different theatrical means to evoke tension, fear, release, and joy\(^{55}\). There also seem to have been instances of ecstasy in which the initiand and other cult members invoked a state of consciousness quite dissimilar to everyday consciousness by means of music and dance\(^{56}\). One example may be found in the description of the rituals for Dionysos Sabazios, employed by the mother of Aeschines, and described (although in a very disrespectful way) by Demosthenes in his Speech on the Crown (259-260):

> On reaching manhood, you (sc. Aeschines), attended your mother’s initiation sessions and read the texts for her, and helped to conduct the rest of the ceremony: wrapping the initiates in fawn-skins and mixing wine, purifying them, plastering them with clay and bran and scraping it off, raising them up from their lustration and bidding them say “I have escaped evil, I have found the better”. You boasted that no one ever howled as loudly […]. In the daytime you led your noble bands through the streets, garlanded with fennel and poplar, squeezing the large-cheeked snakes and waving them above your head, and shouting “Euoś Saboi” and dancing to the words “Hyes Attes Attes Hyes” saluted as chorus-master, leader, ivy-bearer and fan-bearer […].\(^{57}\)

Even though harsh criticism was a constant factor in the discussion of these rituals – exempting only Eleusis and other “official” mysteries as e.g. Samothrace – their impact is just as undisputed. Once again, Plato is our oldest, and best, witness. It seems almost natural for him to employ the events surrounding mystery initiations in Eleusis as a metaphor in central sections concerning his epistemology and anthropology. Prominent among them is a passage in

---


\(^{54}\) In addition we might also think of the development of new forms of jurisdiction during archaic times which may have influenced ideas about punishment and rewards in the afterlife.

\(^{55}\) Burkert 1987, 89-114.

\(^{56}\) As Burkert 1987, 112 states the change of consciousness in ecstasy was typical of Dionysos and Meter both of them often associated to mystical *teletaí*. But one could ask if the phenomenon as such was bound to “initiation” in such a cult. Burkert also reminds us that in the cases of Eleusis, Isis, and Mithras we have no evidence of ecstasy (ibid. 113).

\(^{57}\) Translation by Usher 1993.
his *Phaedrus*, comparing the initiation into the mysteries with the souls’ seeing of beauty while dimly recalling the sight of ideas:

…but before it was possible to see beauty blazing out, when with a happy company they saw blessed sight before them – ourselves following with Zeus, others with different gods – and were initiated into what it is right to call most blessed of mysteries, which we celebrated, whole ourselves, and untouched by the evils which awaited us in a later time, with our gaze turned in our revelations, in a pure light, pure ourselves and not entombed in this thing which we now carry round with us and call body, imprisoned like oysters.” (250b-c)\(^{58}\)

Shortly after this, Plato returns once more to the mysteries, mentioning that the sudden revelation of beauty was preceded by chills and the memory of former fears (*deímata*, 251a). Plato’s *Symposium* includes the speech of Diotima (Symp. 201d-212c), comparing the philosophical ascent to true philosophical knowledge even more explicitly with mystery rituals: the *élenchos* recalls the preparatory purification rituals, followed by the instruction through myth (i.e. the *hieroí lógoi* of the mysteries), and finally the *epoptika*\(^{59}\), the *terminus technicus* for the last stage of initiation at Eleusis\(^{60}\). The dramatic changes which the initiate experienced were taken by Plato quite for granted. He refers to them metaphorically in his *Republic*, so as to illustrate the changes the “oligarchic” personality undergoes when becoming “democratic” (Rep. 560de). In a *teletē*, the soul is emptied (*kenōsantes*) and “cleansed” of all established notions and convictions, crown and exultation after this “initiation” mark the new (false) convictions

In view of the long tradition of interpretation of these passages (esp. *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*), the question is almost lost as to why Plato chose the experiences of mystery rituals in order to illustrate the process of philosophical understanding. Did he employ religious terminology to legitimize his own, novel claim for a philosophy that aimed at theoretical knowledge? Nightingale assumes just this with a view to the platonic term *theoría*, a term taken from the religious sphere\(^{61}\). Or did Plato indeed seek to “sacralize” his philosophy, as Eveline Krummen assumes in her paper on the *Phaedo*?\(^{62}\) This dialogue in fact shows, as I will try to make clear, that the answer is to be sought in yet another direction. In his *Phaedo* Plato relates – albeit often with ironical distance – the brave death of Socrates, who faces the end of his life quite calm and collected after exhaustive conversations with his philosopher friends about the possibility of an afterlife. What Socrates does *not* need are the assurances

\(^{58}\) Translation by Rowe 1986.

\(^{59}\) This systematic comparison is not made explicit in the speech of Diotima but the parallels are obvious as Riedweg 1987, 2-21 shows.

\(^{60}\) For the different stages at Eleusis cf. Clinton 2003.

\(^{61}\) Nightingale 2004.

\(^{62}\) Krummen 2007.
mystery cults offer, although the teletai where quite often alluded to in this text. Philosophical life itself, characterized in part as the division of body and soul, offers enough in the direction of freedom from fear of death. Socrates’ friends, however, are in quite an emotional state, a mixture of joy and sorrow, recalling the ritual experiences of the mystēria: “I experienced something strange” (thaumásia épathon) is how Echekrates begins his tale (58e). His students thus (jokingly) call Socrates goētēs and epodós, calming their childlike anxieties (“to exorcise the anxious child in us”), while they wondered where they would find another religious teacher like him after Socrates had gone (77e-78a). Socrates answers the question, and says that such a religious specialist would be of enormous worth. But he also exhorts his friends to help one another by keeping up the philosophical discourse (78a). Just like mystery rituals, philosophy enables the human being to free himself from fear of death and experience closeness to the divine. Philosophical friends form a community within the polis – as do mýstai. Care for the soul is continually stressed, especially directed at young people, which we might view as a calling for “individualization”. The soul (psychē) is understood in this context as the seat of indestructible identity, though I would rather avoid the term “personality” or “self”. For Plato, the religious practices of the mysteries are both inspiration and competition; he regarded private teletai as endangering his idealized political community. Nevertheless Plato regards these teletai as quite efficient. But the philosophia which he seeks, strongly impressed by the eccentric figure of Socrates, is not based on ritual, but on “knowledge”, although the kind of life the Platonic philosopher would seek may well be termed “individualized”, and also seems to rely on a relationship to the divine.

The transmission of the famous maxim that mystēria are meant to have you “experience” or “suffer”, but not “know”, attributed to Aristotle, shows how much things had changed in Late Antiquity. It surprises us also in showing that there is still competition between religious ritual and philosophy, though focus and content shifted somewhat. Synesius of Cyrene, adherent of Plato and a Christian bishop, complains about the monks who claim that access to the divine is possible via mere ritual, i.e. asceticism, but not via careful study and philosophical training:

---

63 Cf. the compilation of all passages which refer to teletai in this dialogue by Krummen 2007.
64 Cf. above note 51.
But their procedure is like Bacchic frenzy - like the leap of a man mad, or possessed - the attainment of a goal without running the race, a passing beyond reason without the previous exercise of reasoning. For the sacred matter [contemplation] is not like attention belonging to knowledge, or an outlet of mind, nor is it like one thing in one place and another in another. On the contrary - to compare small and greater - it is like Aristotle's view that men being initiated have not a lesson to learn, but an experience to undergo and a condition into which they must be brought, while they are becoming fit (for revelation). (Aristot. frg. 15 Ross = Synes. Dion viii 48a).  

Synesius understands Aristotle’s sentence as postulating a preparatory state before being initiated into the mystēria. Synesius believes, following Plato, that this kind of preparation can and must be achieved by philosophical paideia, though the state to be achieved he too describes as “irrational”. As Christoph Riedweg shows, in attempting to grasp Synesius’ understanding of Aristotle better, it is helpful to look at Clemens of Alexandria first. Clemens also speaks of different levels, employing a terminology which recalls the multi-leveled mysteries of Eleusis. “Learning” belongs to the beginner level, the “lesser mysteries”; immediate insight, epopteūein, follows. Aristotle seems not to oppose, then, a philosophical mathein to an irrational and religious pathein. It is rather to be reasoned that he was the first to systematically compare the road of philosophical understanding, or training, to the three-part mystery initiation (preparation, lesser mysteries, epoptia). Most likely he was induced to do so by the subtle beginnings given in Plato’s Symposium, which we have already discussed.

It is remarkable that Aristotle uses the verb páthos to describe the unique character of the most important part of initiation into the mysteries, which – according to Plato and others – consists of blessed sight and the sudden reversal of fear into joy. Looking back at religious practices from an independent and institutionalized philosophical background, Aristotle gains competence in abstraction. I believe that he doesn’t focus on the connection between páthē of gods in mythological narration and mystery rituals well attested since Herodotus. Rather, Aristotle seems to understand páthos as a lasting experience. It is well possible that he wanted to stress the passivity of ritual participants – not active “learning”, but passive “suffering”. Since Aristotle is one of the first to employ the word páthos systematically as meaning “emotion/feeling”, the notion of strong emotional impression is not too far off. The combination with diatethenai (to be brought in a certain condition) supports this thought. Aristotle seems

---

66 Translation by Fitzgerald 1930 (Greek text appendix nr. 9).
68 Riedweg 1987, 123-130.
70 Riedweg 1987, 129.
71 Hdt. 2,171,2; cf. Burkert 1987, 74-76 who states that despite of the obvious importance of myths about suffering gods in Bacchic and Isis mysteries we should not follow Frazer in speaking of “dying and raising” god or “rebirth” (of gods and initiands).
72 See above note 21.
also view the phenomenon of religious ecstasies (entousiasmós) with analytic distance. We may thus assume that a religious cleansing employing music and dance, as practiced in the mysteries, provided the starting point for his theory of tragedies. Once again, the term pathos (now definitely used as term for emotion) plays an important part:

Tragedy, then, is mimesis of an action which is elevated, complete, and of magnitude; in language embellished by distinct forms in its sections; employing the mode of enactment, not narrative; and through pity and fear accomplishing the catharsis of such emotions (páthē) (Aristot. poet. 1449b).

The relationship between philosophical discourse and religious practice changed fundamentally with Plutarch who supplies another emphatic description of ritual experiences in mystery rituals. Plutarch is not only a philosopher; he is also priest in Delphi. For him, ritual practices are no longer mere metaphors or subjects of analysis, they also supply a valid affirmation of philosophical considerations. This changes the discourse on rituals which was simultaneously intensified by a return to the classical Greek traditions of paideía in the Second Sophistic. Plutarch thus answers the question of what happens to the soul after death by pointing to the experiences of initiands at the mysteries:

… but when that time [i.e. the time of dying] comes, it has an experience like that of men who are undergoing initiation into great mysteries; and so the verbs teleutān (die) and teleísthai (be initiated), and the actions they denote, have a similarity. In the beginning there is straying and wandering, the weariness of running this way and that, and nervous journeys through darkness that reach no goal, and then immediately before the consummation every possible terror, shivering and trembling and sweating and amazement. But after this a marvellous light meets the wanderer, and open country and meadow lands welcome him; and in that place there are voices and dancing and the solemn majesty of sacred music and holy visions. And amidst these, he walks at large in new freedom, now perfect and fully initiated, celebrating the sacred rites, a garland upon his head, and converses with pure and holy men; he surveys the uninitiated, unpurified mob here on earth […] (frg. 178 Sandbach)

It is important to be aware of the following: Plutarch does not say that mystery rituals anticipate or ritually stage death experiences, but says that the soul in death would experience something that is similar to what it experienced during the mysteries. In other words, the tra-

---

73 In discussing the educational functions of music instruments, he says about the flute: „Flutes must not be introduced into education […] moreover the flute is not a moralizing but rather an exciting influence (orgiastikón), so that it ought to be used for occasions of the kind which attendance has the effect of purification (kátharsis) rather than instruction (máthēsis).“ (Arist. pol. 1341a 21-24). In pol. 1341b 32 he states again that the purpose of music can be education, purgation (kátharsis) or amusement. Some people are very liable to emotions like pity, fear and „religious excitement“ (entousiasmós); when they hear sacred music, „we see these people, when they use tunes that violently arouse the soul, being thrown into a state as if they had received medicinal treatment and taken a purge (kátharsis).“ (pol. 1342a5).
74 Hössly 2001, who considers also the medical traditions about kátharsis.
75 Translation: Halliwell 1995. (Greek text appendix nr. 10).
76 Burkert 1987, 84f; on philosophers as priests see above note 23.
77 On religion and the Second Sophistic cf. e.g. Bendlin 2006; Goldhill 2006.
78 Translation by Sandbach 1969 (Greek text in the appendix nr. 11)
ditional form of ritual for Plutarch is a source of information of a higher order. This new perspective demands an acute description of rituals, including “secret” mysteries. Burkert points out that Numenius complains that he as a philosopher had given away the secret of Eleusis. In the instance in which Neo-Platonic philosophers are able to include precise directions as to the execution of certain rituals in their teachings (theurgy), we arrive at an new interest on the actual functioning of rituals. As a first example I would like to turn to Iamblichus. He raises the question of the role of obscenities in religious rituals. Iamblichus draws on Aristotle’s theory of tragedies. He claims that it is not useful to suppress pathēmata completely: they must, however, be tempered. This may be achieved by cleansing (apokathairesthai):

Again the question admits another rationale too. When the power of human emotions (pathēmata) in us is everywhere confined, it becomes stronger. But when it is brought to exercise (energeia) briefly and to a moderate extent, it rejoices moderately and is satisfied. By that means it is purged and ceases by persuasion, and not in response to force. It is by this means that, when we see the emotions (pathē) of others in comedy and tragedy, we still our own emotions and make them more moderate an purge them, and in sacred rites, through the sight and sound of obscenities, we are freed from the harm that comes from actual indulgence (ērga) in them. (Iamb. De myst. 1,11 pp. 39,14-40,8.)

In continuing Iamblichus’ religio-psychological approach, the theatrical dimension (sight and sound) of rituals allows for the katharsis of emotions just as much as theater plays, according to the theory of Aristotle. Is this transferable to the invocation of fear and joy in mystery cults? Unfortunately, we have no opinion of Iamblichus about this. Another Neo-Platonist, though, Proclus, describes the mysteries of Eleusis – dead in his day – as follows:

[...] They (sc. the teletaï) cause sympathy of the souls with the ritual (drômena) in a way that is unintelligible to us, and divine, so that some of the initiands are stricken with panic, being filled with driven awe; others assimilates them to the holy symbols, leave their own identity, become at home with gods, and experience divine possession. (In Remp. II 108,17-30 Kroll)

Proclus’ seems to be quite similar to Iamblichus’ line of thought. In terming the rituals drômena, connecting the souls by sympâtheia, he also recalls the Aristotle’s theory of tragedies. What does come as a surprise is his comment that different participants in the cult also react differently to the ritual. By drawing this line, which seems quite normal to modern-day observers, he adds a new element to all the sources we have looked at so far.

---

80 Sorabji 2000, 273-287.
81 Translation by Sorabji 2000, 286 (Greek text in the appendix nr. 12).
82 Translation by Burkert 197, 114.
83 In the sentence immediately before our passage Proclus says that the teletaí are using mythoi to make obvious divine truth. So maybe drômena could also mean the “plot” of the myths.
Is such an individualist view of the ritual only possible at the moment in which mystery rituals become a thing of the past? Or does it derive from the understanding that experience is a given for a philosopher like Proclus? It seems quite plausible to take as a starting point for Iamblich and Proclus the notion that a philosophical education actually quite matter-of-factly included ritual which in turn made it necessary to reflect in a new way on the consequences for the “soul” of the individual. This leads us back to the question posed at the very beginning, i.e. was initiation into mystery cults in the Imperial Age part of the development of the individual in the sense of “individuation” of a member of the well-educated elite (a *pepaideuménos*) and how does this phenomenon relate to the philosophical discourse in a stricter sense? The writings of Apuleius, chronologically to be placed between Plutarch on the one and Iamblich and Proclus on the other side, may offer an answer to this question. Being accused of magic practices, Apuleius in his speech of defense paints himself as the ideal Greek (Platonic) philosopher, notably stressing his piety. This explicitly includes his initiations into a number of distinctly Greek mystery cults. The following passage allows Apuleius to explain why he kept a number of unspecified objects wrapped up in a strip of linen by his household altar to the *Lares*: (His opponents had identified this behaviour as certain evidence for Apuleius being a magician.)

> I have been initiated into many mystery cults in Greece. Priests have given me some symbols and souvenirs, which I carefully preserve. I am not saying anything unusual, anything new. You, for example, the initiates of Liber present here, you know what you keep stored at home and silently venerate, out of reach of all who have not been initiated. But as I say, I have learned numerous cults, manifold rites, and various ceremonies in my ardour for truth and my sense of duty towards the gods. (Apul. apol. 55,8-9)

The ease with which the Platonic philosopher and sophist speaks about his initiations into the mysteries, thus turning to the *mystae* of Dionysus (Liber) he assumed to be in the audience, shows how much the *initia* / *teletai* belonged to the religious world of the Imperial Age. It may be noted, by the way, that the supposed contrast between “Greek mysteries” and a cult of Liber is quite remarkable. What Apuleius does not mention is that participation in these *initia* supplied him with special, personal experience or insight. This he does seem to mention (at a first glance) in the eleventh book of his *Metamorphoses*. I cannot here reflect on this astonishing masterpiece of narration at any length. Without going into detail I would like to propose

---

84 *Sacrorum pleraque initia in Graecia participavi. eorum quaedam signa et monumenta tradita mihi a sacerdotibus sedulo conseruo. Nihil insulitum, nihil incognitum dico. Uel unius Liberi patris mystae qui adeitis scitis, quid domi conditum aditeis et ab eodem omnibus profanes tacite nunevmini. at ego, ut dico, multinga sacra et plurimos ritus et varias cerimonias studio neri et officio erga deos didici.*

Engl. translation by Harrison et al. 2001

85 Cf. Winkler 1985 and Egelhaaf-Gaiser 2000 to mention only two basic studies.
a reading that notes the ironic, reflective, even satirical character of the treatise. Viewed in such a way, it becomes instantly noticeable that Lucius does not experience that typical reversal from despair to overwhelming joy and a total change of character during the ritual of initiation into the mysteries of Isis, but before, that is after he chances upon the goddess Isis herself and transforms back into a human being during a procession in her honor. In his description of the initiation into the Isis cult he does not mention any transformations or even emotions. Instead, this area is entirely covered in the speech of one of the priests. The only sentiments the narrator mentions are when he speaks of his yearning for Isis after the initiation and his love for the goddess to whose service he now feels himself to be called. The dramatic statement of a rhetor concerning his own initiation into Eleusis – “I came out of the mystery hall feeling like a stranger to myself” – does not apply to Lucius. At the end of his three-way initiation process he has instead the certainty that from now on, the benevolence of the gods will guarantee him a regular income as a forensic orator. The only thing changed is that from now on, he keeps his head shaved as an outward sign that he belongs to the college of the pastophori. The narrative mode allows Apuleius to question the certainty with which for example Plutarch believed in the divine and the effectiveness of traditional ritual. The goddess Isis appears in a “ritual” which the exhausted ass spontaneously invents out of sheer necessity on the beach of Corinth. This, and not a complex and complicated ritual of initiation, brings about the change.

In either case, both the playfully ironic depiction of Apuleius’ Metamorphoses, and the important part mystery initiation plays in his apologia, show how important initia/teletai were in the public eye of the major urban centers of the Imperial Age and how much they were a part of everyday life. In difference to Stoicism, the philosophical writers of Middle and Neo-Platonism incorporated this discourse into their systems, thus offering a singular, quasi religio-psychological interpretation of initiation into mystery cults. A further study of the coincidental development of the discourse of Christian ritual – especially baptism – would show that this phenomenon was by no means isolated, but rather found its parallel and continuity in the baptism homilies of the 4th and 5th century CE.

86 Following Winkler 1985.
87 Apul. met. 11,21,5-9. Cf. 11,15,1-5.
88 Sopatros Rhet. Gr. Vi, 114 f.
89 Apul. Met. 11,30,2.
90 In the end of the text the narrator emphasizes that he did not hide his shaved head: rursus denique qua raso capillo collegii vetustissimi et sub illis Syllae temporibus conditi munia non obumbrato vel obtecto calvitio, se quoqueversus obrio gaudens obibam. (met. 11,30,5).
91 Apul. met. 11,1,4-2,4.
Bibliography

A. Fitzgerald 1930: The essays and hymns of Synesius of Cyrene : including the address to the emperor Arcadius and the political speeches. Transl. into English with introd. and notes by Augustine Fitzgerald. London.
P. Habermehl 1996: “Jenseits” (B IV/V; Via 2/c). In: RAC 17. 258-301; 309.


