

Jan N. Bremmer

**Initiation into the Mysteries of the Ancient World**

# **Münchener Vorlesungen zu Antiken Welten**



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# Contents

Preface — VII

Acknowledgments — XV

Conventions and Abbreviations — XVII

## I Initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries: A ‘Thin’ Description — 1

- 1 Qualifications and preparations for initiation — 2
- 2 The *myêsis* — 5
- 3 The *epopteia* — 11
- 4 The aftermath — 16

## II Mysteries at the Interface of Greece and Anatolia: Samothracian Gods, Kabeiroi and Korybantés — 21

- 1 The Mysteries of Samothrace — 22
- 2 The Kabeiroi — 37
- 3 The Korybantés — 48
- 4 Conclusion — 54

## III Orpheus, Orphism and Orphic-Bacchic Mysteries — 55

- 1 Orpheus — 56
- 2 Orphism — 58
- 3 The Orphic-Bacchic Mysteries — 70
- 4 Conclusions — 79

## IV Greek Mysteries in Roman Times — 81

- 1 Local Greek Mysteries — 82
- 2 The Dionysiac Mysteries — 100

## V The Mysteries of Isis and Mithras — 110

- 1 Isis — 110
- 2 Mithras — 125
- 3 Conclusions — 138

## VI Did the Mysteries Influence Early Christianity? — 142

- 1 The Mysteries around 1900 and during the Enlightenment — 143
- 2 The Mysteries in the post-Reformation era — 145
- 3 The Mysteries and emerging Christianity — 147

**VI — Contents**

- 4 The pagan Mysteries in the earlier empire — **154**
- 5 Christian reactions to pagan Mysteries — **156**
- 6 Christian appropriation of the Mysteries in Late Antiquity — **161**
- 7 Conclusions — **164**

**Appendix 1: Demeter and Eleusis in Megara — 166**

- 1 The temples of Demeter — **166**
- 2 The Thesmophoria — **170**
- 3 Demeter Malophoros — **177**
- 4 Conclusion — **179**

**Appendix 2: The Golden Bough: Orphic, Eleusinian and Hellenistic-Jewish Sources of Virgil's Underworld in Aeneid VI — 180**

- 1 The area between the upper world and the Acheron (268–416) — **182**
- 2 Between the Acheron and Tartarus/Elysium (417–547) — **185**
- 3 Tartarus (548–627) — **187**
- 4 The Palace and the Bough (628–636) — **193**
- 5 Elysium (637–678) — **196**
- 6 Anchises and the Heldenschau (679–887) — **199**
- 7 Conclusions — **202**

**Bibliography — 205**

**Index of Names, Subjects and Passages — 243**

# Preface

Whoever takes the trouble to google the term ‘mysterious’, will get approximately 42 million hits, and the term ‘mystery’ will give more than 114 million: there can be little doubt that people all over the world like mysteries.<sup>1</sup> However, in the course of its long existence, the word has undergone several changes in meaning: its present connotation of ‘secret’ is not found before the New Testament (Ch. VI.3). In the 1930s and 1940s, ‘mystery’ became associated with comics and *Trivialliteratur* in the USA about detectives battling monsters,<sup>2</sup> and it was this that eventually led to ‘mystery’ being used to denote a detective story.

Mystery originally appeared in Greek in the plural, *Mystêria*, as the name of the festival that we currently call the Eleusinian Mysteries (Ch. I), just as other names of Greek festivals are in the plural, such as Anthesteria, Thargelia and Dionysia. For obscure reasons, the Romans used the term *initia*, also plural, to translate *Mysteria*, and this usage became the basis of our term initiation,<sup>3</sup> whereas Latin *mysterium*, eventually, became our ‘mystery’.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the etymology of *mystêrion* is not wholly clear. Generations of scholars have connected *mystêrion* with the Greek verb *myô*, which means ‘to close the lips or eyes’, and they have explained it as referring to Demeter’s commandment in her *Homeric Hymn* (478–479) to keep the rites secret. This assumption may be correct if *mystêrion* contains a secondary -s-, like many other Greek words. More recently, Hittite scholars have explained the Greek term from the Hittite verb *munnai*, meaning ‘to conceal, to hide, to shut out of sight’, rather than ‘keep secret, be silent about’.<sup>5</sup> If we take into account that some of the oldest Mysteries, those of Eleusis and of the Kabeiroi, probably devel-

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1 Google, accessed 20 December 2013.

2 J. Symons, *Bloody Murder. From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History* (London, 1972) 134–142; H. Shpayer-Makov, *The Ascent of the Detective. Police Sleuths in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Oxford, 2011).

3 *ThLL s.v. initio, initium*; H. Wagenvoort, *Studies in Roman Literature, Culture and Religion* (Leiden, 1956) 150–168 (‘Initia Cereris’, first published in 1948), to be added to P. Borgeaud, ‘Les mystères’, in L. Bricault and C. Bonnet (eds), *Panthée: Religious Transformations in the Graeco-Roman Empire* (Leiden, 2013) 131–144 at 138–140.

4 But note that ‘mystery’ in the expression ‘mystery play’ derives from Latin *ministerium* not *mysterium*.

5 N. Oettinger, *Die Stammbildung des hethitischen Verbuns* (Nuremberg, 1979) 161–162; J. Puhvel, ‘Secrecy in Hittite: *munnai*- vs. *sanna*-’, *Incontri linguistici* 27 (2004) 101–104 and *Hittite Etymological Dictionary, M* (Berlin and New York, 2004) 188–192; A. Kloekhorst, *Etymological Dictionary of the Hittite Inherited Lexicon* (Leiden, 2008) 587–588; R. Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, 2 vols (Leiden, 2010) 2.988. I am most grateful to Norbert Oettinger for advice regarding the etymology.