

A Journey in Pictures through the Mystery Religions

By Ursula Kampmann, © MoneyMuseum

The time of the Roman Empire was not unlike today in that the official churches are losing more and more members and esoteric and Christian sects are gaining ground: many people – from time immemorial accustomed to living in a close relationship to their world of gods – were disappointed by the Roman religion and turned increasingly to the mystery cults. It was in these that they found the support they were yearning for.

The influence of these cults on Christianity is actually unmistakable – and yet they symbolise a completely different world of its own ...

How can god be experienced?



Mercy seat. Medal of Hans Reinhart, 1544

At all times people have had the urge to make it possible to experience a closeness to god. When today Christians assemble for holy worship and ritually re-enact the death and resurrection of Christ they are following in the tradition of the mystery religions.

Only those who have been christened and initiated are allowed to participate. Only those who have studied the doctrine and principles can understand the ritual. If an outsider were to look at the medal he would see an old man with a large cross on which a young man is hanging. What would the viewer have learnt about Christianity? Would he have understood that for 2,000 years people have been finding assurance in this faith, that people died and killed for it? Would he understand that Christianity pervades our civilisation?

We are in a similar situation with regard to the mystery religions of classical times. We have individual images, individual stories, but we can no longer reconstruct the intensity with which their message impinged on people's lives.

Eleusis – the mother of all mysteries



An ear of corn. A nomos from Metapontum (Lucania), 530-500 BC

For the Greeks what happened to a grain of wheat that was buried in the ground where it awoke to new life was an inexplicable mystery. This simple secret was at the heart of the mystery cult of Eleusis near Athens. There an explanatory myth was associated with the growth and disappearance of a grain of corn: the story of Demeter and her daughter Persephone.

The rape of Persephone



Persephone seeking her daughter. A bronze coin from Kelenderis (Cilicia), 222-218 BC

Hades, the god of the underworld, abducted the beautiful girl Persephone. Her mother, Demeter, set off in search of her. In her snake chariot she searched the whole world and failed to find her daughter. At last she learnt that Hades had carried her child off into the underworld. Full of sorrow, Demeter let the fields dry up, resulting in famine among the people. Thereupon Zeus ordered Hades to restore the abducted daughter to her mother. But Hades had previously given Persephone something to eat, so that the girl had taken into herself part of the underworld and had thus become part of the nether regions herself.

Persephone's return did not last long. In spring, when everything was turning green and blossoming, she was allowed to visit her mother. But in winter, when nature dies off, she had to return to the underworld.

The spread of the Eleusinian Mysteries



Demeter with ears of corn and torches seated on a cista mystica (mystical box or chest). A dupondius of the Roman emperor Hadrian (117-138 AD), minted for his wife Sabina

This simple myth was open to different interpretations. Did it speak of the growth of corn from a seed or of the genesis and passing away of human life? Did Demeter give her initiates daily bread or immortality?

The cult of Eleusis was one of the most popular mysteries and had high-ranking adherents. Emperor Hadrian, for example, was initiated in Eleusis and depicted Demeter on coins with a picture of his wife.

The mysteries of Dionysus



The head of Dionysus/Drunken satyr. A tetradrachm from Naxos (Sicily), around 460 BC

Dionysus was also revered in mysteries. Today we talk of ecstasy (exalted delight), enthusiasm (possessed by a god) and of mania (madness, frenzy). All these words come from the rituals carried out in honour of Dionysus. In the Dionysiac frenzy the believers felt themselves to be part of nature, removed from the restrictions of their everyday life.

While the Olympian gods always remained the same, Dionysus – like all the "heroes" in mystery religions – possessed a biography which reported the suffering of god. In his suffering, the god became similar to man. Thus man can always hope to triumph over his own suffering by partaking of the divine nature.

The slain Dionysus



Pan playing with the infant Dionysus. A large bronze from Pergamon (Mysia), 161-180 AD

It is related of Dionysus that he was the favourite of his father, Zeus. Only he was allowed to sit on the throne of the father of the gods and play with lightning. Hera, the wife of Zeus, feared the child and so incited the Titans to a terrible deed: they enticed the infant Dionysus with toys and killed him. They cut up his corpse into seven pieces and ate of them. Zeus drove out the Titans when he became aware of their misdeed, and Rhea, mother of the gods, put the pieces of Dionysus together and brought the child back to life.

The triumphal procession of Dionysus



Dionysus with a thyrsus in a panther-drawn biga. A bronze coin from Sebaste (Phrygia), 222-235 AD

Dionysus became a powerful god, who roamed through the world with his followers. Whoever stood in his way and refused to revere Dionysus was punished by the god with madness.

In a panther-drawn biga, or chariot, Dionysus rode ahead of the maenads and satyrs who were profusely garlanded with ivy. In their hands they held the thyrsus, a staff with a pinewood knob, a symbol of the immortality of the believers.

Partaking of the nature of the god



Cista mystica with snakes coiled around it and a mask of Silenus on it. A bronze coin from Laodicea (Phrygia), 138-180 AD

In order to partake of the nature of the god, the believers went into the woods, disguised as maenads and satyrs. They carried the cult objects, which only the initiated were allowed to see, in a closed box or chest.

In a holy frenzy they tore an animal apart which by a miracle turned into Dionysus and devoured the raw meat; at least it is thus reported to have been so in the early period. In the 2nd century AD the believers chewed ivy leaves as a symbol of Dionysus and thus ingested part of the god.

The Cabeiri of Samothrace



The Cabeiri of Samothrace both wearing a pilos (brimless hat) wreathed with laurel leaves. A bronze of the Scythian king Charaspes, 2nd century AD

The ancient mysteries were not mutually exclusive. The more initiations the believer went through, the safer he felt, since all cults promised help. Some were very specialised: in Samothrace the Cabeiri, minor pre-Greek gods, guaranteed protection from shipwreck.

The Great Mother Cybele



Cybele wearing a mural crown, patera and tympanum enthroned, before Attis with a shepherd's staff, leaning against a pine tree. A large bronze from Anchialos (Thrace), 238-244 AD

Many mystery cults originated from the fringe areas of the then known world. Cybele as a fertility deity from Anatolia was the centre of an orgiastic cult.

The following story was told about Cybele: the goddess fell in love with Attis. The king of Pessinus, however, wanted to marry the boy to his daughter. Cybele foresaw disaster and wanted to prevent this. But she came too late. Attis had been struck with frenzy by another jealous goddess. He had castrated himself under a pine tree and died. Cybele hid the severed genitals by burying them. She mourned her beloved and in his honour founded a ritual which was carried out by priests who also castrated themselves in a frenzy.

Cybele in Rome

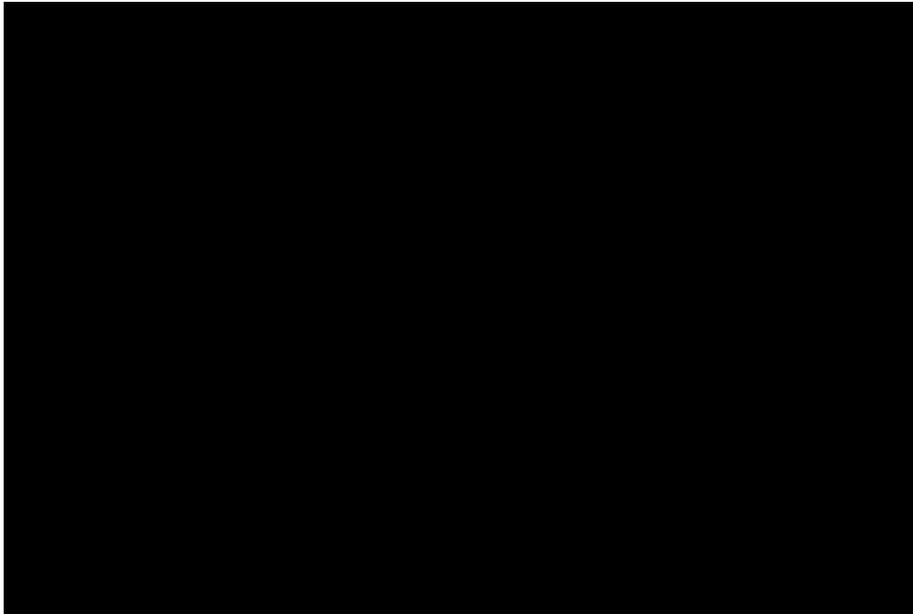


The head of Cybele wearing a mural crown. A Roman denarius, 84 BC

All this was doubtless unknown to the Roman rulers when as a consequence of the threat from Hannibal in 204 BC they brought Cybele to Rome to obtain her help against the Carthaginians. The town of Pessinus sent her sanctuary, the stone in which Cybele manifested herself, to Rome. It fulfilled its purpose. The following year Hannibal left Italy. In 191 BC the Romans built a temple dedicated to her on the Palatine Hill. But they concealed her cult. Only foreigners were allowed to serve her as priests, as castration was a punishable offence in Rome.

Only in the course of the 1st century AD did the Roman attitude change. The mysteries of Cybele became a major Roman festival, which was entered in the state calendar.

The Mediterranean area became an oikoumene



The Roman Empire in 220 AD

From the 1st century AD onwards the cultural and religious ideas from the remote areas of the empire rapidly spread further and further into all the provinces. The East and Egypt, in particular, provided new cults which found their way into the whole of the then known world.

Isis and Osiris



The Temple of Isis. A bronze drachm from Egypt, 111/112 AD

One of the best known was the Egyptian cult of Isis and her murdered husband, Osiris. The myth was old and originated in the age of the Pharaohs: Isis was the sister and consort of Osiris, who as the divine pharaoh taught Egypt how to cultivate the fruits of the fields. His brother Seth hated him and had him killed by a ruse. Seth cut up his corpse and hid the pieces throughout Egypt. When Isis heard of the death of her consort she began to weep so copiously that her tears caused the Nile to swell. This was regarded by the Egyptians as the origin of the annual inundation of the Nile.

Isis set out in search of Osiris' body, found the individual parts, put them together and brought them back to life. Posthumously she gave birth to a son by Osiris, Horus, the new Pharaoh as the living ruler over Egypt.

The mother Isis



Isis placing the crown of Egypt on Horus' head. A bronze drachm from Egypt, 113/114 AD

Isis made her son Horus the ruler over Egypt and protected him from attacks by Seth. Grown to manhood, Horus fought against his wicked uncle, Seth, and killed him or – according to later versions – ensured that the latter was called to account by the court of judges.

In the cult of Isis and Osiris the Egyptians saw the interplay of good and evil, desert and fertility, life and death. In the resurrection of Osiris they recognised an exemplar for their own immortality, granted by the great archetypal mother Isis.

Immortality in the name of Osiris



Antinous as the new Dionysus with the small hem-hem crown on his forehead. A bronze drachm from Egypt, 136/137 AD

The cult of Isis rapidly spread throughout the whole of the Roman oikoumene. It benefited from the fact that Alexandria was an important trading centre that attracted people from far and wide. In the Egyptian metropolis they became acquainted with the consoling teachings of Isis, became initiates and took their new faith back to their homelands.

The Roman rulers, too, were fascinated by the idea of achieving immortality in the form of a new Osiris. No wonder, therefore, that Hadrian, after the mysterious death of his lover, Antinous, had him depicted on coins as the new Osiris wearing the small crown of the Egyptian pharaohs.

Isis and seafaring



Isis spreading her robes before her like a sail, in the background the lighthouse of Alexandria, the Pharos. A bronze drachm from Egypt, 133/134 AD

But not only in the beyond could Isis become a protectress. In this world she was worshiped especially as the patron of seafaring. Every year on 5th March her followers would move in a magnificent procession from the temple to the harbour, where they handed over a decorated boat laden with precious goods to the sea. The aim of this sacrifice was to oblige Isis to give the boats a safe voyage. Seafaring, which came to a standstill in the winter because of the vagaries of the weather, was officially opened with this ceremony.

The Persian god Mithras



Mithras slaying in a mythical sacrifice the bull. A silver medallion in a classical setting

Another highly successful cult was that of the Persian god Mithras.

Mithras was the bringer of light. His festival was celebrated on the day of the winter solstice, as his birth had brought light into the world. His greatest deed was to slay the mystic bull, the source of all fertility. In sacrifice Mithras is always depicted in the same way: on the back of the bull, his faced turned towards the beholder. His compassionate and at the same time suffering mien was explained by the fact that Mithras is the one who offers and at the same time the offering. In this he was too similar to Christ for the latter's followers to react with indifference to the Mithras cult. We know about furious attacks by Christian writers and of brutally destroyed Mithras sanctuaries, which are to be found among early Christian churches. Many elements of the Mithras cult manifest themselves in Christianity – for example, setting the date of Christ's birth at the time of the winter solstice.

The mystai of Mithras



A lion holding a bundle of lightning in its jaws. An as of the Roman emperor Caracalla (198-217 AD), 217 AD

While most mysteries evolved from older roots, the Mithras cult appears to be the systematic creation of the founder of a religion. It is particularly the structure of the initiation degrees that support this theory.

While other mystery religions knew only the initiated and the uninitiated, in the Mithras cult there were seven stages of initiation. The believers would be gradually familiarised with the beliefs and principles. Each step in their knowledge was followed by an initiation. After that the mystai, i.e. the newly initiated, received new garments and new tasks in god's service.

Whoever possessed the fourth degree of initiation was called a lion. During his initiation he received Jupiter's weapon, the thunderbolt, to be used in a kind of mystery drama to slay the Titans once again. Then the mystai were purified by having their hands spread with honey before being awarded a lion's mask.

Mithras and Sol



The emperor, wreathed by a Victoria, sacrificing to the sun god, who is galloping up in his quadriga. The river gods Euphrates and Tigris are positioned below this. A medallion of the Roman emperor Gordian III (238-244 AD)

The second highest grade that a Mithras disciple could achieve was that of Heliodromus, the courier of the sun. The initiate thus became like the sun god, who had revealed to Mithras the right point in time for sacrificing the bull.

It was because of the important status of the sun god Sol that the mysteries of Mithras became one of the most popular religions of the civil and military officials of the Roman Empire in the 3rd century AD. Sol, for example, rose at the same time from a low-ranking deity in the Roman pantheon to become the special protector of the empire. His veneration was the duty of all those who had the well-being of Rome at heart. Thus participation in the mysteries of Mithras became a popular means of emphasising one's loyalty to the Roman Empire.

Mysteries and Christianity



Mercy seat on the medal of Hans Reinhart, 1544

At the beginning of the last century Rudolf Steiner advanced the theory that Christianity was nothing but the legacy of and successor to the mystery religions.

That is certainly not the case. Christianity was by its very nature something completely new. But what was new about Christianity would not have been understood if those who proclaimed it had not put it into words that anyone living in the Mediterranean world was accustomed to understanding. Thus Christian worship adopted many features of the mystery cults of those times.

When Christians today celebrate their Holy Communion they are following in the tradition of ancient mystery cults, whose ceremonies were marked by looking and doing, by a knowledge of the reality that believers were to be reminded of by symbolic acts.