

# The Archaic Mysteries of Ecstasy

An essay on ecstasy, mystic initiation  
and journeys through the Underworld

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This essay is a companion to the album *Archaic Mysteries of Ecstasy* by Alwanzatar. Front drawing is of a relief showing a fleeing maid at Eleusis by K. Momrak, from an original in the Archaeological Museum at Eleusis. Back drawing is of an Orphic bone tablet from Olbia dated to the fifth century BCE. Thanks to Benedikt Momrak and Martin Furan for references and discussions and my family Ingvild and Agathe Evrydike for putting up with all the books in the living room.

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# The Archaic Mysteries of Ecstasy

The ancient Greeks are famous for their philosophy. However, they also practiced secret rites and wild ecstatic rituals, on desolated hillsides and in dark, torch lit temples. These rites were known as mysteries, and thousands of people were initiated every year. The mysteries of the ancient world have fascinated scholars, students of the esoteric, and the general public for hundreds of years. Yet, surprisingly little can be said with certainty regarding their contents, the beliefs behind them, or the actual practices involved in initiation and celebration. This is no surprise, perhaps, the mysteries being secret. It astonishes however, how well these secrets have been kept. Or have they? This essay will not be able to treat all aspects of this vast field of study. Rather, certain themes concerning the mysteries and the afterlife will be investigated, including travels in the Underworld and ecstatic revelation. The mysteries of Demeter at Eleusis and the rites of Dionysus will be paid particular attention.

From the incomplete and scattered bits of information found in ancient texts, it appears that a common factor of the mysteries is an emphasis on travels into darkness and confusion, ending in a revelation of light and sound and a state of ecstasy. The successful initiate is granted a favoured place in the afterlife in the Underworld. The deities involved in the mysteries belong to the chthonic realm, but also have important roles as gods and goddesses of vegetation, the wild, wine and corn, as well as intoxication, revelry and ecstasy.

The mysteries will be discussed in a comparative perspective with a view to Mesopotamian and Indian myths and cultural practices. Among the sources that will be discussed are ancient Greek, Akkadian and Sanskrit myths. As will be seen, the connection between ecstasy, secret knowledge and the afterlife was strong in ancient cultures. We begin our journey with Dionysus, god of wine and revelry, death and destruction, and guarantor for redemption in the afterlife.

## *Dionysus*

Dionysus is a god of several aspects of human life. He is the god of wine consumption, tragic and comic drama, ecstasy, destruction, and initiation leading to a happy afterlife. His wild and destructive aspects are often, but not necessarily connected to drunkenness. As will be discussed, the Dionysian ecstasy appears to be a natural state of primeval frenzy as well as one of alcoholic inebriation. The followers of Dionysus include the *Maenads*, wild women, and satyrs, the goat men led by the old drunkard Silenos. The satyrs indicate a connection to

the goat headed Pan, bucolic patron and deity of the wild. However, Dionysus as a god of wine and wine consumption is also a god of culture. When we add that Dionysus is sometimes equated with the bull as well as the goat, it appears that he was a god of domesticized nature, as well as of the wild.

Dionysus was honoured in Athens with the Dionysia, a dramatic festival where tragic writers and comedians competed. Tragedians presented three tragedies and a satyr play each, a so-called tetralogy, whereas comedians presented only one comedy each. The connections between Dionysus and tragedy are difficult to unravel. The original tragedy, literally “goat song”, may have been a light affair akin to the comical satyr plays, and it does not appear to have had the depths of human failure, self-revelation and despair that archaic tragic writers excelled in. On the other hand, as god of revelry and madness, Dionysus may also be a revealing god. The notion that a drunken personality was the true personality was common in Greece, as will be discussed below (p. 9). The concept of *anagnorisis*, self-revelation or insight, is central to tragedy, a form of realization where the protagonist understands something about him or herself that changes the whole course of the plot.

In addition to being a god of wine and drama, Dionysus also knows his way around the Underworld. He was perceived to be able to help the initiated in reaching the Elysian Fields or places of light in the afterlife. There is a strong connection between Dionysus and the Underworld, most conspicuous in the comedy *Frogs* by Aristophanes, to be discussed in connection with the mysteries of Eleusis (pp. 27-30). Before we explore the different aspects of Dionysus, something should be said about his background and place in Greek mythology. We therefore turn to the *Homeric Hymns to Dionysus*, ancient texts that tell of his birth and early youth.

### The *Homeric Hymns to Dionysus*

There are three *Homeric Hymns to Dionysus*. The first is a fragment (*Hymn 1*), the second is longer (*Hymn 7*) and the last one is shorter (*Hymn 26*). The *Homeric Hymns* are ancient texts composed in the epic verse meter called hexameter, and were thought to have been written by Homer, famed for the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. It is highly unlikely that Homer had anything to do with these texts, however. Only a handful of the *Hymns* can be dated as far back as the 8<sup>th</sup> century, when Homer supposedly composed his epics. The *Homeric Hymns* were composed in several different periods, and some can be dated to the Hellenistic period (323 – 31 BCE). Scholars argue that the *Hymns* belong to a genre called *prooimion*, or preludes to longer pieces

of recitation from the Homeric epics. The *Hymns* may also have been recited at religious festivals (Athanasakis 2004, xiv-xvi). It should be kept in mind that the Greek gods were immortal, but not eternal. Each deity had his or her life story. The *Hymns* are very useful for the study of ancient Greek mythology, because they tell of the birth and life of the gods, including several interesting mythological stories.

According to the *Homeric Hymns*, Dionysus was the son of Zeus and Semele. His place of birth varies, but the lofty mythical mountain range Nysa is often mentioned as the place where Dionysus grew up, nursed by nymphs inside a sweet-smelling cave. He led the nymphs through the forest on wild forays.

As a young man, he was once taken by pirates. Spontaneously, wine gushed over the floorboards of the ship and a vine grew from the sail, with ripe bunches of grapes. Ivy flowered from the mast. Dionysus himself became a lion, and a bear appeared on the other side of the ship. The stricken crew abandoned the ship, except the helmsman who had recognized Dionysus, and who was therefore blessed.

In the stories of his childhood and youth, it is emphasized that Dionysus is a wild god and a god of wine. He is also fond of transformation and causes bewilderment and confusion. As will be seen from other examples, these are some of his most important characteristics.

Little is preserved in the *Homeric Hymns* about the circumstances of the birth of Dionysus. However, it is said in later sources that his mother Semele was killed before his birth and that he was born again by Zeus. In the *Metamorphoses* by the Roman poet Ovid (43 BCE - 17 CE), it is told that Hera was jealous of Semele for conceiving a child by her husband and brother Zeus. She transformed herself into the likeness of Semele's old nanny and approached the young woman, asking how she could be sure that Zeus was the father of her child. Any man could pass himself off as Zeus, but had she seen him as a god? Semele then asked of Zeus to be granted a boon, and Zeus said yes. Her wish was to see Zeus as Hera saw him when they were making love. However, meeting Zeus clad in thunder and lightning proved fatal to the young woman. Dionysus was unborn, yet survived the burning of his mother. Zeus sewed him into his thigh until the time came for his birth. He was given over to his aunt Ino and raised in secrecy, later to be given over to the nymphs at Nysa, the mythical mountain area.

This appears to be a widespread version of the birth and early youth of Dionysus. It is also found in the Classical tragedy *Bacchae* by Euripides, to be discussed below (pp. 7-10). One of Dionysus' epithets was the twice born, and he is thus connected to death and rebirth. As will be seen, this appears to have been important among the Orphics, who told

cosmological stories concerning Dionysus' birth and early life, where he is eaten by Titans. This will be discussed further below (pp. 12-15).

It was once commonly believed among scholars that Dionysus was a latecomer to Greece. In certain myths, he is said to have come from the East with bands of Asian followers. As will be seen in the *Bacchae*, Dionysus is represented as being followed by Lydian and Phrygian women and he claims to have come from India. It has been suggested that the rites of Dionysus originated in Thrace, among people the Greeks considered to be barbarians (Frazer 1995 [1922], 382). However, the name Dionysus is mentioned on Linear B tablets, from the Mycenaean civilization of the Late Bronze Age. Thus, the god cannot be claimed to be a new deity in Greece (Bowden 2010, 106). There is not sufficient evidence to determine what kind of deity Mycenaean Dionysus might have been. It seems fairly certain, however, that he was not included in the Greek pantheon at a late stage in its development. The myth of Asian origins may be explained as part of his identity as an outsider or liminal god.

The idea of an Asiatic Dionysus had a huge impact in the Hellenistic period and later, in the Roman period. In Roman art, the Asiatic Dionysus was popular, riding on a panther (cf. Ramage and Ramage 1995, 254). Alexander the Great (356 - 323 BCE) believed that he was following in the footsteps of Dionysus during his Indian campaign. Scholars have pointed out that this claim is based on very slim evidence: Dionysus is said in Euripides' tragedy *Bacchae* to have gone to Bactria. That single line of drama, plus the appearance of ivy on trees along the way, certain local traditions that were connected to Dionysus and a lot of flattery by his followers, convinced Alexander that he was indeed following in the wake of Dionysus. He came to identify himself with Dionysus, even seeing himself as surpassing the deeds of the god (Bosworth 1996, 119-124). The strange story of Alexander the Great in India illustrates the power of mythology in shaping the ideology of rulers. Also, it is testimony to the flexibility of Greek myths, where the god of wine and ecstasy becomes a conqueror of the East. Arguably, Alexander went mad on his way towards conquering India.

It is to madness that we now turn, viz. the *Bacchae* of Euripides, the most comprehensive written source to the mysteries of Dionysus.

### The *Bacchae*

Euripides (ca. 480 - 406 BCE) was one of Athens' most popular tragic playwrights. He finished the tragedy *Bacchae* right before he died, having served a few years at the court of

the king of Macedon. The play was performed posthumously in Athens in 405 BCE, as part of a tetralogy of plays that won first prize in the dramatic competition at the City Dionysia in Athens (cf. pp. 10-11). The action takes place in Thebes, where Dionysus in human form has arrived after spreading his gospel of ecstatic revelry to the world, having roamed Asia as far as Bactria and the furthest reaches of Persia and Arabia. Now, accompanied by a choir of mad women called *Maenads*, he is coming home: his mother Semele was the daughter of Cadmus, founder of Thebes. Pentheus, son of Cadmus' daughter Agave, rules Thebes and does not welcome the new religion. He does not believe Dionysus to be a son of Zeus; rather, he claims that Semele was struck by lightning for being a liar, falsely claiming to bear the child of Zeus.

Because his divinity is not accepted, Dionysus has turned all Theban women into mad *Bacchae* and caused them to swarm around the mountainsides in Bacchic garments of animal pelts and ivy. They are encamped up in the mountains and will not come down again to the city. Dionysus swears he will lead his *Maenads* to war against Thebes if anyone tries to bring back the women. His goal is to force the Thebans to respect his divinity. In the mountains, he leads the women in wild dances. He is accompanied by a choir of Asian *Maenads*, who sing his praise and tells how they have arrived from Lydia, happy to follow Dionysus and revelling in the feasts of the Great Mother of the gods.

The choir of *Maenads* tells of the death of Semele and the two births of Dionysus, his upbringing in a cave on Crete with the priests called *Curetes*, worshippers of the Titan Rhea, the Mother Goddess. The *Curetes* were jumping about and banging on bronze timpani. The tympani and Phrygian flutes accompany the dance in honour of Dionysus, when he is followed by *Maenads* and wild satyrs, creatures of Rhea the Great Mother. The choir tells of Dionysus hunting in the mountains, drinking the blood of stags. When he roams the mountains, streams are brimming with milk, wine and honey. His band of followers consists of mad women and goat men blowing on oboes and flutes, banging on drums.

Not all the Thebans spurn Dionysus: the blind seer Theiresias and old king Cadmus go out to join in the revels in the mountains, clad in animal skins and carrying *thyrsus* staffs, a sort of staff peculiar to Dionysian worship, made of a giant fennel stick wrapped in ivy with a great pine cone at the top. Pentheus claims that the women in the mountains are drinking wine and giving themselves up to men in the bushes, rather than celebrating religious rites. Therefore, no decent people should go there. He has caught and bound some of the *Bacchae* and he intends to force them all back home. Among those still up in the mountains is his mother, Agave. He scorns Dionysus as a Lydian magician or trickster and denies that he is initiating the women to Bacchus. Rather, Dionysus lures them away to do him service.



Theiresias is angry with Pentheus and praises Dionysus as the god who gave mankind wine: wine frees mankind from sorrow and makes people reveal their true self and speak what they really think.

Pentheus swears he will bring back Dionysus in fetters. However, no sooner is Dionysus brought as a captive to Thebes, the *Bacchae* already in prison have fled, their bonds loosened by themselves. Speaking with Pentheus, Dionysus says he is come from Lydia, having been initiated there in secret nocturnal mysteries by Zeus himself. Dionysus has spread them to the world. Pentheus means to bind Dionysus in his stables. However, Dionysus clouds his understanding so that he binds an ox instead. Then, he causes the building to collapse and starts a fire. Pentheus is stricken with panic and furiously runs around his palace, lashing out with his sword at a phantom Dionysus. Dionysus, however, waits for him outside the city walls.

A messenger arrives, telling of his observations of the *Bacchae* in the mountains whilst driving cattle: they were laying down amid trees and shrubs, not in the fashion that Pentheus said, in wanton lust, but peaceful and serenely. They are clad in skins of animals and girded by snakes. The *Bacchae* were divided in three troops, each led by Pentheus' own relatives. The women were embracing wild animals, some even giving suck to fawns. One struck a *thyrsus* to the ground and springs welled forth, of water and wine. Scratching the earth brought forth milk. Honey was dripping from the *thyrsus* staffs. The cowherd and his comrades attempted to catch the *Bacchae*, but instead, the women rent all the oxen asunder with their bare hands. Afterwards, they attacked villages in the plain, being immune to weapons, but themselves defeating the villagers with blows of their *thyrsus* staffs.

On hearing about this, Pentheus calls to war against the *Bacchae*. However, Dionysus convinces him to go secretly, clad in a woman's robes and holding a *thyrsus* staff, to spy on the *Bacchae* first. Pentheus goes to change his clothes. Dionysus reveals that the whole thing is a ruse to make Pentheus go to his doom, as he will be torn apart by his own mother, his head carried in procession back to the city. Dionysus will send him down to Hades wearing the very tokens of the religion he despises. As Pentheus comes out of his palace clad in women's clothing, he is confused, saying that he sees two suns and two cities, and Dionysus as both a man and a bull with horns.

Pentheus goes to spy on the *Bacchae*, but he is seen and chased, the women thinking him some lion or monster. Dionysus helps him climb a fir tree to escape, but he is overtaken by the *Bacchae* and rent asunder. His mother Agave carries his head back to Thebes, thinking

it is that of a lion. When she realizes that it is her son, she understands that she should have respected Dionysus.

Despite the grisly details, the image of Dionysus and his worshippers is quite positive in the *Bacchae*. They are running around the mountainsides, in a kind of frenzied ecstasy, performing wondrous feats. They are close to a paradisiac garden of plenty, being able to bring forth honey, milk and wine from the earth itself. However, the followers of Dionysus are also dangerous. They kill people and eat animals raw. The significance of the rending of bulls will be discussed below (p. 15). In the following, however, the festivals to Dionysus held in Athens will be discussed, the very occasion when the tragedy *Bacchae* was performed.

### The Dionysia at Athens

The Dionysia was one of the most important festivals of the Athenian festival calendar. It was celebrated on two different occasions, one taking place in the countryside, the other in the city itself. In the countryside, festivities took place in December, with local drama productions of dithyrambs, tragedies and comedies. The festival in the city took place at the end of March, in the month the Athenians called *Elaphebolion*. It was dedicated to Dionysus Eleutherios, named after the village of Eleutheria, where the festival was supposed to have originated. The City Dionysia started on the tenth day of the month *Elaphebolion* with a procession of citizens and other inhabitants of Athens, carrying the ancient cult statue of Dionysus from Eleutheria to the Theatre of Dionysus on the slope beneath the Acropolis. Animals were sacrificed and bloodless sacrifices were offered. In the procession, phalluses were carried, along with other symbols of Dionysus. From the eleventh to fourteenth day of *Elaphebolion*, there were competitions in drama, three tragic writers competing with three dramas each plus a so-called satyr play; a tetralogy. Five comedians participated with a play each.

The City Dionysia and the dramatic competitions were great civic events. Athenian wealthy citizens were responsible for the expenses as well as for the training of choirs, where citizens participated. Originally, at least, the main roles were also played by citizens. The citizens of Athens were divided into ten *phylai* as part of the political organisation of the city. These *phylai* provided two choirs each that performed dithyrambs, or hymns to Dionysus, one consisting of grownups and one of boys. The City Dionysia was more than a drama competition; it was a manifest of the city of Athens. The themes for the tragedies were taken from the mythological past, but would often also allude to recent events. The comedies, on the

other hand, were packed with political satire and all kinds of japes against the establishment and various public figures.

In the Dionysia, Dionysus plays the role of a civic god. Dionysus was praised with drama competitions that demanded great insight into the human condition.

The cult of Dionysus was not controversial in Greece, despite the testimony of Euripides to blood curdling rites. Elsewhere, there was a different story, as will be seen with the fate of the cult of Bacchus in Rome.

## Bacchus and the Romans

In Rome, the cult of Bacchus was placed under strict control after a decree passed in 186 BCE, called the *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus*. The decree states that gatherings for the worship of Bacchus are restricted: no Roman might participate without the consent of the urban *praetor*, and the groups are not allowed to organise themselves as formal bodies. The performance of secret rites is forbidden and public rites are only allowed with the consent of the *praetor* and the Senate. Existing sanctuaries to Bacchus are to be destroyed, except when they contain holy objects.

The rather terse account of the decree does not say anything about why the cult of Bacchus was restricted in Rome. However, the Roman historian Livy (64 or 59 BCE - 17 CE) tells us about events leading to the passing of the decree: certain undesirable religious activities among Roman women were reported during the Second Punic War (218 - 201 BCE). Cults in honour of Bacchus were among them. According to Livy, the cult of Bacchus was of a purely negative character. It had been introduced by a low born Greek, who started initiating people privately and lured them with wine and feasting. Men and women participated together and indecent behaviour took place. The participants are said to have committed all sorts of crimes, even killing people, drowning out their screams with the sound of ritual music and the sighs of the orgies taking place. This cult soon multiplied and spread all over Italy.

Luckily, according to Livy, these cults and their crimes were exposed by a Roman consul. He found that the cult was originally restricted to women, meeting at three specific times a year to accept new *Bacchae*. Matrons acted as priestesses. After some time, men were accepted, as well. Nightly rites soon began, with initiations five times a month. This led to the free exercise of every vice and those who refused to take part were sacrificed by the others. The cults were behind all kinds of crimes and formed a second state in the Roman Empire.

Men and women of the upper classes were initiated and youths were particularly welcome, since they were more eager to commit crimes and participate in unbridled sexual activities. After these things became known, says Livy, the cult was brutally suppressed.

There are several points in Livy's account that have been questioned by modern scholars. The story contains elements that seem to belong in fiction rather than in an historical account: the conspiratorial character of the cults seems fictitious, as does the exposure of their evil ways by a lone consul. Scholars point out that the cult is described as a new phenomenon in Rome prior to the restrictions laid down in 186 BCE, whereas cults to Bacchus are known from Rome since long before that time (Beard, North & Price 1998 vol. I, 93). Further, the private initiations to Bacchus, that no doubt took place, are mixed up with rather stereotypical vices blamed on secret societies.

The sexual and murderous excesses described were no doubt intended to shock conditioned readers. However, it is quite similar to the slander of Pentheus against the followers of Dionysus in the tragedy *Bacchae*, as seen above (p. 8). The claim that the initiative to introduce the cult was taken by a low born Greek, is similar to the accusation of Pentheus against Dionysus as a foreign miracle man.

There are good reasons to believe that private Bacchic rites could upset local communities, with nocturnal cavorting and half-naked women running frenzied in the countryside. On the other hand, Romans were used to seeing extreme displays of religious fervour. Their acceptance for foreign religions was quite broad. However, they did not want decent citizens to participate, nor were they fond of people secretly organizing. Whence, the restrictions made on the cult make perfect sense. The account of Livy must be considered for the best part a fantasy.

We turn now to a different group of worshippers of Dionysus, viz. the so-called Orphics, a term used of religious sects that practiced initiation to obtain a better state in the afterlife.

## The Orphic Dionysus

The Orphics or followers of Orpheus claimed to possess knowledge about initiation that would grant the initiated a better state after death. This took the form of hymns and sacred texts and passwords. The singer Orpheus was famous for having been able to tame animals with his song. He was also one of the crew on the mythical ship *Argo* that went in search of the Golden Fleece. Among the stories about his life, the most well-known is perhaps the one

about his search for his deceased wife Eurydice: she was bitten by a snake and went down to Hades, but Orpheus went down to get her back. He sang and played so beautifully on his lyre that Persephone granted Eurydice to return to Earth on the condition that she followed behind Orpheus and that he did not look back on their way up. Orpheus could not resist reassuring himself that she was following him, and Eurydice was lost forever, returning to Hades. Afterwards, Orpheus shunned women and played his music for the wild beasts. Some women took offence at his disinterest and killed him, ripping his head off and letting it float down a river. The head continued singing until it reached the island of Lesbos, where it was buried.

There are several versions of the life and death of Orpheus. Scholars agree that the story of Eurydice is quite late. It has been suggested that the earlier versions concluded with a successful bringing up of Eurydice from the Underworld, the tragic end being a Hellenistic invention (Berntzen 2009, 9-12). The death of Orpheus is full of controversy as to where, why, and by whom he was killed. There are some myths that present his death as a punishment by Dionysus for offending his rites, being ripped apart by *Maenads*. Others focus on his spurning of women in general (Berntzen 2009, 20-22).

Orpheus the mythical singer was important to the Orphics because a lot of songs about the beginning of the world and other cosmological material were attributed to him. The followers of Orpheus claimed that their knowledge of such songs and verses enabled them to initiate people into mysteries. Some of this material was written down. A famous manuscript is the Derveni papyri, apparently owned by a person who thought that taking it with him to the next life would be of some merit: it was found on the remains of a funeral pyre (Berntzen 2009, 40-41). The Orphics were famously mendicant mystics, but others appear to have had scholarly pretensions. The Derveni papyri are a prominent example, containing a long theogonical poem, dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE.

In late antiquity (from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE) the Orphic world-view was expressed in so-called *Rhapsodies*, creation stories. In these *Rhapsodies*, Dionysus is supposed to perfect the creation as designed by Zeus. He is the son of Persephone and Zeus. The Titans ruin the plan for a perfect world, by murdering Dionysus and eating him. Zeus smites the Titans with a thunderbolt and mankind emerges from the ashes (Berntzen 2009, 37-37).

Scholars argue that the Orphics expected redemption in the Underworld by referring to liberation by Dionysus under the name Bakchios, son of Persephone. This liberation had been conferred on them by rites and initiations both private and public. Passwords on tablets of bone or gold were buried with the initiated (Robertson 2003, 218-219). Noel Robertson argues that Dionysus found his way into Orphic theogonies through worship of the Mother

Goddess. The Mother Goddess was often seated on a throne, a symbol that was conferred on Dionysus, too, and taken into private rites of initiation (Robertson 2003, 221-222).

The Orphic gold tablets are an intriguing source to ancient initiation. On one such tablet found in a grave in Greek South-Italy, dated to 400 BCE, the way through Hades to reach a happy place reserved for initiates is inscribed. The way requires that the soul of the dead drinks from the Sea of Memory, instead of the River of Forgetfulness. Dionysus is the ruler of this holy road leading to the place reserved for the Blessed (Cole 2003, 200). Scholars argue that the gold tablets were the result of private mysteries, independent of temples or cult places. The tablets emphasise the importance of preserving memory in the afterlife. The role of Dionysus was to guide the deceased to the place of happiness in the afterlife (Cole 2003, 206-211). Dionysus as guide in the afterlife will be discussed further below (pp. 27-30).

As has been seen above in the presentation of the *Bacchae* (p. 8), Dionysus was indeed connected to the worship of the Great Mother. He is also a god well suited for guiding people to the Underworld, having a part in death through his miraculous birth. Also, as seen in the *Bacchae*, he was a god with his own rites of initiation.

There is little concrete evidence for Dionysian initiation elsewhere. However, scholars have suggested that the famous frescoes of the so-called Villa dei Misterii in Pompeii may show just such a private initiation ritual (Bowden 2010, 130). The frescoes do depict somebody wearing a theatre mask, as well as a winged figure that may be a goddess, a woman being whipped, and something that may be a book of sacred words. However, all this is open to interpretation.

Dionysus as redeemer of the world is a fascinating concept. It has been interpreted in different ways. J. G. Frazer connects the Orphic stories about the birth and death of Dionysus to a form of vegetation myth and resurrection ritual. He discusses the birth and death of Dionysus at the hands of the Titans as found in the epic *Dionysiaka*, written by Nonnos of Panapolis in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. In this story, Dionysus was fathered on Persephone by Zeus in the form of a serpent and named Zagreus. Zagreus was a horned child. As an infant, he seated his father's throne, grasping lightning in his hands. The Titans spied the infant. Having whitened their faces with chalk, they attacked him while he was looking at himself in a mirror. The Titans killed him and cut him into pieces with knives, after he had tried to evade them by turning into a number of different shapes. When he was finally killed, he was in the shape of a bull. Frazer recounts other, similar stories about Dionysus that include the Titans. In one version, found in Firmicus Maternus, Hera distracts the infant Dionysus, enthroned by his father, and lures him away to be killed, boiled, and eaten by the Titans. Athena hides away

the heart, however, and gives it to Zeus, telling how Dionysus was killed. Afterwards, Zeus killed the Titans and enclosed the heart in an image of his son, placed in a temple. In further versions of this story, Dionysus is revived. This was apparently enacted in Crete with the ritual slaying of a bull that was rent to pieces by the celebrators with their teeth while the bull was still alive. The resurrection of Dionysus is connected to a second conception in Semele. There is also a story where he brings up his dead mother Semele from Hades (Frazer 1995 [1922], 384-385).

There is much to say about the above stories and interpretations by Frazer, but a detailed discussion of these allegorical myths cannot be undertaken here. Frazer argues that since Dionysus sometimes is said to be a bull, the celebrators at festivals where a bull was sacrificed, actually killed the god, ate his flesh and drank his blood. Dionysus is also presented as a goat in several myths. Frazer argues that goats were rent asunder by followers of Dionysus during their Bacchic frenzy, meaning that they killed and ate the god (Frazer 1995 [1922], 386).

Indeed, the god who is sacrificed to himself seems to be a part of the mythology concerning Dionysus. However, this does not make Dionysus a seasonal or vegetative deity, as claimed by Frazer. Frazer's vast amount of testimony to his thesis of vegetative myths throughout his work *The Golden Bough* is culled from a wide range of sources from several different periods and places. He tends to highlight the parts that fit his general scheme of so called vegetative deities. It seems more prudent to accept a many-faceted nature of Dionysus than to reduce him to a type of dying and returning god.

In the following, an Indian deity quite similar to Dionysus will be investigated, viz. the wild god Rudra Shiva.

## Rudra Shiva

Rudra Shiva is an Indian deity whose worship goes back thousands of years. He is praised in the Rig Veda, but his cult is probably much older. In modern India, his followers are easily recognized with their matted hair, often clad in nothing but loincloths. There are several sects of Shiva worshippers, some of the most extreme being renowned for living in graveyards, wearing necklaces of human skulls, and eating off corpses. Drug use, orgiastic worship, and extreme yoga are part of the cults of Shiva. As will be discussed, these practices appear to go back to ancient times, being imitations of the god himself. In the following, the nature of

Rudra Shiva and his cult will be discussed, with a brief comparison between Rudra and Dionysus.

Rudra Shiva is an outsider god. The name Rudra means “the Red” and he is described as beastly or demonic. However, he is a god with devout followers. Texts give a contradictory impression of him, as a celestial and universal godhead, as well as a demonic being. Part of this split image is probably due to developments in Indian beliefs. Indian religion has undergone several changes throughout its long history. In the Vedic period, the priestly elite caste of the Brahmins composed editions of hymns to the gods, where the good deities are celestial beings. These beings had to be worshipped by elaborate rituals that could only be performed by Brahmins. However, folk religion and belief in local demons and spirits existed simultaneously. The gods as they are described in texts of different periods and traditions seem to reflect these different traditions. As will be seen, there are texts containing debates that seem to be modelled on actual controversies between elite priests of the Brahmin establishment and followers of popular cults.

The two faces of Rudra Shiva may seem paradoxical. Ernst Arbman discusses the possibility of Rudra being developed from an originally celestial deity of the Brahmin priests that was later influenced by folk traditions of demons of the graveyard (Erbman 1922, 280-288). He dismisses this hypothesis, however, pointing out that Rudra remains the same throughout the textual and ritual tradition, albeit with a celestial veneer in part of the Vedas: he is an earthbound, cruel and terrible deity, demoniac and connected to horror and ecstasy (Erbman 1922, 309-310). In the epic text the *Mahabharata*, his followers dance wildly and imbibe poisons with him in his orgiastic cult. As Rudra himself, their hair is matted and they are besmeared with the ashes of the graveyard. In historical times, narcotics form an important part of his cult; both hashish and opium (Erbman 1922, 298-301).

A particularly important source to the demonic aspect of Rudra Shiva is found in the so-called Daksha myth: Shiva is the beloved of Suti, against the will of her father Daksha, son of Brahma. In the text *Bhagavatapurana*, Daksha says of Shiva that he is one who runs around the graveyards, followed by bands of spirits and goblins, looking like someone insane, going naked, with matted hair, laughing, crying, besmeared with the ashes of cremations, with a necklace of human skulls around his neck and adorned with human bones, mad and beloved by madmen. Daksha invites to a huge sacrifice, but excludes Shiva and Suti. Suti goes anyway and is shamed by her father. Because of this, she kills herself by self-immolation. Rudra takes revenge by destroying the sacrifice and beheading Daksha.



The myth of Daksha and the destruction of his sacrifice by Shiva is found throughout Indian literature. Attempts have been made to trace the development of Rudra Shiva by comparing different versions of the Daksha myth. Annemarie Mertens argues that the different views on Rudra Shiva found in the sources, as either Lord of the Universe or creature from the tombs, are due to competing traditions, the followers of Shiva extolling their god, whereas authors devoted to other gods, such as Vishnu, defame him (Mertens 1998, 389). This is no doubt a sensible approach. Attempting to trace a chronological development of such views appears futile, however, given the huge problems in dating Indian texts and the different versions of myths.

Mertens suggests that Daksha's view of Rudra Shiva is really that of a Brahmin or orthodox Vedic establishment (Mertens 1998, 390). This seems to me a plausible interpretation. However, the terrifying aspects of Rudra were integral in his identity from the start. Opposition was thus not necessarily against the demonic form of Shiva as against the type of worship offered to him: the form of personal devotion called *bhakti* was popular among followers of Shiva. This could be perceived as a threat to the Vedic sacrifices and the power of the Brahmins, who claimed a privileged access to ritual knowledge. Their ritual system could have been challenged by popular movements that emphasized a direct relationship with the gods through devotion.

Indeed, the worship of Rudra is characterized by personal devotion or *bhakti*, the followers identifying themselves with Rudra Shiva and seeing him as the all-encompassing god. Scholars point out that the *bhakti* world-view became increasingly important in Indian religion after the Vedic period. This is seen particularly clear in the so-called Purana texts, where myths and stories about the gods are woven into complex histories of the cosmos. In these cosmogonies, the *bhakti* world-view comes to the fore, with an emphasis on devotion to one god that embodies the overarching reality of the cosmos. These gods may have different names, but are characterized as being all-containing and all-pervading, while being at the same time accessible and gracious lords (Matchett 2003, 138-139). Shiva as a demonic deity may appear a strange object of devotion. However, the so-called Shaivite traditions worship him as an embodiment of the cosmos.

Scholars have pointed out the ambiguity of the Shaivite traditions, as sharing many of the wider goals of life in the community, while eroding these goals through emphasizing an extreme form of individualism or subjectivity, personified by the transcendental outsider position of Shiva (Flood 2003, 200). There are several different sects following Shiva. Some Shaivite sects define themselves as inside the Vedic and Puranic traditions, others are in

opposition to them. Among the latter are those who emphasize initiation and Tantric yoga practices and the imitation of their god. The goal of these non-Puranic groups is *bhukti*, “obtaining magical power to experience pleasure in higher worlds” (Flood 2003, 204-6). There are many extreme practices documented among Shaivites, including ascetics who imitate Shiva by carrying a begging bowl made out of a human skull, wearing their hair matted or made into thick braids or shaving their heads, covering themselves with ashes, and carrying a staff topped with a skull. They have taken a vow to do penance for the killing of a Brahmin. These groups consciously break the rules of the Vedic tradition. However, they are also known to have received the support of local rulers for their forms of worship (Flood 2003, 207-208). Some Shaivite sects use impure substances in their worship of Shiva and accompanying ferocious Great Goddesses like Maha Kali, including blood, meat, alcohol, and sexual fluids from intercourse that breaks the rules of inter-caste relationships. Thus, they break the Vedic rules and obtain power by evoking these fierce deities. Scholars interpret this as a form of transcendence achieved through transgression (Flood 2003, 212).

There are quite obvious parallels between Shiva and Dionysus. Erbman points to similarities between Rudra Shiva the hash smoker and Dionysus the drunken god, as well as with Odin, leader of the train of the dead. However, he argues that Rudra has more in common with corpse eating demons of death than with either Odin or Dionysus (Erbman 1922, 304-312). The similarities between Shiva and Dionysus were observed by Greeks in India, who interpreted Shiva as a form of Dionysus. There are several similarities, but also important differences. The wild god that leads a band of disturbing revellers is found in several ancient cultures. Odin leads the Oskoreia, Dionysus leads his wild band, and Shiva Rudra leads hordes of ghosts and demons. It is not far-fetched, perhaps, to see this in connection with ancient interpretations of storms. Violent storm gods are found in all ancient cultures. However, two of the three above mentioned deities are also lords of the dead in some way or the other: Odin presides over Valhalla, the afterlife of dead warriors, whereas Rudra is worshipped in the graveyard, leads a train of demonic followers and eats of the bodies of the dead. Dionysus is not a king of the dead. However, as has been seen, he was regarded as a helper for initiates in the Underworld among the Orphics (pp. 13-14). His role in Hades will be discussed further in connection with the Eleusinian mysteries below (pp. 27-30).

As mentioned, Rudra and Dionysus share an affinity for intoxication. Rudra imbibes various drinks of opium and hashish and smokes marihuana or hashish. This is a wide-spread practice among his followers. Similarly, Dionysus is a great wine-drinker and his followers are often drunk. However, as was seen in the *Bacchae* of Euripides, alcohol is not necessary

to reach a state of Dionysian frenzy (p. 9). This may also be the case with Rudra. His wild dancing is not necessarily linked to the use of drugs. Both Dionysus and Rudra are gods of ecstasy and liminal states, including wild dancing, drug taking and drinking, and killing men and beasts. They are both linked to Great Goddesses or Mothers of the Gods. Rudra is different from Dionysus in his affinity for graveyards and drinking from human skulls. However, they both share the terrible aspect of uncontrolled and wild behaviour and are accompanied by demons and wild creatures.

Rudra Shiva and Dionysus also share an important symbol, viz. the phallus: an important symbol of Shiva is the *lingam*, or erect penis. This is regarded by several sects as the highest, undifferentiated form of Shiva (cf. Flood 2003, 220). In the cult of Dionysus, the *thyrsus* may be seen to be a phallic symbol. In addition, phalluses were carried in his processions. A common representation of Dionysus was an erect pole, sometimes topped by a mask.

The train of Dionysus is similar to that of Shiva in certain respects, consisting of creatures of the wild. Dionysus in goat form is connected to several minor divinities, including Pan, the Satyrs, and Silenos. Frazer points out that all these divinities have attributes connected to goats, either looking like goats or wearing goat skins. He points out that these goat gods are woodland deities, not of the fields; Pan being the woodland deity par excellence. In his interpretation, they are a kind of corn-spirits, personifications of the year's harvest (Frazer 1995 [1922], 459). This interpretation is not very convincing. The followers of Dionysus appear as spirits of untamed nature. Similar to the train of Rudra Shiva, they are mad and wanton, unpredictable and dangerous.

Leaving the vegetation myth aside, the similarities between Rudra and Dionysus become more apparent. They are both deities of mystic devotion that set the rules of normal society aside. Ecstasy in every form, be it sexual, murderous, or drug induced, are central to their cults. Both Dionysus and Rudra promise their followers the attainment of secret knowledge that enables them to experience fantastic things in other worlds and in the afterlife. As has been seen, the followers of both deities experienced closeness to god and obtained special powers through transgressing the norms of society, through intoxication and mayhem, even murder. They both appear as primeval sexual energies, potent in every sense of the word.

In the following, further aspects of ecstasy and wisdom will be investigated. We now turn to mystic initiation and experiences in the Underworld, with a discussion of the mysteries of Eleusis.

## *The Eleusinian Mysteries*

The mysteries of Greek antiquity are indeed mysterious and there is a vast literature on the subject. One thing seems clear: the purpose of initiation into the mysteries was to reach a happy state after death, in a special place in Hades where only the initiated could go. However, as will be discussed, there are scholars who argue that the benefits of initiation were not eschatological, but an experience to enrich one's life here and now. Before discussing possible interpretations of the Eleusinian mysteries, a look at the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* is in order, to investigate the mythological origins of the mysteries.

### *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*

The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* is one of the oldest and longest of the *Hymns*. It tells of the abduction of Persephone, daughter of the Mother Goddess Demeter, by Hades, god of death, and Demeter's search for Persephone: Hades swept Persephone away on his chariot while she was picking flowers and carried her away into a chasm in the ground, down to the realm of Hades. Only the sun god Helios saw what happened, but Hecate the Mother of Witches and Demeter heard her screaming. Demeter searched the Earth in vain for nine days, carrying torches. Hecate met with Demeter and told her that she had heard the cries of Persephone. Demeter then asked Helios if he had seen anything, and he told her that Hades had been granted the hand of Persephone by Zeus, king of the gods, and taken her away to his home of mist and gloom. Demeter was furious and kept away from the assembly of the gods. She roamed among men, disguised as an elderly woman. At Eleusis, she sat down by a well and was found by the daughters of the local lord Celeus. Demeter claimed to be a run-away slave. They invited her in to become a nurse in their father's hall. She went there to tend the son of queen Metaneira, Demophoon. When she arrived at the house, she sat sad and silent, but the woman Iambe lightened her mood with ribald jokes. She refused to drink wine, but would accept a drink made of barley meal mixed with water and mint, called *kykeon*. Thus, she was welcomed into her new household.

As a nurse for Demophoon, Demeter fed him ambrosia by day and kept him in the midst of a burning fire by night, to make him immortal. This was discovered by his mother Metaneira, however, who stopped the process just short of completion, fearing that Demeter meant to harm her son. Demeter was very angry with Metaneira, saying that people know nothing of the will of the gods. She then bade the people of Eleusis raise for her a temple and

altar. She would herself teach them rites so that they could make Eleusis famous in the future. Then she brooded in her temple and kept all seed from sprouting for a whole year, causing terrible famine. Zeus sent a messenger to plead with her. She was unmoved even as all the gods and goddesses came and begged her to let the seeds sprout again.

On one condition would she return to the assembly of the gods and let the Earth bear fruit: she demanded to see her daughter. Zeus then sent Hermes, messenger of the gods, to Hades and Persephone. In Hades, Persephone sat downcast, longing for her mother. Hades gave her leave to go and see her mother again, but made sure that she ate a seed of pomegranate before she left, so that she must return to his halls later. Hermes took Persephone back up to the surface in the chariot of Hades. She was re-joined with her mother. However, as she had eaten of the food of Hades, she had to return. Hecate became her helper and companion. Zeus decreed that Persephone should be with her mother for two thirds of the year and one third down in the gloom of Hades. Then, Demeter taught her mysteries and rites to the kings of the cities around Eleusis. These rites were not to be pried into or spoken of. She declared that he is happy who is initiated into the mysteries, but for the uninitiated, life after death is gloom and darkness.

The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* contains an explanation or background for the mysteries at Eleusis. However, it reveals nothing about the contents of the mysteries. Much is known from other sources, regarding the different days of the festivals and processions. The mystery itself, however, is unknown. The secrecy decreed in the *Hymn* was apparently respected. There is a particularly famous example of someone revealing the secrets of the mysteries, or at least making mock of them, viz. the Athenian general Alcibiades, as told by the Athenian historian Thucydides. Because of this incident and the accusations against him, Alcibiades defected from Athens and went into exile, ultimately leading to the failure of the on-going Athenian naval expedition to Sicily in 413 BCE and the beginning of the Athenian defeat in the Peloponnesian wars against Sparta.

## The Sanctuary at Eleusis and the Mysteries

The sanctuary at Eleusis was famous in antiquity. Eleusis was originally an independent town, but became dominated by nearby Athens. It was connected to Athens by the holy processional way, used during festivals. It went from the sanctuary at Eleusis through the countryside and into Athens by a special gate by the Kerameikos cemetery. Over the years, the sanctuary at Eleusis was added to until it formed a complex of buildings. The most prominent building

was the Telesterion, where the holy revelations of the mysteries were made. The Athenian general Pericles (ca. 495-429 BCE) is credited with the completion of the Telesterion, as a hall with a forest of columns and a sort of chapel called the Anaktoron. It was a large building that could hold quite a crowd. The mysteries were dedicated to the two goddesses Demeter and Persephone, also called Kore, the maiden. Dionysus was also honoured, under the name Iacchus. The mystery cult had a program for initiations that had to be observed and complete initiation took a minimum of two years. The priesthood came from certain local families, the Kerykes and the Eumolpidae. However, the cult was supervised by the Athenian official called the *archon basileus*. The mysteries were open to all Greek speakers who had not committed murder and attracted people from the entire ancient world.

The proceedings of the mysteries have been reconstructed by scholars, based on ancient accounts of how things were done: the first step in the process towards initiation took place in the city of Athens in spring, in the month *Anthesterion*. This was the so-called Small Mysteries, a kind of introduction for new initiates, with sacrifices and purifications. The Great Mysteries took place six months later, in the month *Boedromion*. These proceedings lasted ten days and begun with the carrying of the holy objects, *ta hiera*, from Eleusis to Athens, to the shrine called Eleusinion by the Acropolis. The holy objects were carried in chests, *kistai*. The arrival of the holy objects was announced before a great gathering of the people by the priestess of Athena Polias. The first day of the festival was to coincide with the full moon. The participants gathered at the Eleusinion. At the shout of "*Halade mystai!*", meaning "To the sea, candidates!" , they all went down to the sea by the bay of Phaleron. Each candidate carried a piglet. These piglets were sacrificed and burnt, the ashes spread. Thereafter, the candidates bathed in the sea, dressed in new clothes and crowned their heads with wreaths of myrtle. Thus adorned, they went in procession back to the city, where a purification ceremony was held (Zaidman and Schmitt Pantel 1992, 137).

The proceedings continued on the nineteenth day of the month *Boedromion*, when the holy objects were taken back to Eleusis in a huge procession. The holy road to Eleusis is about twenty kilometres. Participants in the festival stood all along the road. The entire city of Athens participated and the procession was a kind of mustering of the citizens of Athens. First in the procession came the statue of Iacchus, accompanied by the shout of "Iacch' o Iacchus!". Next there was the wagon carrying the holy objects. Thereafter came in turns all the priests, the candidates for initiation, the council called the Areopagos Council, the council known as the Council of Five Hundred, as well as all the other officials of Athens, and the citizens organised according to the political organisation of Athens in *phylai* and *demes*. Last

came all other inhabitants of Athens and visitors wanting to watch the proceedings. They were all headed for the Telesterion, the hall of initiation. The ceremonies at Eleusis took three days. The candidates were prepared with sacrifices and by drinking *kykeon*, the drink made of barley meal, water and mint. Only those who had been initiated the year before or at an earlier point in time were allowed to participate in the final revelations of the Hierophant, the high priest of the sanctuary (Zaidman and Schmitt Pantel 1992, 138-139).

There were two degrees of initiates, *mystai* and *epoptai*. The *mystai*, candidates for initiation, arrived at Eleusis after the procession from Athens and participated in the *telete*, the rites taking place after arrival. This consisted of a day and night of fasting, purification, and the drinking of *kykeon*. This was followed by sacrifices to Demeter, Persephone and other Eleusinian gods, of an ox and a phiale, as well as a large cake of barley and wheat called a *pelanos*. This part was followed by entry into the Telesterion. Apparently, the candidates were registered as they entered for these revelations of the mysteries. What these revelations consisted in is not known, but something was enacted (*dromena*), shown (*deiknumena*), and said (*legomena*). These experiences left the participants filled with awe and bliss (Mylonas 1961, 260-261). The highest degree of initiation was known as the *epopteia*. It was only open to *mystai* a year after their initiation in the *telete* and involved seeing objects that were not shown to ordinary *mystai*. Not everyone deemed it necessary to participate in this ritual, which involved seeing sacred objects and gaining a deeper insight into the mysteries (Mylonas 1961, 274). The two rounds of initiation may indicate two different experiences or perspectives (Bowden 2010, 44).

In contrast to other Greek cults, the holy activities of the Eleusinian mysteries took place indoors. The focus of the mysteries was a building within the building, the Anaktoron inside the Telesterion. It was not allowed to speak of what happened there. However, it supposedly involved the Hierophant entering the Anaktoron and fetching something that was shown to the *mystai*, as well as something revealed to the most advanced candidates called *epoptai*, or seeing initiates. The spectacle was lit up by a fire that was burning on top of the building. Scholars suggest that the final object shown was an ear of corn sheared in two (Burkert 1985, 288-289). This interpretation is controversial, however, as will be discussed below.

As was seen in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (p. 21), those who had been initiated in the mysteries could expect a good life after death. The mysteries were supposed to give a kind of knowledge that made life here and now good and took away the fear of death. The true

meaning of the mysteries has been debated extensively. Some of the main lines of interpretation will be discussed briefly in the following.

## The Nature of the Mysteries

What actually took place at Eleusis is not known. It was a secret the initiated swore to protect. All pagan writers are sparing with details. Christian writers lampooned the initiations, but it cannot be ascertained that they knew what went on at Eleusis. Scholars have offered a number of interpretations. The most widely accepted theory was mentioned above, viz. that the Hierophant showed an ear of corn sheared in two, illuminated by fire. The source for this information is the Roman presbyter Hippolytos (170 - 235 CE), who wrote a book known as the *Philosophoumena*, or *Refutation of All Heresies*. On the mysteries at Eleusis, he claims that the Phrygians honoured a fresh ear of cut-wheat as their god and that the Athenians follow this, exhibiting at Eleusis in silence an ear of cut wheat to the *epoptai*, or seeing initiates. Later, the Hierophant cries and shouts aloud before a fire that “Holy Brimo has borne a sacred child Brimos”, meaning “the mighty gave birth to the mighty one” (Mylonas 1961, 305-306).

Walter Burkert argues that the showing of an ear of corn by the Hierophant was an embodiment of the cycle of nature through life and death and back to life. In his interpretation, the initiated understood Demeter as Mother Earth and Persephone as her daughter the corn or the spirit of life that went through the corn and was killed with it. Persephone then returned to life through Mother Earth. This was a lesson for the inner circle of initiates, the *epoptai*, who had witnessed the revelation. In the outer circle of the mysteries, there was a message concerning the invention of agriculture and the growing, reaping and grinding of the corn (Burkert 1990, 68).

Burkert follows the testimony of Hippolytos, a Christian who is unlikely to have experienced the mysteries. Burkert’s interpretation of the mysteries is influenced by the vegetation myth, seeing the core of the mysteries as a kind of explanation of the cycle of life. As will be seen in the following, this interpretation is not universally accepted.

Some scholars maintain that it is impossible to reconstruct the revelations of the mysteries. George E. Mylonas is not convinced that the object shown by the Hierophant was an ear of corn. In his interpretation, Hippolytos confused the Eleusinian mysteries with the Phrygian mysteries of Attis, which were celebrated by showing an ear of wheat. He admits that we are absolutely in the dark concerning what constituted the rites of the *epopteia*. Other



ancient sources claim that a phallus was shown, but Mylonas does not believe this, either. He suggests that the final ritual was in honour of Demeter and Persephone, but does not venture to guess at what was finally shown (Mylonas 1961, 274-278). In a more obscure interpretation, Karl Kerényi argues that the revelations in the final ritual took the form of *phasmata*, visions that were not simple or straight forward, but unutterable. Those who had seen them lived on as though they had, like Demeter, been with Persephone (Kerényi 1962, 102).

In recent years, the discussion of the meaning of the mysteries has continued, but little new seems to have been added. According to Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, the mysteries at Eleusis included a *drama mystikon* of Demeter and Persephone wandering about, enacted in a torch ritual. This ritual was a kind of search for Persephone (Sourvinou-Inwood 2003, 29-32). Although details are not known, there is some ancient testimony to this kind of ritual: the historian Plutarch (ca. 46 - 120 CE) tells of the mysteries that they entailed wandering in circles and in the darkness, shivering, sweating and in fear, before a light appeared and one was accepted into a pleasant place of meadows, with the sounds of voices and conversations with good and wise people (frag. 178). Sourvinou-Inwood interprets this as an imitation of a descent into Hades, in search of Persephone. The goal of this descent was a better state after death. The finding of Persephone or Kore was symbolised during the ritual by showing an ear of corn by the Hierophant at the climax of the mysteries (Sourvinou-Inwood 2003, 33-36).

The search for Persephone seems a reasonable interpretation for the actions undertaken by the initiates as they enter the Telesterion. After all, the main myth behind the mysteries involves such a search. However, the end of the search as the showing of an ear of corn is, as has been seen, quite unsubstantiated. In the myth of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Demeter is reunited with Kore. That Kore should be the corn is conjecture. A descent into Hades to obtain knowledge may well have been part of the symbolism of the mysteries, but that this knowledge consisted in the seeing of an ear of corn is not very convincing. How would that prepare for a better life in death? A term paper on the subject of the mysteries at Eleusis suggests that the mysteries were unique to each participant, the main event being the demonstration of the eventual return of the corn after sowing, through the reappearance of Kore (Momelreku1999, 11). Indeed, the personal realisation of a fact in the universe should not be underestimated. Its effect may have been transforming for the initiated. In this sense, the mysteries may have contained a sort of *anagnorisis*, as known from tragedy, where the protagonist comes to a life-changing realisation of how things really are. It is, however, in my

opinion too reductionist to interpret the mysteries as a demonstration of the workings of the agricultural cycle.

The interpretation of the mysteries as an eschatological preparation for the afterlife is not accepted by all scholars. Hugh Bowden emphasises the experience of nearness to the Goddess Demeter, arguing that life after death was a side effect of being close to the gods. This experience of closeness to god in life was probably more important. In this sense, the rites were not secret, as much as inexplicable (Bowden 2010, 22-24). This interpretation emphasises the more general character of initiations, viz. an experience of the revelation of the gods. In my opinion, this is a more fruitful approach than a specific focus on the re-enactment of the natural life cycle. What the revelations at Eleusis were will probably never be known. This is because the experience was conditioned by the cultural mind set of the participants and the careful preparations undertaken before the revelations took place. Thus, the secret of the mysteries is not one concrete object, as much as the ecstasy of the individual participants.

## Psychedelic Mysteries

To explain the mysteries as an experience, rather than a concrete action, begs the question what caused such a profound and ecstatic experience. An approach that has gained much popularity outside the scholarly community is the attempt to identify a psychoactive substance behind the experiences of the initiated at Eleusis. Robert Wasson, famous for his work on hallucinogenic mushrooms in Mesoamerica, argues that the experience at Eleusis was due to a psychedelic potion being drunk by the initiates that lifted them to the realm of the gods (Wasson 1980, 45). He is convinced that this potion contained mushrooms called *Claviceps purpurea*, a parasite on barley and various grasses (Wasson 1980, 172). The hypothesis of a psychedelic potion is supported by Terence McKenna, who terms the mysteries at Eleusis “a cult of plant-induced group psychedelic ecstasy” (McKenna 1992, 125).

Albert Hoffmann, discoverer of the psychedelic drug LSD-25, took it upon himself to investigate whether it was possible that people in ancient Greece could have had access to a substance similar to the powerful psychedelics LSD or psilocybin. He found that a likely source for a water soluble hallucinogen would be ergot of rye, or *Claviceps purpurea*, a well-known poison with a history of mass hallucinations and death in the Middle Ages (Hoffmann 1978, 25-26). In his argument, it would be easy to prepare a hallucinogenic extract of water soluble alkaloids with the technology available in antiquity, given the suitable kinds of ergot

growing on wheat or barley. Alternatively, ergot growing on the grass *Paspalum distichum* could have been used, in powder form (Hoffmann 1978, 32-33).

Albert Hoffmann and Terence McKenna are both aware of the poisonous qualities of ergot of rye: this mushroom induces a state known as *ergotism*, a form of poisoning characterised by hallucinations, cramps, dry gangrene of the outer extremities, and death. It was known in medieval times as St. Anthony's fire (Hoffmann 1978, 26; McKenna 1992, 135-136). McKenna suggests that there may have been strains of ergot less poisonous or techniques used at Eleusis to separate the toxins from the psychoactive agents (McKenna 1992, 136). Thus, *kykeon* was supposedly made with a kind of ergot not yet identified. This is rather unconvincing. Since there are no reported cases of poisonous reactions among the initiated at Eleusis, it must be considered a mistake to attribute the revelations at the mysteries to *Claviceps* poisoning.

The search for an original drug behind the experiences at the mysteries seems to me futile. First of all, there has been no success in identifying a plausible substance. Second, drug experiences are quite subjective and not likely to produce the same experience for the initiated for hundreds of years. Third, stories about descents into the Underworld to receive knowledge are widespread in the ancient world, with no corresponding uniform drug use. Thus, myths that involve travels to the Underworld and ecstatic visions about the true meaning of existence seem to reflect a common human experience that is not dependent on the use of drugs.

In the following, journeys in the Underworld will be discussed, with their connection to mysteries and initiation.

## Initiation and Hades

The initiated in the Eleusinian mysteries were granted a better place in the Underworld, as it says in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. This is a claim that is met several times in Greek literature and appears to have been common knowledge. It is used for comic effect in the comedy *Frogs* by the Athenian comedy writer Aristophanes (ca. 446 - ca. 386 BCE). This comedy is an important source to Greek conceptions of the Underworld. In the play, Dionysus himself goes down into Hades to fetch a tragic playwright that can help stop the Peloponnesian War. In order to pass safely into Hades, he has dressed himself as Heracles with a lion pelt and wielding a club: Heracles has been to Hades before, hauling up the three-headed god Cerberus.

Dionysus and his slave Xanthias pays Heracles a visit before going down to Hades, to ask about friends and foes, inns and taverns in the Underworld. Heracles describes the way to Hades: first there is a vast and deep lake that must be passed in a small rowing boat, for the price of two *obols* paid to the ferryman Charon. Thereafter, huge snakes and fierce monsters await the traveller. There are puddles and streams of excrement and filth, where those who have lied or foresworn themselves lie and wallow. Thereafter, they will come to a place of flutes playing and glorious sunshine, groves of myrtle and throngs of happy people, men and women clapping their hands. These are the beautiful initiates of the mysteries, able to tell Dionysus everything he needs to know, living right by the gate to Hades.

The topography of Hades appears to have been well established in ancient Greek culture, at least in its general outline. The way description as given by Heracles is quite close to the account found in Homer's *Odyssey* of the way to Hades (Book Eleven). It should be kept in mind that the Homeric epics were key texts for any cultured person in antiquity. Thus, it was fairly common knowledge what Hades looked like. In Book Eleven, Odysseus and his men leave the island of the sorceress Circe to seek the realm of Hades and Persephone. It lies by the furthest reaches of the stream of Ocean, beyond the eternally dark Cimmeria where the sun is hidden by fog and clouds. Arriving at evening, Odysseus and his crew disembark bringing sheep for sacrifice on the shore. Drawing ghosts to drink of the blood offerings, Odysseus hopes to speak to the dead seer Theiresias and find out about his way home to Ithaca. As may be remembered, Theiresias was met in the *Bacchae* as well (pp. 8-9). He was one of the great seers of Greek myth.

Before Theiresias arrives to speak with Odysseus, a great throng of the dead arrives screaming and thirsting for blood, all looking like they did when they died, except that they are shadows. They are powerless and easily held away from the blood sacrifice by a drawn sword. Odysseus speaks with dead friends and relatives, people long deceased and people he did not even know were dead. They are like shadows or dreams with voices and cannot be touched. Drinking from the blood sacrifice enables them to remember the living and binds them to speak the truth. However, their souls have no corporeal qualities left, having escaped their bodies. Before they drink blood, most appear to remember nothing about their former lives.

In the *Odyssey*, the shadowy realm of the dead is divided by mighty streams, the first of which is Ocean. The streams are rapid and difficult to cross. The landscape is vaguely described. Odysseus stays by the stream of Ocean for a long time talking to spirits of the dead. Those he speaks to all tell tales of woe. The dead are everywhere, fluttering about in endless

numbers. They lead a bleak existence. One of the dead souls, Achilles, says he would rather serve as a tenant farmer living up on Earth than rule down in Hades. After Achilles has spoken to Odysseus, he goes away across fields of lilies.

The first place of the shades of the dead is called Erebus, the dark abode of the shadows. It lies right by the stream of Ocean. Apparently, it is a place of brooding darkness amid fields of lilies. Odysseus wanders further and spies old king Minos by the huge gates of Hades, judging the dead. Shades are flocking around him. Odysseus sees more famous dead souls, including Orion, who hunts his prey on the lily covered meadows. He also sees a number of tortured souls, those of people who have wronged the gods: Tityus is bound to the earth while having his liver pecked out by two vultures. Tantalus is a bit further off, standing in the middle of a lake with a canopy of fruit trees over him. As soon as he bows down to drink, the water recedes and as soon as he reaches for the fruit, the boughs swing away in the wind. Nearby, Sisyphus rolls a boulder up a hill, only to watch it roll down again as he is about to tip it over the cliff.

Lastly, Odysseus sees Heracles, or his shadow. Heracles was a demi-god and granted eternal happiness among the Olympian gods, but his shadow dwells in Hades. In Hades, he is surrounded by screeching souls of the dead. He speaks to Odysseus and recalls how he was sent down to Hades to bring up Cerberus, the watch dog of Hades. At this point, Odysseus has to withdraw as thousands of dead souls come screaming towards him. He fears lest Persephone should send the monstrous Gorgon against him, and runs back to the ships on the shore.

The happy part of Hades is also described by Homer, albeit not in Book Eleven. In Book Four, Proteus, the Old Man of the Sea, prophesies to king Menelaus of Sparta that he will not truly die, but arrive at the Elysian Fields by the ends of the Earth where Rhadamanthus rules. This place is the most pleasant for mankind, with no winters filled with snow or ice storms or cold rains. There, the western Zephyr blows gently from the stream Ocean.

Having seen how the topography of Hades looked like to an educated Greek, we now resume Dionysus' trip to Hades: after receiving instructions by Heracles, Dionysus and his slave Xanthias go and meet the ferryman Charon. Dionysus is shipped across together with a corpse, while Xanthias the slave is not allowed in the boat and has to run around the lake. Dionysus is forced to row the boat himself. Underway, the frogs of the Stygian lake sing their humorous chorus *brekekekex koax koax* and hail Dionysus in his happiness on his Holy Pitcher Day, singing about how they are loved by the Muses of the Lyres and the

Clovenhoofed Pan and Apollo. On the other side of the lake, Dionysus comes to a place of muck and filthy darkness, where patricides and the foresworn are forced to dwell. After this, there are ferocious beasts. Then, the sound of flutes is heard and there is the smell of burning torches.

The choir of mystics arrives, chanting “O Iacchus! O Iachhus! O Iacchus!” This is an incantation of Dionysus and the Muses, calling for all uncleanness and evil to flee. The choir sings and dances and alludes to how they use to revel all night long, frolicking in fields strewn with flowers. There is mention of waiting for initiation at vigils, longing to see a bright light. Also, Demeter is mentioned as the goddess of their mysteries. Only those who have been initiated can live in the light of the Underworld.

The rest of the play tells of Dionysus finally entering the gates of Hades, the doors guarded by the Aeginetan king Aeacus, one of the three judges of Hades. The other two judges, the Cretan kings Rhadamanthus and Minos, are mentioned in Homer, as seen above. Dionysus chooses his favourite dramatist after a fierce duel between Euripides and Aeschylus, taking Aeschylus with him up to Earth.

Scholars have pointed out the close proximity of life and fiction in this comedy: in real life, Euripides was recently deceased, in 406 BCE. The comedy *Frogs* was performed for the first time in 405 BCE. Further, the play *Frogs* was written shortly after the first production of Euripides’ *Bacchae* in Macedon. The *Bacchae* was performed in Athens in 406 BCE, the year before the *Frogs* (Cole 2003, 197). It says a lot about Aristophanes that he not only makes a mockery of Euripides’ subject matter of Dionysian mysteries, but also places the recently deceased tragic playwright in Hades and lets him lose a tragic duel to Aeschylus.

The choir of initiated in the *Frogs* are testimony to the belief that those who were initiated in the mysteries were considered blessed in the Underworld. They dwell close by the gates of Hades, in the Elysian Fields. The topography of Hades is pretty similar between Homer and Aristophanes, with the exception of the ferryman Charon, not encountered by Odysseus. Also, Aristophanes renders Styx as a lake, whereas Homer describes the waters in the Underworld as rivers.

There is much talk of monsters in the Underworld, as well as hints at places of punishment and travails. Also, there is the meeting with the judge Aeacus, pointing to more elaborate visions of Hades and the afterlife. This is not covered by Aristophanes, however. The terrors of Hades and dread Persephone are alluded to, but play no further role in the comedy. Likewise, the judging of the dead is only mentioned briefly by Homer, without

further information as to what this meant. The true horrors of Hades are not described, waiting further below for those who are not initiated in the mysteries or blessed by the gods.

The last text to be discussed in this essay is an Akkadian story about a descent into the Underworld, viz. Ishtar who goes to visit her sister Ereshkigal in Irkalla. It shows certain interesting similarities with Greek visions of the Underworld.

## Ishtar's Descent

The text called *Descent of Ishtar to the Netherworld* is an Akkadian story about the love-goddess Ishtar going down into the Underworld, called Irkalla. There are two versions found in the Assyrian king Assurbanipal's library (ca. 668 – 631 BCE). It is also preserved in Sumerian versions. There are some unclear points in the story due to missing parts of the text. However, the outline is as follows: Ishtar goes down to the Underworld, demanding entry. Her sister, Ereshkigal, is ruler of the Underworld and is suspicious of Ishtar's visit. Ishtar is stripped of all her garments and jewellery on her way down and when naked before the throne of the Underworld, she is beset with sixty disease demons and dies. When Ishtar lies dead, all procreation on Earth stops. Ea, god of wisdom, thinks of a ruse to bring back Ishtar, by sending a male prostitute to Ereshkigal. The queen of the Underworld is seduced into giving up Ishtar's body. However, Ereshkigal has her revenge: the prostitute is cursed, and someone has to be sent to the Underworld in Ishtar's stead. Ishtar's lover Tammuz is hexed into forgetting his mourning for her. When she returns and finds him not in mourning, she is furious and sends him to the Underworld (Foster 2005, 498).

In the story, there are several intriguing details: Ishtar forces her way down into the realm of Ereshkigal, by threatening to release the dead, so that they will emerge from below to eat the living. The Underworld is described as a dark place, where food is clay and wine is dust. The dead are like birds clad in their wings. The way down to the Underworld is through seven gates, and the gate keepers strip off one of Ishtar's jewellery or garments for every gate. The rest of the story is also quite intriguing: while Ishtar is held back in the Underworld, all sexual activity ceases and no procreation takes place. This is a catastrophe and the gods have to find a way to bring Ishtar back. This is done through the magic of Ea.

It is of note that the Homeric vision of Hades discussed above (pp. 28-29) is similar in several ways to the Akkadian Underworld. In particular, there is the sorry state of the dead, being birdlike shades eating dust and clay. The gates and their keepers are also found in Hades, albeit Rhadamanthus, Minos and Aeacus are not known for stripping off people's

clothes. Ereshkigal herself is reminiscent of dread Persephone, being Queen of the Dead. The fate of the Earth when Ishtar is dead closely resembles the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and the effect of Demeter's grieving for Kore. Of course, these parallel traits do not mean that the stories are identical. However, it is obvious that Babylonians and Greeks shared several ideas about the Underworld, Irkalla and Hades thus holding several traits in common, such as darkness, impotent dead souls, and a sad fate for most of the deceased.

It is surprising that no rivers are found in Irkalla, Mesopotamia being famous for its rivers. It appears that the model for Irkalla is a city and not a landscape. An important difference between Hades and Irkalla is that there no Elysian Fields in the latter.

Why Ishtar goes down into the Underworld is not mentioned. It has been suggested that she goes in search of her dead lover Tammuz. In this line of interpretation, Tammuz is a vegetation god that is slain and brought back to life (Mackenzie 1996, [1915], 83-91). However, this is to put it the wrong way: Tammuz did not die until after Ishtar had been to the Underworld. Mackenzie's interpretation of Tammuz as a vegetative deity is quite similar to the interpretations of Dionysus by Frazer, discussed above (p. 15). It hinges on a speculative reading of the evidence and cannot be accepted.

I suggest that an important reason behind the several instances of going down into the Underworld in myths is to obtain knowledge, knowledge akin to that obtained through ecstatic initiation. This kind of knowledge produced a belief in power over one's fate after death and a better place in the afterlife. It could also enable the seeker of knowledge to transcend death and return to a new life, as Ishtar did with the help of Ea. This has not so much to do with the seasonal return of life from death, as a transforming experience, giving the initiates a new view of life and death.

### *Concluding Remarks*

In this essay, several aspects of ecstasy, revelation, and the world of the dead have been explored. Starting with Dionysus and ending with Ishtar's descent into the Underworld, the main argument is that there is a strong connection between the Underworld, ecstatic divinities and knowledge that frees mankind from the horrors of death. Death is inescapable, but insight gained through ecstatic revelation can alleviate the misery of mortality on Earth and promises a better state in the afterlife.

A common feature of the deities invoked to gain this knowledge is their liminal identity. Frenzy, intoxication and murder are among the ingredients of archaic ecstasy; a



complete abandon of the constrictions of the conditioned self, giving oneself over to a higher power of unrestricted life. Thus, the *Bacchae* run in the mountains tearing animals apart. The Shaivite sectarians dance on graves, wallowing in the ashes of corpses, smoking hash and wearing necklaces of skulls. These are not the only ways to ecstasy, however. An important path to knowledge is initiation through a form of search in the darkness and revelation of secrets. This is not always accompanied by violence or intoxication, but appears to be an inner experience of discovering the workings of the universe.

Wisdom is attained through a descent into the Underworld. Such ecstatic travels are widely documented around the world and seem to represent an inner journey into the unknown darkness of each individual, to eventually return from peril, enlightened and strengthened against the misery of life and horror of death. Thus, entering the realm of Hades or Irkalla gives the seeker of wisdom powerful knowledge that cannot be explained in words.

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