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# TO LIVE IN JOY AND DIE WITH HOPE: EXPERIENTIAL ASPECTS OF ANCIENT GREEK MYSTERY RITES<sup>1</sup>

YULIA USTINOVA

Mystery initiations were very popular in ancient Greece. In 408/07,<sup>2</sup> after the disasters of the Peloponnesian War had decimated the citizen body of Athens, about 2,200 people were initiated at Eleusis.<sup>3</sup> When in 399 an Athenian court heard a case dealing with profanation of the Eleusinian mysteries, the entire jury was composed of initiates only, which implies that a great number or perhaps even the majority of contemporary Athenians were initiates.<sup>4</sup> On the small island of Mykonos, all the women of the citizen community were admitted to the local mysteries of Demeter.<sup>5</sup> The Orphic or Bacchic mysteries spread all over the Mediterranean, their mendicant priests knocked on every door in Athens, and in many cases were welcome, to Plato's dismay.<sup>6</sup>

Why were mystery initiations so attractive for thousands of people? The social status of the initiated did not rise.<sup>7</sup> Sharing a common secret could titillate, but some mystery cults allowed very vast membership, and many dispensed with permanent organization, although in certain cases adherence to mystery cult associations could endow their members with a feeling of exclusiveness.<sup>8</sup> The unique gifts conferred by mystery initiations were joyful existence, peace of mind, and readiness to accept death: Cicero

<sup>1</sup> This paper is a result of the research supported by the Israel Science Foundation (ISF1077/12). I am very grateful to Michael Crawford, John North, and the anonymous reviewer of this article for their most helpful comments, and to the participants in the seminar on ancient religions at the University of Liverpool for the lively discussion of the topic.

<sup>2</sup> All the dates are BC, unless indicated otherwise.

<sup>3</sup> M. B. Cavanaugh, *Eleusis and Athens, documents in finance, religion and politics* (Atlanta 1996) 211-12; C. Sourvinou-Inwood, 'Festivals and mysteries. Aspects of the Eleusinian cult', in *Greek mysteries. The archaeology and ritual of ancient Greek secret cults*, ed. M. B. Cosmopoulos (London and New York 2003) 47.

<sup>4</sup> And. I. 31.

<sup>5</sup> *LSAM* No. 96; *SIG<sup>3</sup>* No. 1024; W. Burkert, *Homo necans* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London 1983) 253-54.

<sup>6</sup> Pl., *R.* 364E.

<sup>7</sup> It perhaps even decreased; despised or distrusted initiates: *E. Hipp.* 948-954; *Pl. R.* 364B-366B; Heraclit. fr. 22 B14 DK; *D.* 18. 259-260.

<sup>8</sup> The most radical case is a separate burial place for those who have become Bacchic, βαβαχχευμένοι, *LSAM Suppl.* No. 120; S. G. Cole, 'New evidence for the mysteries of Dionysos', *GRBS* 21.3 (1980) 231.

knew that in Eleusis the initiates ‘get the idea not only how to live in joy, but also how to die with hope for the best’.<sup>9</sup>

We will never know how exactly these gifts were obtained. The record at our disposal consists of scraps of information, mainly indirect allusions to the actions of the initiates during the ceremonies and their subsequent perception of the proceedings. It is possible, however, to arrive at a better understanding of these bits and pieces, if they are juxtaposed with the results of modern neuropsychological research. Several attempts at application of neuropsychological and cognitive models to the investigation of mystery cults have been made during recent years.<sup>10</sup> In particular, Greco-Roman mystery cults have been interpreted in the perspective of H. Whitehouse’s theory of modes of religiosity: they are considered as belonging to the imagistic mode, characterized by transmission of religious knowledge in small-scale groups, through infrequently performed and emotionally salient rites.<sup>11</sup>

However, this approach is applied mostly to the analysis of Roman cults, notably Mithraism. Most studies of Greek mystery cults deal with their history, rites, organization, and teachings. In contrast, this paper focuses on embodied mystery experiences of individual initiates. It emphasizes manifestations that are common to the major mystery cults, as reflected in their terminology, practice, mythology, and perception by contemporaries. Diverse mystery cults are treated in their essential unity, phenomenologically rather than historically.<sup>12</sup> In fact, Greek authors from Plato to Plutarch often refer to *teletai* in general, alluding perhaps to their essential congruity. The basic characteristics of mystery initiations remained constant throughout the centuries of their history, modifications of ritual notwithstanding.<sup>13</sup> However, since, under changing social and religious conditions, many aspects of mystery cults were transformed,<sup>14</sup> I draw mainly on Classical and Hellenistic evidence, using later sources with appropriate caution:

<sup>9</sup> *De leg.* 2. 36: ‘neque solum cum laetitia vivendi rationem accepimus, sed etiam cum spe meliore moriendi.’

<sup>10</sup> D. L. Gragg, ‘Old and new in Roman religion: a cognitive account’, in *Theorizing religions past: archaeology, history, and cognition*, ed. H. Whitehouse and L. H. Martin (Walnut Creek 2004) 69-86; R. Beck, *The religion of the Mithras cult in the Roman Empire. Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun* (Oxford 2006) 88-98, 136-52; Y. Ustinova, *Caves and the ancient Greek mind. Descending underground in the search for ultimate truth* (Oxford 2009) 226-55; H. Bowden, *Mystery cults of the ancient world* (Princeton 2010) 44-45.

<sup>11</sup> H. Whitehouse, *Modes of religiosity. A cognitive theory of religious transmission* (Walnut Creek 2004) esp. 74; cf. L. H. Martin and P. Pachis, ed., *Imagistic traditions in the Graeco-Roman world: a cognitive modeling of history of religious research* (Thessaloniki 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Following in this respect W. Burkert, *Ancient mystery cults* (Cambridge, MA and London 1987) 4. For the core elements and functions shared by all the mystery cults of the Classical world, which determine their basic nature, see R. Turcan, ‘Initiation’, in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, ed. E. Dassmann (Stuttgart 1998) 121.

<sup>13</sup> J. A. North, *Roman religion* (Oxford 2000) 68; R. Seaford, ‘Dionysiac drama and the Dionysiac mysteries’, *CQ* 31 (1981) 252; K. Clinton, *Myth and cult: the iconography of the Eleusinian mysteries* (Stockholm 1992) 131; F. Dunand, *Isis Mère des dieux* (Paris 2000) 131.

<sup>14</sup> J. North, ‘The development of religious pluralism’, in *The Jews among pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire*, ed. J. Lieu, J. North, and T. Rajak (London and New York 1992) 182-84.

the discussion focuses on the major *teletai* of the Classical world, namely the Eleusinian, Bacchic (and/or Orphic) and Samothracian mysteries.<sup>15</sup>

Four main questions will be addressed: what kind of experience was considered the core of Greek mystery initiations, how was this experience attained, in what way did it influence the life of the initiates, and what real-life experience could prompt the idea of mystery initiations. The suggested answers will hopefully shed some light on the reasons that made mystery initiations so important to their numerous adherents.

### *Blessings of the mysteries*

In the course of the central ceremony of initiation into a mystery cult, known as the *teletē*, ‘rite of fulfilment’, a great secret was imparted to the *mystai*. At the peak of the ceremonies the initiates witnessed certain objects and heard certain utterings. In many cases, something hidden in a closed chest was displayed to the initiates: a winnowing basket filled with fruit from which a phallus rises remained the symbol of the Dionysiac mysteries until late antiquity, and ears of grain were presumably prominent in the Eleusinian cult.<sup>16</sup> Some scenes, a sort of sacred drama, were probably staged at Eleusis and on Samothrace.<sup>17</sup> In several places masks were worn, either by the priests participating in the drama, or by the initiates.<sup>18</sup> Sacred formulae, *synthēmata*, were pronounced in various mystery cults.<sup>19</sup>

These objects, words and actions do not seem to contain any life-changing or otherworldly revelation. Some items, for instance masks, phalli, and baskets, were used in many rites open to the public. Moreover, stripped of their secrecy, mystery initiations appeared dull and bleak. Even the awesome rites of Eleusis, when divulged in the streets by the atheist Diagoras, lost their gripping force.<sup>20</sup> Appeals to the symbolic meaning of the actions would not help, either: as W. Burkert notes, ‘faith makes use of symbolism, but hardly arises from there’.<sup>21</sup>

The most prominent mystery cults of the Classical era, such as the Eleusinian and the Bacchic or Orphic mysteries, promised the initiates a blissful existence in the present and the future, in particular after death. Initiates are often described as ‘happy and blessed’

<sup>15</sup> Burkert, *Ancient mystery cults* (n. 12 above); P. Scarpi, *Le religioni dei misteri*, 2 vols (Milan 2002); M. B. Cosmopoulos, ed., *Greek mysteries* (London and New York 2003); G. Casadio and P. A. Johnston, ed., *Mystic cults in Magna Graecia* (Austin 2009); Bowden, *Mystery cults* (n. 10 above).

<sup>16</sup> M. P. Nilsson, *The Dionysiac mysteries of the Hellenistic and Roman age* (Lund 1957) 21-37; Burkert, *Ancient mystery cults* (n. 12 above) 9-10.

<sup>17</sup> Clinton, ‘Stages of initiation in the Eleusinian and Samothracian mysteries’, in *Greek mysteries. The archaeology and ritual of ancient Greek secret cults*, ed. M. B. Cosmopoulos (London and New York 2003) 66-70; Sourvinou-Inwood, ‘Festivals and mysteries’ (n. 3 above) 35; Burkert, *Homo necans* (n. 5 above) 286-88.

<sup>18</sup> M. Jost, ‘Mystery cults in Arcadia’, in *Greek mysteries. The archaeology and ritual of ancient Greek secret cults*, ed. M. B. Cosmopoulos (New York and London 2003) 157-61.

<sup>19</sup> Plu. *Mor.* 611D; A. Delatte, ‘Le cycéon, breuvage rituel des mystères d’Éleusis’, *Bulletin de la Classe des lettres de l’Académie royale de Belgique* 40 (1954) 699-708; Burkert, *Ancient mystery cults* (n. 12 above) 46, 94, 98; A. Bernabé and A. I. Jiménez San Cristóbal, *Instructions for the netherworld. The Orphic gold tablets* (Leiden 2008) 151-60.

<sup>20</sup> Crater. *FGrH* 342 F16 (Schol. Ar. Av.1073).

<sup>21</sup> Burkert, *Ancient mystery cults* (n. 12 above) 23.

(μάκαρες καὶ εὐδαίμονες, or ὄλβιου), this dual designation apparently indicating two distinct kinds of happiness that they obtained through initiations,<sup>22</sup> gladness in life and cheerfulness in death. Plutarch restates the ancient idea, expressed in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, and reiterated by Plato in the *Phaedo*:<sup>23</sup> those who arrive in Hades uninitiated would wallow in the mud, while those initiated (into the Eleusinian mysteries) would dwell with the gods.<sup>24</sup> The same notion is repeated time and again in the texts inscribed on gold tablets discovered mainly in South Italy, the Northern Balkans and on Crete, which accompanied *mystai*, Dionysiac or Orphic, to the grave, and were believed to guide their souls on their last journeys.<sup>25</sup> The destiny of the *mystēs* underwent so dramatic a transformation that it could be perceived as an apotheosis: ‘Once human, you have become a god’, says one of the gold tablets.<sup>26</sup> Thus, through initiation rites, mortals could hope to attain renewal and rebirth as immortals – but after their bodily demise. Euripides makes Heracles say that he succeeded in bringing Cerberus from Hades because ‘he was blessed with seeing the rites of the *mystai*’, implying that a *mystēs* could fight the powers of the netherworld.<sup>27</sup> A funerary epigram of a Bacchic priestess from Miletus affirms that she ‘knows her share in the beautiful’.<sup>28</sup> Mystery rites transformed the initiate’s personality through changing his or her attitude to life and death.

#### *The nature of the initiate’s experience*

In the second century AD the Neoplatonist Theon of Smyrna summed up the stages of initiation rites (*myesis*): in the beginning purification (*katharmos*); later learning the tradition (*paradosis*); next ‘beholding’ (*epopteia*); then *anadesis*, which is the end (*telos*) and ‘binding up’ of beholding; and finally the bliss (*eudaimonia*) of being together with the gods

<sup>22</sup> E. Ba. 72; Pl. *Phdr.* 250B; F. Graf and S. I. Johnston, *Ritual texts for the afterlife. Orpheus and the Bacchic gold leaves* (London and New York 2007) No. 5; C. Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie bei Platon, Philon und Klemens von Alexandria* (Berlin and New York 1987) 53; cf. S. G. Cole, ‘Voices from beyond the grave: Dionysus and the dead’, in *Masks of Dionysus*, ed. T. H. Carpenter and C. A. Faraone (Ithaca 1993) 293.

<sup>23</sup> Plu. fr. 178 Sandbach, discussed below; *h. Cer.* 480-482; A. TGF fr. 837; Isoc. 4. 28; Pi. fr. 137 Maehler.

<sup>24</sup> Pl. *Phd.* 69C; cf. E. Ba. 73-77 on the Bacchic *teletai*.

<sup>25</sup> Scarpi, *Le religioni dei misteri* (n. 15 above) 329-333; 421-429; cf. Cole, ‘New evidence for the mysteries of Dionysos’ (n. 8 above); Cole, ‘Voices from beyond the grave’ (n. 22 above); C. Riedweg, ‘Initiation-Tod-Unterwelt’, in *Ansichten griechischer Rituale. Geburtstag-Symposium für Walter Burkert*, ed. F. Graf (Stuttgart 1998); C. Riedweg, ‘Poésie orphique et rituel initiatique. Eléments d’un “discours sacré” dans les lamelles d’or’, *RHR* 219. 4 (2002); Graf and Johnston, *Ritual texts for the afterlife* (n. 22 above); Bernabé and Jiménez San Cristóbal, *Instructions for the netherworld* (n. 19 above); Y. Tzifopoulos, *Paradise earned. The Bacchic-Orphic gold lamellae of Crete* (Cambridge, MA 2010) 115-21.

<sup>26</sup> *JG* XIV 642, cf. 641. 1; Graf and Johnston, *Ritual texts for the afterlife* (n. 22 above) Nos. 3, 5; Bernabé and Jiménez San Cristóbal, *Instructions for the netherworld* (n. 19 above) L. 8. Cf. Tzifopoulos, *Paradise earned* (n. 25 above) 129; A. I. Jiménez San Cristóbal, ‘The meaning of *bacchos* and *baccheuein* in Orphism’, in *Mystic cults in Magna Graecia*, ed. G. Casadio and P. A. Johnston (Austin 2009) 51-53.

<sup>27</sup> E. *HF* 613; Apollod. 2. 5. 12; D.S. 4. 26. 1; X. *HG* 6. 3. 6; J. Boardman, ‘Herakles, Peisistratos and Eleusis’, *JHS* 95 (1975) 1-22; D. Colomo, ‘Heracles and the Eleusinian mysteries: P.Mil.Vogl. I 20, 18-32 revisited’, *ZPE* 148 (2004) 87-98.

<sup>28</sup> *SEG* 17. 503, third to second century: καλῶν μοῖραν ἐπισταμένη; H. S. Versnel, *Ter Unus. Isis, Dionysos, Hermes. Three studies in henotheism* (Leiden 1990) 152.

(*theois syndiaitos*).<sup>29</sup> Theon's trajectory comprises preparations, rational understanding, the core experience known as 'beholding' (*epopteia*, discussed below), and the supreme joy attained as the result of participation in the mystery rites.

The impact of *teletē* on the participants can best be understood through examination of the nature of the knowledge they acquired. It appears to have been very different from an array of myths or prescriptions: instead, the extant sources suggest attainment of awareness of a sort. Synesius, a Neoplatonist and later bishop of Cyrene, cites Aristotle, who 'states that the participants in initiations into mysteries do not have to learn anything, but rather to experience and to be inclined, that is to say, to become fit (for the purpose)'.<sup>30</sup> Aristotle refers to a generic mystery experience, disregarding particularities, such as divine patrons of cults or places of ceremonies. In his view, the most important objective of the Greek initiations is to make the participants live through a certain experience.

Clement of Alexandria also distinguishes between stages of pagan initiations and stresses the importance of the experience of *epopteia* and *perinoia*, non-rational, holistic contemplation and comprehension, at the consummation of the mystery rites:

It is not then without reason that in the Greek mysteries, there are purifications in the beginning [...] After these are the minor mysteries, which give some foundation of instruction and of initial preparation for what is about to happen; and the great mysteries, in which nothing remains to be learned, but only to contemplate and comprehend (μανθάνειν οὐκέτι ὑπολείπεται, ἐποπτεύειν δὲ καὶ περινοεῖν) nature and things.<sup>31</sup>

Instruction, often called *paradosis*, covered the intellectual part of the preparation, acquaintance with the myths associated with a particular mystery rite, and provided the content for the rites.<sup>32</sup> For instance, the initiate was supposed to feel the anguish of Demeter and to live with her through bereavement, or to shudder when he learnt about the sufferings of Dionysus cunningly murdered by the Titans.<sup>33</sup> This information is a verbalized symbolic representation,<sup>34</sup> intended to prepare the *mystai* for the apprehension of a different kind of knowledge. Hidden or true meanings of images and rites were revealed to them as an experience shared with the deity rather than perceived as a result of systematic learning. For

<sup>29</sup> *De utilitate mathematicae* 14-15.

<sup>30</sup> Ἀριστοτέλης ἀξιοῖ τοὺς τελομένους οὐ μαθεῖν τί δεῖν, ἀλλὰ παθεῖν καὶ διατεθῆναι, δηλονότι γενομένου ἐπιτηδείους, fr. 15 Rose, Synesius (*Dio* 8); cf. J. Croissant, *Aristote et les mystères* (Liège and Paris 1932) 137-61; C. Schefer, "Nur für Eingeweihte!" Heraklit und die Mysterien', *A&A* 46 (2000) 60; Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie* (n. 22 above) 128.

<sup>31</sup> Clem. Al. *Strom.* 5. 11. 71. Cf. Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie* (n. 22 above) 5.

<sup>32</sup> Ath. 40D; D.S. 3. 65. 6; Cic. *Tusc.* 1. 29; Clem. Al. *Strom.* 7. 27. 6; Plu. *Mor.* 422C; Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie* (n. 22 above) 6-14; Burkert, *Ancient mystery cults* (n. 12 above) 69; A. Henrichs, 'Hieroi logoi and hierai bibloi: the (un)written margins of the sacred in ancient Greece', *HSPH* 88 (2003) 205-40; Riedweg, 'Poésie orphique et rituel initiatique' (n. 25 above); Tzifopoulos, *Paradise earned* (n. 25 above) 101-15.

<sup>33</sup> Isocr. *Paneg.* 28; Hdt. 2. 51; D.S. 5. 49. 1-6; Pl. *Phd.* 62B, cf. Clem. Al. *Prep.* 2. 17-18; Plu. *Mor.* 361E; Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie* (n. 22 above) 10-13.

<sup>34</sup> Beck, *The religion of the Mithras cult* (n. 10 above) 62: 'that "doctrine" is an expression of the mysteries, not vice versa'.

instance, in Plato's *Symposium* Diotima the wise Mantinean woman suggests that she initiates Socrates into the mysteries of Eros. The context is that of real-life initiatory rites; Diotima the mystagogue dismisses as insignificant all those myths and interpretations she has disclosed to Socrates at the beginning of their conversation, her equivalent of the *paradosis*.<sup>35</sup> The author of the Derveni Papyrus also says that simply learning a set of myths or prescriptions will not lead an initiate to enlightenment,<sup>36</sup> implying that most initiates did not proceed beyond superficial acquaintance with the sacred lore and mere attendance at the ceremonies.

Plato's references to mystery rites suggest that the awareness they imparted was experiential rather than rational, and the experience involved an excited state of mind, *mania*. The paradoxical correlation between the inner contents of god-sent revelations and the visible bizarre behaviour of the experient is discussed on several occasions. In the *Phaedrus* Socrates says that those few who are able to recognize the visions of the divine reality in this world, are stricken with astonishment and 'no longer aware of themselves'.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the philosopher, who alone is able to attain the divine essence of things, appears to the multitude, all those who are unable to understand his godly inspiration, to be 'violently excited' and 'possessed'.<sup>38</sup> In the *Symposium* Plato makes this point quite clear: Alcibiades remarks that all those present at the banquet 'partook in the philosopher's *mania* and Bacchic frenzy' (μανία καὶ βακχεία), stressing that they are initiated – as opposed to servants and other people who are 'vulgar and ignorant'.<sup>39</sup> These are not just metaphors, juxtaposing the acquisition of telestic and philosophic wisdom. Plato affirms that both kinds of wisdom are attained as revelation, rather than by rational deliberation, dialectic inquiry, or learning. Thus, according to Socrates, individuals experiencing mystic illumination look as if seized by madness, and he states this by listing the telestic or initiatory madness, *telestikē mania*, in his catalogue of the blessings of madness.<sup>40</sup> Finally, in Plato's opinion, individuals differ not only in their susceptibility to manipulation of consciousness, but also in their comprehension of these states and attitude to them.<sup>41</sup>

The value of participation in festivals, sacrifices, and other rites enacted by the community and directed towards the deity, did not depend on the participant's memory of his or her feelings, what mattered most was the mere fact of attendance. In contrast, the impact of a mystery initiation was lost if the initiated forgot the sensation and the resulting illumination.<sup>42</sup> Several Bacchic tablets refer to the work or gift of memory when one is

<sup>35</sup> *Smp.* 211A; Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie* (n. 22 above) 22-28; M. L. Morgan, *Platonic piety. Philosophy and ritual in fourth-century Athens* (New Haven and London 1990) 86-89.

<sup>36</sup> G. Betegh, *The Derveni papyrus. Cosmology, theology and interpretation* (Cambridge 2004) col. 20.

<sup>37</sup> *Phdr.* 250A: οὐκέτ' αὐτῶν γίνονται.

<sup>38</sup> *Phdr.* 249D: ἐνθουσιάζων δὲ λέληθεν τοὺς πολλοὺς. K. A. Morgan, 'Inspiration, recollection, and *mimesis* in Plato's *Phaedrus*', in *Ancient models of mind. Studies in human and divine rationality*, ed. A. Nightingale and D. Sedley (Cambridge 2010) 54-55.

<sup>39</sup> *Smp.* 218B; Morgan, *Platonic piety* (n. 35 above) 95-96.

<sup>40</sup> *Phdr.* 265B; 'Our greatest blessings come to us by way of madness (μανία), provided it is given us by divine gift': *Phdr.* 244A, cf. 265A.

<sup>41</sup> Y. Ustinova, 'Madness into memory: mania and *mnēmē* in Greek culture', *SCI* 31 (2012) 121-23.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Whitehouse, *Modes of religiosity* (n. 11 above); Gragg, 'Old and new in Roman religion' (n. 10 above).

about to die, and to the request to drink from the lake of memory when one arrives in the netherworld: the marvel of initiation was to be remembered forever.<sup>43</sup> The awesome experience was worthwhile only owing to its perpetual remembering: in order ‘to live in joy and to die with hope’ after the ceremony, the initiate had to remember it, every moment of his life. The profound emotional involvement was the reason and guarantee of the persistence of its memory.<sup>44</sup>

Mystery rites involved no conflict between doctrine and experience: learning and sensation lead to illumination, and their interaction resulted in approaching the god.<sup>45</sup> The divinely given effect was ‘knowing beyond knowledge’,<sup>46</sup> wordless comprehension which promised salvation and had to be remembered forever.

### *Epopteia*

The focus of various mysteries was revelation of the hidden truth, *epopteia*, ‘beholding’, a direct encounter with the divinely imparted exclusive knowledge which elevated the initiate to his new blessed state.<sup>47</sup> In his treatise on the Isiac mysteries, Plutarch states that *epopteia* is the end of a mystery initiation and contains its fundamental truth:

For which reason Plato and Aristotle termed this part of philosophy ‘epoptic’ because they pass by ostensible, heterogeneous, and manifold notions, and leap up towards the primal, the simple, and the immaterial, and when they really touch the pure truth concerning these matters they think that, just as in mystery initiations (*teletē*), they reach the end (*telos*) of philosophy.<sup>48</sup>

We don’t know exactly what *epopteia* was. In several cults, the term could denote physical seeing: the *mystēs* was blindfolded at the beginning of the ceremony, the veil removed only towards the culmination of the rite, presumably when the initiate was ready to witness the awesome sight.<sup>49</sup> The contrast between sightlessness and sight was apparently reflected in the terminology of the mystery cults: the word *mystēs* is derived from the verb *muein*, ‘to

<sup>43</sup> Graf and Johnston, *Ritual texts for the afterlife* (n. 22 above) Nos. 1, 2, 9; Bernabé and Jiménez San Cristóbal, *Instructions for the netherworld* (n. 19 above) L1, 2, 3; 8, 25. In one case, the initiate is called ‘the hero who remembers’, μνημνόμενος ἥρωος; Bernabé and Jiménez San Cristóbal, *Instructions for the netherworld* (n. 19 above) L. 2, 55.

<sup>44</sup> Ustinova, ‘Madness into memory’ (n. 41 above) 115-20.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. the refutation of the ‘reason for the wise, symbols for the vulgar’ approach and the emphasis on ‘induction’ into mysteries rather than ‘teaching’ their doctrines by Beck, *The religion of the Mithras cult* (n. 10 above) 41-50.

<sup>46</sup> D. M. Wulff, ‘Mystical experience’, in *Varieties of anomalous experience: examining the scientific evidence* ed. E. Cardeña, S. J. Lynn, and S. Krippner (Washington 2000) 398, citing the words of a modern spiritual seeker.

<sup>47</sup> Cole, ‘New evidence for the mysteries of Dionysos’ (n. 8. above) 233; Burkert, *Ancient mystery cults* (n. 12 above) 90.

<sup>48</sup> Plu. *Mor.* 382DE; cf. Croissant, *Aristote et les mystères* (n. 30 above) 157-64.

<sup>49</sup> Burkert, *Ancient mystery cults* (n. 12 above) figs. 2-4, 6; Clinton, *Myth and cult* (n. 13 above) 86; Nilsson, *The Dionysiac mysteries* (n. 16 above) 11, 14, 18.



close' (the lips or the eyes).<sup>50</sup> Moreover, in the Eleusinian mysteries *mystēs* contrasts with *epoptēs*, 'beholder', the two terms designating respectively the first-time and second-time participants in the rites. Thus, the first stage of initiation was characterized by darkness and ritual blindness, while the subsequent stage is focused on sight.<sup>51</sup>

However, *epopteia* seems to imply more than observing a certain scene. In Plato's *Symposium*, Diotima contrasts *myesis* as the initial stage of the search for supreme wisdom, and *epoptika* as the ultimate stage.<sup>52</sup> The trajectory of initiation, as outlined in the *Symposium*, is from experiencing particulars to learning laws and contemplation, to attaining a vision of the ultimate beauty, which makes the mortal dear to the gods (that is, happy) and immortal.<sup>53</sup> The highest point of this trajectory to immortality is 'neither reason nor knowledge',<sup>54</sup> but rather 'seeing' the pure essence of a phenomenon, divine revelation corresponding to the mystic *epopteia*.

Another indication is given by Plato in the *Phaedrus*: those who experience *epopteia* (*epopteuontes*) are mentioned by Socrates in his explanation of the soul's capability, in the distant past, when blameless and unencumbered by the body, to see 'the blessed sight and vision of the most blessed of the mysteries, [...] the sight of simple and calm and happy apparitions'.<sup>55</sup> In contrast, when the soul is entombed in the body, 'by means of inaccurate organs of sense, only a few, and with difficulty' succeed in catching a glimpse of the divine perfection.<sup>56</sup> In the present day, according to Socrates, the only mortal who is able to attain the divine, 'the real being', is the philosopher. Through the recollection, *anamnēsis*, of the pure essence of reality, the limits of human knowledge are transcended: it is a revelation, an escape from the temporal and reunification with the divine.<sup>57</sup> By recollecting his soul's perceptions during its past travels with god, 'always initiated into perfect mysteries, he alone becomes truly perfect'.<sup>58</sup>

Interpreting Platonic ideas, Plutarch records the following view:

[Plato] praised geometry since it draws us away from concentration on perception by the senses and brings us back to mentally conceived and eternal nature, the sight of which is the end of philosophy, as *epopteia* is the end of mystery initiation (*teletē*).<sup>59</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Scarpi, *Le religioni dei misteri* (n. 15 above); 1: XVII. For the meaning of *myesis* see R. M. Simms, 'Myesis, telete, and mysteria', *GRBS* 31(1990) 183-95.

<sup>51</sup> Clinton, 'Stages of initiation' (n. 17 above) 50; 67, 71-73; Scarpi, *Le religioni dei misteri* (n. 15 above) 1:160-68.

<sup>52</sup> 210A.

<sup>53</sup> *Smp.* 208B; esp. 212A.

<sup>54</sup> οὐδέ τις λόγος οὐδέ τις ἐπιστήμη; *Smp.* 211A.

<sup>55</sup> *Phdr.* 250C, cf. 247DE.

<sup>56</sup> *Phdr.* 250B. Plato is most probably alluding to the Eleusinian mysteries and their 'shine', Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie* (n. 22 above) 41; 46-47.

<sup>57</sup> *Phdr.* 247DE; J.-P. Vernant, *Myth and thought among the Greeks* (London 1983) 93-94; M. Simondon, *La mémoire et l'oublié dans la pensée grecque jusqu'à la fin du Ve siècle avant J.-C.* (Paris 1982) 312; Ustinova, 'Madness into memory' (n. 41 above) 122.

<sup>58</sup> *Phdr.* 249C; note the word play: τελέους ἀεὶ τελετὰς τελοῦμενος, τέλος ὄντως μόνος γίγνεται.

<sup>59</sup> *Mor.* 718C.

In the *Symposium* as well as in the *Phaedrus*, *epopteia* is mental vision rather than actual perception of a sight. One wonders whether in real-life mystery initiations *epopteia* consisted of physical observation of objects and actions, or whether this sight, awesome as it might be, was only preliminary to the numinous experience of inner vision, the supreme *epopteia* which changed one's attitude to life and death. Plutarch's phrase indicates that the latter was considered the genuine *epopteia*, Platonic as well as actually achieved in mystery rites. In this respect, the personality of the beholder and his or her state of mind was of crucial importance. Attaining the desirable state of mind was therefore the most important prerequisite for a successful initiation.

*Methods of getting 'fit for the purpose'*

All initiates had to make efforts to become 'fit for the purpose'. This requirement is emphasized in Socrates' account of teletic madness: by means of purifications and *teletai* mentally disturbed individuals who suffer from 'ancestral illnesses' may attain release from their disease, provided they are 'possessed and mad in a correct manner' (ὀρθῶς).<sup>60</sup> Heraclitus claimed that most people performed 'the mystery rites in an unholy way' (μυστήρια ἀνιερωσὶ μπεδνται), implying that in contrast to the vulgar, a wise man knew how to celebrate these rites piously.<sup>61</sup>

This stipulation is crucial: the preparations for the rite were to be accomplished meticulously. Although the secret was revealed to the *mystai* by another person or persons, the initiate was neither an observer nor a conscious learner: his or her state of mind was an important pre-condition for achieving a sense of contact with the divine. Only when well-prepared for the tremendous experience, that is, acquainted with the myth, and most significantly, exhausted, tense with anticipation and over-reactive, was the initiate admitted to participation in the central rites of a mystery cult.

During the preparation for participation in the central ceremony, in addition to sacrifices,<sup>62</sup> the initiate had to go through purification rites,<sup>63</sup> often complex and intimidating. Mystery initiations regularly comprised various austerities, among them fasting, exhaustion, fear, pain, sensory deprivation, rhythmic noises, and uproar. W. Burkert stresses the importance of the anthropologically attested archaic methods of 'shaking the foundations of the personality', such as extreme pain and terror, in the Graeco-Roman initiations.<sup>64</sup> Violently 'stripping off' the initiate's personality by means of flagellation was regarded as purification.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>60</sup> *Phdr.* 244E. *Cf. Smp.* 210A; *E. Ba.* 79; *Porph. Abst.* 4. 5.

<sup>61</sup> *DK fr.* 22 B14, *cf.* B15.

<sup>62</sup> Burkert, *Homo necans* (n. 5 above) 258; ὁμοφάγια in mystery rites: *LSAM* No. 48 and esp. E. fr. 472 *TGF*; J. N. Bremmer, 'Greek maenadism reconsidered', *ZPE* 55 (1984) 274-75; Versnel, *Ter Unus* (n. 28 above) 143-44; Seaford, 'Dionysiac drama' (n. 13 above) 266.

<sup>63</sup> H. W. Parke, *Festivals of the Athenians* (London 1977) 62-63.

<sup>64</sup> Burkert, *Ancient mystery cults* (n. 12 above) 102.

<sup>65</sup> Hesych.: καθαρθῆναι μαστιγωθῆναι; Burkert, *Ancient mystery cults* (n. 12 above) 168; Cole, 'Voices from beyond the grave' (n. 22 above) 291; *cf.* Bowden, *Mystery cults* (n. 10 above) 130-31.

Fasting and thirst, which lead to hypoglycemia and dehydration, are still commonly used by ascetics of various denominations as aids in attaining visions.<sup>66</sup> In Greece, after a day's march from Athens to Eleusis, having covered on foot 22 km, the initiates abstained from food during the whole day before the great ceremony.<sup>67</sup> Consumption of psychotropic substances has also been assumed; however, the recipe of *kykeōn*, the sacred beverage of the Eleusinian mysteries, remains controversial.<sup>68</sup> Fasting and abstinence were prominent in the cult and mysteries of Isis.<sup>69</sup> The combination of exhaustion and subsequent fast enhanced the initiates' sensitivity to the awesome rites.

The power of music to induce *mania* was common knowledge,<sup>70</sup> and dancing and music were prominent in many mystery rites.<sup>71</sup> Whirlers (*romboi*), instruments whirled around on a string, are known to have been often used in mystery rites.<sup>72</sup> Percussion instruments, such as clappers, metal finger cymbals, and *tympana*, are depicted in art almost exclusively in scenes linked with Dionysus or Cybele.<sup>73</sup> Satyrs, Maenads, and mortals playing string and wind instruments, as well as dancing in Bacchic rapture, are also prominent in Dionysiac scenes. Both performers and listeners are often depicted oblivious to their surroundings or flinging their heads dramatically.<sup>74</sup> A rare allusion to a mystery scene on a mid-fifth-century vase features an array of musical activities: there are two flute players, a group of ecstatically dancing girls, one of them holding a *tympanum*, and a boy with cymbals.<sup>75</sup> On Samothrace, the Hall of Choral Dancers was decorated with a frieze depicting the rite enacted there and featuring dancers and musicians.<sup>76</sup> Swift

<sup>66</sup> D. M. Wulff, *Psychology of religion* (New York 1997) 70-75.

<sup>67</sup> Parke, *Festivals of the Athenians* (n. 63 above) 69.

<sup>68</sup> Ground barley and herbs: Delatte, 'Le cycéon' (n. 19 above) 710-26; barley contaminated with ergot (*Claviceps purpurea*), the common grain fungus containing potent hallucinogenic alkaloids similar to LSD: R. G. Wasson, A. Hofmann, and C. A. P. Ruch, *The road to Eleusis: unveiling the secret of the mysteries*, 20th edn. (Los Angeles 1998); M. A. Rinella, *Pharmakon. Plato, drug culture, and identity in ancient Athens* (Lanham and New York 2010) 134-35. For critical assessment see Burkert, *Ancient mystery cults* (n. 12 above) 108-09; Bowden, *Mystery cults* (n. 10 above) 37, 43.

<sup>69</sup> Apul. *Met.* 11. 23; R. E. Witt, *Isis in the ancient world* (Baltimore and London 1971) 57, 158.

<sup>70</sup> A. fr. 57 TGF; E. *Ba.* 125-135; Arist. *Pol.* 1342ab; Croissant, *Aristote et les mystères* (n. 30 above) 49-61; Thphr. fr. 87, 88 Wehrli; Iamb. *Myst.* 3. 9.

<sup>71</sup> Str. 10. 3. 9-16; A. Hardie, 'Muses and mysteries', in *Music and the Muses. The culture of 'mousikē' in the Classical Athenian city*, ed. P. Murray and P. Wilson (Oxford 2004) 15-17.

<sup>72</sup> Archytas of Tarentum, fourth cent., fr. 47 B1 DK: 'ρόμβοι [...] which are swung round in mystery rites (τελεταί);' W. A. Anderson, *Music and musicians in ancient Greece* (Ithaca 1994) 136. Ρόμβος is also important symbolically, since this toy of Dionysus is frequently referred to in the myths of the god's dismemberment: Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2. 17.

<sup>73</sup> S. D. Bundrick, *Music and image in classical Athens* (Cambridge 2005) 47-48; Pi., fr. 70b Maehler; *tympana* and cymbals are even mentioned in the *symbolon* of the mysteries of Cybele, Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2. 15; cf. Schol. Plato *Gorg.* 497C.

<sup>74</sup> Bundrick, *Music and image* (n. 73 above) 106-16.

<sup>75</sup> Crater attributed to the Group of Polygnotus: J. D. Beazley, *Attic red-figure vase painters* (Oxford 1979) 1052; Nilsson, *The Dionysiac mysteries* (n. 16 above) fig. 3; Bundrick, *Music and image* (n. 73 above) 47-48, 159, fig. 94. The context is indicated by the presence a *liknon*-bearer, approaching two gods, presumably Cybele and Dionysus or Sabazius.

<sup>76</sup> Clinton, 'Stages of initiation' (n. 17 above) 67; Hardie, 'Muses and mysteries' (n. 71 above) 19-20.

dancing leading to ecstasy was indispensable in the Corybantic rites<sup>77</sup> and probably in the Eleusinian mysteries, as well.<sup>78</sup> Plato takes for granted the use of music in mystery rites, and explicitly states that Dionysiac initiations involved frantic dancing.<sup>79</sup> Today we know that rhythmic music, singing, and dancing are time-honoured techniques of manipulation of consciousness, used by many cultures around the globe.<sup>80</sup>

Moving between extremities was essential. It belonged to the core of the mysteries: initiates following Aeschines' mother exclaimed: 'I escaped from the evil, I found the better'.<sup>81</sup> This opposition is reflected in various aspects of the mystic ritual. Centuries later, Aelius Aristides described Eleusis as 'the most frightening and the most resplendent of all that is divine for men'.<sup>82</sup>

Degrees of spiritual enlightenment were intrinsically connected with the contrast between darkness and light.<sup>83</sup> Demetrius states that in the context of mysteries, darkness and night are allegories of consternation and trembling: 'Therefore the mysteries are allegorically represented as if in darkness and at night, in reference to consternation and shuddering. The allegory seems to be to darkness and night'.<sup>84</sup> In the reflection on initiation ceremonies of Dio Chrysostom, 'mystical recess' (*mystikos mychos*) is presented as an obvious and necessary part of the environment, where the initiate 'hears many mystic voices and sees many mystic sights while light and darkness appear to him alternately'.<sup>85</sup> In the Eleusinian mysteries, the central ceremony was illuminated by the sacred light, in striking contrast to the preceding darkness.<sup>86</sup> Euripides' *Bacchae*, which is infused with mystery symbolism, contains allusions to sacred darkness and blessed light, and the god himself is addressed as 'greatest light' (in the darkness).<sup>87</sup> In the *Frogs*,

<sup>77</sup> Linforth, *The arts of Orpheus* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1941); Jeanmaire, *Dionysos. Histoire du culte de Bacchus* (Paris 1970) 131-38; G. Rouget, *La musique et la transe* (Paris 1990) 364-75.

<sup>78</sup> D.Chr.12. 33; Ar. *Ra.* 323-336; Burkert, *Homo necans* (n. 12 above) 267, 292. Whirling dancing of masked figures is represented at Lycosoura: Jost, 'Mystery cults in Arcadia' (n. 18 above) 157-61, figs. 6.6 and 6.7.

<sup>79</sup> Pl. *Lg.* 815C; *R.* 2. 364B; cf. *R.* 397A-400E, *Lg.* 653C-673A, 700A-701B; F. Pelosi, *Plato on music, soul and body* (Cambridge 2010) 9.

<sup>80</sup> Bremmer, 'Greek maenadism reconsidered' (n. 62 above) 277-82; comparative studies: Rouget, *La musique et la transe* (n. 77 above); J. C. Fachner, 'Time is the key: music and altered states of consciousness,' in *Altering consciousness. Multidisciplinary perspectives*, ed. E. Cardeña and M. Winkelman 1 (Santa Barbara 2011) 355-76.

<sup>81</sup> D. 18. 259.

<sup>82</sup> *Or.* 22. 2; cf. S. fr. 837 TGF; Pl. *Phdr.* 251A.

<sup>83</sup> Ustinova, *Caves and the ancient Greek mind* (n. 10 above) 229-32.

<sup>84</sup> *De elocutione* 101; Seaford, 'Dionysiac drama' (n. 13 above) 254.

<sup>85</sup> D. Chr. 12. 33; cf. Clinton, 'Stages of initiation' (n. 17 above) 63.

<sup>86</sup> E. Parisinou, *The light of the gods. The role of light in archaic and classical Greek cult* (London 2000) 60-71; Schefer, "'Nur für Eingeweihte!'" (n. 30 above) 50-51, 67; Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie* (n. 22 above) 47-56; Clinton, 'Stages of initiation' (n. 17 above) 66-67. In a second-century AD epitaph, the deceased is described as a 'hierophant from the radiant Anactoron' (ἀπ' ἀιγληέντος ἀνακτόρου) (*IG* II<sup>2</sup> 3709), who showed 'light-bringing rites (ἔργα φαεσίμβροτα) of Deo' (*IG* II<sup>2</sup> 3661).

<sup>87</sup> L. 608-09 and 486; Versnel, *Ter Unus* (n. 28 above) 169; Seaford, 'Dionysiac drama' (n. 13 above) 256; R. Seaford, 'Mystic light in Aeschylus' *Bassarai*', *CQ* 55.2 (2005) 604. It is also argued that in the Dionysiac initiations, the initiate was 'lightning-blasted' like Semele and the Titans, and assimilated to these figures: D. Mendelsohn, 'Synkraunoō: dithyrambic language and Dionysiac cult', *CJ* 87.1 (1992) 118-22.

Iacchus-Dionysus is called ‘light-bearing star of the nightly *teletē*’.<sup>88</sup> An epitaph of an initiate in the Samothracian mysteries mentions ‘the sacred light of the two Cabiri’, thus attesting to the existence on Samothrace of a ritual similar to that of Eleusis.<sup>89</sup>

Dionysiac rites, and mystery initiations in particular, were often performed at night.<sup>90</sup> The function of the natural and artificial caves which frequently served as the *mise-en-scène* for mystery rites, in terms of their physical impact on the mind of the initiates, was to enhance the effect of normal vision of outer surroundings, or even to induce an altered state of consciousness.<sup>91</sup> Dramatic transition from darkness to light, from being blinded to seeing great sights was intended to alter the initiate’s perception of his surroundings. Darkness was not merely functional, but also profoundly symbolic: K. Clinton observes that ‘the loss of sight, seeing only darkness in a kind of death, was like an experience of the Underworld’.<sup>92</sup>

The techniques discussed above were not employed together in every mystery initiation, but each of them by itself was sufficient to alter the initiate’s state of consciousness (slightly or considerably) and make him hyper-sensitive to whatever he perceived. In this condition, seeing the sacred symbols, even if they were in fact trivial objects, could become a life-changing experience.

#### *Mystery experiences and altered states of consciousness*

The most fascinating description of a mystery experience from the point of view of the initiate is given by Plutarch. He refers to the ‘great mysteries’, probably meaning mysteries in general:

At first there was wandering, and wearisome roaming, and some fearful journeys through unending darkness, and just before the end (*pro tou telous*), every sort of terror, shuddering and trembling and sweat and amazement. Out of these emerges marvellous light, and pure places and meadows follow after, with voices and dances and solemnities of sacred utterances and holy visions. Among these the completely initiated (*mystēs*) walks freely and without restraint; crowned, he takes part in rites, and joins with pure and pious people; he observes the crowd of people living at this very time uninitiated and unpurified, who are driven together and trample each other in deep mud and darkness, and continue in their fear of death, their evils and their disbelief in the good things in the other world. Then in accordance with nature the soul stays engaged with the body in close union thereafter.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>88</sup> *Ra.* 343.

<sup>89</sup> C. Karadima-Matsa and N. Dimitrova, ‘Epitaph for an initiate at Samothrace and Eleusis’, *Chiron* 33 (2003).

<sup>90</sup> Paus. 1. 40. 6; 2. 37. 6; E. *Ba.* 485; Heracl. fr. 22 fr. B14 *DK*; Plu. *Mor.* 291A; *LSAM* No. 26; Schol. *Ar. Ra.* 343. Cf. Scarpì, *Le religioni dei misteri* (n. 15 above) 1:598-99; Parisinou, *The light of the gods* (n. 86 above) 71-72, 118-23.

<sup>91</sup> Ustinova, *Caves and the ancient Greek mind* (n. 10 above) 232-55.

<sup>92</sup> Clinton, *Myth and cult* (n. 13 above) 86; cf. Seaford, ‘Dionysiac drama’ (n. 13 above) 261; Burkert, *Homo necans* (n. 5 above) 280; Schefer, “‘Nur für Eingeweihte!’” (n. 30 above) 53, 65.

<sup>93</sup> Fr. 6 Dübner = fr. 178 Sandbach; Stob., *Anth.* 4. 52. 49. Mysteries in general: Burkert, *Ancient mystery cults* (n. 12 above) 91; Riedweg, ‘Initiation-Tod-Unterwelt’ (n. 25 above) 367; A. Bernabé, ‘Imago Inferorum Orphica’, in *Mystic cults in Magna Graecia*, ed. G. Casadio and P. A. Johnston (Austin 2009) 106; Eleusinian

This account depicts an unending flight through the darkness, with a marvellous light at the end, visions, happiness, and meetings with kindly people, as well as the soul's reunification with the body, which implies that they were conceived as temporarily separated during the experience. In modern terms, the report is a description of the initiate's alteration of consciousness.

Altered states of consciousness, sometimes (inexactly) denoted mystic phenomena, often generate subjective sensations of contact with a transcendent spiritual world.<sup>94</sup> During these states, people feel that they are in contact with a higher reality, and everything in the world becomes deeply meaningful. These experiences are much more real for them than perceptions, feelings, or thoughts when in the alert state.<sup>95</sup> Altered states of consciousness create 'an enhanced sense of reality',<sup>96</sup> their noetic quality manifests itself in feelings of illumination and ultimate significance, and they often change the experient's attitude to life. Since mystery initiations involved, as it seems, alteration of consciousness, these deductions are of the utmost importance for the study of the Greek mystery cults.

Modern research demonstrates that altered states of consciousness are associated with electro-chemical processes in the human brain, and are achieved by various means, such as extensive motor behaviour, auditory driving, sensory deprivation and stimulation, activation of endogenous euphoriant releases, ingestion of psychotropic substances, and meditation.<sup>97</sup> Self-inflicted mortification, such as fatigue, fasting, and pain, can also shift consciousness away from its ordinary state.<sup>98</sup> All these techniques were known to the Greeks, and many were used in preparation for and during mystery rites, as we have already seen: fasting, sensory deprivation, enduring physical pain and exhaustion, dancing and singing to the sounds of stimulating music, contrast of darkness and bright light, and other devices frequently occur in ancient accounts of mystery rites.

At present, individuals who have experienced profound alterations of consciousness, recurrently claim to feel a sense of renewed hope, rejuvenation, or rebirth.<sup>99</sup> This aspect of an altered state of consciousness is especially meaningful for the assessment of the impact of participation in ancient Greek mystery initiations on the lives of those who lived through them: it explains recurrent comparisons of mystery rites to rebirth and allusions to bliss and hopefulness felt during and after the ceremonies.

mysteries: Sourvinou-Inwood, 'Festivals and mysteries' (n. 3 above) 33; Orphic initiation: G. E. Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian mysteries* (Princeton 1961) 265.

<sup>94</sup> A. M. Ludwig, 'Altered states of consciousness', in *Trance and possession states*, ed. R. Prince (Montreal 1968) 69-95.

<sup>95</sup> R. S. Ellwood, *Mysticism and religion* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1980) 20; B. Shanon, *The antipodes of the mind. Charting the phenomenology of the ayahuasca experience* (Oxford: 2002) 264-66.

<sup>96</sup> Shanon, *The antipodes of the mind* (n. 95 above) 265.

<sup>97</sup> Ludwig, 'Altered states of consciousness' (n. 94 above) ; Wulff, *Psychology of religion* (n. 66 above) 188-99; M. Winkelman, *Shamanism: the neural ecology of consciousness and healing* (Westport 2000) 148-52; E. Cardena and M. Winkelman, ed., *Altering consciousness. Multidisciplinary perspectives*. 2 vols (Santa Barbara 2011).

<sup>98</sup> I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic religion. A study of shamanism and spirit possession* (London and New York 1989) 34; Ludwig, 'Altered states of consciousness' (n. 94 above) 74; Wulff, *Psychology of religion* (n. 66 above) 70-75.

<sup>99</sup> Ludwig, 'Altered states of consciousness' (n. 94 above) 81-82.

Altered states of consciousness vary in their intensity, from the deeply unconscious to the less dramatic, which may still be responsible for visions or hallucinations; the broad range of altered states of consciousness should be kept in mind in studying a religious phenomenon lacking a record of deep trance. Consciousness may be manipulated by a solitary individual or in a large group. Altered states of consciousness can be cultivated, and their intensity can be controlled. It may vary for the individual from occasion to occasion, and can develop or decrease with time. The ability to attain trance varies among individuals. This fact was not unknown to the Greeks. Plato notes: ‘Many bear the Bacchic rod, but few are Bacchantes’, and Aristotle discusses variations in the impact of *enthousiasmos*, divine possession, on different people.<sup>100</sup> Those experiencing altered states of consciousness more frequently, in a culturally patterned institutionalized framework, will have greater control over the process.<sup>101</sup>

The core element of Plutarch’s report is the initiate’s out-of-body experience. These states are also known also as escomatic state, soul journey, soul flight, *etc.*<sup>102</sup> During an out-of-body experience, an individual usually feels great delight, which may be of brief or prolonged duration.<sup>103</sup> As is the case with other altered states of consciousness, the person is left with a conviction that the experience was real, but is unable to put it in words.

Out-of-body experiences were known in Greece: several archaic semi-legendary personages, such as Aethalides, Abaris, and Hermotimus of Clazomenae, were attributed the ability to release their soul from the body and send it on faraway journeys.<sup>104</sup> For the purposes of the present discussion, it is unimportant whether these individuals experienced out-of-body states; it is crucial that the Greek public was acquainted with this phenomenon and knew that it occurred to (enlightened) mortals in the past and in the present.

These outstanding figures practiced manipulation of consciousness and their experiences were famous and became paradigmatic. It goes without saying that most people could hardly attain a condition of this intensity. However, many initiates endeavouring to attain illumination could live through an alteration of consciousness, its depth determined by his or her personality, preparation, environment during the ceremony, and other factors. In any case, all the elements of Plutarch’s account are in perfect accord with descriptions of altered states of conscious by modern experients. It appears to attest to authentic experiences of some *mystai*, which less gifted or fortunate initiates probably strove to emulate.

<sup>100</sup> *Phd.* 69D, *Arist. Pol.* 1342a; Croissant, *Aristote et les mystères* (n. 30 above) 4. Jiménez San Cristóbal, ‘The meaning of *Bacchos* and *baccheuein* in Orphism’ (n. 26 above) 48-52.

<sup>101</sup> E. Bourguignon, *Possession* (San Francisco 1976) 55; Ellwood, *Mysticism and religion* (n. 95 above) 119-39; Winkelmann, *Shamanism* (n. 97 above) 124; Shanon, *The antipodes of the mind* (n. 95 above) 302-03.

<sup>102</sup> C. Green, *Out-of-the-body experiences* (Oxford 1968); G. O. Gabbard and S. W. Twemlow, *With the eyes of the mind. An empirical analysis of out-of-body states* (New York 1984).

<sup>103</sup> Gabbard and Twemlow, *With the eyes of the mind* (n. 102 above) 22-23; Green, *Out-of-the-body experiences* (n. 102 above) 37-41, 85-87.

<sup>104</sup> E. Rohde, *Psyche* (London 1925) 300-31; J. D. P. Bolton, *Aristeas of Proconessus* (Oxford 1962) 151-53; J. N. Bremmer, *The rise and fall of the afterlife* (London and New York 2002) 39; Ustinova, *Caves and the ancient Greek mind* (n. 10 above) 182-83, with refs.

*Mystery rites and near-death experiences*

Mystery cults not only promised the initiates bliss after death. Allusions scattered through the works of various authors indicate that the aim of the initiate was to attain harmony and serenity by enduring death and learning not to fear it.<sup>105</sup> Initiatory experience, preparing for death, but not exactly like death, seems to be referred to in a number of gold tablets. This great experience is probably hinted at in a tablet from Thuri: ‘Greetings to you who have had an experience not like anything you had had before’.<sup>106</sup> Plutarch compares mystery initiations to death, noting the resemblance of the Greek words ‘to die’ (*teleutan*) and ‘to be initiated’ (*teleisthai*), and alleges that at the moment of death, the soul experiences an emotion (*paschei pathos*) similar to the act of being initiated.<sup>107</sup> Several hundred years earlier, Plato suggested that the word *teletai* derived from *teleutan*, ‘to pass away’, assuming that mystery rites were called *teletai* because they were intended for both the living and the dead.<sup>108</sup> A Gnostic treatise referring to the Eleusinian practice of proceeding from the Lesser to the Greater mysteries cites Heraclitus’ phrase, ‘Greater deaths obtain greater shares’, and clarifies its relevance to the Greater mysteries: ‘Those who obtained these deaths obtain greater shares’.<sup>109</sup> Thus, the deeper the feeling of death, the greater was the blessing. Owing to this awareness, a second-century AD Eleusinian hierophant, as his epitaph states, revealed that ‘to the mortals, death is no evil, but rather good’.<sup>110</sup>

Mystic death was followed by rebirth. In the Dionysiac context, this idea is expressed in a very vivid form in the phrase ‘I entered the bosom of the queen of the netherworld’ on a funerary gold leaf from Thuri, which means adoption or at least nursing of the initiate by the goddess.<sup>111</sup> The transformation obtained by means of initiation could be perceived as an apotheosis.<sup>112</sup>

Mystic initiation may be defined as *ersatz*-death, *imitatio mortis*.<sup>113</sup> In the opinion of the Greeks, thanks to initiation rites which brought them as close to death as was permissible to mortals, *mystai* were confident of their renewal and rebirth as immortals. In modern terms, alteration of consciousness experienced by the initiate during the ceremony

<sup>105</sup> Apuleius describes the initiation into the mysteries of Isis as ‘voluntary death,’ *Met.* 11. 21.

<sup>106</sup> Χαίρε παθὼν τὸ πάθημα τὸ δ’ οὐπω πρόσθ’ ἐπεπόνθεις: Bernabé and Jiménez San Cristóbal, *Instructions for the netherworld* (n. 19 above) L 8; 93-98, 258; Graf and Johnston, *Ritual texts for the afterlife* (n. 22 above) No 3 (8-9); Seaford, ‘Dionysiac drama’ (n. 13 above) 254.

<sup>107</sup> Fr. 178 Sandbach cited above.

<sup>108</sup> R. 365A.

<sup>109</sup> Hippol. *Refut.* 5. 8. 42-44; Heraclitus’ phrase: fr. 22 B 25 DK; Clinton, *Myth and cult* (n. 13 above) 86.

<sup>110</sup> IG II/III<sup>2</sup> 3661. 5-6: Οὐ μόνον εἶναι τὸν θάνατον θνητοῖς οὐ κακὸν ἀλλ’ ἀγαθόν .

<sup>111</sup> Δεσποίνης δ’ ὄπῳ κόλπον ἔδυν χθονίας βασιλείας: Graf and Johnston, *Ritual texts for the afterlife* (n. 22 above) No. 5 (12-13); Bernabé and Jiménez San Cristóbal, *Instructions for the netherworld* (n. 19 above) L 9; 129-32; 306-10. Nursing: Demeter received Demophon in her κόλπος (*h.Cer.* 231); adoption: Hera formally adopted Heracles by an imitation of the actual birth, letting Heracles fall through her garments (ἐνδύματα) to the ground (*D.S.* 4. 39. 2).

<sup>112</sup> See above. It is suggested that the words ‘life-death-life’, alongside ‘Dionysus’ and ‘Orphics’ on the Olbian bone tablet (*SEG* 28. 659) refer to the combination of life and death in mystic ritual: Cole, ‘Voices from beyond the grave’ (n. 22 above) 277.

<sup>113</sup> Bernabé, ‘Imago Inferorum Orphica’ (n. 93 above) 107, 121; R. Turcan includes ‘imitation of death’ in his list of six core characteristics of the Graeco-Roman mystery rites: Turcan, ‘Initiation’ (n. 12 above) 121.



induced the feeling of rejuvenation and transformed his personality through changing his attitude to life and death. The idea of death before rebirth in a new status is indeed present in tribal initiations, one of the sources from which mystic initiations allegedly evolved.<sup>114</sup> The aim of approaching death experience in Greek mystery cults was, however, quite different, namely, their ‘brush with death’ was intended to lead to spiritual transformation, rather than to a passage to a different status in the community.

Furthermore, Plutarch’s account of the initiate’s experience immediately follows his observations on the proximity of mystery experience to death, cited above.<sup>115</sup> In real life, today and two thousand years ago, some people approach death very closely as a result of an illness, wound, or accident, and describe their ‘brush with death’ as a complex event, dubbed a ‘near-death experience’.<sup>116</sup> If one had tried to think up a description of an experience as close to a near-death experience as possible, it is hard to imagine a more apt and vivid report than this Plutarchean fragment.

This condition was doubtlessly well-known in Greece; a whole group of people was known as *deuteropotmoi*, ‘those who die twice’, or *hysteropotmoi*, ‘those whose destiny is postponed’.<sup>117</sup> *Deuteropotmoi* were people who had been pronounced dead, yet returned to their community: either those for whom a tomb was constructed on the assumption that they were dead, or those reported to have died abroad, who reappeared at home. *Deuteropotmoi* were bizarre and mysterious, but not unique: Democritus even wrote a book entitled *On Hades* about people mistakenly believed to be dead.<sup>118</sup> Most remarkable are two detailed stories of *deuteropotmoi*, of Er in Plato’s *Republic* and of Thespesius in Plutarch’s *On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance*,<sup>119</sup> both fictitious, but probably modelled on real accounts of near-death experiences. Significantly, in the opinion of several modern experts on near-death experiences, Er’s story was based on an account of a return from death.<sup>120</sup>

The tale of Thespesius contains quite a number of ostensibly authentic features of near-death experience, including a flight within a dark void at the beginning of the story. These descriptions comprise apparent death, the soul’s separation from the body, the feeling of being drawn out of the body, enhanced visual perception, a bright spot in a dark

<sup>114</sup> A. Brelich, *Paidēs e parthenoi* (Rome 1965); Burkert, *Ancient mystery cults* (n. 12 above) 8; J. Casadio and P. A. Johnston, ‘Introduction,’ in *Mystic cults in Magna Graecia*, ed. G. Casadio and P. A. Johnston (Austin 2009) 6.

<sup>115</sup> Similarities between mystic initiations and near-death experiences have been noted by several scholars: L. Couloubaritsis, ‘Initiation et pédanterie’, in *Mythe et philosophie dans les Nuées d’Aristophane*, ed. L. Couloubaritsis and S. Byl (Paris 1994) 73; P. Bonnechere, *Trophonios de Lébadée* (Leiden 2003) 214-15; Seaford, ‘Mystic light in Aeschylus’ *Bassarai*’ (n. 87 above) 605, but the idea has not been elaborated.

<sup>116</sup> The term coined by R. A. Moody, *Life after life: The investigation of a phenomenon – survival of bodily death* (New York 1976).

<sup>117</sup> ‘Υστερόποτμοι or δευτερόποτμοι. Hesych. s.v. *hysteropotmoi*; Plu. *Mor.* 264; S. *El.* 62-64; R. Garland, *The Greek way of death* (London 1985) 100; D. Ogden, *Greek and Roman necromancy* (Princeton and Oxford 2001) 261; Ustinova, *Caves and the ancient Greek mind* (n. 10 above) 218-29.

<sup>118</sup> *DK* fr. 68 B1.

<sup>119</sup> *Pl. R.* 614A-621D.

<sup>120</sup> Gabbard and Twemlow, *With the eyes of the mind* (n. 102 above) 142; R. K. Siegel, ‘The psychology of life after death’, *American Psychologist* 35.10 (1980) 911-31; S. Blackmore, *Dying to live: near-death experiences* (Buffalo NY 1993) 9.

void, the presence of guiding beings, visions of the netherworld, including pictures of divine beauty and meetings with acquaintances, the feeling of being pulled back to life, and finally a return to this world with supreme knowledge – the elements which occur consistently in the reports of modern near-death survivors.

A virtual visit to the underworld is described by Plutarch in his account of the descent of a certain Timarchus into Trophonius' cave at Lebadea, a place imbued with the symbolism of Hades.<sup>121</sup> The *katabasis* into the subterranean grotto in the Trophonium, as depicted by Pausanias, features conspicuous elements of mystery initiations.<sup>122</sup> Timarchus spent two nights and a day in the cave, in a world beyond normal experience. In sleep or in a trance, Timarchus' soul flew above an ocean with shining isles, and in a mixture of joyfulness and awe he heard voices that explained to him the mystery of metempsychosis and predicted his imminent death. The most substantial inference from Plutarch's description is that in his time at the latest an inquirer in the Trophonium lived through an out-of-body experience, indicated by a range of the symptoms: lack of awareness of the surroundings, passage through darkness to translucent and pure light, flight over a magnificent country, visual and auditory hallucinations, a feeling of unearthly happiness, and the final gift of clairvoyance. Quite predictably, Timarchus' altered state of consciousness was accompanied by culturally patterned visions, reflecting Greek religious and philosophical ideas, including perhaps those narrated by Plato in his story of Er. It is most significant that an out-of-body state was described as part of a stay in a netherworld-like grotto, place of a cult with manifest initiatory aspects.

Near-death experiences are profound subjective events reported in contemporary studies by a quarter to one-third of people interviewed who have been in extreme life-threatening danger, on the verge of death, or were believed or pronounced clinically dead – but ultimately survived. These states are cross-cultural, and their aetiology has not yet been compellingly established. Near-death experiences comprise enhanced cognitive functioning, including one or several of the following elements: panoramic replay of one's life and meeting in the world of beyond with other people alive or deceased, and with various fantastic creatures; out-of-body experiences, a sense of being in a different realm, transcending the boundaries of ego and limitations of space and time; a strong positive sensation of encounter with a source of all-embracing light, wisdom, and love. These sensations are typically described as ineffable, but they entail enduring personality transformations in individuals who have lived through them, among them 'a greater appreciation for life, a renewed sense of purpose, greater confidence and flexibility in coping with life's vicissitudes, increased value of love and service and decreased concern with personal status and material possessions, greater compassion for others, a heightened sense of spiritual purpose, and a greatly reduced fear of death'.<sup>123</sup> This list of after-effects

<sup>121</sup> Mor. 590A-592E; Bonnechere, *Trophonios de Lébadée* (n. 115 above) 154-64; Ustinova, *Caves and the ancient Greek mind* (n. 10 above) 90-96, with further refs.

<sup>122</sup> Paus. 9. 39. 5-14; P. Bonnechere, 'Trophonios of Lebadea: mystery aspects of an oracular cult in Boeotia', in *Greek mysteries. The archaeology and ritual of ancient Greek secret cults*, ed. M. B. Cosmopoulos (London and New York 2003) 169-92.

<sup>123</sup> B. Greyson, 'Near-death experiences', in *Varieties of anomalous experience: examining the scientific evidence*, ed. E. Cardena, S. J. Lynn, and S. Krippner (2000) 320; cf. Moody, *Life after life* (n. 116 above); M. Sabom, *Recollections of death: a medical investigation* (New York 1982); Blackmore, *Dying to live* (n. 120

reported by modern near-death experiencers remarkably corresponds to the blessings of mystery rites, as reflected in the ancient sources.

Near-death experiences occur to the dying or those facing a real possibility of death – and in many cases actually end in death. People who have had near-death experiences are transformed, most notably they are ‘not concerned about dying’.<sup>124</sup> For many modern survivors, near-death experiences are the most intense and happiest moments of their lives, they report decreased death anxiety, an increase in psychic abilities, a higher zest for life, seeing life as rich with purpose; they are fearless about death, and virtually fearless about life.<sup>125</sup> These moments are typically remembered as ‘realer than real’.<sup>126</sup> Transcendental sensations of encounter with the loving supreme being are later recalled as glimpses of direct vision of the ultimate reality and in some cases amount to deep personality change.<sup>127</sup> Because of these characteristics, near-death experience is an age-old form of shamanic initiation.<sup>128</sup>

Prior to death, many modern subjects who did not survive their near-death experience reported transition from anxiety and pain to an ineffable sensation of peace. Perhaps most significant is the fact that information on near-death experiences, and especially witnessing them, greatly comforted the frightened and grieving relatives of the deceased.<sup>129</sup> A contemporary girl who saw a beautiful light on her deathbed, hours before she actually died, said to her mother: ‘You can’t go with me! The light is coming to get me but you can’t go! I wish you could see it...’ Another girl, who survived her near-death experience, reflected: ‘It was like I had a new life. I’m not afraid so much of dying because I know more about it now.’<sup>130</sup> It is possible that in ancient Greece similar events hinted that approaching death might bring about harmony, wisdom, and liberation from fear.

The noetic quality of near-death experiences, the conviction in the reality of the encounter with a deity, the change in their attitude to life and the acceptance of death as benign produced a tremendous impression on survivors and those who witnessed the process of dying,<sup>131</sup> and presumably induced many of them to share their illuminative knowledge with other people. The idea that a mystery rite is homologous to near-death experience, and therefore endows the experiencer with the same benefits, could emerge and gain currency among people eager to be liberated from the fears of human existence.

The lore of near-death experiences, combined with the universal human propensity to manipulate consciousness, and the tradition of tribal initiations, could influence the

above); M. Morse and P. Perry, *Transformed by the light. The powerful effect of near-death experiences on people’s lives* (London 1992).

<sup>124</sup> Morse and Perry, *Transformed by the light* (n. 123 above) 9.

<sup>125</sup> Morse and Perry, *Transformed by the light* (n. 123 above) 70-76.

<sup>126</sup> Blackmore, *Dying to live* (n. 120 above) 7; Sabom, *Recollections of death* (n. 123 above) 16.

<sup>127</sup> Moody, *Life after life* (n. 116 above) 58-64; Blackmore, *Dying to live* (n. 120 above) 146; Gabbard and Twemlow, *With the eyes of the mind* (n. 102 above) 125; Greyson, ‘Near-death experiences’ (n. 123 above).

<sup>128</sup> J. T. Green, ‘The near-death experience as a shamanic initiation: a case study’, *Journal of Near-Death Studies* 19.4 (2001) 209-25.

<sup>129</sup> Morse and Perry, *Transformed by the light* (n. 123 above) 80.

<sup>130</sup> Morse and Perry, *Transformed by the light* (n. 123 above) 79, 9.

<sup>131</sup> Morse and Perry, *Transformed by the light* (n. 123 above) 29-60, statistics 220-25.

evolution of mystery initiations. The darkness-light transition as part of the practice leading to spiritual renewal may have been chosen by individuals who had lived through a near-death experience or an introverted mystic experience, and sought a way to impart their knowledge to other people. Plutarch's juxtaposition of mystic experiences to death, as well as their description, strongly suggestive of near-death experiences, discloses perhaps his intuition that the two experiences are cognate. The account of Timarchus' descent into the Trophonium suggests that the enquirer's state there was almost equivalent to a near-death experience. In a second- to third-century AD papyrus text, Heracles declares that he does not need to be initiated at Eleusis, because he 'has been initiated into much truer mysteries' (μυστήρια [πολὸν ἄ]ληθέστερα μεμύημαι) and in the night he saw 'fire and Korē' (τὸ πῦρ [...] τὴν κόρην εἶδον): the Eleusinian rites were unnecessary to a person who has been to the real netherworld and has seen its queen.<sup>132</sup>

### *Conclusions*

Mystery initiations were essentially fake deaths, rehearsals of the real one, and were perhaps modelled on near-death experiences. The major element of mystery rites was alteration of the initiate's state of consciousness. Even in slightly altered states of consciousness, every detail of one's surroundings may take on incredible beauty and acquire supreme significance. Such states can be induced by various techniques. The great mystery would appear unimportant or even ridiculous to people in a regular state of mind; moreover, the experience itself, undergone in an altered state of consciousness, could not be communicated in words, hence its transcendental content was bound to remain ineffable. During altered states of consciousness normal language abilities are often inhibited: the feeling of ineffability accompanying mystic revelations may be one of the important reasons why they were shrouded in secrecy. Another important feature of altered states of consciousness is the sensation of rejuvenation or rebirth reported by some modern experiencers. This feeling is strongly evident in the ideology of mystery cults, as well as in the subjective sensations of the *mystai*. All through the history of the mystery rites individual predisposition and environment defined the profundity of one's experience. Many initiates attended the ceremonies 'for the record', others caught a glimpse of a revelation, while a few could attain the supreme bliss of feeling at one with the deity they worshipped.

The neuropsychological approach examines 'the thinking and experiencing mind'<sup>133</sup> of the initiates and allows us to come closer to an understanding of the impact of mystery rites. For trivial events to be remembered by the *mystai* as revelations, they had to be brought to a state of heightened sensitivity and perhaps also suggestibility: this is what Aristotle meant by 'becoming fit'. The knowledge of life and death thus acquired was a holistic and ineffable sensation, rather than a learnt doctrine: in Aristotle's words, the initiates were 'not to learn anything, but rather to experience and to be inclined'.

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<sup>132</sup> A. Vogliano, *Papiri della Università di Milano* (Milan 1937) I. 20. 18-32; Colomo, 'Heracles and the Eleusinian mysteries' (n. 27 above).

<sup>133</sup> Beck, *The religion of the Mithras cult* (n. 10 above) 136.