



Mystery Religions

October 25, 2011

Dr. Cindy Ausec

Learning Objectives

- Understand the rise of mystery religions
- Know the Common Aspects and Ceremonies/Rituals of Mystery Religions
- Know the Myths surrounding the Eleusinian Mysteries and the activities that take place
- Understand the Dionysian Religion both the major cult and the Dionysus Mysteries and how the depictions in the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii can shed light on its practices

Rise of Mystery Religions

- Discovery of the Individual
 - Seventh and Sixth Centuries BCE
 - Self-conscious Ego in Literature
- Individual Death – Personal Problem
- After 600 BCE Various Mystery Cults Appear

Mystery Religions vs State Religions

- State or Polis Religion
 - One is obligated to participate
 - Homeric deities
- Mystery Religions
 - Individual decided through personal choice to be initiated
 - Involves secrecy – vows of silence
 - Dying and rising gods – life is victorious

Mystery Religions Common Aspects

- Initiations
- Agrarian Aspect
 - Demeter and Dionysus
- Sexual Aspect
- Aspect of Myth
 - *Hieroi Logoi* (Philosophic Mythos)
 - The God's Suffering
- Immediate/mystical encounter with the divine resulting in a transformation
- Promise of a Blessed Afterlife

General Ceremonies/Rituals of Mystery Religions

- The devotee - Participated in the life of the deity
- Ritual cleansing
- Secret Instruction
- Secret Symbols and Sacred Objects – Sacred Myth
- Narration/dramatic Enactment - Sacred Myth
- Crowning of the Initiate - Symbolic Wreaths

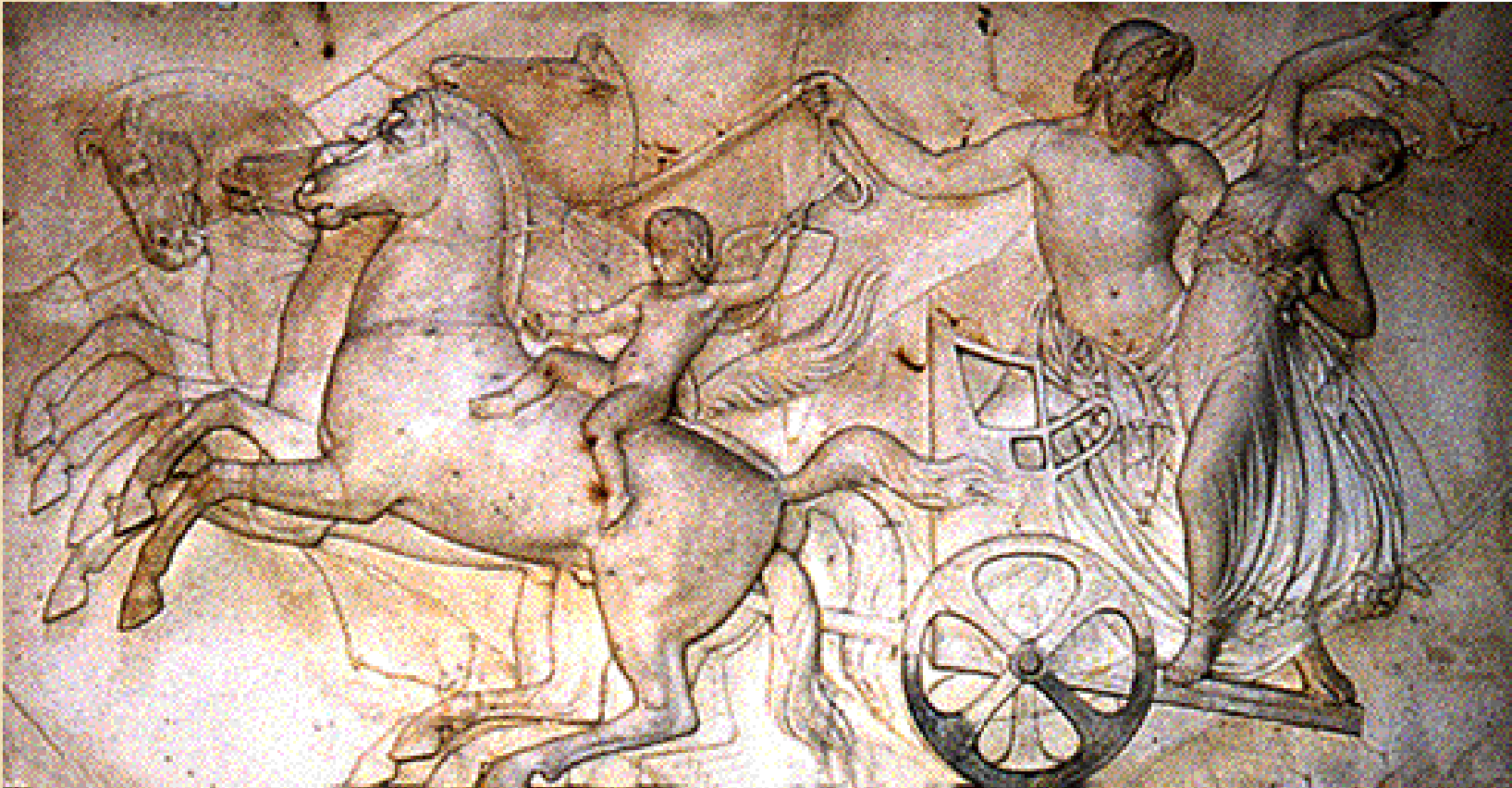
Eleusinian Mysteries

- Temple of Eleusis



Eleusinian Mysteries

- Demeter and Persephone – both associated with Grain



Eleusinian Mysteries

- Extensively Documented
 - Archaeology
 - Epigraphic Evidence of Sacred Laws
 - Literary Sources
 - Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*
- Greek Sources give only Allusions
- Other Sources some details
 - Clement of Alexandria – password *synthema*
 - Gnostic writer – High Point “an ear of grain is cut in silence”

Eleusinian Mysteries

- Month of *Boedromion* (In Autumn)
- 13th Athenian youths bring the “Sacred Things” to Athens
- 16th Ritual bathing in sea – bay of Phaleron
- 19th Great Procession from Athens to Eleusis

Eleusis Temple Model and Plan



Eleusinian Grotto – Pluto



Eleusinian Sanctuary

Telesterion (Initiations Hall)



Main Celebration in *Telesterion*

- Two Celebrants
 - Initiates - *mystes* (pl. *mystai*) or *teles*
 - Watchers – *epoptai*
- *Hierophant* – Leader
- *Anaktoron* – large stone construction w/door in center of *Telesterion*

Initiation

- Hercules w/pig
- Low Altar
- Priest with Offering and Libation



Initiation

- Veiled Initiate
- Sheepskin covered Stool
- Foot on Ram Horn
- Priest holds *Liknon* over their head



Initiation

- Demeter Sits on *Kiste*
- *Kore Approaches with a Torch*



Main Celebration

- Activities
 - “Dreadful Things” are Shown
 - Hierophant appears from inside the Anaktoron
 - Kore (Persephone) appears/Reunion and Rejoicing
 - Divine Birth of a Boy is Announced
 - An Ear of Grain is Cut in Silence

Eleusinian Mysteries

- Taking Death From Its Terror –
Promise of Better Fate in Afterlife

“Blessed is he who has seen this
among earthly men; but he who is
uninitiated in the sacred rites and who
has no portion, never has the same lot
once dead down in the murky dark”

Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*

Dionysus Worship

- Great Dionysia (Athens) – Public Festival
 - *Dithyrambos* – Hymns to Dionysus
 - *Tragodoi* – Tragedies
 - *Satyroi* – Satyr Plays
- Private Dionysus Mysteries

Dionysus or Bacchic Mysteries

- Initiation
- Male and Female *mystai*
- Not Bound to a Sanctuary
- Wandering Priests / Tradition of *orgia* (ecstatic form of worship)

Dionysus or Bacchic Mysteries

- Celebrations – Nocturnal
 - Caves or Grottos
- Initiation is Fulfilled in *baccheia*
 - State of Frenzy That is Blessedness
 - Induced by:
 - Dance
 - Wine
- *Omphagy* – Sacrificial Communion of Raw Flesh
 - Kid or Bull identified w/Dionysus

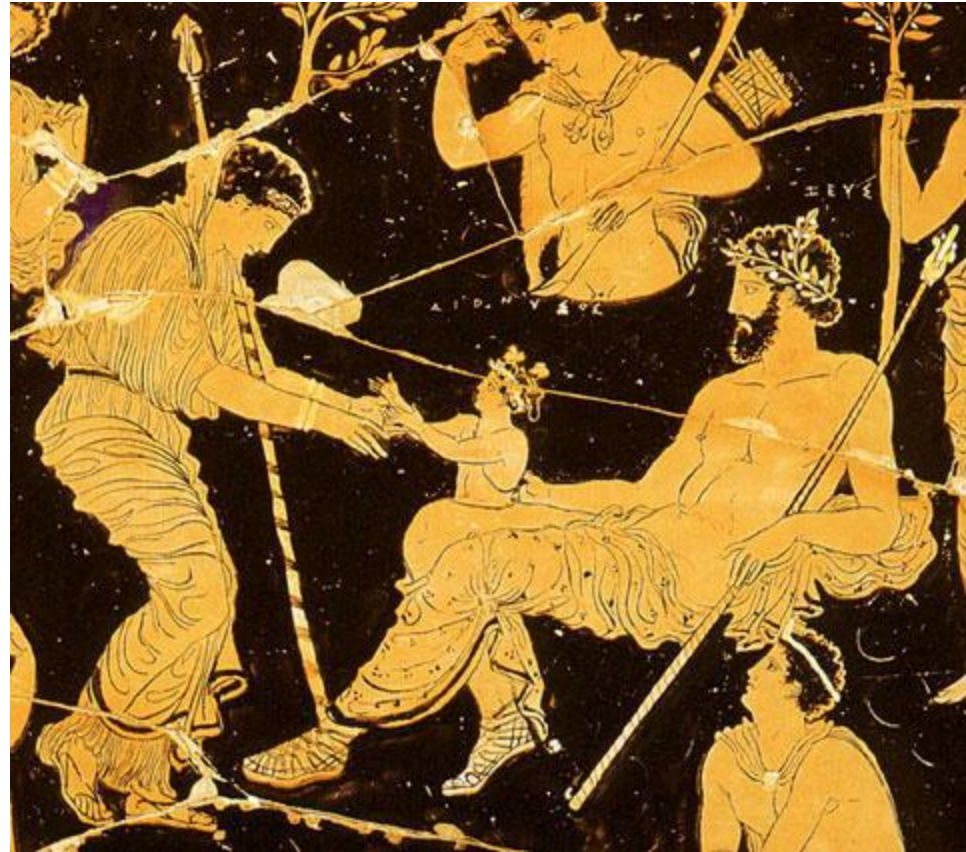
Maenads

- Women – maddened by divine Possession



Euripides

- Punishing Thebes
- Semele His Mother not Believed
- Women driven Mad – Maenads
- King Pentheus – not initiated.



Dionysus Master of Madness

- Plato
- “One must surrender to the madness and allow oneself to be seized by the god in order to become free and well, not only for the present but for all the future”

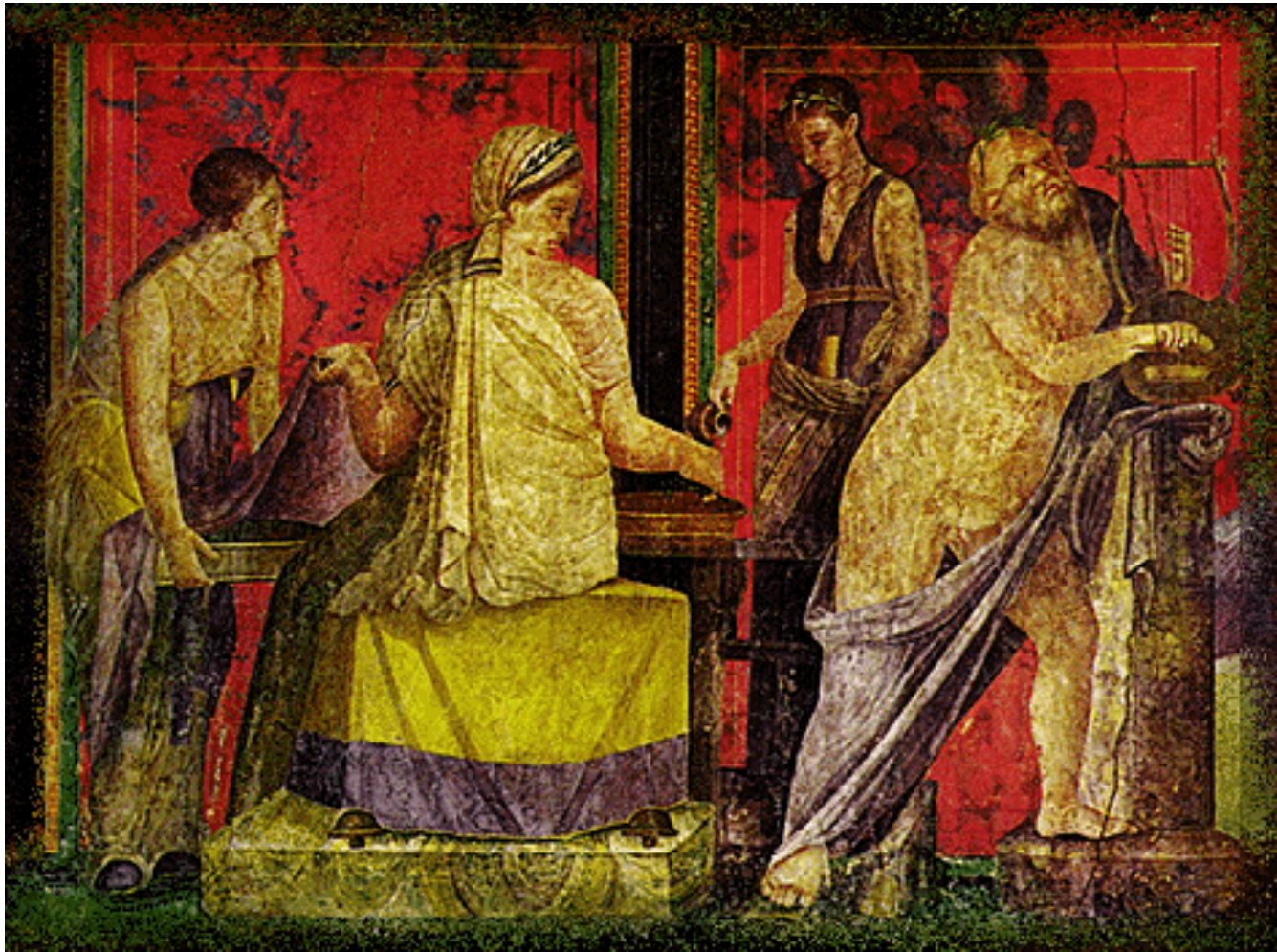


Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii

<http://www.art-and-archaeology.com/timelines/rome/empire/vm/villa-of-the-mysteries.html>



- Nude boy reads a papyrus scroll and a young pregnant woman carries a tray

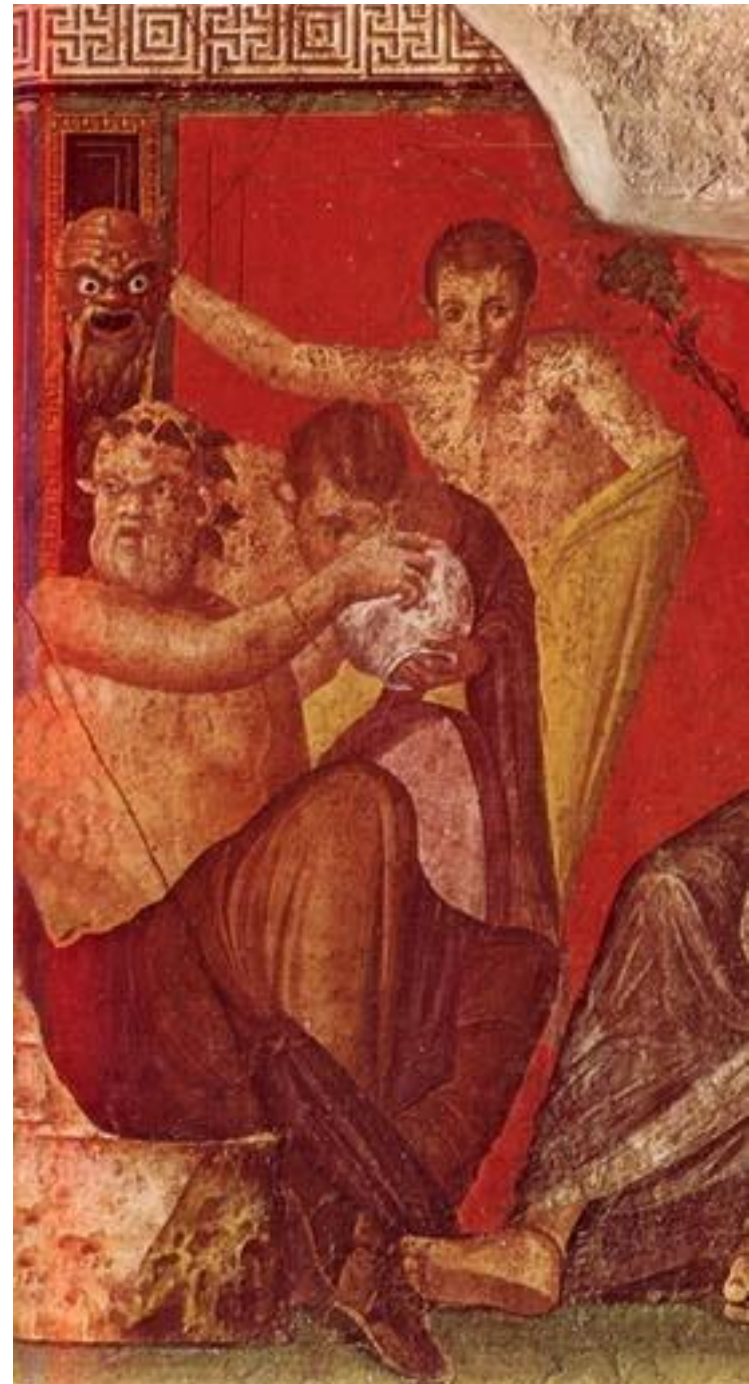


- Women uncover a basket while a Silenus plays a harp



- A satyre plays a pan pipe and a satyress nurses a goat. A frightened woman flees

- A silenus and a satyre hold a bowl and a silenus mask so that the other satyre, looking for his reflection will see a likeness of a silenus



- Dionysus and Ariadne. A thyrsus falls across his body





- The initiate, carrying a staff and wearing a cap, returns from the night journey. What has happened is a mystery to us.



- A woman bows for the flagellation; another twirls in dance playing cymbals

- A young woman prepares for a wedding



• The matron (of the house or of the mysteries) oversee the preparations



Eros



<http://www.art-and-archaeology.com/timelines/rome/empire/vm/villaofthemysteries.html>

Bacchic Afterlife

- Text from Hipponion-Vibo Valentia 400 BCE

“And then the subjects of the Chthonian King will have pity and will give you to drink from the lake of recollection . . . And indeed you are going a long, sacred way which also other *mystai* and *bacchoi* gloriously walk.

- Pindar calls this the “path of Zeus”

Learning Objectives

- Understand the rise of mystery religions
- Know the Common Aspects and Ceremonies/Rituals of Mystery Religions
- Know the Myths surrounding the Eleusinian Mysteries and the activities that take place
- Understand the Dionysian Religion both the major cult and the Dionysus Mysteries and how the depictions in the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii can shed light on its practices