Mystery Cults in Latin Texts

Introduction

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1 The Vocabulary of the Mystery Cults

Mystery cults have long been at the center of debates about forms of religious activity in the Graeco-Roman world. Several methods have been used to approach the study of them: phenomenological, as in an important book by Walter Burkert, or cognitivist, as in Hugh Bowden's work.[1] Other scholars have focused on a particular aspect of the mystery cults, such as Jan Bremmer's recent work on the question of initiation.[2] Alongside these approaches, others have emphasized that it is better to avoid considering mystery cults as an absolute type and to analyze them as rituals in a given historical context.[3] Such an approach makes it possible to understand these phenomena in detail and to avoid the generalizations and simplifications created by a unique and globalizing category of 'mysteries'.[4] The main problem with the study of these rituals is that the vocabulary of mystery cults refers to a ritual reality that remains obscure. This language designates a hidden ceremony, one that is not revealed, or to use an ancient word, one that is 'unspeakable' (ἄρρητον or ἀπόρρητον).[5]

The present issue aims to focus on the vocabularies that express and consequently 'create' the mystery cults. Until now, the study of this terminology

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1 Burkert 1987.
2 Bowden 2010.
3 For this approach, see Pirenne-Delforge and Scarpi 2016; Belayche and Massa 2016.
4 On the category of 'mystery', see Auffarth 2013; Massa 2016 (with bibliography).
5 On these terms, see Delattre 2021, 352-353. On the importance of the 'secret', see Burkert 1998; Bremmer 1995, 70-78 and 2014, 17-18.

has focused on the vocabulary attested in the Greek language, in particular on three terms that are fundamental, for moderns, to the experience of the mysteries: μυστήρια, τελεταί, and ὄργια.[6] Faced with this Hellenocentric approach, which has focused attention on the Greek mystery cults and on the mystery cults in Greek, the aim of our approach is to analyze how the mystery cults and their ritual experience were expressed in Latin.

The studies gathered in this issue propose to combine lexical and literary analyses with a historical approach. From the Hellenistic period onwards, but especially during the imperial period, we see an important diffusion of the terminology of mystery cults: it remained, of course, linked to initiatory ritual practices, but it could also designate any type of relationship with the divinity in a cult context. This diffusion of the vocabulary concerned not only the terms μυστήρια, τελεταί, and ὄργια, but also the terms defining the cultic agents, such as ἱεροφάντης, μύστης, etc. It generated a kind of *koine* in several religious fields and in literary and philosophical texts.[7]

Even if the subject is not discussed specifically in the articles of this issue, it is necessary to consider that this generalization had a significant impact on early Christian literature.[8] From the second century onwards, the terminology of mystery cults was transferred to define Christian liturgy. Terms like μυστήρια and τελετή were spread by Christian works which used these terms in order to define not only the sum total of Christian rites and doctrines, but also significant cultural ceremonies, such as baptism and the Eucharist.

2 Latin Terms for Mystery Cults

From the point of view of vocabulary, Greek and Latin present the same problems of definition. In Latin, several terms can be used to speak of the mysteries and their meaning is not stricter or better defined than that of the Greek vocabulary.

First, there are calques of Greek terms: *mysterium* (with the adjective *mysticus*), *orgia* and *teleta*. As in Greek, classical Latin almost always uses the plural form *mysteria*. Only two occurrences of *mysterium* are attested in non-Christian literature prior to the fourth century.[9] The attestations of *teleta* are very few: only Apuleius uses it in a pagan context in order to name the three initiations

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6   Sfameni Gasparro 1984; Scarpi 2002; Schuddeboom 2009.

7   On this diffusion, see Graf 2003a; Belayche 2013, 35-39. Belayche, Massa, and Hoffmann 2021 see the second century AD as the turning point of this *koine*.

8   On this topic, see Riedweg 1987, following Nock 1952. See also Ramelli 2014; Lang 2015; Massa 2016; Bremmer 2021; Massa forthcoming. For the historiography, see Smith 1990.

9   Cic. *De or.* 3.64 (about the Epicureans), and Plin. *Nat.* 28.232 (about the secret of the Magi).

to which Lucius is subjected after having found his human form.[10] His choice was not followed by later authors and the use of Latin *teleta* remained circumscribed in Latin literature: the only author to use this lexical form is Augustine, at the beginning of the fifth century.[11]

Second, there is the generic term *sacra*, which can be used to designate any type of ritual. It does not refer specifically to the context of mystery cults. As clearly stated in the second century AD by Sextus Pompeius Festus in his epitome from the work of the grammarian Verrius Flaccus, *seclusa sacra dicebantur, quae Graeci mysteria appellant*.[12] The μυστήρια of the Greeks are rituals characterized by a secret dimension.

Third, Latin has its own term to define these rituals, *initia*, the use of which is, however, not systematic. *Initia* can translate the Greek words μυστήρια or τελεταί. As Philippe Borgeaud explains, "les *initia* (mystères) sont conçus, à Rome, comme des rites *qui marquent un début, une introduction à un savoir fondamental*".[13] The term is attested as early as the Republican period to designate several types of rituals. Thus, Varro uses it in connection with the mysteries of Eleusis, but also to speak of the mysteries of Samothrace.[14] In the mythographer Hyginus, the term *initia* designates especially the rites in honour of Liber.[15] In Catullus, on the other hand, *initia* designates by metonymy the tympanum of the ritual ceremonies dedicated to Attis.[16]

Since the models for the mystery cults are Greek, it goes without saying that the sanctuary of Eleusis plays an important role in most contributions. The sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone had acquired, especially since the late Roman republic, a fundamental place in the Mediterranean world.[17] It was conceived as a place of memory and a centre of Roman propaganda in the Greek world. The Eleusinian mysteries had become the model for most mystery cults celebrated in the Roman world. As several articles will show, the lexical palette for speaking of the Eleusinian mysteries in Latin is wide: *sacra*, *initia*, *mysteria*, *orgia*. All these terms are attested to define the one ceremony that the Greeks called, without any hesitation, τὰ μυστήρια.

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10 *Teleta* is used six times: Apul. *Met.* 11.22.8; 24.5; 26.4; 27.3; 29.1, and 30.1.

11 August. *C.D.* 4.31; 10.9.23 and 28.

12 Fest. p. 422.

13 Borgeaud 2013, 138-139. See also Scarpi 2002, XVII.

14 Var. *R.* 3.1.5: *initia Cereris*; *L.* 5.58: *Samothracum initia*. On Varro's presentation of mystery cults, see Rolle 2017.

15 Hyg. *Fab.* 2.6.3; 2.7.1.

16 Catul. 63.9. On the notion of 'initiation', see Graf 2003b.

17 As shown in Cicero's works. On the place of Eleusis in the Roman Empire, see Alderinl 1989; Horster 2012.

The present issue includes a series of case studies in an attempt to find out if there is a Latin specificity of the lexicon of mystery cults. Several literary forms are considered in the papers: poetry, prose, and legal sources. These texts belong to different periods, from the age of Augustus to that of Theodosius II. After an overview of the representation of the mysteries in Greek and Latin poetry, Fiachra Mac Góráin and Damien Nelis focus on the sixth book of Vergil's *Aeneid*. They do not look much at the question of terminology, preferring to investigate the ways in which epic poetry in general and the Vergilian katabasis in particular can be read as special kinds of religious texts, while also attempting to illustrate the interpretive strategies, intertextual, historical, political, religious, philosophical, that must be brought into play in order to appreciate fully Vergil's methods and intentions. Turning the attention from poetry to prose, David Levene devotes his contribution to Latin historians. He starts from an analysis of the vocabulary, before going on to look at a series of individual passages, analyzing in detail the presentation and literary function of the mysteries in given settings A recurring theme is the distance between Greek mystery cults and Roman religious practices, and he brings his paper to a climax with a study of Livy's account of the Bacchanalia crisis, showing precisely how it is both unique and in some ways in continuity with other references to mystery cult in the Roman historians.

Alongside the literary texts, the studies collected here also analyze epigraphic language in order to understand to what extent the inscriptions build a specific vocabulary for the mystery cults. They highlight that there is a discrepancy in the use of this vocabulary between literary and epigraphic sources. The process of diffusion of the vocabulary of the mysteries, mentioned above, is not reflected in the same way in epigraphic production, neither in a pagan nor in a Christian context. In Anne-Françoise Jaccottet's paper, a bilingual Latin-Greek boundary-inscription from the sanctuary of Samothrace (2nd c. AD) and the *Senatus consultum de bacchanalibus* (186 BC) provide the basis for an analysis of the Latin vocabulary and formulae used to refer to the mysteries and rites of initiation. Nicole Belayche's starting point is that study of the epigraphic testimonies of Mithraists should in theory be a promising way of tracing the mysteries in Latin, because Roman worshippers of Mithras were Latin speakers in their vast majority. But she is forced to conclude that there is in fact almost no lexicon of the 'mysteries' in these texts. The lexical analysis she presents reveals less about the 'mysteries' of Mithras than it does about the profoundly Roman nature of the organization of these religious groups. Lavinia Galli Milić brings the focus back to Latin poetry, while also moving it on in time, by turning attention to Latin poets writing in the 4th century AD. Starting from the vocabulary, she examines the use of the word *orgia* in Optatian, Avienus, and Claudian. She then goes on to analyze the references to the cult of Eleusis in

the proem of the first book of Claudian's *De raptu Proserpinae*. Her readings bring out the ways in which texts may reflect contemporary religious concerns, while also being influenced by literary conventions and traditional narrative mechanisms. She brings out the emphasis in these texts on collective sensory experience, on the occult nature of these practices, as well as on their etiological aspects and symbolic meaning. Finally, Alessandro Saggioro studies the presence of the vocabulary of the mysteries in the late antique laws collected in the Theodosian Code. His analysis illustrates the frequent use of some traditional words with new meanings in order to define Christianity and defend its identity against other religions, including the traditional mystery cults. The vocabulary in question presents the concepts and ancient religious ideas used by religious communities in the conflicts of the age.

Obviously, in a small selection of papers, the aim can only be to offer surveys of some of the key questions and present some of the methodologies that have been applied to them, in the context of individual case studies devoted to a few works, authors, genres, and historical periods. The editors hope at least to have shown the interest of 'the Latin mysteries', and hope that the essays collected here will encourage others to go further in the investigation of ancient mystery cults in the Roman world.

Acknowledgments

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