

Oriental and mystery cults in Pompeii

Stephan Matthiesen 01 January 1999 Category: [History and Archaeology](#)



The archaeological evidence in Pompeii can give us some information about oriental or mystery cults, mainly the cults of Isis and of Dionysos. There are different types of archaeological sources which differ in the kind of information they can provide us with. Paintings and mosaics give us an pictorial impression of some aspects of the religious live and therefore help to complete written sources. Their interpretation, however, is often not without ambiguities. Furthermore, the architectural remains, in particular the size and design of buildings related to religious ceremonies, can give us background information about some sociological and economic aspects, e.g. how widespread certain cults were.

Definition and characteristics of oriental and mystery cults

As most mystery cults have their origin in the East, the word “oriental cults” is used almost synonymously. In this essay, I use the word “mystery cults” instead of “oriental cults”, thus emphasising their characteristic features and beliefs rather than their origin.

Mystery cults have some characteristics not usually found in more traditional Roman religions. One is the belief in an afterlife. Life after death did not play a major role in Roman religion, and was even rejected completely by large parts of the aristocracy (Plinius the Elder, e.g. said that it was believed only because people were afraid to die [Kahrstedt, p. 319]), while other parts of the population did believe in continued existence, but then often only as shadowlike ghosts without individuality. This changed in Imperial times, however, and by the 2nd century it was almost generally accepted [Kahrstedt, p. 320]. Mystery cults offered the hope that the individual continued to exist after death, and their spread in this historical situation is therefore not surprising.

Related is a general belief in a more mystical world that is not accessible to everybody. Believers have to understand the mysteries behind ordinary life, and therefore a typical feature of mystery cults is some initiation ceremony in which adepts are accepted into the cults. Also, religion now acquires a moral aspect: While the relation between gods and humans in other cults is rather materialistic, and humans can ask some (material) favour from the god by “bribing” him with appropriate donations and sacrifices, this is no longer sufficient for gaining salvation and eternal life, instead one has to comply with moral rules.

The most important mystery cults in the Roman World are the cult of the Egyptian goddess Isis, the cult of the Greek god Dionysos (often identified with his Roman counterpart Bacchus), the Persian Mithras cult, and Jewish sects, particularly Christianity. In Pompeii, only the cults of Isis and of Dionysos are important, whereas the militaristic Mithras cult (quite appropriately for a peaceful town) and Christianity left no traces⁽¹⁾.

The cult of Isis

The Egyptian Goddess Isis had resurrected her husband Osiris, leading her followers to hope that she would do the same to them and give them eternal life. Her cult was one of the most successful mystery cults in the Roman World

and flourished in Pompeii, with its trade links to Alexandria, too. The Isis temple was situated near the theatre, surrounded by high walls with the entrance placed such that it was not possible to view the ceremonies from outside, and some unusual architectural elements (e.g. the niches beside the cella) as well as Hieroglyphic inscriptions give it an exotic [Étienne 1974, p. 234] and “unroman” appearance.

The Isis cult was very popular among slaves and freedman, but also became quite prominent in the nobility during the first century AD. One might even say that it almost became the official religion in Pompeii [Étienne 1974, p. 231]. This claim is based on the archaeological evidence: The treasure found together with the corpses of unfortunate priests shows its wealth. More importantly, the fact that the temple was quickly rebuilt after its complete destruction by the earthquake, while other temples (Jupiter, Venus Pompeiana) were still being repaired, and the fact that paying for the repair gave the young N. Popidius Celsinus a seat in the senate, show the popular appreciation for Isis.

The acceptance of the Isis cult is also obvious from the number of decorations in different private houses. The decoration in the House of Cn. Poppaeus Habitus (Casa degli Amorini dorati, Vi, 16, 7) gives us the important information that the worship of Isis did not exclude worshipping other gods: he had not only a sanctuary for Isis, but also one for the Capitoline Triad.

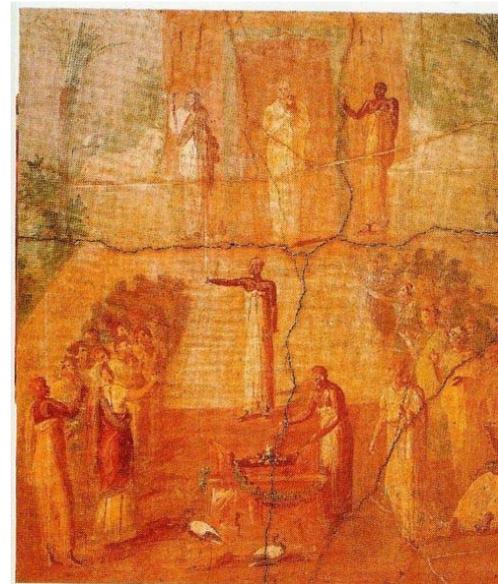
The Isis cult had two important annual festivities, which are depicted in the temple [Étienne 1974], the navigium Isidis (5 March) in which Isis was celebrated as the patroness of sailors, with naval scenes, and the Isia festival (13 - 16 November), commemorating the discovery of Osiris' body, with celebrations including dance and music.

The Isis cult had daily ceremonies before sunrise and in the afternoon. The ceremony of the lustral waters is shown on a famous fresco from Herculaneum (fig. 114 in [Étienne 1996]). A priest is seen holding a vessel (presumably with sacred water from the Nile), while two other priests have sistra, rattle-like musical instruments, in their hands, and a third priest tends a fire on the Altar. Sistrum and vessel with sacred water also appear in the picture of a priest in the House of Loreius Tiburtinus (II,2,2) [Étienne 1996, fig. 118b].

However, despite the large number of paintings showing religious activities, questions remain. For example, while priests generally have shaved their heads, in one Fresco (fig. 118 a in [Étienne]) a bearded priest with the Uraeus serpent is shown. Also, his clothes are different from the pure white tunics of other priests. Is this significant? Did he perhaps have a different rank, or was he a visitor? Or was the painter not from Pompeii and painted the priests as they looked like in his home town?



Temple of Isis, Pompeii
(Source: [Wikipedia](#), license: public domain)



Fresco from Herculaneum showing the ceremony of Isis, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli
(Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#), license: public domain)

Unfortunately, we also have little information about the initiation ceremony, unlike the more “public” ceremonies they are not shown in wall paintings. The chamber in the southern corner of the temple is assumed to be the “initiation chamber”. It is farthest away from the entrance, and it contained a supply of lamps, suggesting secret activities during the night. It is also worth to note that the character of the decoration is different from the more public areas of the temple, the wall paintings are dominated by pictures of Egyptian gods, while scenes showing priests performing the daily ceremonies are lacking, showing that the chamber was devoted to the more mystical aspects.

The cult of Dionysos

The cult of the wine god Dionysos or Bacchus was probably the earliest mystery cult in Pompeii, and a bacchanal was built outside the city in the 3rd century BC. In the 1st century AD, it was still strong, and the temple was quickly rebuilt after the earthquake in 62. Decorations with elements from the cult are abundant in Pompeii., but perhaps many scenes of wine yards only show Dionysos for artistic reasons, e.g. to have some activity between the plants, rather than because the house owner worshipped the god (a modern equivalent would be that in pop art often the sun and moon are shown as faces, although nobody actually believes they are persons). One gets this impression in the Dionysic Garden in the Casa degli Amorini dorati (VI, 16, 7), where elements of Dionysos cult are common in the Garden, but the shrines of Isis and of the Capitoline Triad (see above) suggest that the owner was more serious with other cults. But certainly the cultic elements added a mystic touch to the Garden, showing all the otherworldly beings that would be invisible in an ordinary garden [Étienne 1974, p. 224].

In many decorations, only unconnected, single elements (e.g. masks) were used, but there are also decorations showing a more complete story. One example is a wall painting in the Villa of the Mysteries [Étienne 1996, pp. 120-124, pp. 186-191]. However, the interpretation of the scenes is not unambiguous. In the centre, Dionysos can be seen with a woman, usually interpreted as his lover Ariadne. The left frieze shows important events in the life of Dionysos, and the right frieze the initiation of a woman. Possibly this right frieze shows Semele, Dionysos’ mother (Sauron, quoted in [Étienne 1996, pp 186-191]), and Sauron consequently assumes that the woman in the central scene is also Semele rather than Ariadne. However, this is not very convincing, as the divine couple Dionysos-Ariadne is a standard element of the cult.

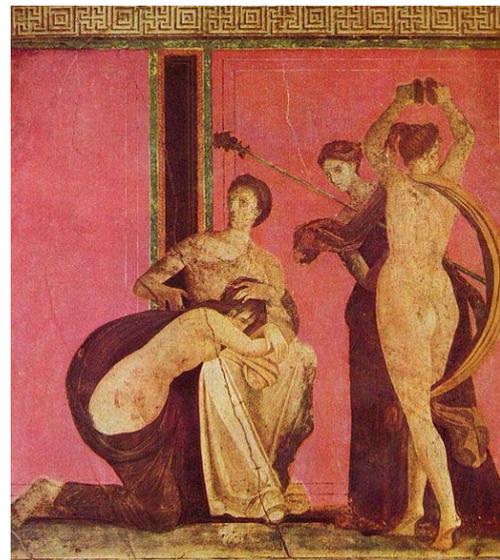


Fresco from the Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#), license: public domain)

It seems reasonable to interpret the first scenes on the right frieze as preparations for Semele’s wedding (with

Zeus) and her pregnancy. The final scene, in which a woman is about to be struck with a whip, has been interpreted by Sauron to show her death by lightning when Zeus appeared. However, Étienne points out [Étienne 1974] that in a similar scene from a tomb in Hermopolis, the winged daemon bears the greek word agnoia. So we see a woman undergoing initiation, when she is tortured by her ignorance of the mysteries, rather than the mystical Semele. On the left frieze, too, scenes showing a priestess are combined with scenes showing the god.

This curious combination of mystic scenes and contemporary cultic practice makes it very difficult to know how much the decoration actually tells us about the religious practice. E.g., was whipping (or perhaps only a gentle stroke) actually part of the initiation of a priest, or is this scene completely symbolic? Unfortunately, this has to remain unanswered.



Freeze from the Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii
(Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#), license: public domain)

Conclusion and summary

Archaeological evidence in Pompeii can complete our historical picture of mystery cults in the Imperial Roman World. In Pompeii, the cults of Isis and of Dionysos were well accepted.

For the Isis cult, scenes showing most of the important annual and daily ceremonies give us a good picture of how these rites were performed, although some details have to remain unresolved. For the Dionysos myth, however, the information about religious ceremonies is rather limited, as the decorations do not even attempt to show a precise picture of a ceremony, but combine elements from contemporary religious practices with mystical scenes from the life of Dionysos, making the interpretation very difficult.

Literature

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Footnotes

1. Although “magic squares” have been found on graffiti in two places in Pompeii that have been interpreted as signs of secret Christians, this is highly dubious, and these graffiti were probably added by plunderers in the 2nd or 3rd century [Étienne 1974, p. 240].

Note: I wrote this essay in 1998 for the archaeology open studies course “Pompeii” by Margaret King and Eleanor Loughlin at the [Office of Lifelong Learning, Edinburgh University](#).

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Schlagworte: [Archaeology](#) [Archäologie](#) [Dionysos](#) [Isis](#) [Pompeii](#) [Pompeii](#) [Religion](#)