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ΤΜΗΜΑ ΜΕΣΟΓΕΙΑΚΩΝ ΣΠΟΥΔΩΝ

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ΕΥΧΑΡΙΣΤΙΕΣ

Πρώτα απ όλα θα ήθελα να ευχαριστήσω τους γονείς μου για την υλική και ψυχολογική στήριξη που μου παρείχαν όλα αυτά τα χρόνια καθώς και για την κατανόησή τους. Έπειτα θα ήθελα να ευχαριστήσω όλους τους καθηγητές και τις καθηγήτριες σε αυτό το Πρόγραμμα Μεταπτυχιακών Σπουδών των οποίων οι ιδέες, η καθοδήγηση και το υλικό των μαθημάτων με έκαναν να βρώ την κλίση μου και να εκπονήσω την παρούσα εργασία. Ιδιαίτερες ευχαριστίες οφείλω στον επιβλέποντα την εργασία μου καθηγητή Παναγιώτη Κουσούλη καθώς και στην συμβουλευτική επιτροπή, τον καθηγητή Παναγιώτη Παχή και τον καθηγητή Σπύρο Συρόπουλο, τόσο για τα πολύτιμα μαθήματά τους τα οποία αποτέλεσαν έμπνευση για να επιλέξω το θέμα, όσο και για την βιβλιογραφική και όχι μόνο καθοδήγηση χάρις στην οποία κατεστάθη δυνατή η εκπόνηση της εργασίας μου. Τέλος θέλω να ευχαριστήσω τους εξαιρετικούς συμφοιτητές και συμφοιτήτριες που με την παρουσία τους και την συναναστροφή μας, έδωσαν χρώμα στο ακαδημαϊκό αυτό εγχείρημα και με έκαναν να συνδέσω για πάντα την πανέμορφη νήσο της Ρόδου με υπέροχες αναμνήσεις.

Στους γονείς μου

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ / ABSTRACT

Ελληνική:

Σε αυτή τη Μεταπτυχιακή Διπλωματική Εργασία, ασχοληθήκαμε με το θέμα των αρχαίων μυστηρίων και πιο συγκεκριμένα των αιγυπτιακών, μεταξύ της Εποχής του Νέου Βασιλείου μέχρι την Ελληνορωμαϊκή περίοδο. Αφού διατρέξαμε κάποια απαραίτητα για την κατανόηση του αντικειμένου γεωγραφικά και κυρίως ιστορικά στοιχεία, στη συνέχεια αναλύσαμε πτυχές της συναρπαστικής όσο και περίπλοκης αρχαίας αιγυπτιακής θρησκείας. Εξερευνήσαμε τις αρχαίες μαγικές και μυστηριακές πρακτικές και συγκρίναμε μεταξύ τους ορισμένες εκφάνσεις τους. Αναλύσαμε τους μηχανισμούς των μυστηριακών τελετών τόσο σε επίπεδο σχηματισμού και οργάνωσης, όσο και σε επίπεδο θρησκευολογίας και ψυχολογίας. Μελετήσαμε τον τρόπο και τους όρους με τους οποίους οι Έλληνες και οι Ρωμαίοι εξέλλαβαν τα αιγυπτιακά μυστήρια και τις ιερατικές πρακτικές καθώς τα ερμήνευσαν και στη συνέχεια τα διέδωσαν με βάση τις δικές τους προσλαμβάνουσες.

Αναλύσαμε την θεολογική πλευρά των μυστηρίων από την πλευρά των Αιγυπτίων αντλώντας υλικό τόσο από την νεκρική ιδεολογία όσο και από τις λατρευτικές πρακτικές και ιερουργίες. Ανακαλύψαμε και αναλύσαμε σε βάθος την διαφοροποίηση μεταξύ των φυσικών θρησκειών και του μονοθεϊσμού η οποία και αποτέλεσε το έναυσμα για να δούμε την επαναστατική θεολογία του Ακενατόν υπό όρους μυστηκισμού και θείας αποκάλυψης. Εξετάσαμε ακόμη το πεδίο της ιστορικής μνήμης και των αλλαγών που επέρχονται σε αυτήν με βάση το ιστορικό και κοινωνικό γίνεσθαι, αλλά και πως επηρεάζει τις μετέπειτα προσλαμβάνουσες ενός λαού τόσο σε ό,τι έχει να κάνει με την ταυτότητά του αλλά και με τις σχέσεις με τους γειτονικούς λαούς.

Στη συνέχεια στραφήκαμε προς την αρχαία ελληνική παράδοση και τα δικά της μυστήρια. Αρχικά εξετάσαμε διεξοδικά την έννοια της μαγείας στην ελληνική μυθολογία και όχι μόνο, καθώς και τις ποικίλες εφαρμογές της στην καθημερινή ζωή. Συνδέσαμε την έννοια του μάγου με τον μυστικισμό και την πρόσβαση σε απαγορευμένη γνώση. Κάναμε εκτενείς αναφορές στους Ελληνικούς Μαγικούς Παπύρους και ορμώμενοι από αυτούς σχηματίσαμε απόψεις σχετικά με την έκταση της χρήσης της μαγείας στην αιγυπτιακή κοινωνία, όπως αυτή διαμορφώθηκε κατά τους Ελληνορωμαϊκούς χρόνους, καθώς με αυτό τον τρόπο γίνεται ξεκάθαρη η πληθώρα των επιρροών από πολλές και διαφορετικές κοινότητες ανθρώπων με

διαφορετικά πολιτισμικά και κοινωνικά υπόβαθρα που όμως όλες μαζί συνθέτουν το γεμάτο μυστήριο ψηφιδωτό της Ελληνορωμαϊκής Αιγύπτου. Κατόπιν μεταφερόμαστε στον παράξενο κόσμο του Ερμητισμού, του οποίου τις αιγυπτιακές καταβολές εξετάζουμε και συγκρίνουμε με τις ελληνικές επιρροές, ενώ παράλληλα στεκόμαστε στα πιο βασικά του σημεία. Σε αυτό το σημείο συνθετούμε την εικόνα του ερμητικού μυστηκισμού και λαμβάνουμε υπόψιν τις πρακτικές μύησης οι οποίες όμως διαφέρουν από το παραδοσιακό αιγυπτιακό κατεστημένο.

Τέλος εξαγάγουμε συμπεράσματα κάνοντας μία αναδρομή στις έννοιες που προσέλαβε η έννοια του μυστηκισμού και της μυστηριακής λατρείας ανα τους αιώνες ανάλογα τις πολιτικές επιδιώξεις και τα ιστορικοπολιτισμικά γεγονότα.

English:

In this master's thesis, we dealt with the subject of ancient mysteries and more specifically the Egyptian mysteries, between the New Kingdom period and the Greco-Roman period. After going through some geographical and especially historical data that were necessary for our understanding of the subject, we then analyzed aspects of the fascinating as well as elaborate ancient Egyptian religion. We explored the ancient magical and mystical practices and compared some of their manifestations. We analyzed the mechanisms of mystery rites both in terms of formation and organization, as well as in terms of religion and psychology. We studied the way and the terms in which the Greeks and Romans interpreted Egyptian mysteries and priestly practices as they disseminated them according to their own cultural perceptions.

We analyzed the theological aspect of the sacraments from the Egyptian point of view, drawing material from both the funerary ideology and the cultic practices and ceremonies. We discovered and analyzed in depth the differentiation between natural religions and monotheistic ones which was the starting point to examine Akhenaten's revolutionary theology in terms of mysticism and divine revelation. We also examined the field of historical memory and the changes that occur in it in the light of historical and social events, and how this affects the subsequent perceptions of a people both in terms of their identity and their relations with their neighboring peoples.

Then we turned to the ancient Greek tradition and its own mysteries. First, we examined in detail the concept of magic in Greek mythology and beyond, as well as its various applications

in everyday life. We linked the concept of the magician to mysticism and access to forbidden knowledge. We made extensive references to the Greek Magical Papyri and, inspired by them, we formed opinions on the extent of the use of magic in Egyptian society as it was shaped during Greco-Roman times, as in this way the plethora of influences from many different communities of people with different cultural and social backgrounds becomes abundantly clear, all of which together make up the mysterious mosaic of Greco-Roman Egypt. We then move into the strange world of Hermeticism, whose Egyptian origins we examine and compare with Greek influences, while elaborating on its most basic points. At this point we synthesize the picture of Hermetic mysticism and take into consideration the initiatory practices which, are strikingly different from the traditional Egyptian establishment.

Finally, we draw conclusions by reviewing the meanings that the concept of mysticism and mystery worship has taken on over the centuries, depending on political aspirations and historical and cultural events.

“I would rather live in a world where my life is surrounded by mystery than live in a world so small that my mind could comprehend it.”

-Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878-1969), American Pastor

1. Prologue

The Nile country, as Egypt was described very accurately by Herodotus¹ as being a gift of the River, was graced to be the home of a civilization that is known to be one of the most archaic, complex and ostentatious ones the humanity has ever known. This substantial legacy and contribution does not only contain grandiose statues, magnificent monuments and scientific advancements but also an extremely elaborate and multileveled belief system that shrouded the whole civilization with a mystifying quality, gave it a unique place among the scholars of the ancient times as it became their focal point and, in many cases, the spiritual and cultural basis of other civilizations that built upon. In this dissertation we're going to discuss religious beliefs and practices and focus extensively on aspects of mysticism, esotericism and various systems, the core of which originated many millennia ago. According to the sources, the ancient Egyptian civilization covered a period from three 3100 BCE., up until the Macedonian conquest of Alexander the Great (331BCE) when the Dynastic Period ends, and the Hellenistic / Ptolemaic period begins. From 30 BCE onwards, the land of Egypt loses its importance as a political center as it deteriorates to a province of the Roman Empire after the death of Cleopatra the VII. (David, 2007)²

Since the examination, exploration, and analyzing of the whole Egyptian religious corpus would by far surpass the scope of this dissertation, we will only be focusing on the situation as it was during the New Kingdom and the Graeco-Roman periods. More specifically, the periods that we will explore span from the 18th Dynasty, approximately 1539 to 1075 BC, until the end of the Roman period, 30 BC to 395 AD. At this point it is important to mention that both the chronology and the categorization in Dynasties and Kingdoms, follows the works of Manetho, an

¹ “ ἐστὶ Αἰγυπτίσι ἐπίκτητός τε γῆ καὶ δῶρον τοῦ ποταμοῦ” (ΗΡΟΔΟΤΟΣ, Ἱστορία 2.5.2)

² (David, 2007, 63)

Egyptian priest who lived during the 3d century BC (Ptolemaic era) and was responsible for the translation of various pieces of work of religious Nature from the traditional Egyptian language to Hellenistic koine. It is known for him that he possessed the seat of the High Priest in Heliopolis as well as the Keeper of the temple Records and was one of the key figures for the introduction of the worship of Serapis in Alexandria³.

2. Historical and religious background

Before we delve into the analysis of the religious affairs of that era, we need first to examine the social and political background so that we can understand more efficiently the environment in which the doctrines and ideas that we will discuss later, became prominent and popular. After the Egyptians became liberated from the Hyksos regime, their stance towards the outsiders, became stricter and changed dramatically, especially to the peoples who lived in what is now Syria and Palestine⁴. Responsible for the routing of the Hyksos and the imperialistic expansion was a new family from Thebes which managed to reunite the Egyptian Kingdom⁵. The reason for this aggressive policy was twofold, on one hand they had to prevent any further attacks from the eastern side of their country and on the other hand this aggression led Egypt to engage in a series of conflicts with the neighboring kingdoms, become an empire and establish influence and subjugation to the general area⁶. The series of conquests were not only beneficial for foreign policy but also very significant in solidifying the power of the monarch and the religious status quo what supported him by accumulating wealth in the form of spoils of war. This influx of wealth transformed the religious scenery by exalting the formerly local Theban god Amun. It was at this time that this god absorbed characteristics formerly attributed solely to god Re, thus becoming Amun – Re, a sun god and the supreme deity of the whole Egypt, with close attachments to the royal power and the pharaoh himself⁷. The unprecedented wealth, influence and power the priesthood possessed led them to be perceived by the pharaoh as a threat to the throne and thus during the Amarna period (18th Dynasty), Akhenaten, also known as

³ (Μανέθων, 1999, 11-13)

⁴ (David, 2007, 68)

⁵ (Jones, 2005, 2706)

⁶ (David, 2007, 68-69)

⁷ (David, 2007, 65)

Amenhotep IV, took drastic steps towards thwarting the aforementioned status quo by relocating the religious and administrative capital, desecrating the temples and annulling the former priesthood, while at the same time he introduced a monolatry or a henotheistic religion⁸ with the Sun-disc at its epicenter⁹. With this exception, for the rest of the period Thebes remained the religious capital and a vast necropolis was beginning to form on the opposite side of the Nile. What is now known as Deir el Medina was a sprawling city comprised mostly by workmen, laborers and artisans, whose line of work pertained to funerary affairs.

One of the most prominent periods of that era was the Ramesside period which spanned 1292 -1075 BCE. Ramses I is regarded to be one of the most significant figures in the religious history of Egypt and the first legitimate ruler after the Amarna Period. Not only did he reinstated the previous status quo but also, he performed extensive repairs and additions to a series of old temples. The temple is now contained multiple chapels and sanctuaries dedicated to various states and this was practiced for the Pharaoh to show his polytheistic devotion¹⁰. Furthermore, at that point we witness the reinstating of the malevolent god Seth whom they included both in the royal names and in military insignia¹¹. Another significant change was the funerary customs and more specifically the type of information that was contained within the burial chambers and the coffins as it became less and less biographical and pertaining to the life and position of the dead and more space was dedicated towards funerary rights religious texts mythological settings and magical incantations. It was texts of this nature that later comprised the corpus move that legendary book of “Going forth by day” or as the archaeologists later named it “The Book of the Dead¹²”.

During the Third Intermediate Period (1085 – 668 BCE), Egypt’s set of affairs changed drastically. Throughout the 21st Dynasty, Egyptians encountered considerable aggression from the west but also later from the so mysterious “Sea-peoples” who changed the economic, social and cultural landscape of the Eastern Mediterranean forevermore. The external aggression could only bring instability, stagnation and eventually decline to the people of Egypt. With the country

⁸ (Jones, 2005, 2707)

⁹ (David, 2007, 69)

¹⁰ (Jones, 2005, 2707)

¹¹ (Jones, 2005, 2707)

¹² (Jones, 2005, 2707-2708)

practically separated to two distinct administrative centers: the northern part was ruled from the city of Tanis by a series of kings while the second one was placed in the South and its center was the Thebes, foreign monarchs came to power. Libyans and Kushites ruled briefly the land before Assyrians came from the north conquering the country¹³.

After the 25th Dynasty and the brief Assyrian occupation the Late Period (664–332 BCE) is inaugurated, with the Saidic Dynasty coming to power in the Delta region¹⁴. That was a time of rebirth in Egypt as not only there was a renewed and fervent interest in older religious practices and beliefs but also, for the first time in the country's history local religious items became commercial goods thus expanding the cultural and religious influence on the greater area¹⁵. From that point on 525 BCE and for the next 5 dynasties Egypt became a part of the Persian Empire and its role deteriorated to one of a Satrapy, a Persian administrative unit. It is worth noting, that during the previous periods of occupation the religious landscape did not change noticeably but largely remained the same mostly because both Assyrians and Persians did not show any particular interest in the local religion and customs.

That all changed with the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great in 332 BCE. Both Alexander and later the Ptolemies realized that for them to maintain their power they had not only to respect the doctrines of the local religion but also embrace them, publicly and integrate themselves into the religious system and the political power it bestowed¹⁶. This policy included the building, restoring, expanding and consecrating a series of temples as much as providing the priesthood with the appropriate privileges¹⁷. The Ptolemies did not confine themselves in these, but they also encouraged acculturation between the Greek religion and the Egyptian one in an attempt diffuse them together and thus give the subject who were ethnically mostly Egyptian and Greek an ideological background on which unity could be achieved. To this end we can trace the introduction of Serapis as a primary god in Alexandria and the adaptation over Egyptian religious and funerary practices by the Greeks¹⁸. A characteristic of the era was the extensive changes in the written language of the temples. Not only the number of hieroglyphic symbols increased, but

¹³ (David, 2007, 70)

¹⁴ (David, 2007, 70)

¹⁵ (David, 2007, 70)

¹⁶ (David, 2007, 70-71)

¹⁷ (David, 2007, 71)

¹⁸ (David, 2007, 71)

also the language became intentionally obscure and cryptic, perhaps as the priests tried desperately to preserve the ancient knowledge of their ancestors before the foreigners come to the knowledge and desecrate it¹⁹. The same practices were maintained by the Romans after the death of Cleopatra VII and the establishment of the Roman occupation of the country.

3. Magic and cultic practices

Before we delve any deeper toward exploring several aspects of the ancient Egyptian religion we need to consider and examine first the aspect of magic. As a concept magic can take many definitions. In many societies has been an integral part of religious practice and thought but in western society it has been generally associated with superstition and even malicious intent. Usually, magical acts revolve around a certain behavior and / or recitation of verbal formulas and spells either by a commoner or a professional magician for them to achieve something tangible in the physical world oh the life beyond²⁰.

Magic was indeed significant for the Egyptians as it is apparent from the multitude of texts that are preserved today, and it was considered a gift of Re while there are several texts containing the legendary knowledge of Thoth (later known as Hermes Trismegistus)²¹. Multiple magical charms, spells and invocations were used to alleviate the symptoms of various illnesses and even cure them²², to avert an impending disaster or to simply assist in affairs of romance. In terms of medical practice, the Egyptians had made advancements of significant proportions but nonetheless Magic played a significant role as many of the procedures made extensive use of magical texts or recitations, potions, salves and amulets²³. Another category of magic Egyptians practiced extensively was a form of sympathetic magic as they were used pots or figurines with names of their enemies written on them before smashing them to pieces in order to destroy physically their enemies²⁴.

¹⁹ (Jones, 2005, 2708)

²⁰ (Jones, 2005, 5562-5564)

²¹ (Jones, 2005, 2712)

²² (Jones, 2005, 2712)

²³ (Jones, 2005, 2713)

²⁴ (Jones, 2005, 2712)

The ones that define the culture in the most characteristic way though, are the funerary spells. Those were specifically procured in order to aid the deceased in their way through the Dwat and the Great Judgement and allow them to transform, thus achieving eternal life. These funeral texts were of antique origin and were part of the New Kingdom “Book of the Dead” as we mentioned earlier²⁵. The spell is contained are often described in detail with explicit instructions and in many cases the spell itself claims its efficiency and assures the user that it has completed its purpose many times in the past²⁶. In this category the opening of the mouth ritual must be included as a magical process in order to restore basic human functions to the deceased for them to see, to hear, to be able to speak, and also to be able to breathe, eat and drink during their arduous way through the Dwat²⁷.

Along with magic, one of the most prominent characteristics of the ancient Egyptian religion was the organization of various and numerous cults dedicated to various deities. One of the most significant was the cult of Osiris that originated from Busiris As it preceded the cults of Khentymentiu “foremost of the westerners” and Wepwawet “opener of the ways” from Abydos and Siut, respectively²⁸. As Osiris was the god of the underworld, his cult permeated many facets of the Egyptian culture, his statues often decorated the mortuary temples of the Pharaohs and the deceased often took epithets pertaining to Osiris, such as “vindicated” as a token of respect to the Judgement of the Soul in front of him²⁹.

4. Mysteries

Mysteries or mystery religions, like all terms that characterize a pananthropic phenomenon as religion, it is impossible to fit within one single definition. It is basically an umbrella term referring to a variety of religious aspects. In this section of this dissertation, we will try to procure a concise and complete description that is most appropriate for the subject we are examining.

²⁵ (Jones, 2005, 2712)

²⁶ (Jones, 2005, 2712-2713)

²⁷ (Jones, 2005, 2713)

²⁸ (Jones, 2005, 2711)

²⁹ (Jones, 2005, 2711)

It is now purposeful to search for the origin of the word in order to better understand its meaning and the different connotations that are implied when it is used in different contexts. The Greek word “μυστήρια” initially was used only to refer to the Eleusinian mysteries in the Hellenic world and it had the meaning of a secret worship but only specific people who had undergone a special ritualistic initiation could only be accepted to participate. They initiates were called “μύσται” a term that implied specific preparation before accessing. The mysteries themselves and the rituals that were contained therein were called “τελεταί”, which has the meaning of the rite of passage, or “ὄργια”³⁰ a term that is closely related to “ἔργον” which means work or project. It is apparent now that we are talking about something entirely and essentially different from other official religious functions. The mysteries are not accepting anyone and everyone and are not open to the public as usually religions are.³¹ Centerpiece to this system is “γνῶσις” which in this context means the hidden or esoteric knowledge³² This forbidden knowledge was a prerequisite for someone who would desire to be initiated and the access to it would be heavily guarded in the sense that only someone who would be tried and carefully selected would have participation to it. Particularly interesting is the Latin translation of the word mysteries which is *initia* and as for the term *myesis*, initiation, something that gives validity to the close connection with the ceremonial admission and the exclusive character of the mysteries³³.

Historically, the mystery cults in their Greco – Roman sense were not present in Egypt until the 2nd century BCE and they are comprised by esoteric rituals that are repeated annually in most cases and following the agricultural cycle. At the center of the mystery cults a venerated deity is found, and the practitioners are communicated arcane piece of knowledge that allows them to conquer death. Also, in most cases such practices are being performed alongside the regular open part of the religion or cult, but also separated from the general public’s eyes and ears³⁴. This was enacted when the cult organized various yearly festivals and celebrations at fixed dates where participation to the festivities and the conducting of offerings was completely

³⁰ (Burkert, 1987, 9)

³¹ (Lindsay, 2005, 6327)

³² (Lindsay, 2005, 6327)

³³ (Burkert, 1987, 8)

³⁴ (Lindsay, 2005, 6327)

unrestricted and parallel to the main course of events or right after them, the mystery ritual was taking place with only the initiated and they initiates present³⁵.

The first time in history where Mysteries in Egypt are mentioned, is in the works of Herodotus, Histories. There, he describes a temple of Neith which he identifies with her Greek counterpart, Athena. In his attempt to be respectful and conscious about what he conveys, he baptizes the secrecy that was customary to revolve the Egyptian cults and their proceedings as mysteries. The reticent description about a ritual called the “Navigation of Osiris”, a god whose name he purposefully omits, leads him to believe that the Egyptian priests were actually performing mystery rituals in the sense of the Greek mystery cultic rituals, thus crystalizing the notions that the Egyptians not only had mystery cults but also, since they were a more ancient and wise nation, they possessed the authentic ones. The identification of Osiris as the Greek Dionysos and the common tragic fate both gods suffered sealed the connection between the two even further, despite the Egyptians not having these types of cultic worship and also not considering them as something distinguishable from the usual practices³⁶.

It is important to note that Isis is not mentioned here, it’s not until the Hellenistic period that Isis is presented revealing herself in an aretology, where the goddess makes her contribution to mankind and the natural order known. Among other accomplishments, the creation of mysteries is attributed to her and more specifically, the creation of the mysteries of Eleusis, some of the most sacred ones in the Hellenic world.

Since the mystery cults of Isis can only be attested in the late antiquity, the only way it could have been established would have been with the aid and guidance of priests and mystics from other mystery cults³⁷.

Bearing in mind what we found out about the origin of the word mystery at the beginning of the previous paragraph, we can now expand upon the notion of the secrecy that extensively shrouded the ancient mysteries, we must examine two other adjectives that are suggestive of a basic characteristic of the mystery cults: “ἄρρητα”, unspeakable and “ἀπόρρητα”, forbidden³⁸.

³⁵ (Burkert, 1987, 10)

³⁶ (Bremmer, 2014, pp. 110-111)

³⁷ (Bremmer, 2014, p. 116)

³⁸ (Burkert, 1987, 9)

The characteristic is that the content of the mystery rituals must remain sealed within the circle and not be given out to outsiders, but also but the mysteries cannot be betrayed as their meanings, teachings, and procedures would simultaneously lose their meaning and appear insignificant, or even pointless, if revealed to the public³⁹. This made possible for the various mystery cults to survive and continue their works, teachings and attempts to reach the unknown, even if their secrets were revealed to uninitiated parties, by maintaining the absolute secrecy though, they retained the corresponding esteem and eminence.

5. The nature of initiations

Initiation is a very common practice, and as a phenomenon has been observed and examined across space and time throughout the years. The forms of this procedure are many as it can be found in the wide range of settings and in the most plethoric variety of purposes⁴⁰. Initiations can be conducted without necessarily alluding to any kind of mystery or mysticism, in many cases initiations are received by members of political, administrative or military authority, by persons with interest of being admitted to certain circles or even individuals who reach a certain age. From a sociological point of view, initiations can be defined as a ritualistic dramatization of status change⁴¹.

What is striking about ancient mysteries is that, with the aforementioned information in mind, they do not fall into any other categories. The members of these societies are not closely related nor there were specific rules of conduct between the members or any kind of substantial attachments. Other factors such as sex, age, economic and political status were not, in most cases, taken into consideration either and even after someone had undergone the initiation, there was no perceivable changes happening to either the outward appearance or the socioeconomic status. However, there was a significant change for the person that partook in the ritual and that concerned their relation either to the deity that was behind a particular mystery cult or a belief system that was now enacted upon them⁴². This transformation was personal as it was the

³⁹ (Burkert, 1987, 9)

⁴⁰ (Burkert, 1987, 8-9)

⁴¹ (Burkert, 1987, 8)

⁴² (Burkert, 1987, 8)

experience which enabled the new state of mind, through the perception of the sacred. Also, another difference that we can indicate, is that the experience of the sacred was not something to be done only once in a lifetime but it was performed on many occasions every time the mystery ritual was in effect⁴³.

An important aspect of the initiations was that, as we said before, they could take place alongside the main, prominent and above all, public, cults. Keeping that in mind, apart from the initiations that were conducted in fixed dates, along with the more official celebrations as their consummation, such as the Eleusinian Mysteries, in many cases initiations were performed on demand of the patron deities themselves. One of these cases is the initiation of Apuleius in the mysteries of Isis, when the goddess herself revealed the sign to the high priest who then gave his permission for Apuleius to be initiated⁴⁴. Under this light we can reach the conclusion that mysteries were mostly perceived as a special mode of reaching the sacred within a more generalized religion to which its closely related and intertwined. Plainly put, mystery initiations were an optional way to express religious sentiment within a context and can be compared to the various pilgrimages in Christian religion.

Perhaps one of the most significant differences between other types of initiations and the mystery initiations is that the latter were highly discretionary, and any sense of unavoidability or obligation was out of the question. Tribal and family traditions although relevant to some extent, they never obscured the voluntary character of the mystery initiations⁴⁵. This of course does not mean that there was not a certain kind of soft pressure from the initiators themselves towards the prospective initiates, so they would complete the ritualistic procedure⁴⁶. Expanding on the notion of free will in relation to the initiation, we now need to examine the profoundly individualistic character of such practices. Although in certain cases the initiated formed a close - knit network that comprised of people who helped and supported each other, the mysteries were mostly an individual - specific religion that was fueled by totally private decisions and hopes of salvation through the experience of the godly power⁴⁷.

⁴³ (Burkert, 1987, 8)

⁴⁴ (Burkert, 1987, 10)

⁴⁵ (Burkert, 1987, 10-11)

⁴⁶ (Burkert, 1987, 11)

⁴⁷ (Burkert, 1987, 12)

This is reminiscent of the practice of votive offerings to certain deities that people enact only in cases of imminent peril and death, or more rarely, in cases of gaining some kind of wealth. These votive offerings have the character of a religious transaction between the voter and the god as the former pleads for divine intervention in exchange for either material wealth or simply, the promise thereof⁴⁸. This form of conduct is so common that transcends both space and time in a way that we can still recognize its sentimental value so many millennia later. The prodigious number of this type of offerings, the archaeologists have discovered, tell us a very human and humble story of anxiety, fear and above all hope, that permeates not only space and time but also the socioeconomic classes and ranks, and displays in the most spectacular manner, the desperate endeavor of humans to control their fate⁴⁹.

It rises no question that most of the offerings refer to either sea voyages, or the recovery of a person from a state of illness, nor does so that some of the most prominent deities, such as Isis and Serapis, were specialized in healing, restoring and salvation. Within the same context another type of offering is the one that is made after the supposed divine intervention in the form of gratitude for a fulfilled plead and in Latin it is called “votivas reddere voces”. This gratitude could be manifested by the employment of the so-called “aretalogies”, by which the god or goddess was worshipped and praised in the deepest of manners, for the salvation it provided to the afflicted person. In many cases, and especially during the healing rituals that were under the auspices of Isis, the patient had to confess their sins to the goddess as the prerequisite for their healing. Although sinful behavior is mentioned and condemned in the most explicit way in later forms of mysticism, and the importance of purity of body, mind and spirit is amplified regarding the ancient mysteries, this practice is not directly linked to them⁵⁰.

From a psychological point of view the votive procedure is nothing but a simple coping mechanism so humans were able to surpass the impossible odds they face in life. It basically transforms reality to a form of contract between the mortal and the deity. A contract that is based on the cerebral function of reciprocation and the structure of “do ut des” and thus can relieve the enactor from the crippling anxiety of the uncertain future. If the divine intervention eventually comes in the form of either salvation or a form of profit, then the voter is inclined to offer

⁴⁸ (Burkert, 1987, 12)

⁴⁹ (Burkert, 1987, 13)

⁵⁰ (Burkert, 1987, 16)

something again to the deity in order to protract their protection. It is a manageable commission for something that far exceeds the cost⁵¹. Furthermore, because of the public character of the votive offerings, the general morale is raised as the personal misfortunes become public and the suffering dissipates. The guidance and the encouragement of the priests provide the necessary motivation a person needs to not give up hope, or to try again⁵².

Concluding this segment, it is useful to point out that, as Burkert contends, the initiation process is both motivationally and functionally akin to the practice of votive offerings and the final purpose of both is no other than salvation. Moreover, the introduction and establishment of new forms of mysteries, dedicated to different deities, should be expected as the evolution of this cults is organic and dictated by the failed attempts of the people to reach the divine and the subsequent experimentation with other, more promising ones. Lastly, we must not forget that mystery religions evolved around regular votive religions⁵³ and functioned largely as an optional addition to them, accessible only for the selected few.

6. The psychological factors of the mystery religions

One of the many facets of the mystery cults and certainly one of the most interesting, is the psychological impact those rituals had on their participants. If we take into consideration the text of Lucius Apuleius, “The Golden Ass”, which is a unique account written in first person perspective about the writer’s consecutive initiations to both the mysteries of Isis and Osiris. Although this theme will be encountered again at a later time in this dissertation, it is purposeful to use it now to explain certain psychoanalytical aspects of this particular cult and try to extrapolate some conclusions about the mystery cults in general. This source was selected because although it is a first-person account about a personal mystery initiation, nonetheless, it is not a strictly religious text as elements of spirituality and theology do not monopolize the interest but allow for other topics to be revealed⁵⁴.

According to this person's account, his absolute dedication to goddess Isis, did not exclude him from the outside world nor prevented him from pursuing his day-to-day interests, but

⁵¹ (Burkert, 1987, 13)

⁵² (Burkert, 1987, 14)

⁵³ (Burkert, 1987, 15)

⁵⁴ (Burkert, 1987, 17)

contrarywise the initiations themselves and their incessant requirements, became the reason for him to navigate significant distances throughout the Roman Empire and interact with many different people for the sole purpose of completing them. Apuleius' success early in his life, as a respected and established lawyer, became a source of envy and the malice from his peers, which caused a significant amount of discomfort and displeasure in the form of constant anxiety, ominous visions and sleep deprivation. This predicament caused him to deteriorate psychologically and the only solution to his ailment was the renewal of his initiations. It is self-evident now that the religious mysteries were a source of mental stability by alleviating the occupational anxiety and by restoring Lucius' mental health⁵⁵.

It is generally known that Isis possessed the power to alter the destiny of the mortals and "The Golden Ass", testifies to this. She had authority over life and death, as it is stated in the sources of both the Egyptian and the Graeco-Egyptian traditions, and thus she was able to avert death and grant a new life to her followers. What is made clear though, through the texts is that this new life concerns the present life of a person who is initiated and not the one after the physical death in the soteriological sense. As the old life of a person is worn down to the point that it is no longer enjoyable, Isis and her revelations procure a new one no different than the previous one but certainly more meaningful. This is important as the salvation came in the present, when it is practically needed and genuinely appreciated, instead of a precarious promise of an afterlife deliverance⁵⁶. This practical aspect of the mysteries must not lead us to believe that the initiations didn't have anything to do with life after death, or a promise of a prosperous eternal life. The fear of death is pervasive throughout the mystic ideology as much as the hope of a new life. It seems to us as if there was a balance maintained between two capacities, with the practical, psychological and healing benefits on one side and the promise of a peaceful and blissful life in the underworld on the other⁵⁷. After examining all these different aspects and details, we could easily argue that the mysteries were nothing more than a rehearsal of death and resurrection both in this world and the next. The person was saved from their previous unworthy and sinful life by experiencing the divine, and then, they begin another life that is much more fulfilling and substantial because they are under the grasp of fear of death no longer. After the

⁵⁵ (Burkert, 1987, 17)

⁵⁶ (Burkert, 1987, 18)

⁵⁷ (Burkert, 1987, 23-24)

latter fatefully comes, the person can hope to reach the divine again, and be protected by it for eternity, as Isis reveals to Apuleius: “And when you have completed your lifetime, and go down to the underworld, you will find me in the subterranean vault, shining in the darkness of Acheron and reigning in the innermost quarters of the Styx, while you yourself inhabit the Elysian Fields, and you will adore me frequently as I am well disposed towards you⁵⁸” This is the reason the mysteries appealed so much to the people and became so deeply rooted alongside the main cults.

A prominent theme that we notice repeatedly when we are examining and exploring the ancient mysteries is that of the spiritual cleansing of the initiates. This was performed through rituals that most of the times included water as their basic element. Their purpose was to allow the initiate to purify their body and soul so they could be cleansed and ready to receive the apophatic experience. Many forms of this catharsis were used, namely the cleansing through water and the one using powerful emotions, that led the initiates to feel delivered from their mundane plights and become ready for the sacred knowledge that was going to be manifested to them⁵⁹.

7. Organization and function of the mystery cults

In this section we will be occupied with exploring the ways that the ancient mysteries were organized, the similarities and the differences between them as much as the individuals who were responsible for recruiting, validating and initiating new members, and of course the ones that enabled the continuation of the practice⁶⁰. It is logical that the mystery cults would follow the general rules of any other religion. Depending on the individuals' background or the character of the cult, the disciples or enactors would invest a certain amount of energy and favor. It is expected, of course, that in case the mystery cult had an economic basis and thus the head of it would be a professional, it would be of vital importance to them that the cult was constantly expanding and effectively in search for new members⁶¹.

⁵⁸ (Burkert, 1987, 26)

⁵⁹ (Burkert, 1987, 19)

⁶⁰ (Burkert, 1987, 30)

⁶¹ (Burkert, 1987, 30)

What makes the research problematic is that the mystery cults were heavily diversified in many of their basic aspects. Forms of organization or any kind of coherent community between their members are very difficult to identify as the evidence is inconclusive at best. If we examine closely and carefully the many different cults three different structures seem to emerge that resemble a form of organization: first, the nomadic practitioner, secondly a group of priests that is anchored to a specific sanctuary and lastly a much larger group of individuals that are part of a special religious club and is constantly on the move⁶².

In the first case we have a single individual who is conducting a life close to the divine that is characterized by ritualism. This nomad is basically a professional priest without a temple that is wandering throughout the land and crossing borders performing various ceremonies such as purifications, initiations and sometimes even revelations of the future to people or deliverance of ill individuals from their plight. “The one who makes the sacred craft⁶³”, a religion professional, who is promoting a tradition of a profession that was handed to him by another person who retired before doing so and had the role of a spiritual master and mentor. This conveyance of sacred knowledge was a ritual and a mystery on its own right, and it will be conducted once again when it is time for the itinerant sage to retire and pass on the legacy⁶⁴. A very prominent difference between other arts and crafts and this one, as all of them carried a sense of tradition and continuity within them, was that the divine practitioner was completely exposed to all the risks of their profession, and he was forced to face them all alone. In times of turmoil and uncertainty a person with such exceptional abilities was very useful and indeed in demand, as every single soul resorted in such measures to survive, making this profession very profitable. At times when peace, stability, and prosperity thrived though, the nomadic sage was not faced only with lack of prospects and poverty, but also with adverse behavior from the public in the form of mockery, social exclusion, and even physical aggression as there wasn’t any safety net to support them in times of need⁶⁵.

The second form of organization is the one that we will be occupied with, in this thesis, as it was most common in Egypt, and we possess the most pieces of evidence and information

⁶² (Burkert, 1987, 31)

⁶³ (Burkert, 1987, 31)

⁶⁴ (Burkert, 1987, 31)

⁶⁵ (Burkert, 1987, 31)

about. The priesthood and the people who enacted the mysteries were dependent on a sanctuary that was their base of practicing their hieratic duties. The priests and the temple personnel were much more organized, and structured than the previous case, and through the offerings and sacrifices made by the devoted believers many temples and sanctuaries became successful enterprises and attained a significant amount of affluence⁶⁶. The clergy in this situation was not as much exposed to risks and the uncertainties of fate, as the sanctuaries were largely supported and benefited from the central authorities and thus enjoyed security and prosperity. This respect and appreciation though came at the cost of freedom, as the priests themselves were accountable to specific and complex hierarchies which especially in the context of Egyptian religion, were both hieratic and political⁶⁷.

The third form of organization is perhaps the most loose in terms of adherence and coherence between its members. It comprised of communities that their members did not have many aspects of their lives common, but they belonged to the same “communion”. This meant that the members retained their independence and equality towards one another while remaining fully integrated and preoccupied with their personal affairs within their respective communities. The economic contributions and the dedication of time and interest were only made on a voluntary basis without an unavoidable set of rules dictating the specifics. What is strikingly different between this form of mystery organization and the previous one, is the complete absence of a hierarchy as no head of those cults was recognized and thus no structural ranking was established. Wealthy members of such communions were expected to cover the majority of the expenses the sacred procedures were in need of, and in exchange for their generosity they received commemorative inscriptions and enviable titles and status. In many of these cults the most significant expense was the building of a shrine dedicated to that particular group’s cult, and the reward was the nomination of the owner as the official hierophant⁶⁸.

Now that we have explored the three types of organization of mystery cults in detail, it is essential to clarify that those three types were not mutually exclusive. A certain cult could exhibit two types of the aforementioned organizations, as a nomadic sage can create his own itinerary communion, or a priest belonging to a temple can diversify themselves from the rigid hierarchy

⁶⁶ (Burkert, 1987, 31-32)

⁶⁷ (Burkert, 1987, 32)

⁶⁸ (Burkert, 1987, 32)

and become a part of a communion, or an independent single sage. There were occasions where an itinerant communion could become accustomed to performing rituals in a specific sanctuary and thus become attached administratively to it as well ⁶⁹. These examples cannot exclude of course a case in which a mystery cult changes forms and organizations throughout the ages.

An important factor that must come to attention is that the central authorities in certain cases did not remain indifferent towards individuals who were operating within the first form of organization, in other words, the independent sage. A piece of evidence, in the form of a royal edict of Ptolemy IV “Philopator” (222 – 204 BCE), addressed the mysteries of Dionysus and Meter and more specifically the people who were enrolled in initiating new members to these cults. The edict stated that the nomadic sages were tasked to travel to Alexandria and register in the hieratic catalogs. Upon registering they needed to declare the name of the person who introduced them to the cult and initiated them, along with the names of the one who initiated their master and their master’s master, up to three generations of sacred craftsmen. In addition to that, they were demanded to surrender a copy of their sacred texts “ἱερός λόγος” in order to be examined and testified upon, regarding its authenticity⁷⁰. Under this light we can see that this type of organization that was enacted on, almost, a family basis in which a proper itinerant sage knew not only the name of his master but also the names of his spiritual grandfathers. Alongside this form of certification on behalf of the official state the sacred texts were examined as well so both the divine teachings and their origin could be examined and validated⁷¹.

From all these different types of organizing the mysteries and their combinations only one is the most prominent in regard with the traditional mystery cults of Egypt. An extremely pervasive idea the ancient Egyptians possessed and which we encounter on many occasions while examining these subjects, is that statues contained various forms of deities and divine beings. For this reason, this status needed to be anchored to a specific place which in most cases was a temple. The divinity that resided inside the statues⁷², demanded incessant adoration and ritualistic care on behalf of the priests and thus the priests had to be disposed and dedicated to a

⁶⁹ (Burkert, 1987, 32-33)

⁷⁰ (Burkert, 1987, 33)

⁷¹ (Burkert, 1987, 33)

⁷² This theme was indeed very common in ancient Egyptian tradition, and we can encounter it in many different aspects and facets of the religious life, either when pertaining to a mystery cult or not. This mindset will survive during the Hellenistic period up until the late antiquity, as the writings of Hermes Trismegistus testify.

specific temple. This in turn created the status quo and the priesthood was regularly divided between higher and lower ranks⁷³. This perception is described in detail in “Serapis aretology” that has been found in an inscription in the island of Delos, and refers to Apollonios, an Egyptian priest, who tried to introduce and mystery cult by carrying the god in the form of a sacred statue⁷⁴. Because Serapis lived inside this statue, the priest had to provide a home for him in the form of rented lodgings until a more permanent solution in the form of a temple proper was found. We are informed that because of the wealth that was procured via the votive offerings, eventually the state took possession of the cult in order to partake in the benefits⁷⁵. According to the sources though, even if the temple was on foreign, non-Egyptian, soil, extreme and meticulous care was given so that the rituals were not corrupted by being performed by foreigners or at least only by them. The procedures had to maintain a certain connection to the motherland, so much so that the most important functions were performed by a native Egyptian. It is expected that the sacred books, instruments and even the purifying water were directly imported from the land of the Pharaohs. Naturally, the care that was given to the gods was exactly the same as it was in Egypt. The priests completed their exhausting duties, day and night, tending the god’s every need, and even overseeing the magnificent ceremonies and pompous processions that were dedicated to them every year⁷⁶. What is plain to see about this procedure is that there is a migrating priest who at some point establishes a temple and thus becomes dependent on that temple, changing, in this way, forms of organization. What is genuinely interesting is that expanding this traditionally Egyptian way of priesthood, a much more Hellenic tradition can come into play in the form of an enthusiastic group, a “thiasos”, that is using the temple as a spiritual point⁷⁷. Also, a different group of believers, would use certain parts of the temple as their personal lodgings, paying the appropriate price, of course, to the priests in order for them to be closer to the divine even for a small part of their lives.

8. Egyptian Mysteries: The Greek perspective

⁷³ (Burkert, 1987, 38)

⁷⁴ (Burkert, 1987, 38)

⁷⁵ (Burkert, 1987, 38)

⁷⁶ (Burkert, 1987, 39)

⁷⁷ (Burkert, 1987, 39)

The problem we encounter in our examination, starts with the mysteries of Isis and in extension with the procedure of the mysteries in Egypt in general. At first sight we can realize that the sources we possess about the mysteries of Isis are extremely rare and intentionally reticent about the details. According to what we know, it is possible that their initiations did not have the character that the Greeks later perceived them to have. According to the account of Apuleius, our protagonist was subjected to successive initiations both in the cult of Isis and the cult of Osiris, in order to be able to claim the priesthood title of “pastofori” in Rome. This leads us to believe that the initiations were not one-time events but maybe in this context, they functioned as hierarchical steps towards several hieratic and administrative positions⁷⁸. It is possible that this misunderstanding was caused by the way the Greeks interpreted the rituals that pertained to the Egyptian priesthood because certain theatrical aspects of the processes had a secretive and very exclusive character⁷⁹. Successive initiations were used in the Egyptian religion as a form for the various priests and servants of the gods to traverse through the very intricate and elaborate hierarchical system that was imposed upon most of the public cults, and they became stricter and more demanding as a priest progressed up the ladder. That was continued to up to the point that certain rights were so secret that only the highest ranking priests could possess knowledge of them and participate⁸⁰. This structure is completely different from the one Greeks were accustomed to. In the Hellenic world, the numerous mystery cults were known to the public, although the details were a secret, and whoever was interested in being initiated and participating, could discuss and apply, without having any significant confinements or prerequisites⁸¹. Egypt played always a significant role for the Greek intellect, especially about religious and theosophical affairs, and because of this, the mystery cults could be no different. They believed that Egypt was the source of all the mystery cults, and many Greek scholars such as Herodotus, embraced this notion.

These syncretistic notions justify the adaptation of several Egyptian symbols by the Greeks, including the following two: The “cista mystica”, a sacred container made of wicker that contained the head of Osiris within a vase with a sizable serpent guarding the lid. This box had

⁷⁸ (Burkert, 1987, 39-40)

⁷⁹ (Burkert, 1987, 40)

⁸⁰ (Burkert, 1987, 40-41)

⁸¹ (Burkert, 1987, 40)

been connected to various sources and ceremonies, the most notable of which is the finding of Osiris. The descriptions are not conclusive about its nature and function, but we are certain that it became a symbol of secrecy and seclusion⁸². Alongside it, another symbol with Egyptian roots became prominent, the statute of Harpocrates with his finger positioned in front of his lips, in an act of silence⁸³. In many cases acculturation was combined with religious propaganda, during the later stage of the Isis cult, a notion was cultivated surreptitiously by the priests that the goddess herself was responsible for the mysteries of Eleusis, and that those mysteries, were nothing more than a mere branch of the main original cult. There were certain parts of the myths with remarkable similarities that allowed the myths to be compared and, in many cases, Demeter was identified with Isis⁸⁴. Of course, the fact that the Egyptian mysteries were much more organized and clandestine in nature than the Greek ones, added to the prestige and the idea that the Egyptian was the most ancient and thus the most powerful ones. This in turn increased the popularity of the Egyptian mysteries so much, that the various sanctuaries started offering initiations upon request exactly as was the practice in Hellenic mysteries. This practice had to be adapted though in order for the Egyptian mysteries to not lose prestige by making the process of the initiation easy and open to everyone.

The account of Apuleius is shedding light to these procedures, describing them as borderline unaffordable and extremely time consuming as they demanded the prospective initiate to spend all their time inside the premises of the temple participating in various expensive rituals while waiting for the deity to reveal to the priest that the time was right and that they could proceed with the completion of the initiation⁸⁵. This type of initiation was most probably a rare occurring event as not so many people would be able to possess the economic means and time that was asked for in order to participate. It was thus a special service reserved for the special few who were interested in having a more essential and close relationship to the divine.

9. Aspects of faith and self-identification

⁸² (Voss, 1979, 23-24)

⁸³ (Burkert, 1987, 39-41)

⁸⁴ (Burkert, 1987, 41)

⁸⁵ (Burkert, 1987, 41)

As we hinted earlier, mystery cults were comprised of people with similar interests, common religious inquiries and on certain occasions, the same socioeconomic backgrounds. Although most mystery cults did not provide their members with a network which was supposed to protect them and provide them with opportunities to flourish, it is logical for us to think that a certain degree of camaraderie and even friendship would occur through the involvement and participation in these rites. We can confirm this especially when certain mysteries were indeed providing their members with such a set of connections and security in the form of support in legal affairs. Either way the mysteries promised an environment of secretiveness and exclusivity that would elevate them in front of the eyes of the deity and although there were no perceivable changes within the sphere of the initiate's public life, it is easy for us to conceive that the participants were conscious of their exceptionality. The newly initiates were encouraged to remember the day⁸⁶ of their initiation and all of its proceedings, to pay attention to the many secret symbols and passwords and they were even allowed to keep certain memorabilia as tokens of their initiation. Aside from that, we have to mention that on many occasions the participants of the mysteries indulged in a form of competition between themselves, as they tried to rise above their peers in terms of devotion and generosity. The common activities provided the appropriate environment as they included sacrificial offerings and consumption of food and drinks. There, the most affluent members were given the opportunity to exhibit their means by contributing massive amounts of money, commercial goods or even land to the organization⁸⁷. An important factor was the high individuality the members exhibited as they remained autonomous, free to tend to their private affairs and most importantly, since the initiation was dependent entirely on the person's decision, that same person had the freedom to abandon the said organization and disengage from all its activities. This was done without any repercussions of a legal nature or otherwise. There were no penalties or physical punishments, nor exclusions of any kind⁸⁸ in the public life.

In many cases practitioners that were strangers to one another were encouraged to communicate and advise each other on matters of the mysteries and also to form friendships. For a practitioner to seek and find a mystery initiate of the same cult in a different area, there were

⁸⁶ (Burkert, 1987, 46)

⁸⁷ (Burkert, 1987, 44)

⁸⁸ (Burkert, 1987, 45)

certain common symbols that facilitated the recognition among them, imposing a sense of familiarity and camaraderie amongst total strangers⁸⁹. From Apuleius we get privy about his voyage from Corinth to Rome and how our protagonist sought after other worshippers of the Isis cult to whom he was a stranger before. We get to know that the Roman initiates deemed his previous initiation incomplete and thus requested of him to conduct a local one. What we can exert from this piece of information is that first of all, there were many different cults of the same deity but also that there was a form of, furtive yet existent, competition and even hierarchy between the cults, in terms of validity and sanctity.

The propaganda of the cults, and the priesthood's attempts to attract more devotees and wealthier members, cannot be interpreted as a strife for expansion and inclusivity, but as a means to establish the presence of the cult. The first and foremost concern was that the teachings be kept a secret from the common people that were unworthy of it. This is directly connected to the identity of the practitioners as the knowledge and the process were contributing to something truly esoteric and exclusive, which is the common experience of the initiation. Another contribution to the mutual identity, was, in some cases, a certain and common, way of living⁹⁰ or a distinctive set of clothing and appearance, such as "linen clothes and a shaved head" as it was a common feature for the ones who were followers of Isis⁹¹.

By saying that the cultic life did not have a profound effect on the follower's public life, does not mean that the religious organizations were immune to public or political affairs. There are instances where men of the state and politicians, tried to engage and mobilize devotees to causes that had little to no relation with the religion they followed⁹². A politician could make a plea to a religious group which they themselves were a part of, in order to accelerate their progress through the sits in the government. We can see here that in many cases the religious sphere correlated and met with the political and civil one in constructive ways as the one came to the aid of the other.

Being compared to an organized religion, especially the Abrahamic monotheistic ones, which came of course, much later, one could infer that the mystery religions were significantly

⁸⁹ (Burkert, 1987, 45)

⁹⁰ (Burkert, 1987, 46)

⁹¹ (Burkert, 1987, 47)

⁹² (Burkert, 1987, 48)

less coherent and organized, and also that their members did not bestow the same connection and importance upon one another, like they did in the organized religions. This, although it gave foot to certain researchers to claim that mysteries were inferior to the organized religions, can be misleading as it obscures specific characteristics which could revert this image⁹³. It is probable that a cult without a dogmatic orientation and a rigid identity avoided concepts and situations that plagued most of the modern religions. By indoctrinating the followers to a polarity of “us versus them”, drives people to an aggressive attitude towards other religions or cults, thus eliminating any attempt of theosophical dialogue or inquiry, let alone a constructive cooperation. As Burkert states, “the pagan gods are not jealous of each other as they form an open society”, this in turn, nullifies any concept of heresy or excommunication on grounds of devotion to more than one cult or the introduction of new deities and practices to an already established religion⁹⁴. To this end testifies the practice of housing, within the same temple, statues belonging to gods other than the one the sanctuary was dedicated to initially and making offerings to them. Initiates were not at all prevented or even discouraged from participating in multiple mysteries and devoting themselves to more gods. This notion of course, extended to priesthood as well, as there was nothing preventing a priest to participate and coordinate rituals pertaining to more than one religion⁹⁵. This was supported by a theoretical and ideological substructure which dictated that different gods could coexist without one imposing on another. To this end the similarity between the major deities and their characteristics played an important role. This of course does not mean that the various gods and goddesses and their names were not important individually or that their followers believed that they were mere forms or incarnations of a greater, inclusive entity⁹⁶. Related to this tradition are the many names of Isis who is called “μυριώνυμος” – the one with ten thousand names.

The same tradition can be applied to the oaths taken by the initiates in order for their secrecy and silence to be reassured. In the same oath it was custom to contain, not only the appeal for the god to whom the initiate is taking the oath for, but also the names of others, lesser and of more local character deities. Although many researchers in the past tried to define these

⁹³ (Burkert, 1987, 48)

⁹⁴ (Burkert, 1987, 48)

⁹⁵ (Burkert, 1987, 48-49)

⁹⁶ (Burkert, 1987, 49)

gods and goddesses, referred to only, altogether under the epithet “whom I revere”, we can be sure that those divinities were none other than local deities, and extending the oath towards them, only strengthen the obligation of the person to keep the contents of their oath valid. The entrance to a new religious community, in this way, does not exclude the religious past of a person but, on the contrary, makes use of this person's devotion and fervor by extending the love and faith towards the previous religion to the new one. This practice establishes that relying to modern, monotheistic religions is highly problematic in our quest to understand better the ancient religions. Instead of conversion and resentment of the previous religion, the person was encouraged to continue their old traditions by incorporating the new faith in an organic and peaceful manner⁹⁷.

10. The theology of the mysteries

Theology, by definition, is the systematic study of the divine and its nature or of a religious belief system. One of the first users of this word was none other than Plato himself in his work “The Republic”, in which the meaning given to the word is the discussion about God. Here we will use the same sense of the term in our quest to discover the theological background of the ancient mysteries.

The problems with examining the ancient mysteries begin with the realization of the absolute scarcity of the sources available. The liturgical books of paganism have been lost forever and this loss is unrecoverable as they contained unique knowledge that would have allowed for a more complete and accurate perspective in terms of dogmatic content and authenticity. This has been forcing the researchers towards a series of indirect sources in the hopes of curbing the problem. The three types of substitute evidence that have been employed towards this cause were: the Greek romances, the Gnostic and Hermetic literature and the Greek magical papyri⁹⁸. This material is comprised of pieces of evidence very different in nature from one another, and each one of them must be meticulously examined in relation both to historical data and to other sources for the claims contained to be corroborated. In addition to the

⁹⁷ (Burkert, 1987, 50)

⁹⁸ (Burkert, 1987, 66)

unique problems that each of the groups is plagued with, none of these pieces of information is direct and thus it cannot be taken in without skepticism or at the very least a hint of mistrust⁹⁹.

Although at first glance an improbable resource, romances, have been found to contain information pertaining to ancient mysteries. Basically, they are adventure tales taking place in a semi historical place and time, and in most instances the protagonists are two lovers that are being kept apart by various misfortunes and obstacles, but in the end, they are always reunited and live happily ever after. As a form of literature according to Britannica, was introduced at the latest stages of the Hellenistic era and enriched the later Latin literature with a series of themes and motives. Apart from romance, other topics included exotic adventure, magic, the punishments of the gods and even appalling realism¹⁰⁰. In Apuleius' work "Golden Ass" we can find valuable information about the initiations in the mysteries of Isis and Osiris although the work itself is a romance. While we may dare to deduce more information based on this novel, it is always useful to exert some caution as the symbolisms that are contained and the details that are described could have been used as a mere tool to make the narrative more appealing and give it a pompous tone¹⁰¹. Religious rituals were in many an occasion integral for the development of this story and often contained illustrious and vivid descriptions of the religious life. The challenging part is that while we can certainly entertain the thought that they are describing real life events, nonetheless we have to always consider the fact that a deeper involvement on behalf of the writer is not necessarily true, as the primary scope of the novel was to amuse and not inform¹⁰².

The second group of our sources is Gnostic and Hermetic literature. The Hermetic writings, or Hermetica, were texts of occult theological nature that were ascribed to the Egyptian god of knowledge Thoth, who was later Hellenized in the form of Hermes Trismegistus and they contained various types of topics which included philosophical questions about the God and the people, the nature of the universe and the powers that rule over it, and certain aspects of astrology and even divination¹⁰³.

⁹⁹ (Burkert, 1987, 66)

¹⁰⁰ (Britannica, 2023)

¹⁰¹ (Burkert, 1987, 66-67)

¹⁰² (Burkert, 1987, 67)

¹⁰³ (Britannica, Hermetic writings, 2013)

Gnosticism on the other hand, refers to various religious and philosophical movements that were popular during the Roman era and more specifically within the second and third century C.E. which means that there were later than the Hermetic tradition. The topics that were examined within these groups were similar to the aforementioned tradition, and an emphasis was given to the secret knowledge “γνῶσις” from which the name is originated¹⁰⁴.

The material available, although of considerable quantity, paints a so far fragmented picture, which is pushing the research in a multitude of directions¹⁰⁵. In these texts, caution must be exerted once more, as some of them, especially the ones of Gnostic origin, are heavily influenced by the Christian or Jewish heritage, due to their cultural environment and because of this they cannot be reliable enough as dependable sources about the nature and structure of the ancient mysteries that predate the advent of Christianity or the Judaic traditions. The texts from the Hermetic tradition were not immune to the influences of Christianity either, as it is plain to see in the first chapter of the Corpus Hermetica, the “Poimandres”, which alludes heavily to Jewish -Christian ideas¹⁰⁶. In its turn, this signifies that whatever piece of information we can conclusively infer, has been modified by the effects of religious systems that differ to the extreme from the ancient religions. Even the linguistic aspects are problematic as far as the terminology is concerned as the word “mystery” is used here with philosophical connotations, pertaining to Platonism, and assign the word with a symbolic meaning¹⁰⁷. In conclusion, we can understand that the texts, although providing us with potentially useful insights, nonetheless, they need to be examined properly and diligently in order to provide a purely pagan picture and not the amalgamation they currently are.

The last group refers to the Greek Magical Papyri, a series of papyri, originating from the Graeco-Roman period that were containing various magical spells and rituals, described in detail. It is apparent that the corpus in our possession today is a mere fraction of what originally existed¹⁰⁸. The incorporation of the Greek magical papyri in the theological research was first introduced by the German scholar, Albrecht Dietrich. While it is true that the tradition of magic

¹⁰⁴ (Britannica, Gnosticism, 2020)

¹⁰⁵ (Burkert, 1987, 67)

¹⁰⁶ (Burkert, 1987, 67)

¹⁰⁷ (Burkert, 1987, 67)

¹⁰⁸ (Betz, 1986, 41)

and mysticism have been in effect at the same time throughout religious development, nonetheless the contents of the texts have little to do with the mystical traditions and the mystery initiations. The spells that are contained are a combination of elements that can be attributed to mainly the Greek religion but also are heavily influenced by the Christian and even the Mesopotamian tradition. The character of those spells and invocations is highly problematic as well, because they refer to private ceremonies that satisfy very private needs and goals, something which is completely opposite to the idea of being initiated to a community that can produce an environment of unity and amity¹⁰⁹. A major difference between a practitioner of magic and a mystery initiate is none other than the result they aim to achieve. While the mysteries are incorporating a new member so that they can participate in the various rituals, experience a closer connection to the divine, and to be in a more beneficial relationship to it, on the contrary, the magician has more mundane tasks, as his efforts are focusing on individuals or at small groups of people at best, and in addition to that, the achievements were of a much more practical and individualistic nature as they mostly referred to divination, enrichment in earthly goods, protection from the evil eye, legal affairs, or maybe the seduction of a lover¹¹⁰. What is strikingly out of the ordinary when we are examining sources of this kind, is the almost complete absence of healing and medicinal recipes and spells, and this is maybe because by that time and era, the medical procedures were mostly left to professional doctors and organized temples¹¹¹.

Now that we have analyzed all the three groups of sources that we have available we can understand the difficulty that is intrinsic to this quest. It is perhaps possible that the so-called mystery texts never actually existed, at least not in the form that we today have in our imagination. The mysteries were never unspeakable and secret in the sense that would make someone curious and interested in participating, but mostly in the sense that their essence and core ideology cannot be expressed by human languages¹¹². Proclus makes use of the term “unspeakable sympathy” when he tries to describe what is felt by the participants during the rituals while Aristotle, states that the people that are undergoing the initiations and the ceremonies should not learn “μαθεῖν” their contents but experience them, feel them on their

¹⁰⁹ (Burkert, 1987, 68)

¹¹⁰ (Burkert, 1987, 68)

¹¹¹ (Burkert, 1987, 69)

¹¹² (Burkert, 1987, 69)

persons and be affected by them “παθεῖν”¹¹³. At this point it is useful to clarify the context of this quotation, as in his work, Aristotle tried to differentiate the primitive but highly theatrical mysticism the Egyptians employed, to the philosophical mysticism which may not be theatrical in nature and flamboyant but can lead the person step by step towards cerebral exaltation. In order to achieve these higher experiences, the initiate does not learn new information but rather this information is supposed to exist prior to the initiation.

By continuing and expanding on the theme that the previous paragraph ended with, here we'll be using the term “logos hieros” in order to refer to a series of mystical texts that contained the knowledge that was guarded within the various mystery cults. A numerous amount of mystery texts that revolve around the preparatory learning the initiates had to achieve in order to progress, have been recovered. These testimonies are about the transmission of knowledge and speech, logos, had a significant position within them, as significant was the obligation of the initiates to not verbalize the proceedings to the uninitiated. The mystery teachings, at their core, had placed a sacred tale, a story full of symbolisms which was known by the name “hieros logos, which contained information about the gods and occult aspects about them. According to Burkert, the myth is a tale passed on through the line of oral tradition, with a certain series of actions comprising its structure, that is coming to life¹¹⁴ by anthropomorphous actors, and it is the earliest and most common form of transferring the knowledge of gods in the ancient world¹¹⁵. In this sense, the myths supplied the appropriate environment for the several aspects of the mysteries to be able to be expressed and made known.

Another pillar on which the mysteries were built is the extensive use of allegorical constructs. In the dawn of the Hellenistic era, allegory carried the notion of mysticism, and in turn, the mysteries are themselves expressed through the mechanisms of allegory and analogy. Exactly as and in addition to the theatrical rituals and the overwhelming, mostly nocturnal settings, the use of allegorical schemes induced a sense of excitement, fear and revelation to the mysteries¹¹⁶. In this manner, as Macrobius¹¹⁷ wrote that a plain exposition of the divine is

¹¹³ (Burkert, 1987, 69)

¹¹⁴ (Burkert, 1987, 77)

¹¹⁵ (Burkert, 1987, 73)

¹¹⁶ (Burkert, 1987, 79)

¹¹⁷ Ambrosius Theodosius Macrobius, was a Roman philosopher of the 4th and 5th centuries CE.

abhorrent and unnatural, and because of this, the mysteries themselves are obscured by figurative expressions, so even the initiates themselves cannot reach through the veil and can only venerate the mystery. Only the ones who have sharpened their perception with wisdom can reach the true interpretation¹¹⁸. After all, the mysteries take heed from nature itself which does not allow for easy and direct interpretation. Because of the close relation between mysteries and allegory, all applications of allegorical narratives in a religious context came to be considered as mystic¹¹⁹. In the mysteries of Isis, the use of the nature allegory is no exception. They allegorization starts not in the Hellenistic era, but it was part of the Egyptian tradition as well. Osiris and his myths were strongly connected to the river Nile, which was of utter importance for the population. Just like the death and the resurrection of Osiris, the water is reduced but it always returns at full force during the summer, providing the people and animals with precious water and the crops with nutrients enabling them to continue living. In such ceremonies, a container full of Nile water, was presented and carried in processions resembling the course of the river, and inside in sanctuaries that were built to resemble Nilometers, artificial floodings were also produced¹²⁰. The simplest interpretation of the myth, was that Isis represented the earth while Osiris represented the water of the Nile. Seth, Osiris' vicious brother, represent the salty sea from which nothing can grow. The circles of lamentation that is succeeded by cheerful festivals, can be nothing else than the attempt of the people to bring the prosperity back¹²¹.

This holds true especially when we examine the mysteries, as in most cases each divinity behind each mystery cult had a very specific myth which the mystery tried to reenact, it used its symbols, and through repetitive invocations and rituals, the participants elevated themselves to the sphere of the divine. The narrative in these myths is generally known as many sources give accounts of them, nonetheless specific details have been kept secret because of their religious meaning and sacred gravitas¹²². It is known that certain parts of the myths were so sensitive and important that the priest protected them by terrifying vows of secrecy. These forbidden parts contained stories about castration, dismemberment, sexual relations of the gods, and although some aspects of them were sometimes already known, nevertheless, they were kept secret

¹¹⁸ (Burkert, 1987, 79)

¹¹⁹ (Burkert, 1987, 80)

¹²⁰ (Burkert, 1987, 82)

¹²¹ (Burkert, 1987, 82)

¹²² (Burkert, 1987, 73)

because the ordinary and vulgar people would not understand the hidden meanings, and would thus shape a rather unfitting and sacrilegious image of the mysteries and even the deities themselves¹²³.

Relevant to these patterns, was the motif of the suffering god, which played a very important role, and it was connected with practices of ritualistic grief and mourning that was reminiscent of certain episodes of the sacred myths of the mysteries. This is especially true for the mysteries of Isis and Osiris where we have the sequence of a lamentation period followed by a joyful one, due to Osiris' resurrection¹²⁴. The practitioners of the mysteries were exclaiming "we have found, we are happy together", as after days of lamentation, with public exhibitions of maddening grief¹²⁵, the idol of Osiris was revealed once again and the priests orchestrating this ritual, reassured the participants that as the God was saved, in this way, sympathetically, they themselves would be saved by whatever plagued them. Although the pattern of resurrection is pervasive in most of the mystery religions, we can never ignore the dimension of death that is present even after the act of resurrection, as Osiris remains within the kingdom of the dead. Perhaps, what is important in these types of myths, is the transformative powers the mysteries can bestow upon their members, and not a literal, physical resurrection at a point after death. The resurrection in this context then, can be interpreted in a sense of a better afterlife than the uninitiated, and the retaining of consciousness after death. The character of such texts can be placed under the philosophical or theosophical categories and their influence can be found in many works of antiquity¹²⁶.

Entrusting this theosophical knowledge within a book, was not a later practice but rather an incredibly old one, as we have references of books from the earliest of the sources. The decree of Ptolemy Philopator leaves no doubt about the existence and use of such documents, as we stated earlier, and according to which the practitioners were ordered to surrender a copy of their hieros logos to a royal official for inspection. This happened to enable the better control of such teachings, along with the people who partook in them, by the state. It is probable that every practitioner or priest had their own copy of the sacred teachings and that in some cases the

¹²³ (Burkert, 1987, 75)

¹²⁴ (Burkert, 1987, 75)

¹²⁵ (Burkert, 1987, 77)

¹²⁶ (Burkert, 1987, 70)

whole cult was centered around such documents. The books that the mystery practitioners used were not comprised only of theosophical and philosophical texts but also contained material of pertinent books, the topics of which included instructions for interpreting omens and prophecies, instructions to perform prayers to various divinities, and also instructions for sacrificial offerings¹²⁷. Knowledge was the centerpiece of the ancient mysteries, so much so, that many practitioners complained and raised caution about certain fraudsters who took advantage of naive prospective initiates, and although they took fees, they never revealed the truth to their customers¹²⁸. Books were not the exclusive material used in passing the knowledge down, but they were used in accord with various others, such as iconography, theatrical performances and special hymns to complete the experience.

What we need to clarify in this point is that, although the books played a very important role for the cultic function of the mysteries, nonetheless these do not comprise the very basis of the religion such as the holy books of the monotheistic religions. The ancient mysteries had lacked the dogmatic character which we later encounter in modern religions, and there was not by any means an organization behind the hieros logos in order to control and transform it¹²⁹.

11. The Extraordinary experience

In this chapter we will be occupied with aspects that are connected to the experience of the mystery rituals and how this experience functioned and transformed a person's psyche. The mysteries were supposed to be exceptional events, so much so that they influenced the rest of the person's life. Being a participant in such events would expose someone to an experience that could be felt to the very soul of the person and as we said earlier, it was described with the word "pathos". By continuing the Aristotelian point of view, during the mysteries the initiate was not there to learn but to experience and this experience could change their state of mind¹³⁰. It was also said that any person, regardless of their place of origin, who partook in the initiation process, would be overwhelmed, and absolutely astonished by the theatrical rituals using both

¹²⁷ (Burkert, 1987, 71)

¹²⁸ (Burkert, 1987, 72)

¹²⁹ (Burkert, 1987, 71-72)

¹³⁰ (Burkert, 1987, 90)

optical and acoustical effects and illusions, with light and darkness appearing interchangeably. The whole ritual was supposed to move something in even the most cold and coarse person in the world and lead them to realize that there are more things in this world than the eyes and ears can perceive. The rituals and liturgic processes were hinting towards the grand and unalterable miracles of the universe, with the celestial bodies circling around and thus the halls in which the initiation rituals were taking place, were a micrography of the cosmos itself, and the forces that comprised the all and allowed it to function, were the participants themselves¹³¹.

The mysteries, from the religious point of view, provided a direct and instant contact with the divine in this way. From a psychological perspective though, the initiate came into contact with an exceptional and completely out of the ordinary set of events, which transformed and altered their personality. This leads us to the realization that, as the mysteries are something to be felt and perceived only by the mind and soul, a mere observation, if someone from the outside gained the privilege to witness them, this would contribute little to nothing to their knowledge. Experiencing the unspeakable, was performed as a package of a series of successive rituals that prepared the prospective initiate for what was about to unfold. Unending days of fasting, purifications, exhaustion, apprehension and excitement, all these conditions contributed only to make this procedure as profound and marvellous as humanly possible¹³². The ability of the mysteries to induce irrevocable change, is made clear from the Plutarch's description, that the experience of the initiation is similar to that of dying. The soul wanders away in circles, led on by treacherous paths and is taken by panic, before a warm light shines in front of it and opens a way to salvation, as the soul is now free and honored among other initiated, looking down upon the unholy crowds of the uninitiated who suffer in their muddy and foggy domain¹³³.

From Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, we have the only first-hand account about the proceedings of an actual initiation but this type of source, being a romance, is highly problematic and needs to be treated with caution. The literary style of this work is very decorative, and considerably evocative, and tries to intrigue the reader. The writer informs us about the various procedures of the initiations and also his personal experience, as he "approached death, saw the sun at midnight, came closer to the gods of both the upper and the underworld, and adored them

¹³¹ (Burkert, 1987, 90)

¹³² (Burkert, 1987, 91)

¹³³ (Burkert, 1987, 91-92)

from a very close distance”¹³⁴. Unfortunately, due to the nature of the rituals he was obligated not to reveal anything of value and of course the scope of the novel, which was to entertain and not to document, the writer manages in picking our curiosity without ever satisfying it with an inclusive description¹³⁵.

One could say that the mysteries were based in a system of dualistic opposites, the realms of life and death were not mutually exclusive but participated in a dynamic relationship that created a unity connected to the divine. This dualism can be perceived in many symbols and aspects of the sacred rituals and teachings, such as darkness and light, as we already have seen in the descriptions of various initiations, the macrocosm and the microcosm in terms of above, meaning the celestial bodies and their functions in the realm of the divine, and below meaning the land of the living¹³⁶.

Another point of interest in the ideology of the ancient mysteries is that they lacked a form of baptism, as far as the evidence can corroborate, as it was not usual for pagan tradition. The various purification rituals though, that utilised water were absolutely part of the ancient tradition and of course the same was in effect for the mysteries as well. The act of baptism, in the sense of submersing a person in the water in order for them to be admonished of their previous life and be initiated to the new one, as a clean slate, was not in effect here. In the temples of Isis there were containers for water, and the use of water in rituals was very popular, but it was used as a means of replicating the flood of the Nile and not for conducting baptisms¹³⁷.

12. Popular beliefs about mystery cults

In an environment full of secrets, theatrical performances, words of power, and access to the forbidden divine, the people who are not initiated in the mysteries, are becoming curious and demand answers. When answers cannot be provided, the public resorts to invoking imaginary constructs to satisfy the curiosity. The beliefs that came forth from such invocations, transformed the way that the people viewed the mysteries and what they thought of their rituals. In this

¹³⁴ (Burkert, 1987, 97)

¹³⁵ (Burkert, 1987, 98)

¹³⁶ (Burkert, 1987, 101)

¹³⁷ (Burkert, 1987, 101-102)

chapter we will try to shed some light to the most prominent of those beliefs and figure out which of those are valid truths and which are mere misconceptions.

The first question to trouble the non-initiate's mind and spike their interests, is whether the initiation rituals contained forms of torture. This was perhaps one of the most frightening aspects of the rituals and perhaps one of those what was used by the adversaries of certain cults in order to vilify them and avert perspective initiates from participating. It is normal for us to imagine that certain levels of harassment towards the newcomers, a form of hazing if we use the modern terminology, indeed took place. Either way it is largely enforced in many aspects of modern life when it comes to an initiation of some kind, even if it is not pertinent to religious practice, such as the military and certain exclusive clubs. This form of controlled torture is used on the new members in order for them to feel the shock of the distraction and diminishing of their identities and use this disturbing event to make them receptive towards a new one¹³⁸. The torture could take many forms, depending on the cult, it could be only psychological, only physical, or both. In other words, it could be comprised of humiliation from the priest or / and from the peers, physical pain or even permanent mutilation. In some examples, the ordeal took the form of extended periods of fasting or enduring the elements of the nature. Certain rituals didn't involve only around pain and humiliation, but they contained also a theatrical aspect in them. Our sources indicate examples where the prospective initiate's hands were tied, while they were blindfolded when the priest cut the bonds and theatrically liberated them. Fire was believed to be of purifying nature and thus in many cases it was used for such a purpose, while acts of violence using real or facsimile weaponry and even human sacrifices were implied as well¹³⁹. Before we condemn this kind of rituals as brutal and barbaric, counter to their supposed strife for enlightenment, we need to consider the possibility that all those descriptions and images are used to symbolise the torment, but the initiate psyche is subjected to, as they transform from a crude person to one being in contact with the divine¹⁴⁰. Of course, the quality of symbolism does not exclude the possibility that at least some of these practises were indeed enforced to a certain extent. For the lack of more accurate and decisive information, the answer to this question will be remaining veiled by ambiguity and uncertainty.

¹³⁸ (Burkert, 1987, 102)

¹³⁹ (Burkert, 1987, 103)

¹⁴⁰ (Burkert, 1987, 104)

The second question and perhaps the most tantalising one, the general public raised about the ancient mysteries is there one concerned about the sexual behaviour of the initiates. Although in the antiquity, the term orgy possessed a quite different meaning from nowadays, as it indicated the workings and typical procedures of the cults, nonetheless this could not stop the people from connecting the inner workings of a cult and the typical nocturnal setting with stories and tales of erotic debauchery. In reality, the mysteries were no strange to such practises. Both the sexual act and the public display of, mostly male, genitalia, had an exceedingly long tradition of being associated with not only life as an apotropaic symbol, but also as the very symbol of life after death¹⁴¹. In many instances, the very connection with the divine, was ritually facilitated by a phallic or otherwise sexual symbology. Intimate union with the god or goddess is heavily implied in various sources, usually incorporating stories of impregnation of a female participant with the seed of the god¹⁴². Under this light we have to mention that the act itself was not a centrepiece of this experience but the vehicle on which it was transported to the person. As far as the cult of Isis is concerned, the situation is problematic as there are no explicit sexual symbols. All of their public aspects of their appearance, from the way they looked to the way they performed their religious obligations, everything seemed severe and almost sterile. The only aspect of the myth that could hint to sexual acts and impregnation, is the association of Osiris' penis with the waters of the Nile, and the subsequent relation of the water with fertility and abundance. What picks our interest, is importance that the priests of Isis to give in to the abstinence of the individual in preparation for the initiation¹⁴³ and also some reference to the marriage bed for the two gods, which the priests were responsible of. It has to be noted though that sexual abstinence was not something new in this context as the majority of the mystery cults, enforced abstinence to their prospective members prior to their rituals of initiation. Under the light of psychology, this practise would make the initiate more sensitive to certain signals and symbols and allow them to be perceived in a more profound and mind- altering manner¹⁴⁴.

All of the aforementioned practises, aimed at inducing a unique and extraordinary experience to the participants and the easiest way for this to be achieved what is the consumption

¹⁴¹ (Burkert, 1987, 105)

¹⁴² (Burkert, 1987, 106)

¹⁴³ (Burkert, 1987, 107)

¹⁴⁴ (Burkert, 1987, 108)

of mind-altering substances and narcotics. Exactly as pain and sex, drugs and their consumption, are still heavily associated with mystical societies and of course mysteries. Although the mysteries of Eleusis were the most “suspicious” in regard to potential employment of drugs via the kykeon¹⁴⁵, many different sources have hinted that the Eleusinian mysteries were not unique in that manner. Although the incorporation of substances cannot be adamantly established, it is nevertheless important to point out that certain substances, whether they were narcotic or not, were indeed consumed and they had an integral role to the rituals. The common meals that the participants looked forward to, were a means of expressing a common and binding experience in order to create a sense of unity within the group¹⁴⁶.

13. The Egyptian tradition

The ancient Egyptians were perhaps the only people with such a fascination about life. Although this may contrast with the way that the majority of people perceive the ancient Egyptian culture, as the culture of the dead, it is important to note that the Egyptian system of beliefs was not transfixed with death at all but rather with the continuation of life after the physical death. For them life was something permanent and death was only a necessary milestone along the way. Their funerary religion was very complex and vast amounts of time and resources were dedicated towards who reaching the afterlife¹⁴⁷. In spite of there are many changes in the culture of Egypt and all the religious adaptations, the core of the funerary beliefs was not changed. The chronological period who will it be examining here is the period between the New Kingdom, 1550 - 1069 BCE, until the late period, 664 - 332 BCE. The blooming cultural activity of the New Kingdom was of course fuelled by the stability, power and affluence that characterised the era and as we mentioned earlier the city of Thebes what is the centre of this activity.

The religion and politics at the time were not independent from one another as we might think, but Egyptian royalty was absolutely involved with the realm of the divine, to the point that the Pharaoh represented the solar power on earth, an idea that who was in effect from the most

¹⁴⁵ (Burkert, 1987, 108-109)

¹⁴⁶ (Burkert, 1987, 110-112)

¹⁴⁷ (Bryan, 2002, 12)

ancient times. At that time the Pharaohs were buried and what is known today as the Valley of the Kings, under a pyramid shaped mountain in western Thebes within subterranean chambers. This place of burial remained in use until the 21st Dynasty (1069 – 945 BCE) when it was (Jan, 1990) Both the religion and the highest authority were based on the ideology of preserving the natural order (maat), the personification of which as a female deity was responsible of governing the universe in terms of its natural functions up to the guidance of the dead through the Underworld¹⁴⁸. The movements of the sun in the sky and the flooding of the Nile, were not natural occurring events to the Egyptians in the sense that they did not take them for granted. Rather they were the workings of the gods who maintained the order against the malevolent deities and demons that wanted to bring chaos and destroy the world. The sun was setting each evening, thus entering the realm of the Dwat, and it was born again in the morning of the next day to live once more. The same happened with the deceased Pharaoh, as the incarnation of Re on earth, and so he needed external help to transcend the realm of shadows. This aid came in the form of written guidance on the walls of temples, coffins and other objects, for the Pharaoh to use in the afterlife and become one with the sun god. The same was valid to the people of Egypt as well, and in order to achieve rebirth, they employed a series of complex rituals, magical invocations, amulets and ceremonies.

14. The Egyptian Cosmogony

In this chapter we will explore the intricate and elaborate subject of the ancient Egyptian cosmogony, the way the different traditions were created and developed, and the role the local belief systems influenced these traditions. This examination will be useful for us to be initiated to the Egyptian religious status quo and to be able to perceive the numerous facets of this particularly complex religion. As always, the religious aspect we will examine first, will be the birth of the cosmos, as it defines the borders and created a space in which the rest of the mythology is being unfold.

Although our focus will be primarily on the New Kingdom, the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, it is appropriate to clarify that the Egyptian mythology concerning the creation, can be

¹⁴⁸ (Bryan, 2002, 12)

perceived as one continuous process of theological development throughout the years and the historical events. Ideas and systems that were developed in earlier stages at the distant past, such as the Old and Middle Kingdoms, can be traced within textual evidence at much later periods. This informs us that no matter the progression and transformation, the core values and ideas have never been dramatically succumbed to profound change¹⁴⁹. This way, since the chronological examination is nonsensical, the most suitable way is perhaps the typological one, with the extensive analysis of the contents of each of the major traditions¹⁵⁰. The problem with this method, is that one needs to be very cautious to discern the traditional Egyptian influence that is apparent in the textual evidence, from the various foreign influences that took place due to historical events and political circumstances¹⁵¹. Besides this adversity regarding the authenticity of the ideas, environmental reasons must also be considered. The significantly different climatological conditions between the North and the South, or the proximity of a specific place of cultural and religious interest to the Nile, can lead us to believe that a certain religious center was prolific regarding the production of liturgical texts and mythological treatises when others were not, simply because the survivability of the papyri is not uniform¹⁵².

In order to overcome these issues, the safest way to proceed is by surveying the different cosmogony theologies from a mythocentric and also geographical point of view. The geographical aspect of it comes from the fact that at least in their initial phases, the various cosmogonies that were developed, had a distinctly local center, and started as cults dedicated to certain deities in a highly individualistic and independent manner. The belief systems that we will try to analyze are three, Heliopolitan, the Mempite and the Hermopolitan which although distinct from one another, notwithstanding, their later versions show an interdependency¹⁵³.

Firstly, the Heliopolitan tradition is going to be explored. This cosmogony is centered on Heliopolis, a city of important status and cultural significance situated within the boundaries of modern day Cairo. This belief system can be safely placed in the earlier periods, but its core teachings did not only remain intact, but were embellished upon at the Later period. The creator

¹⁴⁹ (McClain, 2011, 1)

¹⁵⁰ (McClain, 2011, 1)

¹⁵¹ (McClain, 2011, 1)

¹⁵² (McClain, 2011, 2)

¹⁵³ (McClain, 2011, 2)

in this mythological corpus is Atum a deity that gave birth to the world by the act of masturbation, an act that brings forth the feminine, given symbolically the hypostasis of Nebet-hetepet, the “Lady of the Offerings” or Hathor, the deity of love and procreation, that was inherent and present in his person and an integral part of the creation. According to the scriptures, Atum created Shu (personifying the element of air) and Tefnut (the element of moisture) first, that came forth inseparable, floating in Nun’s primordial waters. In order for the creation to exist, Geb (the earth) and Nut (the sky) were also born, separating the couple forever, thus creating space. From this union came forth Osiris (fertility and rejuvenation), Seth (chaos), Isis (motherhood and magic) and Nephthys (protection). These deities formed the Ennead, the central group of deities before anyone else came to existence. Ultimately though, as the religion was transformed and exposed to foreign influences, the eight deities were considered as hypostases and avatars of the creator god Atum¹⁵⁴.

The traditions of Memphis are similar with the ones of the Heliopolis in the sense that a creator god was responsible for bringing the lesser deities and the material world into existence. The major difference is that according to the scriptures, the creator was Ptah, a god associated generally with craftsmanship and artistry and that he did not resort to any sexual or otherwise physical means to create the universe. He accomplished that in an intellectual manner, as everything he thought of, he created by uttering its name¹⁵⁵. The notion that existence started within the mind of a powerful entity and also the importance and inherent magical power of the names of everything created, can be traced to much later religious systems which were apparently and directly influenced. Such a system is Hermetism and the notions that the creation and everything material exist in the mind of an all powerful being is at its core teaching as we will see in another chapter. It is important to clarify that Ptah created not only the Ennead as we came to know about in the Heliopolitan cosmogony, but also Atum himself. This enabled the priests in Memphis to claim their belief system to be older and thus more accurate and also to elevate their city in a religious way in the eyes of the people. According to scriptures dating from the New Kingdom onwards, the creator god created space by lifting the sky away from the earth as one of the first steps, this reminds us of the importance of creating the boundaries between

¹⁵⁴ (McClain, 2011, 2)

¹⁵⁵ (McClain, 2011, 3)

Nun and the world in order to enable the rest of the creation to take place¹⁵⁶. In the Ptolemaic era, Ptah was recognized universally as the creator of the gods.

As far as the Hermopolitan religious tradition is concerned, it lacks a set of original texts, in a way that the most information we have of this belief system is available from indirect sources. Cosmologies of Memphis and Thebes have provided us with traces of this theogony. Instead of an Ennead, here we have four couples of deities that represent the primordial forces. Nu with his wife Naunet stood for the primeval waters, Huh and his wife Hauhet represented the infinity of the waters, Kek and Kauket embodied the darkness of the world before the creation and Amun with his wife Amaunet personified the hidden and unfathomable nature. These primeval gods and the elements they symbolized were parts of the creation before the creation and agents of the creation of the tangible world themselves. Initially these two groups were separated according to their gender. The union of these two counterparts and the turmoil it procured gave way to the first mound, thus initiating the rest of the creation. In later versions of this cosmogony the creator of the Ogdoad is Ptah who created the hidden egg from which the other seven gods emerged, apparently due to the influence of the teachings of Memphis, but the true creator in these texts is Nun, the primordial waters themselves that set the universe in motion¹⁵⁷. After the emergence of the mound from the waters, the eight initial deities join together and form Ra, the sun god, or Amun, according to more Theban influenced manuscripts¹⁵⁸.

As we mentioned earlier, the Theban theological system considered Amun as the unseen force behind the creation of the Ogdoad. Amun is the one behind every single aspect and facet of creation, as his power transcends through every other created deity. This god – creator was separate and hidden from his creation when he disturbed the still primeval waters to begin his great work and thus even the gods themselves are aloof of his existence but at the same time they act as his avatars.

During the New Kingdom and especially during the Graeco – Roman period, these types of texts were extensively used to adorn temples. These compositions contained notions and ideas

¹⁵⁶ (McClain, 2011, 3)

¹⁵⁷ (McClain, 2011, 3)

¹⁵⁸ (McClain, 2011, 3)

not only from much older eras, but also from a multitude of sources, such as mortuary texts, apotropaic spells and so on. The need for such texts under the encouragement and patronage of the new elite, either Greeks or Romans, made the priests and artisans trusted with such undertakings to seek and take advice from all the different cosmogonic mythologies, thus mixing their elements and creating amalgamations never seen before¹⁵⁹. The excessive production and embellishments of these texts under the new rulers, gave the opportunity to the priests and scribes to put them under syncretistic scrutiny as it was a common theological practice during that era. Another prominent aspect of the production of such commodities was the local character that they sometimes possessed, as many texts contained additional elements that were befitting to the specific areas of the production¹⁶⁰.

15. Mortuary practices and mysticism

The first type of mystical mythology we encounter in the ancient Egypt in without a doubt the mystery of death and renewal, concepts so important to the ancient Egyptians that the entirety of their mythology is revolving around them. The mystery though is not death itself, but rather the renewal of the world after each nightly death, in other words the morning sun. In order to find out about the functioning of the solar circle within the mortuary ideology and the mysteries that accompany it, we need to examine the tombs of the New Kingdom era. The dual purpose of the tomb is to preserve the memory of the deceased as a physical monument commemorating their existence and to accomplish it the tomb had to be visible and accommodating, while at the same time it needed to protect the mummy and the personal items off the dead, by providing a secluded and inaccessible shelter. To accommodate for these needs, the tomb had open rooms in which the ceremonies, liturgies¹⁶¹ and mortuary rituals were conducted and deeper beneath the ground through narrow shafts that were filled with debris after the burial, the sarcophagus laid with all the appropriate offerings and treasures, shielded forever from the world of the living to one of religiousness and mystique¹⁶². The decorations of these tombs are even more revealing since the most frequent motive is the plunge of the sun disk into the netherworld during the night. In this journey the sun gives life to the world of the dead and

¹⁵⁹ (McClain, 2011, 4)

¹⁶⁰ (McClain, 2011, 4)

¹⁶¹ (Assmann, Egyptian Mortuary Liturgies, 1990)

¹⁶² (Assmann, 2014, 187)

eventually becomes united with Osiris, who in turn provides it with the means to come forth again¹⁶³. The mystery of the death of the sun and the texts whose contents were pertinent to it were surrounded by secrecy, so much so that they were not accessible to the general public but only for royal consumption. Another distinction was the themes that were used exclusively to the tombs of the Pharaohs themselves, excluding any other person from their usage¹⁶⁴.

There are mythological episodes and symbols that further endorse the mysticism that surrounds Osiris and by extension all the dead. The term “mystery” in the mortuary texts extends its meaning to include the term “corpse”, and in the case of the sun god this can only mean the corpse of Osiris, which he enters and becomes the son of Nut, which in turn enables him to resurrect. The god himself demanded absolute silence so no one could disturb the dead. Osiris’ tomb is a mystery all by itself as well, as his wife Isis hid each part throughout different parts of Egypt and made the local priests swear that they would not reveal the position to anyone lest the body would be susceptible to attacks of Seth. We see here that the first form of mystery in the Egyptian religion was pertinent to death and the life after¹⁶⁵.

In terms of symbolism, the mortuary texts are full of allusions of transformation and transition. Images of portals and hidden places are very commonly used, so much so that in the Book of the Dead describes a series of seven to twenty one portals that the dead must traverse in order to reach Osiris. One of the most popular tabletop games of ancient Egypt was called senet, and it was about passing through a series of spaces, or rooms, avoiding obstacles and traps and at last reach eternal life. It is not an exaggeration to say that this game had a mortuary and religious basis before it became beloved by the living.

Secret names and their power come ones more into play, since according to the texts the gates were guarded by repulsively looking sentinels, tasked with guarding Osiris for eternity. The possession of the names of the guards themselves and their consecutive gates provided the deceased with a safe passage¹⁶⁶. It was believed that the deceased, after successfully overcoming all the difficulties in their journey, became an “akhw” a transfigured spirit that took a different

¹⁶³ (Assmann, 2014, 188)

¹⁶⁴ (Assmann, 2014, 188)

¹⁶⁵ (Assmann, 2014, 190)

¹⁶⁶ (Assmann, 2014, 191)

name and substance, capable of continuing living indefinitely in the netherworld after having successfully passed all the trials imposed to them by the gods¹⁶⁷.

In addition to crossing over the other side in terms of physical and metaphysical condition, the deceased was also initiated into death itself as if it was a mystical cult. The dead Pharaoh needed to be initiated into the mysteries of the netherworld as a priest needed to be initiated in a temple to assume their duties and the character of the community, he encounters there is definitely cultic¹⁶⁸. The connection between the temple initiation in the world of the living and the otherworldly initiation in the land of the dead is even more pronounced when we consider that the participation in various festivities and the initiation to their sacred rites as preparatory step towards the initiation in the ones after the physical death¹⁶⁹. After someone's death and given they had been at a presence of a god due to their participation in the initiation during their life, they were given the privilege of being vis a vis with their protector deity in the realm of the dead¹⁷⁰.

16. Funerary rituals and the Mysticism of Kingship

In this chapter we will try to analyze and detect traces of mysticism and initiatory practices within the fabric of the traditional ancient Egyptian religion, long before foreign influences and cultural exchanges affected their belief system. For this we will be utilizing the Pyramid Texts, that although their earlier examples are attributed to the Old Kingdom, a period that far precedes the scope of this Thesis, none the less it consists of the earliest and purest form of this type of religious texts and has also heavily influenced the formation and contents of the Coffin Texts and the amalgamation of liturgical texts contained in the famous Book of the Dead. According to Naydler, the Pyramid Texts can be interpreted as deeply mystical ones, since they contain themes and practices usually found in various mystery cults that were prevalent throughout the Mediterranean.

Although the Pyramid Texts are usually regarded as of a strictly funerary nature, nevertheless, they include images associated with mystery cults, such as transcending of the

¹⁶⁷ (Assmann, 1990, 4)

¹⁶⁸ (Assmann, 2014, 200-201)

¹⁶⁹ (Assmann, 2014, 203)

¹⁷⁰ (Assmann, 2014, 204)

Dwat while the subject is still alive, dismemberment and dissolution of oneself, infusion with a deity and spiritual rebirth are among them. The world of the dead was not a static place for the ancient Egyptians, accessible only after the physical death of a person as it is regarded today, but it was a whole world that existed alongside the earthly one and it was constantly interjecting and influencing it¹⁷¹. The visible forces and the supernatural ones were interrelated to a point that at times it was hard to distinguish them apart in an Egyptian's mindset. It is thus not surprising that the care given towards the intangible aspects of life was of the same level if not greater than the one allocated towards the mundane physical ones. This is made clear by a text that appears in the Tomb of Ramesses VI, called "The Book of what is in the Dwat", dating to the New Kingdom. The contents of this book have the character of knowledge as was experienced, inscribed and preserved by the priesthood and they do not give the impression that they comprise of pure speculation and fabricated stories targeting the naïve. Keeping this in mind, we will try to find evidence on the existence of rituals designed to project the human psyche into the realm of the dead while the individual is still alive. The titles themselves, that certain officials maintained, allude towards these practices, such as "master of the secrets of heaven, earth and the underworld"¹⁷². Here it is thus discussed that these types of secrets could be only accessed by direct experience and communication with the divine.

Of course, such bold claims are absolutely contrary to the vast majority of the academic community and the prominent Egyptologists, even from the earliest days of the discipline, dismissed the potential mystical characteristics of the ancient Egyptian religion based on their pre-existing notions of the theological capabilities of the ancient Egyptians. For the earlier researchers the Egyptians were categorized as a pre-philosophical people and thus unable to comprehend delicate notions about the netherworld and complicated theological theories. At the same time the more practical and scientific aspects of the Egyptian culture were overstressed, regarding their complex underworld with its various stages and treacherous paths as mere children stories designed to fuel the imagination without ever going into depth¹⁷³.

¹⁷¹ (Naydler, 2003, p. 19)

¹⁷² (Naydler, 2003, pp. 20-21)

¹⁷³ (Naydler, 2003, pp. 23-25)

Another factor towards the denial of mysticism within the theological fabric, was the fact that in the previous centuries, multiple sects and esoteric circles, embraced, encompassed and extensively utilized aspects of the ancient Egyptian tradition, rendering every academic interest towards them suspicious and better avoided for the feat of tarnishing one's live integrity¹⁷⁴. Nonetheless, there were efforts to reintroduce the research for mystical aspects within the religion as early as the first quarter of the 1900's. Subjects such as suffering through trial, and experiencing death while still alive made certain researchers point out the inherent mysticism that characterizes the ancient Egyptian religion¹⁷⁵. In 1982, the Egyptologist Edward Wente was among the first who expressed doubts regarding as to whether the New Kingdom funerary texts were initially and exclusively used in funerary context or their use found application in the realm of the living as well. These texts were able to give a glimpse into the future to the people that utilized them and provide them with information about things that the common people could not be knowledgeable about¹⁷⁶. Assman, although dismissing the possibility of mysteries being present in the liturgical practice, nevertheless he acknowledged the fact that the so called funerary texts could have served purposes other than aiding in traversing the underworld¹⁷⁷.

Although it is not logical to assume that the ancient Egyptians believed in and utilized mysteries and initiatory practices only after the physical death, many researchers contend that the cosmography contained within the mythos about the underworld was simply and plainly a pseudo-scientific transfer of the life in the world of the living to the next one as they were completely and utterly pragmatic in their physical world. Furthermore, the Egyptian culture not possessing a mystery system of its own while being surrounded by many cultures that relied heavily on mysticism and initiation would be surprising¹⁷⁸.

In order to examine the subject more carefully, we need to take into consideration the primary deity of the Egyptian underworld, Osiris. Regarding the mythology of Osiris, the god and his initiatory rituals were only evoked within a funerary environment and more importantly when a Pharaoh died and his son, who mythologically was identified with the god Horus,

¹⁷⁴ (Naydler, 2003, p. 42)

¹⁷⁵ (Naydler, 2003, p. 44)

¹⁷⁶ (Naydler, 2003, p. 44)

¹⁷⁷ (Naydler, 2003, pp. 45-46)

¹⁷⁸ (Naydler, 2003, p. 50)

ascended on the throne. In this context Osiris is the old king, while Horus is the new king¹⁷⁹. The texts in the pyramid of Unas make this clear with “I am Horus, my father’s heir. I have gone and returned”¹⁸⁰ and as the deceased king finds his place in the underworld as he has been unified with Osiris, “As he (Osiris) lives, this king Unas lives, as he dies not, this king Unas dies not, as he perishes not, this king Unas perishes not”¹⁸¹

While the bipole of Osiris – deceased and Horus – living is widely accepted, attention must be paid to the fact that in certain instances the deceased Pharaoh is identified with Horus while the living successor is identified with Osiris¹⁸². This opens the way for us to reconsider the role of these two gods within the funerary context and perhaps consider that these funerary scripts were initially utilized by the living. In this regard, two sources come to shed some light into the matter. Both are kingship rituals, meaning that they are pertaining either the succession of a new Pharaoh, or the preservation and renewal of his reign, meaning that in both the rituals described next, the king is alive.

The first dated to the Middle Kingdom and is commonly known as the Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus. Its elaborate story with the complex details and the many vignettes, culminates to the coronation of Horus and the raising of Osiris¹⁸³. This ritual was initiated by preparation of sacrifices and food offerings, and then a symbolic dismemberment of Osiris took place, while grain was being walked on by oxen. Symbolic imagery of victory over Seth and the raise of a Djed column, was accompanied by a wrestling match and at last a coronation and a ritualistic meal. The Pharaoh then wears a specific type of garment, called *geni* and a special text is cited in which a central role is played by the embrace between Horus and Osiris “I have embraced this my father who has become tired, so that he may become quite healthy again”¹⁸⁴. This invigorating embrace thus, is transferring vital power from Horus to Osiris in a union mystica, between two living divine entities, to the point they are indistinguishable from one

¹⁷⁹ (Naydler, 2003, pp. 58-59)

¹⁸⁰ (Naydler, 2003, p. 60)

¹⁸¹ (Naydler, 2003, p. 61)

¹⁸² (Naydler, 2003, pp. 65-66)

¹⁸³ (Naydler, 2003, p. 67)

¹⁸⁴ (Naydler, 2003, p. 68)

another¹⁸⁵. Lastly the king, with the aid of specialized priests, climbs a ladder towards the heavens, while the priests are discouraging every and any follower of Seth from following him.

This union of Osiris and Horus is what causes us to retrospect as the previous notions about the divine dipole of life and death simply do not apply here. Why is the living king connected and unified with the resurrected Osiris and what are the ramifications of this union mythologically¹⁸⁶?

Another ritual also provokes questions, and this is none other than the Sed Festival. This is dated as far back as the early dynastic period and was taking place throughout the Egyptian history. It was commonly held on the thirtieth year of the reign of each Pharaoh but it was usually performed in much shorter intervals by certain Pharaohs. Its purpose was to renew and reinvigorate the kingship and also to prove the king worthy of his position both physically and spiritually. It was held for five days and usually after the yearly celebrations dedicated to Osiris. For this festival either a new temple was built or a new festival hall within the premises of an existing temple and also a royal tomb chamber was added to house the culmination of these rituals. Within this tomb among other pieces of symbolic imagery, a funerary bed was placed, the type of which was typical of funerary beds and was extensively used for these purposes as it is attested in iconography. Among other rituals, the Pharaoh was repeatedly purified and changed clothes and royal insignia. Shrines of the deities of Egypt were also present to which the Pharaoh performed offerings and burned incense in order to receive their blessings. A coronation ceremony was held afterwards as the king was crowned for each of the four cardinal directions. The king performed a symbolic walk around the shrine, taking possession of it, while carrying the standards of Wepwawet, the opener of ways. According with the iconography, the king was accompanied by a sed priest, typically tasked with performing funerary rights to the Pharaohs, along with an “opener of the mouth” and “the one who carries the qeni” a fact that reminds us of rites strictly funerary and the embrace of Horus and Osiris respectively¹⁸⁷. Following these, the king entered his “tomb”, after the appropriate purifications took place, which was the pinnacle of this festival. The king took the vestiges of Osiris with his iconic white crown and beard and

¹⁸⁵ (Naydler, 2003, p. 69)

¹⁸⁶ (Naydler, 2003, p. 71)

¹⁸⁷ (Naydler, 2003, p. 73)

comes to meet twelve gods and goddesses, namely Ra, Atum, Shu and Tefnut, Geb, Nut, Osiris and Horus, Seth, Isis, Nephthys and the king's ka. Although the king appears alone in his tomb in the presence of the deities, he is depicted acting, alive and standing, something that makes us believe that this is a mystical union while the Pharaoh is still living, a projection in other words of the Pharaoh towards the realm of the gods and more specifically, to the underworld if we take into consideration the funerary setting.¹⁸⁸ According to the sources, afterwards, the Pharaoh is depicted on the deathbed lying on his stomach and wearing a funerary shroud akin to the one Osiris is depicted with. Horus is presenting him with the symbols of life, stability and dominion while the word “awake” is written¹⁸⁹. The king then sheds his funerary garments and emerges in his usual regalia, as if resurrected, while a Djed Column is erected, symbolizing Osiris. At the dawn of the fourth day the Pharaoh faces the trial named “dedication of the field” where he runs around a demarcated area that symbolizes his whole kingdom, thus proving his physical well-being. In the last day of the festivities, he is crowned once again, sealing and confirming his worthiness¹⁹⁰. It is important to note that with the coronation, the king gained the status of the Son of Ra, thus embracing the solar power.

The implications of these festivals are multiple. First of all, we can no longer accept the funerary texts as strictly of that nature and we may begin to suspect that the texts accompanying the dead in the afterlife, are perhaps the product of mystical experiences of living people, whose knowledge was written and preserved in texts that were later used in this way. Secondly that there were indeed mystical rituals involving priest and the Pharaoh himself, and that their purpose was to connect the king to the divine realm and even the underworld as it is suspected from the association of the Lord of the Dead, Osiris with the living Pharaoh. Thirdly, since a tomb was used by the Pharaoh within the context of a kingship festival, it is not a stretch to think that the royal tombs had use long before the physical death of their owner. The king was able to renew his reign, prove his vitality and harmonize again the relations between the physical world and the netherworld, as was his duty to keep the chaotic forces at bay.

¹⁸⁸ (Naydler, 2003, pp. 74-77)

¹⁸⁹ (Naydler, 2003, p. 79)

¹⁹⁰ (Naydler, 2003, p. 80)

17. Mnemohistory and a connection with Akhenaten?

In the religious context, Moses is viewed as a rebel who led the way for the salvation of his people from the Egyptian oppression. His theological views were formed as a way of counteracting the existing religion, thus creating the distinction between the true monotheism and the false polytheism. These two notions are so far apart that there could never have been a point so that the one would lead to the other in a natural order. This fundamental turn from paganism can only come by divine intervention in the form of a revelation to a prophet who in turn would attempt to reach their people with the divine message¹⁹¹. By creating a new truth, it is of course not sufficient to simply embrace it, but also to deny the religious past by eliminating the remaining ties with it, thus liberating oneself from the sinful and delusional past¹⁹².

In order to delve deeper in the subject of the Mosaic distinction and the ways that his personality is pertaining to Akhenaten, it would be optimal to introduce a new term in our thesis, “mnemohistory”. As the name itself implies, this type of historical knowledge, is not concerned about the accuracy and authenticity of the historical information, but only how these bits of information are remembered and integrated within a cultural and social context¹⁹³. It is also concerned about the affects such memories have at present or how they modelled the time period we are interested in and although the tradition is at its epicenter, it is not examining whether they were founded on a factual basis, but simply how they came to exist, since a memory is malleable, and it does not guarantee the truth¹⁹⁴. Perhaps the most concise description of the term would be that mnemohistory is exploring cultural memory and it is important to be noted that the Greeks considered the culture as directly related to collective memory¹⁹⁵.

With Moses being a semi-mythological figure, his Egyptian rebellious counterpart, Pharaoh Amenophis IV, was definitely a proven historic one. Although ancient Egypt was very generous regarding the abundance of information it provides, especially in written form and particularly for its lines of kings and dynasties, nonetheless when it came to Akhenaten, Egypt maintained an absolute silence for many years, until archaeologists eventually discovered

¹⁹¹ (Assmann, 1997, 6-7)

¹⁹² (Assmann, 1997, 7)

¹⁹³ (Assmann, 1997, 9)

¹⁹⁴ (Assmann, 1997, 9)

¹⁹⁵ (Assmann, 1997, 15)

evidence of the existence of this Pharaoh. This conundrum has to do once again with memory and how it is utilized, as after his death, there was a complete and unprecedented damnatio memoriae. The deeds he committed that brought upon him such a vicious punishment, was the absolute abolishment of the existing polytheistic and well established system, with its numerous cults, temples and mythological texts, and the introduction of a monotheistic religion that had the sun disc at its epicenter, the one true god, Aten¹⁹⁶. It was this defiance of the old status quo and the profound changes that were made that many saw at once the parallels with the story of Moses. Could Akhenaten, an Egyptian pharaoh and perhaps the first monotheist be the true, historic version of Moses himself? Could the hymns composed by Akhenaten be the predecessors of the Mosaic Psalms to the Hebrew god? Absurd as it may seem, this connection had been already made in the ancient times and it was a process that was heavily influenced by phenomena pertaining to the preservation of memory and handling traumatic events, or in other words, mnemohistory. But first we must delve into some historical facts before we try to analyze this link.

According to the historic data one of the main events in Egypt, was its conquest of the Hyksos during the 17th century B.C.E., a people descending from Palestine that ruled the kingdom for approximately a hundred years¹⁹⁷. Although for certain ancient scholars Hyksos were considered as the predecessors of the Judaic people, nonetheless, there is no tangible support to this claim as they were very lenient towards Egyptian polytheism, so much so that they kept and enforced all the religious duties the native Pharaoh performed. In addition to that, they seem to have been worshiping their own deities such as Baal, although there was no attempt to spread the cult to the natives. The concept of conversion itself seemed to be futile and illogical in this kind of religions¹⁹⁸.

The beginning of the religious conflicts indeed took place without any external influence, when both the sides were mutually exclusive with no points of convergence. During the 14th century B.C.E., Akhenaten rebelled against traditional norms and enforced a monotheistic counter religion. Using the power that the divine revelation endowed him; he transformed and replaced the whole cultural system in the most profound way. This whole ordeal scarred not only

¹⁹⁶ (Assmann, 1997, 23)

¹⁹⁷ (Assmann, 1997, 24)

¹⁹⁸ (Assmann, 1997, 24)

the history of Egypt but its people as well. The temples of the old gods were closed and destroyed, their images were desecrated, and their worship was violently banned. We must keep in mind of course that in the minds of the people, the theurgies and liturgies were integral and irreplaceable for the natural order to be preserved, otherwise the whole world would slide irrevocably into chaos and destruction, thus the cultural shock they faced must have been immense¹⁹⁹.

In order for us to realize the extent of this change, we have to note that the celebrations and feasts arranged in specific days throughout the years from the priests of the great temples, played an important role to the lives of the ordinary Egyptians as they provided them with an opportunity to actually see their gods, who left the dark abodes of their temples and presented themselves among the worshipers. This was a matter of cultural identity and the cities themselves were built purposefully around the major temples as a sign of cohesion²⁰⁰. To the already existing and escalating crisis taking place in the realm of ideology and religion, others of a more physical nature were added, making the general situation bleak and desperate. External aggression and hostilities between the Hittites and the Egyptians soon ensued and as history has shown, whenever a war breaks out, pestilence and disease usually follow. Both the fighting and the arresting of prisoners lead to an unprecedented epidemic that swept the whole region from Anatolia to the entirety of Middle East, and it most probably affected significant parts of Egypt as well²⁰¹. The abandonment of the traditional faiths along with the war and the infectious diseases took a huge toll on the peoples who most probably connected these events and interpreted the adversities they endured as a divine punishment for their sacrilegious behavior²⁰².

We can now see that the Amarna period was beyond traumatic to the point that all remnants of it were demolished, defaced or otherwise destroyed, so nothing could bear any memory from that abominable era. The pharaoh's name itself was lost to the passage of time, condemning him to non-existence, the fate feared most by the ancient Egyptians and especially pharaohs²⁰³. For the people, since not even the name of the perpetrator survived, remained only a

¹⁹⁹ (Assmann, 1997, 25)

²⁰⁰ (Assmann, 1997, 26)

²⁰¹ (Assmann, 1997, 25)

²⁰² (Assmann, 1997, 26)

²⁰³ (Assmann, 1997, 27-28)

remembrance of something catastrophic and unclean. This form of latent trauma was later expressed after the restoration of the old religion and took the shape of hatred and aversion towards Asiatics and everything related to that region²⁰⁴. For Egyptians, Asia became the cultural other, that is an enemy to stability, prosperity and order and thus associated with Seth, the god of rebellion against the legitimate king. This animosity towards the physical enemy and the lack of clear memory of the past, lead to the projection of heretic ideas and blasphemy to the Asiatics. This was very explicitly shown in a Ramesside novel in which the King of the Hyksos people was named Apophis, the god of chaos and destruction of the Egyptians, and had established an absolute monotheism with Seth in its center²⁰⁵.

After examining the events during the Amarna period and the severe consequences it caused to the people, their collective memories, and the ways they tried to cope with the psychological toll that it took, it is now time to return to the works of Manetho, as they took form in the Hellenistic times. According to certain scholars, these historiography works contained traces of the monotheistic ordeal²⁰⁶ as they were shaped retrospectively and with the trauma itself causing the memories to crystalize across the ages²⁰⁷. In Manetho's scriptures, we learn about a Pharaoh that needed to cleanse the land from all who were afflicted by leprosy, so he could come in contact with the gods. The ostracism of the lepers brings upon the Pharaoh and his kingdom divine punishment and war, since the lepers, situated in Avaris, the traditional Hyksos capital, acquire military assistance from the outside and conquer the two lands for a period that approximates the period Akhenaten was in power²⁰⁸. Their leader, a former priest servicing the old religion, commands that they stop worshiping the gods and to eat animals that were considered sacred to Egyptians, thus inverting the norms and establishing anti-religious practices. Their new practices are designed to actively demonstrate their disdain and spitefulness towards the status quo and also enables the participants to distinguish themselves from the rest²⁰⁹. Additionally, to the former, a second commandment bans any and all contact with people from outside the community, thus, not only strengthening the ties amongst the members of his

²⁰⁴ (Assmann, 1997, 28)

²⁰⁵ (Assmann, 1997, 28)

²⁰⁶ (Assmann, 1997, 29-30)

²⁰⁷ (Assmann, 1997, 30)

²⁰⁸ (Assmann, 1997, 31)

²⁰⁹ (Assmann, 1997, 31)

community, but also excluding influences that could have a negative impact. This also enables the leader to instill a sense of threat and minority that is all but dissolved in the midst of non-believing, impure hordes²¹⁰.

Although the Amarna monotheistic religion did indeed possess certain attributes of an enclave culture, such as the boundaries erected around the city that allowed the city to maintain its prestige and religious purity, it is noteworthy to mention that this exclusivity was largely practiced by the Jews, who had immigrated to Egypt and under this light, it points towards the typical perception of the Jewish population during the Hellenistic times. During the occupation of the lepers, the legitimate king rescued what he was able to of the sacred idols and fled to Ethiopia before returning to Egypt along with his grandson and reclaim their Kingdom²¹¹.

Returning to the subject of mnemohistory and in an attempt to connect the different and on first glance, unrelated stories, we can see now that the story of the lepers could have been an altered memory of the Akhenaten's monotheistic efforts and the subsequent expulsion of his ideas, relics and name. The true historical facts are thus coded and encrypted in a story that presents, of course, similarities with the original, but the most important character and events have been omitted or distorted, to enable the process of healing from the inflicted trauma by rendering it innocuous²¹². This type of preserving the collective memories is naturally susceptible to transformation and various alterations along the way, hence the many different versions of every such story²¹³. According to Assman, the Hyksos started to be regarded as enemies of the Egyptian religion much later and certainly not before the Amarna period²¹⁴. This in turn shows us that two separate events did indeed merge in a way so firstly, the traumatic experience is externalized and attributed to someone of foreign origin, and thus eliminates the fear that the catastrophe can come from within the state and even worse, the Pharaoh himself, and secondly, as the cultural enemy is beyond the borders, the people are unified under the power of the state and the administration becomes more secure.

²¹⁰ (Assmann, 1997, 32)

²¹¹ (Assmann, 1997, 33)

²¹² (Assmann, 1997, 39)

²¹³ (Assmann, 1997, 39)

²¹⁴ (Assmann, 1997, 41)

18. Concealed monotheism

According to some prominent scholars of the age of the Enlightenment, like William Warburton, who analyzed the Mosaic tradition and attempted to discover the hidden meaning of the ancient Egyptian teachings, there is another distinction apart from the Mosaic. This distinction revolves around the duality of the secret and the overt in relation to religion. Moses thus became the leader who in spite of the status quo, he revealed the true meaning of the religion, formerly known as mysteries and made the public knowledgeable of the inner workings²¹⁵. From this assumption, the “dual religion” hypothesis is created, where the lesser mysteries were all the visual and theatrical means the religion employed to captivate the people, including the highly decorative hieroglyphic scripts, the elaborate rituals and the sacred animals, and the greater mysteries, in which the initiate was communicated with secret knowledge about the meaning of all these symbols, the immortality of the soul and the awards they would reap had they conducted an honorable life²¹⁶. The greater mysteries were as expected conveyed only to selected individuals whose minds and souls had been appropriately prepared and themselves could handle the true nature of the religion. The religion in depth was henotheistic believing that the plenty and complicated forms of divinity were but facets of one all including and anonymous God²¹⁷.

Keeping this in mind, the notion that the main religion and the various mystery cults where antagonistic towards one another, became prevalent with the latter being considered as forms of counter – religions that coexisted with the main, fraudulent, religions simply because they were useful for keeping order within the state²¹⁸. In this sense, the usage of secrecy is a political decision and a tool with which the masses remain mesmerized and respectful²¹⁹.

²¹⁵ (Assmann, 1997, 96)

²¹⁶ (Assmann, 1997, 97-98)

²¹⁷ (Assmann, 1997, 98)

²¹⁸ (Assmann, 1997, 101)

²¹⁹ (Assmann, 1997, 101-102)

19. Protection against sacrilege

Another prominent view on mystery religions took the hieroglyphics as a starting point. For certain researchers, Warburton included the use of hieroglyphic scriptures as a means to preserve primarily religious texts, reflected on the need the priests had to preserve the integrity of their divine knowledge²²⁰. During the Later years and especially with the ever increasing presence of Greeks and Romans, the priests of the temples became increasingly worried that the foreigners who tried to understand the elaborate native myths and rituals and become part of them, would lessen the importance of the mysteries and make them profane. As a defensive mechanism, in their efforts to protect the secrecy and prestige of their religious knowledge, they turned to their own ancient traditions making their writings and carvings as indecipherable as they could²²¹. One of the strategies they followed is making the hieroglyphic system of writing immensely complicated, by increasing dramatically the number of symbols from approximately 700 to a staggering 7000, which in turn enabled only the most dedicated of scribes to read the scriptures. This in turn led the Greeks, and perhaps rightfully so, to regard the hieroglyphic system not as a normal and conventional system, but as a secret and extremely well-guarded code, that only the most accomplished initiates would be able to break and access its meaning²²².

This awareness of course, on behalf of the priests, increased the mystique and charm of the ancient Egyptian secret rituals which in turn and indeed somewhat ironically, increased the demand of foreigners to be part of them via initiation, especially during the Late Period. This notion can be best described as an interpretation of the myth of Osiris and Seth. The corpse of Osiris symbolizes the unspeakable secrets of the mystery cult and Seth is the violator who threatens to expose those secrets to the world as in the myth tries to discover and violates the corpse of his brother²²³.

According to other scholars, the multitude of cults were in effect from the beginning of the state, along with notions about life after death but the mystery cults, in the exclusive sense, were founded much later. Since the universal acceptance of polytheism, and its extensive use by the state and administrative affairs, it was impossible to be simply replaced. Thus a “new” more

²²⁰ (Assmann, 1997, 108-109)

²²¹ (Assmann, 1997, 110-112)

²²² (Assmann, 1997, 109)

²²³ (Assmann, 1997, 113)

exclusive form of religion was formed that shared and circulated ideas too unfathomable and even dangerous to the masses²²⁴. This new religion that was so precarious to polytheistic ideas, was the Nature itself and its sublimity. Nature, or Isis as she was correlated with the nature and its hidden powers, was the one true deity that the people had to worship and beg for its benevolence²²⁵. The initiation according to this view was to, at first, prompt a shock to the soon to be initiated and fill them with divine terror for the majesty of the nature, as a preparatory step for a truth that could be only felt during an immense emotional outburst. Within the Egyptian mystery texts we come across the idea that emotions of awe and terror were accompanying liturgies associated with revelations of forbidden knowledge and exclusive pieces of wisdom, so much so that we possess extensive accounts of initiatory descriptions²²⁶. In this particular example we will examine a so called “Hermetic cave” where the wisdom of Thoth was conveyed to the initiates. We are informed about the necessity of the place to provoke feelings of piety and religious apprehension²²⁷. The awe inspiring atmosphere that already exists is being strengthened by the frightening sound of water that “only the most inquisitive would dare approach its source”. The columns containing parts of the hidden knowledge are adorned with lamps that could barely illuminate the vast cave, adding to the majestic and highly theatrical scene²²⁸. It is perhaps useful to mention that even in much later times the use of ambience characteristics such as cavernous or subterranean locations, darkness and candlelight, various sounds including wind and water, either natural or mechanically generated, was the *modus operandi* for many contemporary forms of initiations and societies deliberately shrouded in mystery²²⁹.

20. The Amarna religion and the search for the One

Returning to the Amarna religion and its uniqueness for the ancient times, it is plain to see that presents attributes that are regularly attested to non- natural, secondary religions. The complete rejection of polytheistic ideas, the old sacraments, and imagery, provides it with a more

²²⁴ (Assmann, 1997, 127-128)

²²⁵ (Assmann, 1997, 129)

²²⁶ (Assmann, 1997, 131-132)

²²⁷ (Assmann, 1997, 132)

²²⁸ (Assmann, 1997, 134)

²²⁹ (Assmann, 1997, 135)

rationalistic character²³⁰. Furthermore, the clear distinction from the former status quo and the canonization of the texts, liturgies and teachings also contributes to this idea and this can be seen by the hymns as well.

Continuing in the theme of initiatory knowledge and personal contact with the divine, in the hymns we have an absolute reversal of the former notions. In this new religion of Akhenaten, everybody can know about the god, since he is not hidden away in a temple or guarded by the high priests, but he is present in the sky, apparent to everyone. In this way the knowledge is not only available but also a prerequisite²³¹. The inversion does not stop there, as traditionally, the pious people could see the god themselves as part of rituals in festivals that were in place for this exact cause. In the new religion though, seeing the god is preserved only for the deceased who after death will become part of the divine presence, and the Pharaoh himself who is the only living individual blessed with such a gift.

21. The Ancient Greek Tradition

In this chapter we're going deviate from exploring the ancient Egyptian religious practices, so we can examine magic as it was regarded and practised by the Greeks. We are going to mention and examine thoroughly the numerous similarities and differences between Greek and Egyptian magic as they formed two different traditions in their initial structure. Here our scope is to investigate the forms, structures, premises and uses of ancient Greek magic. In turn this will provide us with a platform on top of which we will compare the two traditions and we will be able to discern the influence of one to the other in a clearer manner, especially as these became more and more impactful during the Graeco - Roman era.

22. On Hermeticism

Continuing on the subject of the concepts of mysticism during the Graeco – Roman period, it is useful at this point to delve deeper into the particulars of something we only

²³⁰ (Assmann, 1997, 169)

²³¹ (Assmann, 1997, 188)

mentioned above, the Hermetic tradition. As Hermeticism has become subject to a multitude of interpretations, additions, and alterations throughout the centuries, due to their immense influence, we need to clarify that in this chapter we will only be occupied with the works ascribed directly to Hermes Trismegistus, the principal authority of this theosophical ideology. Hermes Trismegistus, a fictional person evidently, was an amalgamation of the Egyptian god Thoth and the Greek god Hermes, as amalgamation was this new theological and philosophical theory that combined aspects of Greek and Egyptian origin²³². Thoth was represented with the head of an Ibis and he was one of the most prominent and respected gods in mythology, since he was the judge on the feud between Horus, the son of Osiris and the latter's brother, Seth, the usurper. Among other things, he taught the people the arts of writing and record keeping and was universally accepted as the wisest and protector of culture. Being connected to the night as the nocturnal version of Ra, he quickly became associated with the underworld as he was also regulating and overseeing the correct performance of the burial rituals accompanying the deceased in his final journey. Keeping this in mind and due to the syncretistic environment produced during the Graeco- Roman period it was not surprising that the deity became associated with another mediator between the worlds, the Olympian Hermes²³³. This was done in an "interpretation graeca" as the Greeks strived to find parallels between the two religions.

The providence of the textual evidence cannot be of course attributed to the supposed writer and thus in order to classify and consider them as one single corpus we need to find certain connecting characteristics that are common throughout the works. First and foremost we need to exclude pieces that were written in much later times and thus could not have been related to the ancient sources. Also the ancient sources themselves were pseudepigraphic by design since the importance did not lie within the patronage of the texts but it was a title to classify the text as a part of a certain philosophical character thus informing the reader. The factual writer was not important as long as their writings were in line with the original teachings²³⁴. In addition to that, the multifaceted contents of the books, span from philosophical inquiries about the creator and the function of the universe, to hymns and astronomical information, to ethicology and even popular magic, something completely pertinent for the environment that they came to be, but

²³² (Florian, 2007, 3)

²³³ (Florian, 2007, 4-5)

²³⁴ (Florian, 2007, 8-9)

utterly impractical for the cotemporary researchers trying to isolate the essence of Hermeticism²³⁵.

Now it would be useful to examine the relation between Hermeticism, mysticism and the initiations. This previously missing link was added when in 1945, a formerly unknown work was discovered in a Coptic library, titled “The Ogdoad Reveals the Ennead”. The text contains information and detailed instructions for the followers of the Hermetic faith so that they could ascend and reach the true knowledge²³⁶. The unification with the God is not apparently a simple and straightforward process, since both ethical and cerebral steps need to be covered first. The very first step of this journey, is for someone to abstain from impulsive behaviors and control their physical wants, in order to live in accordance with piety and lawfulness towards the One. Prayers and using words of mystical power were also used and they were also regarded as a spiritual sacrifice, “*ἠυσίεζ λόγου*”. The god himself presents himself in a vision whose meaning cannot be transmitted, and its description exceeds the limitations of words²³⁷. The few features we learn about from the text is that within the vision the initiate is transformed in a form of pure spirit and then guided by the god himself to the true wisdom. This vision of course cannot be invoked voluntarily by the initiate but will occur when the God decides one is worthy of it²³⁸. After the divine revelations, the initiated assumes the role of an apostle, entrusted with the duty of documenting their experience in hieroglyphics in a temple of Diospolis. Elaborate instructions are then given for the preservation of such a document, as it has to be encoded in a column of turquoise color, adorned by apotropaic figures and winged sun-discs for protection against destruction or blasphemy. Furthermore, the book is concluded with a sacred oath so its apparently potent contents can never be used in malevolent ways²³⁹. Here we can spot an antiphrasis, as on one hand the initiate is tasked with the sacred duty of making his worship public, while on the other hand the utmost care is given for the contents of this religious practice to remain hidden and accessible only to selected few. This was probably due to the fear that divine knowledge can be catastrophic if placed in improper hands.

²³⁵ (Florian, 2007, 10-11)

²³⁶ (Florian, 2007, 16)

²³⁷ (Florian, 2007, 16)

²³⁸ (Florian, 2007, 17)

²³⁹ (Florian, 2007, 17)

In later times, other manuscripts came to prominence that shaped the concept of Hermeticism and made attempts to interpret the initial texts and to also expand them, incorporating features of relative philosophies and ideas, such as Neoplatonism. One of the most prominent was Iamblichus, and the work in question is titled “On the Mysteries”. In this work, the Egyptian religion is very close to Hermeticism and Iamblichus regards Hermes Trismegistus because he revealed to the world the subliminal and true nature of the Egyptian polytheism. The world itself is part of the One, the universal being that includes everything, is part of everything and is made of the same divine substance as everything. The phrase used to describe the god is “hen and pan”, the creator and the one whose oneself is the creation. All the other beings, being deities or mortal creatures, are mere facets and manifestations of the One. There is also a hierarchy between the beings that comprise the cosmos, with the ones that are placed in higher realms and closer to the god being more pure and noble than the ones that have succumbed to degeneracy and are placed lower and closer to the material world²⁴⁰.

A distinction is here present as well, as are the realms of the material entities and the spiritual beings. The names of the gods are to be preserved intentionally vague to the common people and even perhaps the priests themselves, as they are not directed towards them, but towards a higher mind, “nous”, whose intellectual capabilities and authority are infinitely superior to that of humans. In this case, the intellectual capabilities of the people, “logos”, are insignificant and utterly inadequate²⁴¹. According to the Hermetic teachings and their interpretation of Iamblichus, the people have two souls, one of them is directly connected with the stars, entities of higher order. This divine part of the soul does not subject to the physical laws of the material world and is free from the common destiny of the mortals. After death, this part of the soul is reunited with the stars it came from and come in contact with the One once again. When a person is still alive though, as they possess this divine soul within them, they can still be liberated from the mortal chains by participating in the secret knowledge²⁴².

An important and recurring theme that a researcher can find in almost all of the Hermetic works, is the power of the stars and the ways they impact the everyday life. Since the heavens is the origin and the final destination of each person’s soul, it is only logical that there is a strong

²⁴⁰ (Florian, 2007, 19-20)

²⁴¹ (Florian, 2007, 20)

²⁴² (Florian, 2007, 21)

connection between the celestial movements and human behavior and destiny. In other words, the doctrine of ‘as above, so below’. Inspired by this notion, many works of this nature describing the affects the different phenomena have in our physical world, including the meteorological changes and even a combination between astrology and medicine. Especially the latter was named *iatromathematica*, and according to it, the ailments were ascribed to different celestial bodies and astral phenomena, and thus the treatments were performed accordingly. In the hermetic world astrology was a way of unlocking the secrets of the universe and attaining divine knowledge. So much so that by consulting the stars and correlating their movements with specific mathematical formulas, one could draw safe conclusions for someone’s sickness, health, chances of recovery or death²⁴³.

Another significant attribute to Hermes Trismegistus was that of a powerful magus. One of his accredited works is none other than *Kyranides*, a book allocated to domestic and public magic. According to the myth, and the book itself, only the worthy ones should have access to its contents. Within its pages one can find recipes containing parts or secretions of animals, birds, fish, plants, combined with inorganic materials such as metals, stones etc. The fundamental premise on which this type of magic works, is that an energy can be transferred through invisible links that are arranged in a hierarchical order and permeate everything, from one part to another, in a sympathetic way. This theme, along with others about the existence of the soul, its entrapment inside a mortal body and its return to the Creator after the physical death, leave no doubt that although of a different nature and purpose, these texts are indeed part of the Hermetic tradition although it was systematically ignored by the researchers who had been dismissing it as a simple work of magic²⁴⁴.

In terms of mystical practices, Hermeticism seems to be centered on concepts of spiritual rebirth and beholding the divine presence. Borrowing terms from his alchemical experience Zosimus described the hermetic experience and compared it with the transformation of the metals. Thus, only the accomplished and pure practitioner would accomplish the purification of his works. As we saw earlier with the initiation of Tat by Hermes himself, there are a series of inner and spiritual workings that have to be performed before the revelation can happen within

²⁴³ (Florian, 2007, 22)

²⁴⁴ (Florian, 2007, 24)

the soul by the help of a mystagogue, in this case Hermes. The point of distinction between the hermetic mysteries and the mysteries of other religions, is the surprising absence of elaborate rituals or events with multiple participants, as the whole procedure was both introverted and private. This is strikingly different from the complicated initiatory processes of virtually all the other cults and a point of critique on behalf of Plato who condemned the participants who took the rituals on only a superficial level, without being internally transformed by them²⁴⁵.

Nonetheless, there are indeed certain texts that allude to practices that could be characterized as rituals, such as communal prayers, baptisms and so forth, but first we have to think that these descriptions may not be of real events but allegorical schemes to allow the student for a better understanding, and also, given the immense influence these texts and ideas had to other schools of thought, they could be the results of the impact those schools had on Hermeticism itself²⁴⁶.

23. Conclusions

After carefully examining all the diverse and different aspects of mysticism in the Egyptian religion, we can now draw our conclusions. First of all, it is plain for us to see that the mystery cults are a side that many if not all religions possessed in antiquity. Even if it was not expressed as an exclusive, highly theatrical series of rituals performed clandestinely, certain aspects of secrecy and mysticism embedded within the liturgies and certain performative events are common. Even so, the researchers for many years did not consider the mystery religions as anything more than plain magic and thus misconceptions about their nature and their sociopolitical function were believed to be inferior and regularly ignored. In the formation of this stance, played important role preexisting notions and ideas, in many an occasion coming from the Christian faith which viewed the mysteries as decadent forms of major religions or that they were mere means for the salvation of the soul.

The mysteries were so profoundly similar to their corresponding regular and open cults but at the same time contained significant differences. Under no circumstances did they antagonize the main faith but due to their exclusive and secretive character at the same time they

²⁴⁵ (Florian, 2007, 33)

²⁴⁶ (Florian, 2007, 35)

differentiated themselves from it. After careful examination we can claim that the mysteries were part of the main religion, but they were accessed by a selected body of people who sought a more personal relation with the divine. The mysteries of course were not completely independent from the outside world but in many occasions served political, social or even economic purposes. There have been many examples of a mystery cult being a means for acceptance in a specific group of people, for social progression and even political prestige. The temples themselves demanded exorbitant amounts of money in exchange for accessing the mystical knowledge they possessed. From the stories of Apuleius for example, we learn about the relations between two major mystery cults, namely the mysteries of Isis and the mysteries of Osiris in which although the priests recognize each other cultic significance, nonetheless they prompt the already initiated in the mysteries of Isis, Apuleius to invest again in an initiation to the cult of Osiris as the priests there advised him.

After examining a number of mystery cults it becomes apparent that they are in many ways different from one another in terms of organization, function and of course sacraments. While some cults were centered around a temple and performed their rituals alongside the main faith, others were much more versatile as they comprised by itinerant groups of devotees. Additionally, when a practitioner migrated to a place that the cult was not established, it wasn't uncommon for them to import artifacts and materials from their motherland so the authenticity of the rituals would not be compromised.

A common consensus between the different cults is the extraordinary experience. By design the mysteries were prepared in a way that excited the initiate in a way do fundamental that induced psychological changes to the initiate. Although fear of the unknown, sacred terror and commandingly impressive performances were used to bring the initiate in a state of alertness and religious dread, the experience as a whole was highly positive, so much so that the initiations were always in high demand. Another common denominator was that this experience could not be described with words, as it would completely lose its meaning, on the contrary, it was meant to be felt in the mind and soul.

The first type of mystical practices in the ancient Egyptian religion were of mortuary nature and context. The deceased Pharaoh was being transformed during his traversing through the Dwat and by overcoming the various obstacles in his way, to a "akhw" a blessed spirit

worthy of eternal life. Further strengthening this idea is the fact that all of the mortuary procedure, from offerings to the encasing of the body within a sarcophagus and its subsequent interment were performed under mystical terms and symbolisms. The Pharaoh had to meet and be united with the god Osiris who himself was hidden and protected from his brother Seth. Thus the Pharaoh, who was in certain ways identified as a manifestation of Osiris, had to be hidden and protected in his resting place.

Even when the religious status quo in Egypt was utterly and violently altered by the rebellious Pharaoh Akenaten, the mysticism was so well embedded in the Egyptian religious character, that certain aspects of it remained. Using the great distinction we can see how mysticism is employed and used in a monotheistic context, with the Pharaoh being the chosen one of the sun disk Aten, and the only one having the knowledge of the god. Although the religious rituals were conducted in open air spaces and not within the hidden corridors of the temples, nevertheless, secrecy was indeed practiced in this case as well, as the capital city and center of this new religion was intentionally secluded and completely non accessible to the unfaithful.

With the Greek occupation of Egypt from the era of Alexander the Great onwards, the status quo shifted again. This time not by a rebellious individual trying to destroy the former religion, but from people, namely Greeks and Romans, who because of the high esteem in which they regarded the Egyptian theurgy, they wanted to become knowledgeable about their secrets. The priests acted out of fear of losing their sacred traditions to people who although mesmerized by the mystique of the ancient gods, however they were profane and sacrilegious towards the very strict ways of the priests. Thus, in order to protect the degradation of what they stood for, they chose to revert towards their most ancient of customs and in addition changed the language in a way that it became completely illegible to the outsiders and infinitely more complicated to learn.

Last but not least, the examination of the Hermeticism leads us to believe that although the central ideas are clearly Egyptian, many foreign influences have affected the textual evidence. The immortality of the soul and the promise of unification with the Supreme Being after one's physical death can all be attributed to a pure Egyptian tradition. The fact that this type of religion has been influenced by the Greek philosophical and theological movements,

especially Neoplatonism, can be attested from the fact that it encourages the transformation of the initiate's soul in an internalized manner and without external symbols, sounds and performances. In other words, it supports a purer form of mystical initiation that uses only the cerebral activity and the power of prayer and its purpose is for the One to be revealed within the initiate himself.

We can now see that the essence of mysticism has been changing throughout the years and its meaning and functions are entirely dependent on the context. Initially it was part of the funerary rituals, and its necessity was due to Seth's malevolent forces. Later on, it became part of the regular religious festivities and was performed side by side with them. There has been an instance when mysticism was used as a basis for a counter-religion, where the divine revelation became a tool for altering the cultural character of an entire nation. In times of instability, mysticism was also employed to prevent or at least restrain the degeneration of sacred ritual due to the irresponsible behavior of the conquerors. Lastly, mysticism can be used for the internal transmutation of a person that wants to acquire knowledge of the god and mechanisms that set the universe in motion.

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APPENDIX

Magic and religion

In this chapter we will examine briefly the phenomenon of magic in the Hellenistic world and also its relation to religion. Regarding the magical practices and their relation to religion, a special focus has been allocated to the research on the mystery religions, as they seem to be the bridge between magic and religion²⁴⁷, incorporating elements from both the realms. One way of examining the mystery traditions and their interconnection with religion is to explore the rituals performed in said mystery traditions and their connections to the myths they correspond to. This could be simplified furthermore as the examination of the relation between religion and magic itself, and whether the latter is the predecessor of the former, or the other way around, with magic being a simple form of religious decadence. Since religion bore always a positive connotation, opposite to magic, it was believed firmly that magic was connected to irrationality and lack of scientific means and explanations, while the establishment of religion coincided with the enlightenment of the human civilizations and the development of rational thinking²⁴⁸. On the other hand, the ancient sources inform us of another theory, in which religion formed initially in its purest of forms as humans were created specifically to pay their respects and worship the Creator who made them. Subsequently, human nature with all its shortcomings and folly, corrupted this idyllic situation, with the introduction of false gods and diverting their worship from its initial purpose. The pinnacle of debauchery of course was magic, as by using it the people attempted to control their life in ways they were not supposed to, defying the deity²⁴⁹. These definitions and juxtapositions are innately dangerous to the academic research as they pollute it with modern notions and presuppositions, such as the duality and inherent difference between the religion and magic. These notions resonate with other seemingly contrasting concepts, such as the magic and science, although historically they were closely related and during the biggest part of human history, indistinguishable²⁵⁰. The connection between magic and religion must be examined through a theological lens and questions need to be placed

²⁴⁷ (Betz, 1991, 259)

²⁴⁸ (Betz, 1991, 259-260)

²⁴⁹ (Betz, 1991, 259-260)

²⁵⁰ (Betz, 1991, 262)

forward about the legitimacy of magic within the religious context, and the shaping of the deities' actions in accordance with the people's desires²⁵¹.

These enigmas can be illuminated much better when we examine them through the primary sources, namely the Greek Magical Papyri: texts that contain the mindset of the common people, as it was formed within the multifaceted syncretistic environment of Graeco - Roman Egypt²⁵². It is in these texts that our notions and prejudices on magic are challenged, since it is not portrayed as something decadent, obsolete and blasphemous, but on the contrary, religion and magic are presented as working side by side and one complimenting the other.

Terms such as “*ἱερά μαγεία*”, sacred magic, are given with a very positive meaning while other terms pertaining to mystical initiations such as “*ὦ μακάριε μύστα*”, connect magic to religious initiations, leading us to believe that at least in this set of textual sources the barrier between the two does not exist²⁵³. This of course does not mean that the total amount of the magical practices are acceptable by the status quo of the society, and also in many instances we are informed by the magician about potentially dangerous side effects their spells can have, while other magicians simply reassure us of the legitimacy of their recipes as what they write is in accordance with the laws of the gods and according to their will and instructions²⁵⁴. Even if a certain problematic can be sensed regarding the bending of the powers of the gods to one's personal will, the major concern of the magicians in their recipes is whether a certain procedure actually has effect as it is apparent by the commendations one can find at the end of some spells²⁵⁵.

The syncretistic influence within the texts is apparent, especially in texts written in both the Hellenistic Koine and Egyptian demotic language, while the contents are alluding heavily to both magical traditions. In the spells, the borders between the Hellenic and the Egyptian traditions are vague as religious backgrounds and mythological traditions are used simultaneously. It is interesting though to point out that the trust of a spell's efficacy is strongly

²⁵¹ (Betz, 1991, 262)

²⁵² (Betz, 1991, 263)

²⁵³ (Betz, 1991, 263)

²⁵⁴ (Betz, 1991, 263)

²⁵⁵ (Betz, 1991, 263)

dependent on its Egyptian origin²⁵⁶. Linguistically, while Greek and Demotic Egyptian is primarily used, Coptic and even hieratic words and phrases are also included, forming a kind of code that only magicians with a solid education on the intricacies of the Egyptian language could break. Other texts are of purely Greek origin, and some follow the Jewish magical tradition. Although following the Egyptian magical culture, the Greek spells and influences were not simplistically imposed upon it, but they were gradually integrated from the Classical Greek era onwards, a process that was completed during the Graeco-Roman period. On the other hand, the Jewish influence is from syncretistic processes and not from the Jewish religion itself²⁵⁷.

We will now focus on the connection of magic and more specifically the contents of Papyri Graecae Magicae to the mystery traditions and initiations. Once again linguistic examination provides us with a new light under which we can see that there is no clear distinction between magic and mystery cults. Magic is identified with the term mystery and mystery of God, connecting with the most emphatic way the magical practices with sacred rites “ἱερά μυστήρια” and the magicians practicing them with the term “μύσται”, elevating them to the status of initiates²⁵⁸. The mystery cult terms of Greek origin are pertaining primarily to Greek deities and liturgical practices, providing a cultural and religious structure on which the magical formulae can function²⁵⁹. This of course does not imply that mystery cults and this type of terminology was a Greek intervention inside the Graeco- Egyptian religious circumstances but only that this particular one was a clear Hellenic influence.

The notion that the Greek mystery cults did not employ magic in their mythological basis and rituals initially, and that this is a product of the infusion of local Egyptian elements and concepts to it, cannot be corroborated since magic was indeed present in a multitude of aspects. Either in the forms of fire rituals, as it is the case in the Eleusinian mythos where Demeter tried to immortalize Triptolemos, or various purifications, symbols and even golden Orphic tablets, which were used in specific rituals to guide the soul to the afterlife, we can perceive that magic possessed a quintessential role to these mysteries²⁶⁰. With this in mind we can interpret the texts

²⁵⁶ (Betz, 1991, 263-264)

²⁵⁷ (Betz, 1991, 264)

²⁵⁸ (Betz, 1991, 264)

²⁵⁹ (Betz, 1991, 265)

²⁶⁰ (Betz, 1991, 265)

as an aftermath of the expansion of the Greek cults and their ideas within the Hellenistic culture. The influence that these cults exerted is possible to have transformed other cults with a more open character into mystery cults²⁶¹. An illustrative example of this procedure was the transformation of the traditionally Persian Mithraic religion to the Mithras cult during the Hellenistic era. Judaism was also affected, incorporating terminology and mythological interpretations pertaining to mysteries, and also opposing the Greek mysteries regarding them as false with the most fervent proponent being Philo of Alexandria²⁶².

A very illuminating source about the transformation of magic into mystery cult, is the “Spell of Pnouthis” (PGM 1.42 – 195), a pseudepigraphal letter containing instructions for someone to acquire an assistant daemon. The ritual itself is supposed to be shrouded in mystery and secrecy, with only the initiated being able to access the knowledge of performing it²⁶³. In another part of the texts, we can see the procedure of initiation to the mysteries of Mithras being described as “initiation into the magical arts” and “being born again after death”. Centerpiece to this ritual was a special ointment that was prepared following the strict rules of a sacred recipe, reminding us of the magical remedies and “φάρμακα” that we extensively covered earlier and it was ritualistically applied to the initiate’s face²⁶⁴.

One of the most engaging and authentic aspects of the Graeco-Roman era, was the acceptance of facets of diametrically different traditions and their combination into the same spell. We can see traditionally Egyptian symbols such as the Scarab, to be used in contexts of different religions. Elements of Egyptian, Greek and Judaic religion are constituents in the same recipes and spells, manifesting the spirit of acculturation and religious acceptance that formed the culture. A very good example of this would be a love spell that although invoked the Judaic God, nonetheless, it describes the act of love as “the mystery rite of Aphrodite”²⁶⁵.

It is plain to see now that with the infusion of Greek magic to the Egyptian religion, the latter became transformed, enriched and accepted by the new status quo in the form of mystery

²⁶¹ (Betz, 1991, 265)

²⁶² (Betz, 1991, 266)

²⁶³ (Betz, 1991, 266)

²⁶⁴ (Betz, 1991, 267)

²⁶⁵ (Betz, 1991, 268)

cults as it incorporated itself to the Hellenistic religious corpus. The magicians, people of questionable repute in older times, they became ambassadors or mystagogues of a new, personal and elevated form of religious practice. By combining elements of different cultures, the magicians managed to procure magical goods of a more prestigious nature and thus appeal. This amalgamation of course affected the established sacred mysteries negatively, as the rituals were imitated by freelancer magicians and lacked the hierarchy and camaraderie that was a focal point in them, but on the other hand, they enabled the common people who did not possess the means to participate in the proper mysteries, to be initiated and establish the personal connection with the deity²⁶⁶. It was after all, this appropriation of cultic and religious materials, myths and rituals that diversify magic from religion. Magicians never appreciated nor protected the core of mystery traditions from which they borrowed their spells and amulets and this is the reason magic is not a religion, but as the magicians themselves proclaimed, it is a religion that works²⁶⁷.

²⁶⁶ (Betz, 1991, 269)

²⁶⁷ (Betz, 1991, 269)

Curse spells

Various peoples were systematically using magic in hopes of getting tangible aid towards several goals, or to avert several misfortunes from ailing them. Greeks were not exception to this rule either. The hope of prevailing in a struggle, finding love, acquiring knowledge to the mysteries of the future or even deliverance from an anguish led, people to employ nefarious methods such as the binding curse spells, better known as defixiones or “κατάδεσμοι”. These macabre artifacts possessed several forms, the most prominent of which was the lead perforated tablet and the lead figurine usually depicted bound, in agony and / or perforated by a multitude of stakes. They were always thrown in untimely deceased people’s tombs or in water wells so they could reach the underworld deamons which in turn would fulfill the contents of the curse²⁶⁸. The practice was not unique to the Greeks, but the Romans adopted it as well. We can find such artifacts in Attica, Sicily or even the Black Sea. The earlier examples of such a practice indicate that the curses were in widespread use from the 5th century BCE²⁶⁹. During the 2nd century AD, archaeological evidence can be found throughout the classical world and materials such iron and bronze are also used. The preferred places of deposition were not confined to tombs and water wells anymore, but in certain cases, they were placed in the areas they were supposed to influence, such as theaters and hippodromes, making their target more easily identified²⁷⁰.

As the goals of both the systems are the same, that is to address several everyday issues and influence events and situations that are completely outside of a person’s control, one could consider magic as a small scaled, private form of religion. The relation between the two has been the bone of contention among the several academic schools of thought as magical practices were shunned as mere superstitions, full of perverse imitations and corrupt rituals, to the point they become the exact opposite of the religions. The magician doesn’t express the same level of reverence and piety as the priest and thus the relation of the former with the divine is a purely utilitarian and borderline blasphemous one²⁷¹. During the most recent years though, there has been a gradual shift considering the opinions of academics on magic. It is now regarded as a

²⁶⁸ (Christopher A. Faraone, 1991, 5)

²⁶⁹ (Christopher A. Faraone, 1991, 5-6)

²⁷⁰ (Christopher A. Faraone, 1991, 18)

²⁷¹ (Christopher A. Faraone, 1991, 6)

branch of religious practice, although separate, nonetheless comprised of the same continuous phenomenon²⁷².

It is imperative for the sake of understanding, to clarify certain aspects about the fabrication and the implementation of the curses in the earlier stages of the practice. It needs to be understood that at least initially, the *κατάδεσμοι*, as the word itself implies, were meant to bind and obstruct their target, making them susceptible to the users acts and unable to reciprocate, without eliminating them²⁷³. This reluctance to cause permanent harm can be seen in relation to the character of the curse tablets, as they were a mere measure of preparation before an upcoming struggle and not tools of maleficent acts of vengeance. Both these aspects corroborate the theory that the primary purpose of the curses was to aid in interpersonal conflicts within the public or domestic civil life²⁷⁴.

The nature of the curse tablets and the figurines was simple in terms of construction and because of this, it is unclear whether they were produced privately in a household setting whenever they were needed, or they were simply commissioned to a “professional” magician²⁷⁵. Procuring a flattened piece of lead and inscribing onto it was no arduous task but there are sources confirming the existence of professionals who undertook the production of such goods in a more systematic and even standardized manner. The other type of curse is much more difficult to produce in a domestic setting and thus we perhaps need to ascribe it solely to the professional magicians. The small lead figurines bear in some instances exquisite details and characteristics and are depicted either bound or in suffering, and even in certain instances were placed within small coffins, further insinuating the morbidity and effectiveness of the practice.

While the defixiones initially contained only the name of their target, this gave way to other, much more complex and elaborate forms from the classical era onwards²⁷⁶. The formulae used, although subjected to a level of consistency, they formed various types, including verbs with a meaning of literal binding, “*καταδένω*”, invocations of daemons²⁷⁷ and orders to fulfill the

²⁷² (Christopher A. Faraone, 1991, 6)

²⁷³ (Christopher A. Faraone, 1991, 18)

²⁷⁴ (Christopher A. Faraone, 1991, 18-19)

²⁷⁵ (Christopher A. Faraone, 1991, 19)

²⁷⁶ (Christopher A. Faraone, 1991, 20)

²⁷⁷ Here we are using the archaic form of the word in order to differentiate the Greek mythological entities from the Christian tradition.

contents, a form of wishing for the target to be affected using the appropriate wording and perhaps the most interesting of all, the “*similia similibus*” formula, which made use of analogies and sympathies to transfer the energy or condition from something to the person it sought to bind²⁷⁸. This last type is probably the most problematic, as it seeks to transfer aspects of death and uselessness to the target, making it thus not a tool of preemptive binding but an instrument of destruction against the opponent²⁷⁹.

The relation between the curses with the underworld and more importantly, death, come forth when we realize that the material of choice was lead. This cold, grey and lifeless metal was not only inexpensive, but was ideal for transferring its qualities to the victim as well. Taking this into account, we must consider that the curse formulas on many an occasion were not written in a usual manner as expected, but they were from right to left, bringing the sinister implications about the malice of left side to the play. Adding to the power of the curse and of course its intertwining with death, was the aforementioned method of placing the defixiones themselves inside graves²⁸⁰.

After the lead, another, even cheaper material was chosen for the construction of the curses, the wax. There are sources indicating the usage of wax as a means for the curse and that it was quite popular as well. These types of materials though, rarely survive the relentless passage of time and the adverse climate at the northern part of the Mediterranean and thus we have no examples of them. It is also indicated that the simultaneous use of both the materials during the construction of a defixio, took place, with the scholars believing that this practice was taking place so the effect could be enhanced²⁸¹. The fact that in Egypt we have artifacts made by other materials that have survived, such as wax and clay figurines, makes the academics skeptical on whether the lead was indeed the preferred material, or it was simply a matter of preservation abilities, or lack thereof, that the lead made ones eventually survived.

Another prominent aspect of the Greek cursing tablets and figurines was the practice of the magician or the perpetrator to chant and whisper certain magical phrases in total secrecy and away from prying eyes, in order to complete the ritual. The secrecy and privacy of the whole

²⁷⁸ (Christopher A. Faraone, 1991, 20)

²⁷⁹ (Christopher A. Faraone, 1991, 22)

²⁸⁰ (Christopher A. Faraone, 1991, 22)

²⁸¹ (Christopher A. Faraone, 1991, 22)

affair and the nocturnal setting gave way for certain academics to claim that this was necessary due to the shame and perhaps the unlawfulness associated with these practices²⁸². Although in certain cases and contexts the use of black magic was not acceptable, and the professionals that produced the tablets were shunned and feared by the community, we have to take into consideration that the practice of secrecy was always correlated with religious practices and prayer²⁸³. Communication with the divine was always a private matter in the Greek religion, with the oracle questions and answers being no exceptions. At this point it is perhaps useful to correlate the secrecy and magic with mysticism and exclusive traditions that seek to establish a more direct form of connection between the person and the divine powers. This notion is further corroborated by the plea on behalf of the perpetrator to daemons and entities that are of far minor status than the Gods and Goddesses of Olympus. This is not only because of the malevolent and deathly contents of the curse or the practice of cursing itself, but also because only minor entities would be occupied with the unimportant and mundane tasks of binding a victim. Considering the nightly setting for the rituals to take place, the practical reasoning would be also correct, since the person placing the curse would have preferred to be hidden so they would not alert the target of a ritual being performed against them. Means to counteract the malevolent magic existed and regularly used wither in a form of protective amulets or a defensive spell that would render the binding undone²⁸⁴.

In the light of the aforementioned information, it is apparent that the dichotomy between “magic” and “religion” under which much of the academic community works, fall short of accurately identifying and analyzing the situation. The Greek curse tablets seem to stem from customary rituals, seeking to render the opponent impotent within an intense and highly competitive environment that was Ancient Greek society²⁸⁵. The antagonistic character of the curses can be seen from their non – homicidal scope in the majority of the times, an attribute that made them acceptable for aiding in public or interpersonal matters within the civilized, intramural life²⁸⁶.

²⁸² (Christopher A. Faraone, 1991, 32)

²⁸³ (Christopher A. Faraone, 1991, 32)

²⁸⁴ (Christopher A. Faraone, 1991, 32-33)

²⁸⁵ (Christopher A. Faraone, 1991, 35)

²⁸⁶ (Christopher A. Faraone, 1991, 35)

Another point that binds together religion and magic, is the ways the people tried desperately to control fate and alleviate the outcomes of the various misfortunes that were befalling them. A person suffering from a disease, apart from certain, commonly unreliable or ineffective medical remedies, they had to rely heavily on religious means of salvation in the form of prayers, offerings, incubations or even amulets. These types of instruments though, never veered off significantly from superstitious traditions or magical practices²⁸⁷. Amulets specifically, were used extensively to cover a multitude of needs and wants of the people who used them. While aiding an individual in mundane and everyday tasks such as prosperity, romantic affairs, or simply power over their adversaries, talismans were primarily used to combat illnesses and injuries or to impede the powers of malevolent entities to influence negatively the user's lives²⁸⁸. Interestingly enough, the term “περίπτον”, which in ancient Greek describes the charm, contains the notion of something that is attached and tied to the person²⁸⁹, similarly perhaps to the term “κατάδεσμος” but with the opposite use.

Amulets were constructed using a plethora of materials, either organic or not, and while initially they were “blessed” with a prayer or incantation orally, at the later stages they would often contain segments of these incantations, inscribed on themselves. This, according to the researchers, defines the transition from a strictly orally transferred tradition to one that made extensive use of literary means in terms of magical practice²⁹⁰. This transition allows the archaeological research to identify and distinguish the amulets from the simple pieces of jewellery, since without any descriptive inscription, it is impossible for a conclusion regarding the use and specific purpose to be reached²⁹¹. Placing the use of the amulets within a specific chronological frame is highly problematic and has to be based on hypotheses. The specimens themselves are few and scarce due to the nature of the materials used as we mentioned earlier. On one hand we have amulets constructed of perishable materials that could not withstand the harsh and fluctuating conditions of the Mediterranean, such as wood or wax, and on the other hand we have amulets made of very precious materials such as gold and silver, the intrinsic value

²⁸⁷ (Kotansky, 1991, 122)

²⁸⁸ (Kotansky, 1991, 122)

²⁸⁹ (Kotansky, 1991, 122)

²⁹⁰ (Kotansky, 1991, 122-123)

²⁹¹ (Kotansky, 1991, 123)

of which acted detrimentally to their preservation. More humble materials such as copper and lead were systematically reused as well, due to their malleable and durable nature.²⁹²

One of the earliest confirmed examples of the use of inscribed amulets, comes from the ancient city of Ephesus and more particularly, the “Ephesia grammata” the mystical letters engraved on the sacred statue of Artemis²⁹³. These mystical words were used in amulets or in verbal incantations for their prophylactic powers. It is important to clarify that these letters and words were practically incomprehensible to the users, a fact that explains certain discrepancies between the sources²⁹⁴. As for the materials used to accommodate these phrases, sources inform us of leather pouches and sheets of lead folded many times. The specimen from Phalasarna Crete is an exceptional example since it contains a long text written in the form of hexameters, a characteristic that imbues it with a poetic and perhaps mystical aura²⁹⁵. Whether it was a personal charm to ward off malevolent forces or a household item for a more communal use, it cannot be certain, but it was clearly used as a countermeasure for a plague that hit the area during the 4th century B.C.²⁹⁶. The spell contained in the amulet is pertaining to a hymn, since it is not only written in hexameters, but also it invokes certain deities that are connected with healing. The inclusion of Ephesian letters among other magical utterances and forms²⁹⁷ are the aspects that can really distinguish it from a common inscribed amulet.

As with many other aspects and facets of religious culture, the presence of amulets is not spontaneous or without external influences. Ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern amulets must have impacted the Greek magical and religious tradition since it is known that the Greek merchants had encountered these civilizations and the various amulets and artifacts of power were indeed commercial goods. This is attested by the multitude of scarabs and other sacred objects that are found in Greece, of which some are imported directly from Egypt, while the majority of them is locally produced based on Egyptian prototypes. Whatever the influences of course, one cannot claim that the production and implementation of amulets in general is of

²⁹² (Kotansky, 1991, 125)

²⁹³ (Kotansky, 1991, 126)

²⁹⁴ (Kotansky, 1991, 126)

²⁹⁵ (Kotansky, 1991, 126)

²⁹⁶ (Kotansky, 1991, 126)

²⁹⁷ (Kotansky, 1991, 127)

foreign origin in Greece, since the belief systems and magical practices are indigenous to every civilization²⁹⁸ and comprise one of the most basic human characteristics.

Many medical procedures and practices involved the use of magical utterances and charms, and of that we are explicitly and elaborately informed from the Greek mythology²⁹⁹. These procedures utilised both standard medical practices, such as binding a wound to stop the haemorrhaging, as much as sympathetic magic which apparently played a significant role here as well. For example, binding a trauma to stop the haemorrhaging, is not only medically important in this context but also magically important, since the act of binding, aided by the utterance of magical words, is binding the blood in knots as well³⁰⁰.

Another means to combat pain, illness or injury, was of course medicine. It is important to clarify that the “φάρμακα” the caregiver provides to the victim possessed nowhere near the medicinal value or efficacy of proper medicine and should most probably used with the notion of potions. These potions could be used on their own, but in many cases for the sake of effectiveness, they were used alongside other methods, such as incantations and actual medical procedures³⁰¹. The potions were either attached to the patient in order to imbue them with their salvatory properties, or they were applied to the afflicted member, or simply ingested. Incantations were part of the potion making procedure and it is important to note that sympathy was present here as well. By performing theatrical movements and actions that imitate the affliction and its healing, and by using the proper, but utterly nonsensical to the common person chanting, the magician would channel the properties and conditions of unrelated objects to the patient, thus removing the ailment³⁰².

Remaining on the subject of medicinal magic and mystical knowledge, we must comment on herbalism in ancient Greece. The principles of these methods are a unique mixture of religious notions, magical beliefs and rational pharmacological observations. The sources, namely Theophrastus’ work in Book IX, although maintain a façade of traditional rationalistic inquiry, they fail outstandingly to avoid the extensive use of magic and the religious

²⁹⁸ (Kotansky, 1991, 123)

²⁹⁹ (Kotansky, 1991, 123-124)

³⁰⁰ (Kotansky, 1991, 123)

³⁰¹ (Kotansky, 1991, 124)

³⁰² (Kotansky, 1991, 124)

connotations³⁰³. From the mixing and combining of the various herbs, potions were concocted that were known as “φάρμακα”. Although in modern times this term means medication, its initial significance was that of a magical potion or a charm that could have any possible outcome to the person on which it was used. “Φάρμακον” itself simply meant the magical means and its effect, whether beneficial or detrimental, was denoted by the context in which it was used³⁰⁴. This dual meaning of both poison and remedy is nowhere more apparent than in Homeric Odyssey, where Circe uses a “φάρμακον” to transform Odysseys’ companions to swine and at the end, she uses another “φάρμακον” to counteract the first one³⁰⁵. Homer also enlightens us about the immense knowledge of “φάρμακα” the people of Egypt possessed as well as the abundance of substances and concoctions available³⁰⁶.

The utterly ancient Egyptian tradition and the profound respect, if not apprehension shown by the Greeks, paved the way for the birth of a Graeco - Egyptian tradition. These syncretistic amalgamations culminated in the creation and heavy circulation of the Hermetic texts. The origins of these texts are cryptic, although they are attributed to certain mythological figures, such as Hermes Trismegistus, a Hellenized version of the Egyptian god of knowledge and mystical power, Thoth, Asclepius and Agathodaemon among others³⁰⁷. Written in the form of revelations regarding the origins of the world and the purpose of mankind, the texts contain hermetic medicinal knowledge³⁰⁸. Here pharmacology is closely intertwined with astrology since the philosophy of the hermetic teachings revolves around the Supreme Being and the creation of everything in this world out of the vibrations inside his mind. Since everything is created from the same substance, it is both logical and expected to take advice from the constellations on earthly matters. In this method, herbs can be attributed to specific planets and zodiac signs and both diagnoses and the appropriate medical procedures can be linked to the behavior of the celestial bodies³⁰⁹. The fact that the texts that allude these notions can be found in many different sources written during many different eras, and the fact that they survived, were circulated and taken into consideration until the medieval times, shows us the profound impact they had not

³⁰³ (Scarborough, 1991, 153-154)

³⁰⁴ (Scarborough, 1991, 154)

³⁰⁵ (Scarborough, 1991, 154)

³⁰⁶ (Scarborough, 1991, 155)

³⁰⁷ (Scarborough, 1991, 170)

³⁰⁸ (Scarborough, 1991, 170)

³⁰⁹ (Scarborough, 1991, 170)

only in terms of medical practice but also as a way of thinking³¹⁰. Furthermore, in the latter versions of hermetic medical recipes we can see the presence of certain ingredients that were totally unknown during the Ptolemaic era³¹¹.

A special category of plants and their magical properties is comprised of several texts that came to be known as *Papyri Graecae Magicae*. Written in the most prominent languages of the era, Greek, Coptic and Demotic, they contained information on a multitude of plants, minerals and animal products that could be used in producing various magical recipes, along with the appropriate incantations and invocations for the magical mixtures to take effect³¹². These texts although they are dated on Roman and Byzantine Egypt, nonetheless, they contain information on recipes way older than this, dating back to the era of Pharaohs. They contain useful insights on the beliefs of various peoples, from pagans to Christians and Jews and also of the notions and superstitions of the common people in terms of magic and potions³¹³. Extensive parts of these texts concern the collection of the plant itself, which was a small ceremony before the beginning of the production of the potion. The herbalists “ρίζοτόμοι”, would perform established spells towards the plant soon to be harvested and attend a series of actions as well, such as purifications on themselves, fumigations, incense burning, libations and invocations³¹⁴. Of course, like many things pertaining to magic and the mysterious powers of the plants, secrecy is employed here as well. The names of the various materials have been either altered or written symbolically, forming a code capable of confusing and misinforming the person who has no part in this sacred knowledge³¹⁵. One of the most mysterious examples of such substances, is none other than “κῦφι”, a concoction of the most ancient Egyptian origins and extremely complicated producing process, made of thirty-six different ingredients, all of which had certain medicinal properties. The sources claim that it was incense, ointment and edible medicine, all at once and also it is observed that there was a gradual improvement of the recipe throughout the years³¹⁶.

³¹⁰ (Scarborough, 1991, 171)

³¹¹ (Scarborough, 1991, 171)

³¹² (Scarborough, 1991, 172)

³¹³ (Scarborough, 1991, 172)

³¹⁴ (Scarborough, 1991, 172)

³¹⁵ (Scarborough, 1991, 174)

³¹⁶ (Scarborough, 1991, 175)

