

Mystery was
widespread, as there
were very

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Mystery religion is characterized by secret cults spanning a wide span of history. They originate in early Greece history and lasted for many centuries. They evolved in different cultures but still shared similarities with past cults. Reinhold Merkelbach (2010) listed one defining factor, "Mysteries were always secret cults into which a person had to be 'initiated' (taken in)." Initiates gained secret knowledge that those that had not been initiated did not have access too. Some secrets from centuries ago have yet to be discovered. Mystery cults often held ceremonies with a variety of activities, usually involving a certain myth.

"Each mystery also centered around a myth in which the deity either returned to life after death or else triumphed over his enemies" (Nash, 2009). Unlike modern religion, people could participate in many different mysteries worshipping different gods and goddesses. Greek Mystery Cults Greek mystery cults celebrated many different gods; each god having a unique, specific reason to be celebrated. Greeks thought their worshipping activities were vital to their ways of life. In general, Greek religion meant performing rituals and sacrifices to certain gods. Belief in Greek gods was widespread, as there were very few Greek atheists. It was not a uniform religion.

Greeks believed in the same gods and myths, but interpreted and recounted them differently. Even with differences person-to-person, communities still found unity. "Each Greek polis had a series of public festivals throughout the year the were intended to ensure the aid of all the gods who were thus honoured" (Adkins & Pollard, 2017). One prominent festival in Greek civilization was the Dionysian festival. Reinhold Merkelbach (2010) stated <https://assignbuster.com/mystery-was-widespread-as-there-were-very/>

that, “ In every Greek city the god Dionysus was worshipped by fraternities and sororities.” These festivals celebrated Dionysus, god of fruitfulness and vegetation. Dionysus was considered the god of wine, which explains why the festivals included wine drinking. Initiation in these festivals was saw as initiation into sexual activities, as those kind of activities also took place at Dionysian festivals.

Other activities included choral singing and mimes. In the City of Dionysia, performances were held in the theater. Another important Greek mystery was the Eleusinian mystery. It celebrated the goddesses Demeter, goddess of nature, and Kore, also known as Persephone. It took place biannually in the city of Eleusis, which was located northwest of Athens.

The city and celebration was so important that “ the Sacred Way (the road from Athens to Eleusis) was the only road, not a goat path, in all of central Greece” (Mark, 2012). Large agricultural festivals were celebrated, specifically grain, as Kore’s myth with the cycle of grain. In the myth, Kore was kidnapped by Hades and brought into the underworld.

Demeter went searching for her daughter. During this time, she refused to continue her duty of making grain grow. Kore returned to her mother and made a deal with Hades to spend part of the year with him. Demeter went back to her job of tending to the world’s grain, while Kore was in the underworld with Hades tending to the dead plants. This was how the seasons were explained in Greek mythos. This cycle paralleled the cycle of grain and human life which is celebrated in Eleusis. Those that took part of the most secret rituals of the Eleusinian mystery no longer feared death, as one of the

message of Persephone's myth is that there was no death, merely a transformation. Kore did not die in the myth, she became Persephone, the Queen of the Dead.

Some elements of the rituals are unknown because each initiate was sworn to secrecy. The Eleusinian mysteries are split into two rituals. " There were the Lesser Mysteries, which took place in the spring, and the Greater Mysteries which those who had been purified earlier took part in when September came" (Mark, 2012).

Participants would drink Kykeon and then head to the Telesterion, an underground theater. The exact ritual that took place in the Telesterion is unknown, but it did affect each participant deeply. Several famous Greek and Roman writers participated in the Eleusinian Mystery, such as Socrates, Plato, Plutarch, and Cicero. The Eleusinian Mysteries survived many centuries, but were shut down when Emperor Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Along with the Dionysians and the Eleusinians were the Orphics. This group worships Greek hero Orpheus. Orpheus was known for his musical skills. " His music could charm the wild animals of the forest and even streams would pause and trees bend a little closer to hear his sublime singing" (Cartwright, 2013). The Orphic group was made up of those who wanted a closer relationship with their religion. Orphics wrote about purification and the afterlife. Despite the similarities members had, much more so than other mystery cuts, there was no organized church and opinion in writing varied.

Where Eleusinians deep emotional connection to their cult was the absence of the fear death, the Orphic emotional connection was sin.

Reinhold Merkelbach (2010) explained it as, “ They believed that there was a divine part in man—his soul—but it was wrapped up in the body, and man’s task was to liberate the soul from the body.” Orphics sought to liberate themselves in many ways. One way was abstinence from many pleasure-ridden things; meat, wine, and sexual activities. This contrasts with the Dionysians drastically. Wine and sex were important components to their festivals and worshipping. This difference highlights the diverse ideas of the Greek people around one ancient religion. Death was a part of the Orphic mystery, as a man’s soul would be judged at the end of his life.

He’d be rewarded or punished after completing three life cycles. It is somewhat similar to the Christian Heaven and Hell. “ If a man had lived a righteous life, his soul would be sent to the meadows of the blessed in Elysium; but, if he had committed misdeeds, his soul would be punished in various ways and perhaps sent to hell” (Merkelbach, 2010).

Orphic religion was the basis of Pythagoreanism. This group, based in Southern Italy, focused on math, music, astronomy and philosophy. They also developed the Pythagorean theorem, which is commonly used in Geometry math classes today. Some history about the group is missing, as Holger Thesleff (2013) describes, “ The life of Pythagoras and the origins of Pythagoreanism appear only dimly through a thick veil of legend and semihistorical tradition.” Early history of the group was a religious group primarily worshipping Apollo and the Muses.

The group lasted many centuries and evolved when new ideas in the group arised. Mystery Religion in Rome and the Roman EmpireAlexander the Great's Hellenistic empire spread Greek culture and religion immensely. This included mystery religion and cults.

The Dionysiac Mysteries spread to Italy and were known as Bacchanalia in Latin. They were used as an excuse for sexual activity and violence. The Roman Senate went as far as to prohibit the celebrations. Greek mystery religion also became influenced by Oriental religion and vice versa.

This also happened with Egyptian culture and religion at a faster rate. Royal mysteries were made from the mixing of the two cultures. Egyptian gods and Greek gods were worshipped by the same people. " These Egyptian gods became equated with Greek gods: Isis with Demeter and Aphrodite; Horus with Apollo and Helios; Serapis with Zeus, Dionysus, and Hades" (Merkelbach, 2010). In Alexandria, Egypt a suburb was named after Eleusis. Both the Eleusinian and the Dionysiac Mysteries became popular religious groups and celebrations in Egypt.

Roman culture was heavily influenced by Greek culture and this persisted into the Imperial times. Greek religion became their religion but with varying names for gods. Zeus became Juno, Athena became Minerva, etc.

They also adopted a number of cults, some Greek and some from cultures. As previously mentioned, Dionysian religion, known as Bacchanalia, was popular in the Italy, Greece, and Asia Minor. Near Porta Maggiore in Rome

was home to a community that mixed Dionysian religion with Orphic and came up with new ideas about Orphic hymns.

New communities began all over the Roman Empire, mixing various ideas and festivals. Greeks and Romans also turned to Oriental mystery cults, most notably the cult of Isis, goddess of love. This Oriental blending experienced pushback from Emperor Augustus. According to Reinhold Merkelbach (2010), "The Emperor, who wanted to restore the genuine Roman religious traditions, disliked the Oriental influences.

" This did not stop the spread of the cult of Isis, which became very popular in the first BCE centuries, and other Oriental religious influence. Lower middle class people particularly gravitated toward to cult of Isis. Asia Minor's influence was less so than the Orient's cult of Isis. The goddess Magna Mater, or Great Mother of the Gods, came from Asia Minor but was absorbed into Roman religion.

The same goes for the fertility god Attis, who was Magna Mater's lover. The cult worshipping the two grew under the rule of Emperor Claudius. The cult always had a centered belief around death, as they believed in an afterlife. Another notable Asia Minor cult was of Mithra, the Persian god of light.

Reinhold Merkelbach (2010) described their worship as, "the cult of Mithra was concerned with the origin of life from a sacred bull that was caught and then sacrificed by Mithra."