

LÁSZLÓ KÁKOSY

MYSTERIES IN THE ISIAC RELIGION

Initiation into mysteries was a feature of religions which most intrigued the imagination of the laity in Antiquity and continues to do so even today. Mysteries were integral parts of various religions in the Roman period. The mysteries of Eleusis had a considerable influence on the latest stage of the Isiac religion. It is well known that Plutarch's *De Iside* contains motifs borrowed from the Homeric Demeter hymn. There were mysteries in the cult of Mithras, which had seven stages of initiation, and in the cults of Dionysos; the cult of Cybele and Attis were also linked with mysteries.¹

These rituals offered additional religious knowledge, and the initiate became acquainted with otherwise concealed details of the myths and was introduced to secret doctrines. A Greek interpretation of the name "Isis" said that "to her more than anyone belong knowledge and understanding."² The Greek name of her temple *Iseion* shows "that we shall know what really exists if we approach the sanctuaries of the goddess with reason and reverence."³ The initiate had to undergo trials (cf. Mozart's *Zauberflöte*) and swear to secrecy. Esoteric knowledge had to be preserved from profanation and exposure to unworthy eyes.

If one follows closely the thread of events in book XI of Apuleius' novel, it will be clear that Lucius is being cautiously led to the heights of ultimate truths and the most hidden secrets of religion. This gradual progress is expressed not only in the three stages of the initiation. The first step towards the great goal is taken by Lucius himself, still in the form of an ass, when he awakens with sudden fright on the sea-shore and sees the full orb of the moon emerging from the sea.⁴ As through a revela-

¹ BURKERT, W.: *Antike Mysterien*, München 1990, M. GIEBEL: *Das Geheimnis der Mysterien. Antike Kulte in Griechenland, Rom und Ägypten*. Zürich–München 1990, R. MERKELBACH: *Isis regina – Zeus Sarapis*. Stuttgart–Leipzig 1995, 161–174.

² *De Iside* 2. The English translations are by J. GWYN GRIFITHS. Plutarch's *de Iside et Osiride*, Cardiff 1970. μάλλον αὐτῇ τὸ εἰδέναι καὶ τὴν ἐπιστήμην προσήκουσαν.

³ *ibid.* ὀνομάζεται γὰρ Ἰσεῖον ὡς εἰσομένων τὸ ὄν, ἂν μετὰ λόγου καὶ ὁσίως εἰς τὰ ἱερά τῆς θεοῦ προσέλθωμεν.

⁴ Met. XI. 1

tion, he comes to realize that all human affairs are governed by the goddess who manifests herself in the moon. (He became worthy of this revelation by the grace of the gods, by his voluntary escape from a spectacle planned to take place in the theater in Corinth where he was to copulate publicly with a murderess.)

He begins to pray to the goddess whose true name is still unknown to him. The second step towards knowledge was due to the grace of Isis who rose from the middle of the sea and revealed herself in her full splendour and overwhelming divine majesty. But what was even more essential to Lucius, she revealed herself to him as a goddess of universal power. She is the highest of deities whose power is revered by the whole world in various forms and by diverse names, such as Minerva, Venus, Diana, Proserpina, Ceres, Juno, Bellona and Hecate. Still, it is the Ethiopians and the Egyptians who gave the goddess her true name, Queen Isis.

In Egypt her cosmic power is summed up in the use of the name *Isis* in the meaning *sky*.⁵ She is also called the "Female Sun (Rê) on the sky".⁶

One unusual feature, alien to her original Pharaonic image, was her late identification with the moon.⁷ In Ancient Egypt the moon was held to be male, but the notion that the moon was the Eye of Re ("eye" is feminine) led to its association with some goddesses.

The second part of the goddess' self-revelation touches directly on Lucius' fate. According to the instructions given by Isis, he had to eat a crown of roses held by the priest in the procession of the feast of the *Navigium Isidis* to regain his human body.

When the miraculous transformation really took place, in exactly the way as foretold by the goddess, the revelation received the full authentication. Lucius became a devotee of the Isiac religion, and he certainly learned much of its ritual and theology. This status, however, only gave him access to exoteric knowledge; the most essential steps, the three initiations were still before him.

An important question must here be addressed which has given rise to much controversy among scholars. There is a strong doubt as to the ancient origins of the Isiac mysteries in the Roman Period. Mysteries are considered to be a mainly Greek phenomenon. Pharaonic religious literature primarily focused on afterlife, on the eternal existence of the soul; ritual and magical texts and the hymnic praises of the gods also played a predominant role.

A careful reading of the relevant texts has brought, however, to light a number of allusions to mysteries in Pharaonic Egypt and has proved the existence of an esoteric literature mainly in the domain of the solar cult.⁸ Herodotos was the first to rec-

⁵ D. KURTH: Göttinger Miszellen 19 (1976) 35–37).

⁶ Dendara IV 72.

⁷ E.g. Plutarch: De Iside 43, 52, Diodorus I, 11, 1.

⁸ J. ASSMANN: Re und Amun (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 51). Freiburg–Göttingen 1983, ASSMANN: Unio Liturgica. Die kultische Einstimmung in götterweltlichen Lobpreis als Grundmotiv "esoterischer" Überlieferung im Alten Ägypten. (Secrecy and Concealment, edited by KIPPENBERG, H. G. and STROUMSA, G. G.). Leiden–New York–Köln 1995, 37–60. L. KÁKOSY: Tempel und Mysterien (Ägyptische Tempel – Struktur, Funktion und Programm. Hildesheimer Ägyptologische Beiträge 37, Herausgegeben von GUNDLACH, R. und ROCHHOLZ M.). Hildesheim 1994, 165–173.

ognize the existence of mysteries in Egypt.⁹ He seems to have been initiated into some of these cults, and he dutifully keeps secret about the details of these ceremonies. A group of texts from the 21st–23rd dyn. describes the “introduction” (*bes*) of the kings, high officials and priests into the innermost sanctuary of the temple to contemplate the most sacred cult-statue of the god.¹⁰ The cult of Osiris was undoubtedly associated with secret rituals; the religious drama representing the triumph of Osiris over death which took place in the chapels on the roof of the temple of Dendara was performed behind closed doors with the exclusion of the public.¹¹

We may, furthermore, consider the existence of other mysteries in Egypt. As mentioned above, the cult of the Sun preserved its important position in Late Egyptian mysteries and esoteric doctrines. To quote just one element, the two boats of Re, *manedjet* and *mesektet* were regarded as secret objects and access to them was only granted to privileged persons who were regarded as initiates.¹²

On the day of Lucius’ initiation, he was dressed in an unworn linen garment and the high priest led him into the holy shrine. At this point, however, the narrative, which was hitherto verbose, becomes reticent and deliberately obscure.

“I approached the boundary of death and treading on Proserpine’s threshold, I was carried through all the elements, after which I returned. At dead night I saw the sun flashing with bright effulgence. I approached close to the gods above and the gods below and worshipped them face to face. Behold, I have related things about which you must remain in ignorance, though you have heard them”.¹³

The dramatic climax of the initiation was enacted at night in the innermost sanctuary. Under the seal of secrecy Lucius (Apuleius) was not permitted to relate the details, but in spite of the vague formulation it is clear that the initiate experienced death and resurrection. The rite had strong ancient Egyptian affinities,¹⁴ with the sun shining bright in the night in the underworld, as it is described in the Egyptian funerary literature, first of all in the *Amduat* and the *Book of Gates*, but also in some chapters of the *Book of the Dead*. The initiate passed through the cosmic elements and thus gained a full idea about life after death. He sees the “gods above” too

⁹ II. 170–171.

¹⁰ J.-M. KRUCHTEN: *Les annales des prêtres de Karnak ...* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 32). Leuven 1989.

¹¹ S. CAUVILLE: *Le temple de Dendara. Les chapelles osiriennes I–III* (BdE 117–9). Le Caire 1997.

¹² J. BERGMAN: *Ancient Egyptian Theogony in a Greek Magical Papyrus*. In: *Studies in Egyptian religion: Dedicated to Prof. J. Zandee*. Suppl. to *Numen* XLIII. Leiden 1982, 28–37. KAKOSY: *Temple... 170–1*.

¹³ XI.23. *Accessi confinium mortis et calcato Proserpinae limine per omnia vectus elementa remeavi, nocte media vidi solem candido coruscantem lumine, deos inferos et deos superos accessi coram et adoravi de proxumo. Ecce tibi rettuli, quae, quamvis audita, ignores tamen necesse est*. Trad. by J. GWYN GRIFFITHS: *Apuleius of Madauros. The Isis-Book* (ÉPRO 39). Leiden 1975.

¹⁴ M. P. NILSSON: *Geschichte der griechischen Religion II*. München 1961, 624 ff., J. G. GRIFFITHS: *Apuleius of Madauros. The Isis Book (Metamorphoses, Book XI ÉPRO 39)*. Leiden 1975, 296–308.

because the Sun god Re makes his voyage through the twelve regions – called *hours* in Egyptian terminology – of the realm of the dead.

In the morning the initiate who rose from a symbolic death to new life received *twelve* robes. The following acts of the ritual took place publicly, without any secrecy. Lucius carried a torch in his right hand and his head was garlanded with a crown of leaves standing out like sun rays, indicating the solar nature of the resurrection. On the third day the ceremonies of the initiation were concluded with a cultic banquet.

The *Metamorphoses* suggests that Isis was willing to raise her devotees from moral death. She gave back Lucius' human form who had been changed into an ass because of his depravity. The crown of roses by which the miracle of transformation is brought about derives from the "crown of triumph" in Chapter 19 of the *Book of the Dead*. Archaeological evidence for roses is known from Egypt in the Roman period, when it is apparently introduced into the funerary cult.¹⁵

When Lucius regained his human form, he was born again to a new life. Isis' magical healing power was a conspicuous feature of her personality and it was famous also among the foreigners interested in Egypt or living in the country. Diodoros attributes to her the discovery of the drug of immortality by which she raised Horus to new life.¹⁶ The belief in Isis' power over life and death is also attested in earlier times. In a hieratic magical papyrus Isis speaks of herself: "I call back to life who is dead".¹⁷

Besides the ritual form of mysteries, we also have to mention an intellectual, philosophical initiation into the deepest essence of religion. In *De Iside* Plutarch leads the reader to understand the real message of the myth of Osiris and Isis by quoting the views of various philosophical schools about the history of Osiris. The understanding of the essence of the nature of the god, which is only intelligible spiritually, shines through the soul like a lightning.¹⁸ This type of philosophy which gives guidance to the searching soul is called *epopticos*, i.e. offering insight into the ultimate realities of religion and philosophy. The last phase in this development is represented by the Neoplatonic *unio mystica* which means not merely an access to the secrets of the divine, but also a complete spiritual union with god.

The iconography of the goddess also contains allusions to philosophical cosmology. Some Isis statues have a disk on their heads decorated with two incised lines crossing each other in the shape of an X or a cross.¹⁹ The source of many similar representations in Roman times was Plato's *Timaeus* 36 B. In this treatise the World-Soul, the spiritual aspect of the cosmos, is described as an entity divided by two axes resembling the Greek letter X. The neoplatonist Porphyrius later traced this idea to Egypt, noting that the Egyptians had a sign, a circle with a X which to them depicted

¹⁵ GRIFFITHS: Apuleius... 159–161.

¹⁶ I.25.

¹⁷ A. MASSART: MDAIK 15 1957, 179.

¹⁸ De Is. 77.

¹⁹ KÁKOSY: Solar Disk or Solar Globe? FS. Westendorf–Göttingen 1984, 1060 and the statue in the Museum in Tata: V. WESSETZKY: Die ägyptischen Kulte zur Römerzeit in Ungarn (ÉPRO 1), Leiden 1961, fig.20.

the cosmic soul.²⁰ The two circles on the spheres originally probably represented the celestial equator and the ecliptic (zodiac) crossing each other obliquely.²¹ To describe them as an X is a simplification of physical reality. As a matter of fact, on most monuments, including some Isis statues, the figure is depicted schematically with rectangularly crossed lines. In the case of these monuments the lines may have been interpreted as the horizon and the meridian. The cosmic globe on her head (represented as a disk) was an eloquent symbol of the universal rule of Isis.

In the Roman Imperial period a close relation was established between Egyptian cults and the philosophical school of the Neoplatonists. *Theurgy*, a practice to evoke the spirits and gods and to influence them was accepted both by Egyptian religion and Neoplatonism. An interesting instance of such an occult ritual is found in the *Life of Plotinus*, written by his disciple Porphyrius.²² An Egyptian priest who arrived in Rome and was introduced to Plotinus wanted to demonstrate his knowledge in spiritual magic and offered to show the indwelling *daimon* of Plotinus. The séance took place in the Iseum in Rome, this being – in the opinion of the priest – the only pure place in the city. In the course of the theurgical ritual it turned out that it was not a demon, but actually a god which dwelt in the philosopher. It should be noted here that the idea that a god resides in the human personality can be traced back to the New Kingdom in Egypt.²³

The initiates of Isis and Osiris were believed to have share in the divine nature of the gods to such a degree that on some monuments it is difficult to decide whether we are confronted with the image of the deity or her devotee.²⁴ On a mummy portrait the deceased woman was allowed to wear a miniature Isiatic crown.²⁵

I offer this study to Professor I. Borzsák whose œuvre has enriched the research of Egyptian religion with new comparative methods.²⁶

Eötvös Loránd University
Faculty of Humanities
Dept. of Egyptology
H-1364 Budapest P.O. Box 107

²⁰ Proclus, In Timaeum III. II.247.

²¹ O. J. BRENDÉL: Symbolism of the Sphere (ÉPRO 67). Leiden 1977, 53.

²² Vita Plot. 10.

²³ H. BONNET, RÄRG, 225–8 s.v. Gott im Menschen.

²⁴ E.g. the tomb stones from Athens on which the deceased is represented in the likeness of Isis. FR. DUNAND: Le culte d'Isis dans la bassin oriental de le Méditerranée II (ÉPRO 26), Leiden 1973, 144–150.

²⁵ L. H. CORCORAN: Mysticism and the Mummy Portraits in: M. L. BIERBRIER (ed.): Portraits and masks. Burial Customs in Roman Egypt. London 1997, p. 49, pl. 26/3.

²⁶ E.g. Volgai Osiris-mythos. (The myth of Osiris in the Volga district). Antiquitas Hungarica 3 (1949) 111 ff, Aquis submersus. Acta Ant. Hung. I (1951–1952), 201–222, Caesars Funeralien und die christliche Passion. Acta Ant. Hung. 10 (1962) 23–31.