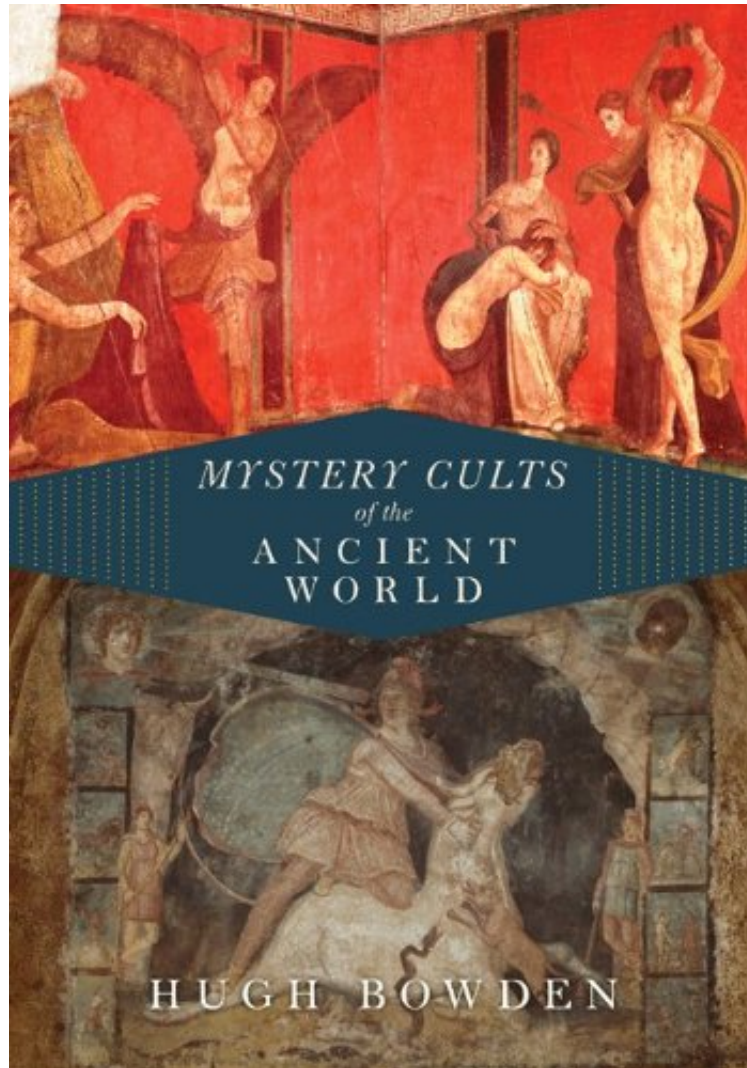


# Mystery Cults of the Ancient World

*Hugh Bowden*

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**Hugh Bowden : Mystery Cults of the Ancient World** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Mystery Cults of the Ancient World:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Comprehensive and well researched By Don Gakusei Bowden's "Mystery Cults of the Ancient World" is comprehensive and well researched. He investigates what we know of the different mystery cults in Greek and Roman times and how they developed over time, from the hints left in literature as well as remains of temples and meeting places. The work is well laid out and contains many illustrations and photos. Interestingly, at the end of the book he tries to provide a sense of the "feel" of the cults by comparing some modern "cults" like Pentecostals and snake handlers, where ecstatic states are invoked through rituals and euphoric

meetings. Perhaps a little speculative, but this is a minor criticism to an otherwise excellent study about what we know of the pre-Christian and Christian-era mystery cults.<sup>4</sup> of 11 people found the following review helpful. Mystery cults of the ancient world  
By Maria Luisa de la Rosa Preve  
I'M A TEACHER IN GREAT AND ANCIENT RELIGIONS, THIS BOOK WAS VERY USEFULL FOR MY CLASSES AND MY WORK, EASY TO UNDERSTAND.I AM GLAD I BOUGHT IT.<sup>2</sup> of 2 people found the following review helpful. It's dry because it's cautious  
By DAJ  
In the past decade, several books have come out that look at a variety of mystery cults. This one is aimed at a popular audience more than the others. However, I sometimes found it surprisingly difficult to grasp the overall picture from Bowden's detailed discussions for example, when trying to picture the sequence of events in the Eleusinian mysteries. A slightly more academic book on the subject, Jan Bremmer's *Initiation into the Mysteries of the Ancient World*, was actually more readable for me in that respect. The major advantage of this book is that its coverage is broader than the others. Bremmer covers much but not all of the same ground as Bowden and discusses less of the cultural context, and *Romanising Oriental Gods* is limited to the three "oriental" mystery cults. Bowden dedicates a chapter each to the Eleusinian Mysteries; the Kabeiroi and the mysteries of Samothrace; other Greek mysteries; the cult of Cybele (Magna Mater); the Dionysian or Bacchic mysteries; private initiation rites; the Orphic tablets connected with the Bacchic mysteries; the cult of Isis; and the cult of Mithras. That may not include all of the mystery cults in the Mediterranean (for example, there's some evidence for mysteries in the worship of the Roman emperor), but it certainly covers most of them. The next-to-last chapter describes the extinction of all the mystery cults and the possible interaction between them and Christianity. The conclusion discusses the religious ecstasy that mystery rites seem meant to induce, which the initiates interpreted as contact with the gods. He lists a lot of modern parallels to this phenomenon before settling, rather strangely, on Pentecostal snake handling as his prime example. Bowden considers this ecstatic state the most important element of the rites, and he downplays the importance of secrets and symbolism in the mysteries. He implies that the symbols had no single authoritative interpretation, imparted no secret knowledge, and were deliberately vague in their meaning. Though Bowden doesn't quite say so, he seems to think that each initiate interpreted the rites differently based on this vague symbolism. One can disagree with that viewpoint, but it does counterbalance the more imaginative attempts to interpret the symbolism in the cults. Mithraic studies are particularly plagued by this kind of elaborate speculation. Bowden's aversion to speculation is partly why the book is drier than you'd expect. He's reluctant to give a straightforward description of the mysteries because it's hard to piece one together using the evidence we have. Despite that flaw, I recommend either this book or Bremmer's as a starting point for understanding the mystery cults.

This is the first book to describe and explain all of the ancient world's major mystery cults--one of the most intriguing but least understood aspects of Greek and Roman religion. In the nocturnal Mysteries at Eleusis, participants dramatically re-enacted the story of Demeter's loss and recovery of her daughter Persephone; in the Bacchic cult, bands of women ran wild in the Greek countryside to honor Dionysus; and in the mysteries of Mithras, men came to understand the nature of the universe and their place within it through frightening initiation ceremonies and astrological teachings. These cults were an important part of life in the ancient Mediterranean world, but their actual practices were shrouded in secrecy, and many of their features have remained unclear until now. By richly illustrating the evidence from ancient art and archaeology, and drawing on enlightening new work in the anthropology and cognitive science of religion, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World* allows readers to imagine as never before what it was like to take part in these ecstatic and life-changing religious rituals--and what they meant to those who participated in them. Stunning images of Greek painted pottery, Roman frescoes, inscribed gold tablets from Greek and South Italian tombs, and excavated remains of religious sanctuaries help show what participants in these initiatory cults actually did and experienced. A fresh and accessible introduction to a fascinating subject, this is a book that will interest general readers, as well as students and scholars of classics and religion.

From Booklist  
This intriguing book offers the latest archaeological and textual information about some of the ancient worlds least-known, most compelling religions, most of which center on goddesses; for instance, Demeter, whose rites at Eleusis were attended by millions of initiates who kept the experience secret for hundreds of years, so that we still do not know exactly what happened in the mysteries. Two goddesses imported to Rome, Isis of Egypt and Cybele of Asia Minor, developed ecstatic cults among their converted followers. Among the male gods considered, the most significant is Dionysus, the wine god worshiped by the wild maenads, whose religion may have survived for almost a thousand years to crop up again in Pompeii. Bowden distinguishes these religions from others by noting that they are based in experience rather than in doctrine. Full of rarely published information but accessibly written, this is an excellent addition to the literature of ancient religions. --Patricia Monaghan "Mystery Cults of the Ancient World is clearly written and richly illustrated, and gives a solid introduction to an extremely elusive phenomenon. . . . [I]t remains a reliable and accessible guide to the religions that gave 'mystery' its name."--Richard Smoley, *Parabola Magazine*  
Greek and Roman men and women by the thousands, even millions, chose to be initiated into religious cults amid strict vows of secrecy; remarkably, not a single voice from antiquity has ever spilled the beans. Despite centuries

of scholarly probing, the exact words, visions, benefits, or promises revealed during these closely guarded rituals remain unknown. This important book presents a sensible, convincing account of what these occasions may have offered their participants; how they related to mainstream, public traditions; and what the mysteries likely entailed. . . . Well-organized by cult types, splendidly illustrated, and jargon-free, the book deserves a wide readership."--Choice

"This book should be on the bookshelf of every thinking pagan, from the most scholarly reconstructionist to the most insouciant eclectic. What we need to know--and what it abundantly reveals--is why mystery cults were (and still are) important. . . . [A]s a guide to pre-Christian classical Paganism, this book is unsurpassed."--Barbara Ardinger, *Witches and Pagans Magazine*

"Students and generalist readers, as well as classicists looking for basic information on mystery cults, will find much useful information here. . . . [T]his is an eminently readable, enlightening overview of a fascinating topic and will become the go-to generalist resource . . . on ancient mystery cults."--Bronwen L. Wickkiser, *American Journal of Archaeology*

"Mystery Cults of the Ancient World is clearly written and highly accessible both to scholars and interested general readers alike. . . . Bowden's multi-discipline approach to studying the value of these cults in people's lives, rather than an attempt to piece together a list of rituals or practices from scattered sources, is refreshing."--Carey Fleiner, *Canadian Journal of History*

From the Back Cover "As clear and well-informed an account as one could imagine of ancient cults involving secret initiation. Hugh Bowden puts together in a highly accessible way the literary and material evidence. Well-paced and an attractive read, this is a very welcome addition to ancient history and religious studies, and will also appeal to the general reader."--Robin Osborne, University of Cambridge

"This book debunks some longstanding misconceptions about mystery cults and provides an accessible introduction to a fascinating topic."--Radcliffe Edmonds, Bryn Mawr College