

**Giovanni Casadio and Patricia A. Johnston (eds.)**

*Mystic Cults in Magna Graecia*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2009.

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This edited collection of papers arises from two symposia held in 2002 and 2004 and hosted by the Vergilian Society and Brandeis University at the Villa Vergiliana in Cuma, Italy, on the topic of “The Cults of Magna Graecia.” To the best of my knowledge, this is the first volume focusing exclusively on a wide range of ancient religious cults in the geographic region of Magna Graecia. This alone makes it a useful reference work and ‘must-read’ for those interested in ancient Mediterranean religious traditions and practices. The papers are divided thematically in accordance with the chief deity of and type of cult: the first section examines cults dedicated to Dionysus and Orpheus; the second focuses on cults of Demeter and Isis and the third on the cult of Mithras. This thematic structure is excellent, allowing the reader to locate relevant contributions on specific cults easily and quickly; furthermore, the decision to group papers on Dionysiac and Orphic cults together makes sense, given the extreme difficulties in drawing any firm demarcation between these respective forms of religiosity.

As is often the case with such an edited collection, the papers are of varying quality and scope. A major strength of the collection is its interdisciplinary nature, with contributions from classicists, historians of religion and even a geographer. Moreover, the papers examine textual, archaeological, epigraphic and iconographic forms of evidence, with one drawing on cognitive theory and several combining detailed analyses of multiple forms of evidence in order to give a balanced and rounded picture of the cults under consideration. However, given this impressive showcase of methodologies, the historian of philosophy might hope for more discussion of philosophical parallels and connections (although certain contributions, such as those of Alberto Bernabé and R. Drew Griffiths, do actively engage with philosophical evidence and themes). In a broader sense, more cohesiveness and interplay between the various contributions would have improved the quality of the volume. Several themes and *topoi* recur in various papers, such as the importance of divinization and the aim of immortality in forms of Orphism and Dionysiac cults, as well as the significant roles of both men and women in Demeter cults in Magna Graecia. More could have been said about these intriguing issues and a conclusion drawing together such threads and suggesting areas for future research would have been a very helpful addition to the volume.

The introduction contains a comprehensive survey of previous and recent scholarship on ancient mystery cults, discussing historical and critical perspec-

tives, including research undertaken by classicists, historians of religion and ethnologists. It also introduces key features and elements of each of the cults under examination, centring on what can currently be deduced from available evidence. This introduction is very useful, although certain generalised statements made therein may be misleading to non-specialists, such as “The idea of rebirth can be documented only in later Hellenism” (which, even discounting the evidence from Plato and Pythagoreanism, is questionable given the existence of the “Orphic” Gold Tablets from the fourth century BCE which seemingly attest to this notion in some form).

Part I, on Dionysus and Orpheus, contains a well-rounded selection of papers from important scholars in the field, opening with Giovanni Casadio’s examination of the cult of Dionysus in Campania. Dionysiac worship is attested in this region for a period of a thousand years and Casadio demonstrates how the cult of Dionysus presents itself in various seemingly contradictory forms that characterise the god’s ethos. Anna Jiménez San Cristóbal examines the meanings of key terms in Orphism. These two papers, which both make important contributions, could have benefited from some cross-referencing, given that they discuss similar or identical issues on more than one occasion. Radcliff C. Edmonds examines the issue of identity in the ‘Orphic’ Gold Tablets through the lens of the narrative structure of the text inscribed on the tablets. Although his methodology is useful, the omission of examination of relevant ritual contexts and philosophical parallels results in a less complex and contextualised exploration than might otherwise have been the case. Fortunately, Alberto Bernabé’s rich contribution redresses the balance, comprising a detailed examination of the journey to the Underworld as presented in relevant textual and iconographic evidence pertaining to Orphic cult, against a rich background of philosophical, religious and material contexts. The section concludes with R. Drew Griffiths’ brief but fascinating examination of possible allusions to and mockery of Pythagorean motifs and teachings in Petronius’ *Satyricon* against the background of relevant social, cultural and literary contexts: however, his conclusion that the doctrine of reincarnation emerged from Magna Graecia (Southern Italy) seems somewhat tendentious given the narrow range of extant evidence pertaining to the issue. Rather, this issue, as with so many others, remains obscure due to lack of evidence.

Part II, which focuses on cults of Demeter and Isis, opens with Giulia Sfameni Gasparro’s examination of the cult of Demeter in Magna Graecia, focusing on the case study of San Nicola di Albanella. Kathryn M. Luccese uses Landscape Synthesis to examine a temple of Demeter in Latium (Ch. 9). Raymond J. Clark examines the motif of terrifying female apparitions in *Aeneid* 6, focusing on Aeneas’ encounter after crossing Avernus and its possible connections with the

Eleusinian mysteries (Ch. 10). He seems to conclude that there is no connection. In Chapter 11, Bonnie Maclachlan uses material and archaeological evidence to explore the ritual activity of Locrian women. Utilising evidence from the Locrian *pinakes*, as well as material remains discovered at Persephone's shrine and a cave of the Nymphs (Grotta Caruso), Maclachlan examines the interplay of eschatological and nuptial themes in this range of votive and decorative evidence, arguing for a continuum in the ritual processes of both locations. Her suggestions that the *korai* figurines or dolls recovered in this cave of the Nymphs represent *proteleia*, gifts offered to Persephone by young Locrian brides at the time of their marriage, and that female worshippers may have participated in initiation ceremonies at both locations, are intriguing and deserve further exploration. Utilising a wide range of literary, iconographic and archaeological evidence, Frederick Brenk examines the related roles of Isis and Osiris in the Iseum in Pompeii and concludes that Isis was more prominent than Osiris at this Iseum, in contrast to their respective roles at the Iseum Campanese in Rome (Ch. 12). Paolo Caputo examines the results of the excavations undertaken at Cumae (Campania) under his own direction, including findings that provide the first substantial evidence for the presence of a cult of Egyptian deities at Cumae and that indicate that Cumae may have also had an Iseum (Ch. 13). Patricia A. Johnston considers the finely tuned balance between *labor* and *religio* in Vergil's *Georgics* and examines possible allusions and references to mystery cults within the poem (Ch. 14).

Part III focuses on the Mithraic mysteries. Luther H. Martin focuses on initiation in the Mithras cult, drawing on cognitive theory (Ch. 15). Using the Amor and Psyche relief in the Mithraeum of Capua Vetere as a case study, Martin examines the degree of 'syncretism' operative in this cult: this relief represents the only known presence of these Greek figures in a sanctuary devoted to Mithras. This contribution opens with some very sensible remarks regarding the (lack of) utility of the category 'syncretism', including its redundancy both as a descriptive and as an explanatory category. The final two contributions to the volume examine the variant roles and constructions of the body in Mithraic cult. Focusing on images of initiation in relevant iconographic evidence found at the Capua Mithraeum, Richard Gordon examines representations of the body as a means of exploring the transmission of initiation, knowledge and identity in the Mithraic cult (Ch. 16). Gordon studies the structure of binary oppositions evident in the images of (possibly idealised representations of) initiation contained in the podium frescoes from the Capua Mithraeum and links these oppositions with wider issues, such as the relation between ritual action and the state theatre of cruelty, along with the emergence of heroic-passive values in early Christianity. Glenn Palmer examines the

(apparently unique and extremely unusual) placement of the wound (on the shoulder) in the Mithraic tauroctony which is included in an array of images relating to the Mithraic cult (Ch. 17). Palmer argues convincingly for links between the tauroctony and Egyptian funerary rituals and mythological and astrological motifs.

As the first comprehensive collection of essays examining the range of cults of Magna Graecia, this book represents important reading for historians of religion, art historians, classicists and ancient historians (particularly those whose research specialises in mystery cults and ancient religions), and those working on ancient philosophy who are interested in the possible connections between such cultic practices and the many philosophers originating from, associated with or apparently setting up philosophical communities in this geographical region, such as Empedocles, Parmenides and Pythagoras. However, the specialist nature of the volume (Latin and French are frequently cited without translation; a lack of explanation of technical terminology also characterises the book) means that it will probably be too advanced for use by most undergraduate students. Each essay has endnotes located at the end of the contribution, a somewhat frustrating feature given that the reader has to constantly flick back and forth whilst reading. The volume contains a general index, *Index Locorum* and index of authors, as well as a wide selection of black and white illustrations. Overall, this is a useful volume in that it draws together current research and evidence for the presence of a range of cults in Magna Graecia; the scope and coverage of the volume are impressive and the presence of significant themes and parallels across cultic and geographical contexts are suggestive of important directions for future research in this area.

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