Ancient Mystery Cults

Institute for Lifelong Learning

Douglas Kenning

Sources

basic sources & commentary


specific cults

*Cybele and Attis: The Myth and the Cult*, Maarten Vermaseren (1977)

*The Eleusinian Mysteries & Rites*, by Dudley Wright (2003). Best introduction I know to the thousand years of these central and most fascinating of mysteries.


*The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, David Ulansey, tells of the paradigm shift that completely overturned the old idea of Mithraic iconography from a cult about the vegetative regeneration of the earth to one about a complex understanding of astrological symbols in the heavens.

*Orpheus and the Roots of Platonism*, Algis Uždavinysm describes how the legendary poet, Orpheus, became a bridge between the earliest Greek and Egyptian mysteries and Neoplatonic and Hermetic wisdom. He argues that at its heart pre-Socratic philosophy, and even Socrates himself, sought “knowledge through madness” directed at oneness with the divine.

For the cult of Isis, I can only offer the general books above, since specific books that I have looked at are full of New Age mysticism that has little to do with the Isis of the ancient world, or are too academic for general interest.
The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century, by Bernard McGinn. McGinn’s The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism series is the most respected and comprehensive look at Christian mysticism. This first volume is the one that covers our era.


related items of interest:

Violence and the Sacred, by René Girard. Girard attempts to prove an inextricable causal connection between violence and religion. Specifically, mimetic desire, the scapegoat mechanism, and sacrifice are means by which communities control the violence that we all find compellingly cathartic. That is, by transferring our desires into the sacred and making rituals of controlled violence, a community tries to maintain internal peace and harmony.

Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms: Journeys Into the Disappearing Religions of the Middle East, by Gerard Russell (2014). In the lands of Islām have existed scores of tiny, fringe faiths that manage to encompass a amazing breadth of human spirituality, many holdovers from ancient times. This is an account off former diplomat Gerard Russell’s personal visit to many of them.

Saints and Madmen: Breaking Down the Boundaries Between Psychiatry and Spirituality, by Russell Shorto, looks at ecstatic religious experience—seeing visions, hearing voices, etc.—and modern psychiatry’s attempts to dismiss them or explain them.