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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.

Hugh Bowden is senior lecturer in ancient history at King's College London. He is the author of *Classical Athens* and the *Delphic Oracle* and general editor of "The Times" *Ancient Civilizations* (HarperCollins).

Subject Areas:

Archaeology and Ancient History

Religion

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