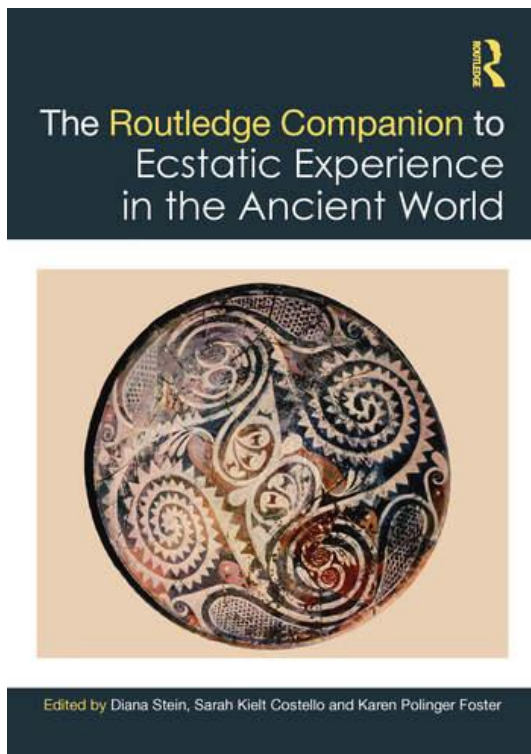


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The **Routledge Companion** to  
Ecstatic Experience  
in the Ancient World



Edited by Diana Stein, Sarah Kielt Costello and Karen Polinger Foster

Diana L. Stein, Sarah Kielt Costello, Karen Polinger Foster (eds), 2021: *The Routledge Companion to Ecstatic Experience in the Ancient World*. Routledge: Abingdon, Oxfordshire. 560 pages, 33 colour and 61 b/w illustrations.

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Reviewed by Helene Whittaker

The aim of *Ecstatic Experience in the Ancient World* is to cast light on what the editors maintain has been a neglected area of ancient religious expression, an assertion that can hardly be disputed as a general statement. Although there has been considerable interest in the topic, at least regarding some areas of the eastern Mediterranean, methodological and theoretical approaches have been lacking. The editors have largely succeeded in their aim of drawing attention to the ubiquity and variety of ecstatic experiences in the ancient world and have produced an impressive volume.

The volume consists of an introductory chapter by the editors and 27 chapters which present and examine the evidence for ecstatic experience in particular cultural contexts in the ancient world. Each chapter has a separate and substantial bibliography. The contributions are diverse in the types of evidence that they consider

and in their approach. An underlying premise is the universality of ecstatic experience, even if it is shaped by cultural context and can manifest itself in very different ways. In the *Introduction* the editors define ecstatic experience as an experience that is ‘out of the realm of the ordinary’, ‘a heightened sensorial experience’ or an ‘altered state of consciousness’, while ‘rapture’, ‘trance’, ‘dream’, ‘mystical moment’, ‘hallucination’ and ‘spirit or demonic possession’ may also factor in. Although the *Introduction* could have included a more theoretically informed discussion about the nature of ecstatic experience, the looseness of the definition leaves the individual authors free to interpret the meaning in different ways according to the specific cultural context and the available evidence. The generalisation that ecstatic rites were usually secret seems doubtful. It also seems odd to blame the Catholic Church for its attitude towards the religious traditions of the Aztecs for the lack of ‘systematic inquiry’ on ecstatic experience in the ancient world. Moreover, ecstatic experiences are not exactly unknown or regarded with hostility in Catholicism.

**Part 1** *Setting the stage; psychoactive substances past and present*

In the first chapter of Part One (‘Contextualising the study of ecstatic experience in ancient old world societies’), Sarah Kielt Costello provides an overview of the history of research from the nineteenth century to the present. Her treatment of the topic ranges widely and deals with a broad time period. It is therefore necessarily somewhat superficial. To my mind, it is also a bit biased and too intent on proclaiming the originality of the volume. It criticises earlier research because it has been reluctant to accept evidence of ecstatic states in the ancient world, and attributes this to ‘intellectual discomfort’. I would not necessarily agree that there has been an unwillingness to recognise ecstatic aspects in ancient religious experience. It is certainly not true for Bronze Age Crete, for example, where a focus on ecstatic experience has been central to our understanding of Minoan religion and culture since the early days of Cretan archaeology. Although ancient Greeks in the historical period have often been regarded as characterised by rationality, the irrational aspects of Greek culture and religion have also received a good deal of attention. E. R. Dodds’ *The Greeks and the Irrational*, first published in 1951, had a notable influence in challenging the rationality of the ancient Greeks. The ecstatic elements of the cult of Dionysus and other ancient Mediterranean cult practices have long been recognised and addressed in the relevant literature. I also fail to understand how the terms Bronze Age and Iron Age reflect ‘an imperialist, colonialist structure of control’. A large part of the chapter consists of an overview of social developments and political events particular to the United States, which seems out of place. Etzel Cardeña’s contribution (‘Not only ecstasy: pouring new concepts into old vessels’) is concerned with states of consciousness from a psychological perspective. He points out that many commonly used terms have different meanings and that this is not always taken into consideration in discussions about altered states of consciousness. Michael J. Winkelman (‘From Shamans to sorcerers. Empirical models for defining ritual practices and ecstatic experience in ancient, medieval and modern societies’) distinguishes between different categories of

religious practitioners and describes their main characteristics, which he argues can be associated with subsistence strategy and socio-political context. All in all, I found the articles in Part One the least satisfactory in the volume. Although they contain a lot of information, they are also too generalising and intent on establishing rigid definitions. It is unclear what exactly is meant by 'setting the stage' since they seem quite disconnected from the contributions in the following sections.

### **Part 2** *Psychoactive substances past and present*

The chapters in Part Two deal with the evidence for plants which were or might have been used to induce altered states of consciousness. The use of alcohol to produce an altered state of mind in symbolic contexts has long been recognised in Mediterranean and Near Eastern archaeology. The numerous plants with psychoactive properties that were or could have been used to deliberately induce altered states of consciousness are considered by Giorgio Samorini ('Psychoactive plants in the ancient world. Observations of an ethnobotanist') and Alison Betts ('Ecstasy meets paleoethnobotany. Botanical stimulants in ancient inner Asia'). Stephen Batiuk ('Caucasian cocktails. The early use of alcohol in "the cradle of wine"') discusses archaeological and palynological evidence from sites in Central Asia and the Near East and links between ritual and alcohol. The considerable textual evidence from Mesopotamia is analysed by Barbara Böck ('Mind-altering plants in Babylonian medical sources') and Hittite textual sources are investigated by Rita Francia ('Plant-based potions and ecstatic states in Hittite rituals'). Riccardo Andreozzi and Claudia Sarkady ('Proscription of aphrodisiac and psychoactive plants in Ptolemaic Egypt') concentrate on identifying plants that were excluded from religious contexts. They suggest that this was associated with ritual cleanliness. David Ilan ('The ring-kernoi and psychotropic substances') presents an interesting and convincing interpretation of the Cypriote ring-kernos, which he suggests was used for the consumption of hallucinogenic plant drugs as part of religious rituals.

### **Part 3** *Ecstatic experience and the numinous*

The chapters in Part Three analyse the significance of locations where altered states of consciousness took place, focusing on the ways in which ecstatic experiences were deliberately shaped through the natural and cultural environment where ritual activities took place. The role of architecture and imagery in setting the scene for an ecstatic experience is vividly described in Anne Porter's contribution ('Beer, beasts and bodies. Shedding boundaries in bounded spaces'), which includes a detailed and evocative analysis of Göbekli Tepe as a ritual space. Sam Mirelman ('Lament, spectacle and emotion in a ritual for Ishtar') analyses ecstatic aspects in the Mesopotamian cult of the goddess Ishtar/Inanna by focusing on one particular ritual, which included self-mutilation as a means of acquiring an altered state of consciousness. John Coleman Darnell ('Writing for the dead, welcoming the solar-eye goddess and ecstatic expression in Egyptian religion') examines the textual evidence for spirit possession and ecstatic practices. The two contributions that deal with Bronze Age Crete nicely

complement each other. Emily Miller Bonney ('Altered states on Prepalatial Crete') suggests that clay vases in the form of a female figure that are found at several Prepalatial sites should be interpreted as material recreations of ritual experiences rather than as representations of goddesses, which is how they have usually been interpreted. They can further be seen as attesting to the long tradition of ecstatic experience in religious contexts on Crete. Christine Morris and Alan Peatfield's contribution ('Bodies in ecstasy. Shamanic elements in Minoan religion') is perhaps the most interesting chapter in the volume. The methodology is innovative in that the authors relate their own experience of practising trance to the interpretation of the ritual meaning of the small terracotta figurines of men and women found at Cretan peak sanctuaries. They argue that the body postures of the figurines can be interpreted as sacred trance-inducing postures. This was tested by the authors and other members of the excavation team at the site of the peak sanctuary at Atsipadhes, which confirmed that imitating the postures of the figurines over a longer period of time did indeed lead to visionary shape-shifting experiences. I wonder if a similar argument could be made for the female terracotta figures, known as 'goddesses with upraised arms', which have been found in Late Minoan III sanctuaries, in which case an association with poppies could indicate that mind-altering substances might also have been involved (cf. Polinger Foster's contribution on drug use in Minoan Crete). However, their argument may be weakened somewhat by the fact that maintaining any contrived position for more than a few minutes will affect the mind. Susan Lupack ('The Mycenaeans and ecstatic ritual experience') investigates the evidence from open-air ritual sites and religious iconography and suggests that Mycenaean religion might have been influenced by ecstatic practices in Minoan religion. She further suggests that they may have been associated with a Bronze Age cult of Dionysus. Olympia Panagiotidou ('Emotional arousal, sensory deprivation and "miraculous healing" in the cult of Asclepius') investigates connections between the mental and emotional states of patients who spent time at a sanctuary of Asclepius. She argues that the natural and cultural environment of the sanctuaries deliberately targeted the sensory, perceptual and mental processes of the patients. Alice Clinch ('Ecstasy and initiation in the Eleusinian Mysteries') reconstructs the various stages of the ritual process in relation to the experience of initiates who participated in the Eleusinian Mysteries. Yulia Ustinova ('Apolline and Dionysian ecstasy at Delphi') discusses ecstatic elements in the cults of Apollo and Dionysus and argues for an interrelationship between them. Maik Patzelt ('Communing with the spirits. Funeral processions in ancient Rome') describes how the wailing of hired mourners, the presence of actors who impersonated the ancestors of the dead, and professional musicians were deliberately employed to heighten the emotional experience of a Roman elite funeral for participants and onlookers.

#### **Part 4** *Expressions of the ecstatic mind*

Ulrike Steinert ('Ecstatic experience and possession disorders in ancient Mesopotamia') presents a survey of textual evidence, which distinguishes between the

various types of ecstatic experience that were recognised in ancient Mesopotamia. John Z. Wee ('Ghosts in and outside the machine. A phenomenology of intelligence, psychic possession and prophetic ecstasy in ancient Mesopotamia') explores how consciousness and the interpretation of possession and ecstasy were shaped by social and cultural structures in ancient Mesopotamia. Benjamin R. Foster ('Ecstatic speech in ancient Mesopotamia') appraises the interpretation of the considerable evidence for ecstatic speech at Mari. Diana L. Stein ('The proto-theme of a Near Eastern glyptic language family') argues that images on seals and sealings can be read as visual language, which reflects aspects of shamanic activities. Caroline J. Tully ('Understanding the language of trees. Ecstatic experience and interspecies communication in Late Bronze Age Crete') analyses the gold rings from Neopalatial Crete which depict human beings interacting with trees and argues that the depictions of the bodies indicate that tree-shaking was used as a consciousness-altering technique. Karen Polinger Foster's wide-ranging contribution ('Psychedelic art and ecstatic vision in the Aegean') can be seen as a complement to Ilan's contribution in *Part Two*. She points out that traces of opium have been recognised in Cypriote juglets, which seem to imitate the shape of the poppy capsule, indicating the social and probably also ritual significance of plants that could produce altered states of consciousness. In the Aegean saffron crocuses also occur as an artistic motif. She points out that it is not only the poppy that contains psychoactive substances, but also the crocus, and that this was of significance to its artistic popularity. She further suggests that the psychedelic wildness that she sees as characterising artistic expression in the ancient Aegean indicates that the use of psychoactive drugs was widespread and perhaps intentionally used as a source of inspiration. She suggests an interesting comparison between the United States in the 1960s and Minoan Crete as periods of social and cultural change when narcotics were readily available. Nassos Papalexandrou ('Sight as ecstatic experience in the ancient Mediterranean') analyses the imagery on the Idaean cave tympanon in order to investigate the role of visual and auditory experience in altered states of consciousness.

This is not a particularly coherent volume. What constitutes ecstatic experiences or altered states of consciousness is understood very differently by the individual authors. The *Introduction* includes short resumes of the contributions but a discussion of the ways in which the papers relate to each other would have been useful. The paradox that the body is often the source of and/or the vehicle for altered states of consciousness, which are often experienced and understood as an escape from the body, could have been treated more thoroughly from a theoretical viewpoint. There is surprisingly little interest in gender perspectives. However, the collection contains a lot of varied and fascinating information and original perspectives and interpretations that will be useful not just to researchers and students but to anyone interested in the ritual role of altered states of consciousness in the ancient world. It is clear there is a wealth of archaeological, iconographical and textual evidence that testifies to the prevalence and diversity of ecstatic experience in the ancient eastern Mediterranean. The volume succeeds in demonstrating that ecstatic experiences were of fundamental

importance to ancient religious expression. It can inspire and provide a starting point for further research on a topic which would seem to be of greater relevance to our understanding of the ancient world than has previously been recognised.

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