

WHAT WE CAN LEARN ABOUT THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES

George Mylonas, Ph.D.

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Dr. George Mylonas (1898-1988) was a Greek archaeologist and scholar renowned worldwide for his expertise, erudition, and wit. Having received his doctorate from the University of Athens in 1927, he continued his study at Johns Hopkins University, where he earned a second Ph.D. He later taught at Washington University in St. Louis from 1933-1968, founded the Department of Art History and Archaeology there, and directed the university's archaeological digs at Mycenae. After retirement, he returned to Greece to serve as Secretary General of the Archaeological Society and oversaw the dig at Mycenae until his death. Mylonas was in the forefront of efforts to protect the Acropolis in Athens from air and water pollution.

For Dr. Mylonas, archaeology and history were far from dry or dead. In a 1985 interview with Michael Wood on his series *In Search of the Trojan War*, Mylonas chuckled when he told the interviewer that he converses with Agamemnon "all the time." His definition of the work of an archaeologist is to "infer from withered flowers the hour of their bloom."¹

In this selection from his work on *Eleusis*, Dr. Mylonas explores the nature of what we can know about the ancient Mysteries.



What we can learn about the Eleusinian Mysteries is certainly very limited. We know of certain rites that were not, however, part of the secret celebration; we can figure out certain acts that were part of the Mysteries, such as the enactment of the sacred pageant; we know nothing of the substance of the Mysteries, of the meaning derived even from the sacred drama which was performed. Explanations suggested by scholars thus far, and philosophic conceptions and parallels, are based upon assumptions and the wish to establish the basis on which the Mysteries rested. These accounts do not seem to correspond to the facts. The secret of the Mysteries was kept a secret successfully and we shall perhaps never be able to fathom it or unravel it.

For years, since my early youth, I have tried to find out what the facts were. Hope against hope was spent against the lack of monumental evidence; the belief that inscriptions would be found on which the Hierophants had recorded their ritual and its meaning has faded completely; the discovery of a subterranean room filled with the archives of the cult, which dominated my being in my days of youth, is proved an unattainable dream since neither subterranean rooms nor archives for the cult exist at Eleusis; the last Hierophant carried with him to the grave the secrets which had been transmitted orally for untold generations, from the one high priest to the next. A thick, impenetrable veil indeed still covers securely the rites of Demeter

and protects them from the curious eyes of modern students. How many nights and days have been spent over books, inscriptions, and works of art by eminent scholars in their effort to lift the veil! How many wild and

We may assume that the pageant of the wanderings of Demeter, the story of Persephone, and the reunion of mother and daughter formed part of the *dromena*; that it was a passion play which aimed not only

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ingenious theories have been advanced in superhuman effort to explain the Mysteries! How many nights I have spent standing on the steps of the Telesterion, flooded with the magic silver light of a Mediterranean moon, hoping to catch the mood of the initiates, hoping that the human soul might get a glimpse of what the rational mind could not investigate! All in vain—the ancient world has kept its secret well and the Mysteries of Eleusis remain unrevealed.

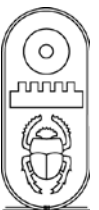
What We Know

The few details that we know are inadequate to give us a complete understanding of the substance of the rites. What do we know about those rites? We know that different degrees of initiation existed, the most advanced of which was known as the *epopteia*.

We know that all people of Hellenic speech and untainted by human blood, with the exception of barbarians, were eligible to be initiated into the Mysteries—men, women, children, and even slaves. We know that the main initiation, the *telete*, included at least three elements: the *dromena*, the things which were enacted; the *deiknymena*, the things which were shown; and the *legomena*, the words which were spoken. The spoken words and the sacred objects revealed by the Hierophant remain unknown.

to unfold the myth of the Goddesses to the initiates but also to make these initiates partake of the experiences of the Goddesses to share with them the distress, the travail, the exultation, and the joy which attended the loss of Persephone and her reunion with the mother. Certainly the story of the Mater Dolorosa of antiquity contains elements that appeal to the human heart and imagination. “With burning torches Persephone is sought, and when she is found the rite is closed with general thanksgiving and a waving of torches.” We may assume that the fortunes of Demeter and Persephone symbolized the vegetation cycle—life, death, and life again: “the sprouting of the new crop is a symbol of the eternity of life”; that they gave the initiates confidence to face death and a promise of bliss in the dark domain of Hades whose rulers became his protectors and friends through initiation. But can we go beyond this point and imagine more fully the substance of the Mysteries?

There are a good many scholars who believe that there was no more to the Mysteries than the few facts and surmises we have summarized; there are others who believe that their substance was so simple that it escapes us just because of its simplicity. There are even a few who maintain that the secret was kept because actually there was no secret worth keeping. The testimonies of



the ancient world would prove untenable the suggestion of the agnostics. I believe that nearer the mark are the scholars who are trying to suggest a meaning which could have appealed to so many people for so long. Of the variety of suggestions made we shall quote but three because they seem to us that they take us as far towards a solution of the mystery as we can hope to go with the available evidence.

Nilsson suggests that the Mysteries based “on the foundation of the old agrarian cult a hope of immortality and a belief in the eternity of life, not for the individual but for the generations which spring one from another. Thus, also, there was developed on the same foundation a morality of peace and good will, which strove to embrace humanity in a brotherhood without respect to state allegiance and civil standing. The hope and the belief and the morality were those of the end of the archaic age.”²



First excavations by the Greek Archaeological Society of Athens, began in 1882, under rubble. In 1931, the Temple of Demeter was found, fifty years later!

Existence in the Hereafter

Guthrie has suggested that the Eleusinian cult was based upon the Homeric (and I would add also Mycenaean) conception of the hereafter and of an existence after death somewhat altered to benefit the initiates.”³ “In Homer,” he states, voicing the generally accepted ideas, “dead exist indeed, but they are strengthless, witless wraiths, uttering thin bodiless shrieks as they flit to and fro in

the shadowy house of Hades.” And we may recall in this regard Achilles’ words, “I should choose, so I might live on earth, to serve as the hireling of another, of some portionless man whose livelihood was but small, rather than to be lord over all the dead that have perished,” whom he described as “the unheeding dead, the phantoms of men outworn.”⁴

But Homer also has an Elysium, a very pleasant place indeed, to which went special people for special reasons; Menelaos was destined to go there because he “had Helen as his wife and in the eyes of the Gods he was the son-in-law of Zeus.” Guthrie suggests that perhaps this Elysium was promised to the initiates of the Eleusinian cult, and that promise of course filled them with bliss and joy. The suggestion seems plausible, especially since its inception could go back to the Mycenaean age when the Mysteries were established at Eleusis. It holds no punishment for the uninitiated and only the promise of good things for the *mystai*; the two correspond to the prospects held out by the Hymn. It is simple, but does not seem to have any relation to the Goddesses of Eleusis, whose role was not that of assigning dead to different categories.

“Are we left quite in the dark as to the secret of salvation that Eleusis cherished and imported,” asks Farnell, and we may well join him in his answer. “When we have weighed all the evidence and remember the extraordinary fascination a spectacle exercised upon the Greek temperament, the solution of the problem is not so remote or so perplexing. The solemn fast and preparation, the mystic food eaten and drunk, the moving passion-play, the extreme sanctity of the *iepa* revealed, all these influences could induce in the worshiper, not indeed the sense of absolute union with the divine nature such as the Christian sacrament ... but at least the feeling of intimacy and friendship with the deities, and a strong current of sympathy was established by the mystic contact.”

Since those deities ruled over the lower world, people would feel that “those who won their friendship by initiation in this life would by the simple logic of faith regard themselves as certain to win blessings at their hands in the next. And this,” suggests Farnell, “as far as we can discern, was the ground on which flourished the Eleusinian hope.”⁵

Was this conception sufficient to justify the enthusiasm of the ancient world? What was the role and significance of Demeter who was the major deity of the Mysteries and who was not the mistress of the lower world? Plouton the master of that world had from all appearances a very secondary role and Persephone would emerge as the dominant power if the suggestion is accepted. Both Farnell and Guthrie reason well what can be obtained from the available evidence, and give us perhaps a portion of the significance of the Mysteries. I agree with them since I had reached similar conclusions; but I cannot help feeling that there is much more to the cult of Eleusis that has remained a secret; that there is meaning and significance that escapes us.

Appeal to Heart and Soul

Whatever the substance and meaning of the Mysteries was, the fact remains that the cult of Eleusis satisfied the most sincere yearnings and the deepest longings of the human heart. The initiates returned from their pilgrimage to Eleusis full of joy and happiness, with the fear of death diminished and the strengthened hope of a better life in the world of shadows: “Thrice happy are those of mortals, who having seen those rites depart for Hades; for to them alone is it granted to have true life there; to the rest all there is evil,” Sophokles cries out exultantly. And to this Pindar with equal exultation answers: “Happy is he who, having seen these rites goes below the hollow earth; for he knows the end of life and he knows its god-sent beginning.”⁶

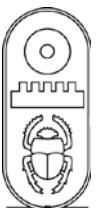
When we read these and other similar statements written by the great or nearly



Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Persephone*, 1874.

great of the ancient world, by the dramatists and the thinkers, when we picture the magnificent buildings and monuments constructed at Eleusis by great political figures like Peisistratos, Kimon, Perikles, Hadrian, Marcus Aurelius and others, we cannot help but believe that the Mysteries of Eleusis were not an empty, childish affair devised by shrewd priests to fool the peasant and the ignorant, but a philosophy of life that possessed substance and meaning and imparted a modicum of truth to the yearning human soul. That belief is strengthened when we read in Cicero that Athens has given nothing to the world more excellent or divine than the Eleusinian Mysteries.⁷

Let us recall again that the rites of Eleusis were held for some two thousand years; that



for two thousand years civilized humanity was sustained and ennobled by those rites. Then we shall be able to appreciate the meaning and importance of Eleusis and of the cult of Demeter in the pre-Christian era. When Christianity conquered the Mediterranean world, the rites of Demeter, having perhaps fulfilled their mission to humanity, came to an end. The “bubbling spring” of hope and inspiration that once existed by the Kallichoron well became dry and the world turned to other living sources for sustenance. The cult that inspired the world for so long was gradually forgotten, and its secrets were buried with its last Hierophant.

ENDNOTES

¹ “George E. Mylonas,” at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_E._Mylonas.

² Martin P. Nilsson, *Greek Popular Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), 63.

³ W.K.C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion: A Study of the Orphic Movement* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1935), 149.

⁴ *Odyssey*, 11, vv. 476 and 489-491.

⁵ Lewis R. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 197.

⁶ Sophokles, *Fragm.*, 719 (Dindorf); Pindar, *Fragm.*, 102 (Oxford).

⁷ Cicero, *De Legibus*, 2, 14, 36.



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