

# THE WISDOM OF THE SAGES: THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES

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**O**ur debt to the mysteries of antiquity is great. Every Rosicrucian should be as familiar with their origin, purpose, and practice as extant information permits. The original manuscript was written in Athens in Greek by Frater Nicholas P. Kephalas after a comprehensive study of the few remaining sources of information which have survived the religious prejudice of the past centuries. The work was accomplished during the 1940s despite the unfavorable conditions that prevailed during World War II and civil war in his own homeland with resultant poverty and destruction. His efforts are dedicated: "To the Emperor of AMORC, Ralph M. Lewis, and to the fratres and sorores of the International Jurisdiction of the Rosicrucian Order, as a token of profound respect and pre-eminent honor."

It is evident from the manuscript that it is a work of love—love of the achievements of his ancient forebears, and love of philosophy and the mystical teachings which so greatly influenced the thought of later times. It was necessary to translate the manuscript into English. This was a task that required an excellent knowledge of both Greek and English. The translation was a labor of love for the Rosicrucian Order, AMORC, by Frater Peter G. Demos, who lives in the United States, and the manuscript has now been adapted for modern readers.

If age gives dignity, then we shall acquire a mantle of mental and spiritual poise by this study. It extends into remote antiquity the age of what we cherish and hold to be worthy of us. It is good to feel that our feet are in the soil of the past while at the same time we reach into the future. It prevents us from feeling that we are suspended in an unstable state.

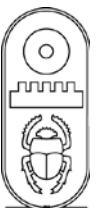
## The Ancient Mysteries

Mysteries are sometimes described as religious truths or secret rites. In the following definition, the word *sacra* refers to things which are sacred, whether these are utensils, objects, or temples. *Kore* means maiden. In her book called *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, Jane Harrison discusses the mysteries.

"Mysteries were by no means confined to the religion of Demeter and Kore. There were mysteries of Hermes, of Iasion, of Ino, of Archemoros, of Agraulos, of Hecate. In general, mysteries seem to occur more usually in relation to the cult of women divinities, of heroines and earth-goddesses; from the worship of the Olympians in Homer they are markedly absent. In general, by a mystery is meant a rite in which certain *sacra* are exhibited, which cannot be safely seen by the worshipper till he [or she] has undergone certain purifications."

The religious mysteries of the ancient world were mystical and symbolic ceremonies. Their performance revealed occult and sublime philosophic dogmas to those fortunate enough to receive such initiation. The adjective *fortunate* is employed intentionally, since initiation into the mysteries was obtained only after lengthy trials. Initiation was considered a distinction and a token of priceless honor and accomplishment.

The most famous of all ancient religious mysteries, among which were the Kabairian of Samothrace, the Dionysian, the Orphic, the Cybeleian, the Adonideian, the Attican, the Damian, the Auxesian, and the Thracian,



were those which took place at Eleusis of Attica in honor of Demeter, goddess of agriculture. The Eleusinian Mysteries stood far above the rest in spiritual content and ceremonial majesty.



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The origin and generally the formation of the various mysteries of the ancient religions are hidden in the impenetrable darkness of the ages. Consequently, if ever their exact explanation can be discovered by the noble and ceaseless efforts of archeologists, the dark curtain of the past will be lifted for a better and more complete enlightenment of modern historical and religious science. It will provide a more thorough understanding of ancient Indian, Phoenician, and Egyptian beliefs, which are now so badly misunderstood. Moreover, such an explanation will throw light upon the national characteristics of the Greeks, whose most interesting prehistoric period, one that has inspired the noblest and most majestic ideals and sentiments of humanity, still remains covered by the phantasmagoric clouds of complex and paradoxical mythology.

The Eleusinian Mysteries engaged not only the attention of the ancient Greek and Roman authors, but also that of the early founders of the Christian church and later of scientists, archaeologists, historians, and philosophers. Some of these will be referred to later.

Certain things may be deduced about the Greek mysteries. First, the mysteries as practiced in Greece can be traced to at least three thousand years before Christ. Second, there is an immediate and mediate genetic relationship between divinities and beliefs of different people, which will be presently stated more explicitly. Third, at least some of the mysteries predated the Hellenic invasions, but the origin of the Eleusinian Mysteries is uncertain.

An exact explanation of the Eleusinian Mysteries is not an easy matter. The ancient authors, who for one reason or another touched on them, expressed themselves guardedly. Silence was imposed by a threatened punishment of death to anyone who dared to betray the sacredness of the mysteries. Pausanias, one of the best-known travelers of ancient times, who as an initiate had entered the inner part of the temple with the intention of describing whatever was to be seen, was prevented from doing so by a dream. "The dream forbade the description of everything viewed within the temple, affixed and performed, that might make clear what should never be told."

Strabo, on the other hand, who was not an initiate and, therefore, unable to enter the temple of Demeter or the buildings accessory to it, speaks only of what he could see while passing by the walls. He said that the temple had the capacity of a theater.

However, in spite of the enforced silence, the Eleusinian Mysteries no longer remain completely secret. Today, in addition to the information offered by the ancient authors, there are written remains preserved by the Theological School of Alexandria, and the varied information of the early leaders of the Christian church. From these the persistent inquirer can attain a rather good idea as to what the mysteries were.

Clement of Alexandria who lived from about 150 to 215 CE wrote on the mysteries. However, the leaders of the church discussed

the mysteries primarily to refute them as heresies. We glean some information from the Greek dramas and from philosophers such as Plato.



A Karyatid from Eleusis. These were the capitols of huge pillars for the Temple. Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.

### The Homeric Hymn to Demeter

The reason for the mysteries being established at Eleusis is related to the beautiful and dramatic myth concerning Demeter and her daughter Persephone. This is perhaps the most important myth in all Greek mythology. It is well presented in the Hymn to Demeter, composed probably in the seventh or sixth century before Christ. It was discovered in a Moscow library.

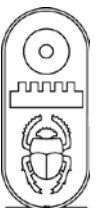
Paul Decharme (1839-1905), a member of the French archaeological school at Athens, states in his work, *Mythology of Ancient Greece*, published in 1879, that the hymn is so well executed that it makes the myth stand out from all the rest as the most beautiful and moving creation of the Greek imagination. The changes of the seasons, the life and death of nature are presented in so vivid and unforgettable a manner as to impress the reader that he is observing a mystical tragedy.

The first act of this divine drama deals with the abduction of Persephone. The story opens with Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, playing with the nymphs, daughters

of Oceanos, in the center of a green and flowery meadow of Sicily. She was a living picture of youth and beauty. The aromas of the rose, narcissus, lily, iris, hyacinth, and all the other flowers in bloom attracted her, and she ran joyfully about. But in the midst of all that beauty, she noticed suddenly a narcissus that surpassed all others in size, beauty, and fragrance. Fascinated, she extended her hands to pluck it. Then and there the earth opened abruptly, and the infernal and terrible god of Hades rose up out of its depths in a golden chariot. He seized her and immediately transported her to his gloomy kingdom. The young goddess cried out and begged for the help of Zeus, supreme master of all the gods, but in vain. No god and no person heard her plaintive cries.

A free translation from the original hymn states that so long as the goddess Persephone saw the land, the starry skies, the sea with its rushing waves wherein live all kinds of monsters, and the brilliant rays of the Sun, she never lost hope that she would soon see her beloved mother and the entire circle of the gods coming to her rescue. Despite her sorrow, this hope enlivened her imagination and provided entertainment, especially when she heard her voice re-echoed by the mountain peaks and the depths of the sea. When Demeter, her august mother, heard her daughter's plaintive cries, she tore her diadem from her hair, threw a dark shawl over her shoulders, and dived down over land and waves like a bird in search of its offspring.

Then follows the second act of the drama: a thrilling account of Demeter's wanderings in quest of her daughter. The pains and suffering of inconsolable maternal love are beautifully described: "The august goddess wandered for nine days over the entire Earth with lighted torch in hand. Possessed by torment, she tasted neither ambrosia nor sweet nectar; she did not even have time for sleeping or bathing."



On the tenth day of her wanderings, Demeter met the goddess Hecate, who became interested in her misfortune. Hecate informed her that she had heard Persephone's cries but had failed to recognize the kidnapper. Demeter listened intently but remained silent. Then the goddess of vegetation resumed her search with the same persistence and anxiety.

Pity and compassion caused Hecate to accompany Demeter to assist in the search. Shortly the two goddesses came before Helios, the sun god. As the divine witness of all events, he had not failed to see the kidnapping of the virgin. Before Demeter had completed her question, Helios revealed the kidnapper's identity. He told her that he was none other than Hades, who had taken Persephone for his wife with the permission of Zeus.



The legendary cave of Pluto (Hades) at Eleusis.

### **Demeter Seeks Persephone amongst Humans**

The sufferings of Demeter were augmented. Angered at Zeus, she departed from Olympus, the home of the gods, and even dropped her divine characteristics. Through metamorphosis, she became an aged woman. Thus transformed, she wandered from one human habitation to another, seeking her beloved daughter. Her wanderings finally led her to Eleusis.

Again, we quote: "Broken-hearted, she sat on the roadside by the well of Parthenian,

where people were wont to obtain their water, in the shade of an olive tree which stood thereby. . . . She pulled down the hood which she had on her head and remained silent for a long time without showing the least interest in anything. There she stayed without food or drink, pining away because of her unending sorrow for her beautiful daughter."

When the daughters of Celeus, the first mythical king of Eleusis, came to the well of Parthenian to fill their copper amphoras with cool water, they found the old woman sitting there silent. They asked her all kinds of questions. Not wishing to reveal her identity, Demeter said that she had been kidnapped by pirates, who had let her off on the shores of Attica. She stated that she had started inland without knowing where she was going, that she was seeking refuge and would be willing to serve in any household as a nurse or maid. The maidens hastened home to tell their mother about the old woman. Queen Metaneira, their mother, having a baby to rear, told them to fetch the old woman to the palace. Gladdened by their mother's consent, the maidens announced the good news to Demeter and rushed back to the palace with her.

As the goddess stepped across the threshold, a heavenly splendor shone through the mask covering her face. It lighted the entire hall and betrayed her divinity. Possessed by respect mixed with fear, Metaneira rose from her throne. But the bereaved goddess let her veil fall over her face immediately and said not a word. All present looked at her and wondered, but she remained motionless and silent. Apparently, nothing could console her or free her from her misery. Only young Iambe, a slave woman, by her jests succeeded occasionally in bringing fleeting smiles to the lips of the embittered goddess. Nevertheless, Metaneira decided to entrust her son, Demophon, to the care of the divine nurse, ". . . and so the child grew as a god without

ever being fed any cereal or any milk from his mother's breast."

Demeter regularly anointed the infant's body with nectar and steadily blew over its face as she held it close to her bosom. During the nighttime, without letting his parents know, she hid him in smoldering embers as women of old were wont to hide firebrands. Metaneira discovered this one evening and gave a loud cry, fearing that her baby would be burned. Thus confronted, the goddess withdrew the infant from the embers and scolded the wife of Celeus.

The embers into which Demeter had thrust Demophon were to purge him from all earthly elements and make him immortal. However, Metaneira feared the practice and put an end to it. Thus her son remained unprotected from the dangers of old age and death. Nevertheless, Demophon became a privileged individual, for he had sat on the knees and had slept in the bosom of the goddess.

With her divinity fully revealed, Demeter could no longer hide her identity from the royal circle. She told them: "I am the much honored goddess Demeter, the joy and the interest of gods and mortals. Then let the people build a temple on top of the hill above the Kallichoron (well) in my honor. Let them build it on the most advantageous ground and have them erect an altar underneath it. There I shall teach you how to perform my mysteries hereafter."

### A Terrible Year

But the suffering of Demeter still remained unsoothed, and her obstinate wrath brought about terrible events. "She destroyed

every harvestable thing and brought unto humankind an awful year. No seed sprouted from the earth because divinely-crowned Demeter had them all well hidden. In vain did the oxen draw the plows over the land. The myriads of white oat seeds were sown for nothing."

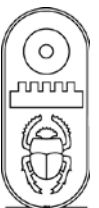
The entire human race would have perished if Zeus had not taken a hand in the matter. He ordered Iris to intervene, but Demeter, the goddess of vegetation, spurned all pleas. She told Iris to inform Zeus that there would be no return to Olympus and that the earth would not produce fruit and grain until her daughter was returned to her. Unable to move her, Zeus was forced to assent. He ordered Hermes, messenger of the gods, to descend to Hades and persuade the ruler of the underworld to let Persephone depart from his realm of darkness.

Mindful of his brother's plea, Hades consented to let Persephone return to her mother. Because he loved her so much and wanted her to return to his kingdom in the underworld, before she departed he forced her to eat some pomegranate seeds which prevented her from remaining on Earth all year. Escorted by Hermes, Persephone climbed into her husband's chariot drawn by four untamed horses. She was taken to her mother, and the two embraced each other.

When they stood joyfully apart looking at each other, the mother asked fearfully, "Tell me, my beloved child, did you eat anything before you left the nether world?" When her daughter nodded affirmatively, Demeter knew what had happened and told Persephone that



Cosmè Tura, *The Triumph of Demeter*, 1476-1484, Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara.



thereafter she would have to return to the underworld for three months of the year.

During the other seasons, Persephone would be permitted to remain with the other immortals. “When the earth will be decorated during the sweet-scented season of spring with myriads of different flowers, you will always come back from the dense darkness to be a superb sight for gods and humans.”

In the Homeric Hymn, this very dramatic myth ends with a reconciliation of Demeter and Zeus and the return of Demeter to her abode on Mount Olympus. The promise of Zeus to permit Persephone to return to her mother for part of the year soothed the wrath of the goddess. But Zeus left even this in the hands of Rhea, mother of the gods, to accomplish.

Rhea, approaching Demeter, said, “Come, my daughter, Zeus invites you to return to the circle of the immortals. He promises to grant you most of what you have asked and has consented to allow your child to leave the dreary depths of Hades for part of the year. Come then, my daughter, obey his will. Do not prolong your implacable hatred against Hades and Zeus and do make possible an early harvest for suffering mortals.”

Demeter finally yielded to the pleas of Rhea, and the consequences of her wrath immediately disappeared. She again became a beneficent force, and the desolate lands once more bloomed with vegetation. The interrupted life of nature began again as a result of the agreement between heaven and Earth. But one of the great benefits to humanity was the teaching of her divine science to mortals while she stayed at Eleusis. She ordained that no one should neglect, disbelieve, or make public these teachings.

As the following quotation states, respect for the gods should restrain any tongue: “...and whatever we have thus revealed is

no reason why we should fear and lament, for it is a great sin to obstruct speech.” (The implication is that there is no reason to state what we are not supposed to reveal.)



Frederic Leighton, *The Return of Persephone*, 1891.

The Homeric Hymn to Demeter ends with these important and epigrammatic words: “Blessed are the mortals, inhabitants of Earth, who have seen the great spectacles. But whoever remains uninitiated and never participates in the performance of the sacred ceremonies will be forever deprived of this blessing because they will not possess it even when death shall send them to the gloomy world below.”

### Establishment of the Mysteries

Before we begin a thorough examination of the establishment of the Eleusinian Mysteries, the fact must not be left unmentioned that contemporaneously with them there were being performed in Egypt the Lesser and Greater Mysteries dedicated to Isis and Osiris or Serapis. In the Book of the Dead, one may notice among the editor’s comments the following statement: “This

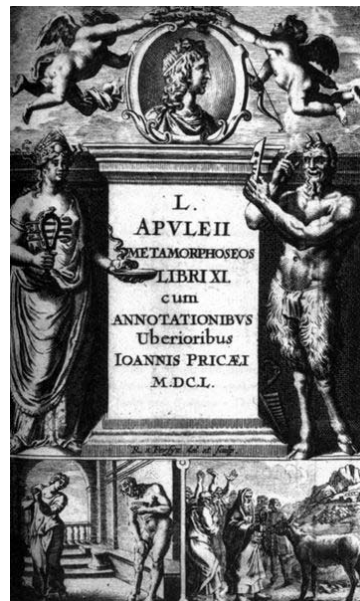
goddess (Isis), who abolished cannibalism in Egypt, and who taught the Egyptians how to cultivate a number of cereals as well as the grapevine, the art of weaving and clothing in general, and the art of sorcery. . . .”

Lucius Apuleius, born about 125 CE in Madauros in Numedia, a Platonic philosopher and author of a work entitled *The Golden Ass*, has Isis say to Lucius Varius, “My name, my divinity is adored throughout all the world, in divers manners, in variable customs, and by many names. For the Phrygians that are the first of all humans call me the Mother of the gods of Pessinus; the Athenians, which are sprung from their own soil, Cecropian Minerva; the Cyprians, which are girt about by the sea, Paphian Venus; the Cretans which bear arrows, Dictynian Diana; the Sicilians, which speak three tongues, infernal Proserpine; the Eleusians, their ancient goddess Ceres; some Juno, other Bellona, others Hecate, others Rhamnusia; and principally both sort of the Ethiopians, which dwell in the Orient and are enlightened by the morning rays of the sun, and the Egyptians, which are excellent in all kind of ancient doctrine, and by their proper ceremonies accustom to worship me, do call me by my true name, Queen Isis.”

It can easily be conjectured from this quotation that Apuleius was initiated into the Egyptian Mysteries of Isis. Consequently, what Isis is said to have told Lucius Varius may be close to the truth.

Apuleius also makes the following confession which indicates respect, secrecy, even awe with which the mysteries were regarded. He writes in *The Golden Ass*: “Thou wouldst peradventure demand, thou studious reader, what was said and done there: verily I would tell thee if it were lawful for me to tell, thou wouldst know if it were convenient for thee to hear; but both thy ears and my tongue should incur the like pain of rash curiosity. Howbeit I will not long torment thy mind, which peradventure

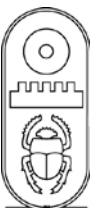
is somewhat religious and given to some devotion; listen therefore, and believe it to be true. Thou shalt understand that I approached near unto hell, even to the gates of Proserpine, and after that I was ravished throughout all the elements, I returned to my proper place: about midnight I saw the sun brightly shine, I saw likewise the gods celestial and the gods infernal, before whom I presented myself and worshipped them. Behold now have I told thee, which although thou hast heard, yet it is necessary that thou conceal it; wherefore this only will I tell, which may be declared without offence for the understanding of the profane.”



Title page from John Price's Latin edition of Apuleius's novel *Metamorphoses, or the Golden Ass* (Gouda, Netherlands, 1650).

This may be better understood by recalling that in the Mysteries of Isis the initiation took place at a certain time. Then the initiate was brought in direct contact with the world of the departed, who dwell in the invisible realm where there exist different conditions and immaterial virtues.

To attain this state, the initiate let him- or herself be put into a coffin or sarcophagus. Assuming the appearance of a mummy, the initiate gradually entered a passive state. In



this condition, the initiate was carried into the astral or cosmic realm by invisible forces and thus had intercourse with the dead as well as with the gods.

We should note the common elements in the mysteries, the descent into darkness and then the light, or the death and rebirth.

Traditionally, after being tested by the four elements or by descent to the underworld, the initiate was placed in a sarcophagus and sailed across Acheron, the River of Woe, to the Isle of the Blessed, where the initiation was to take place. Actually, the initiate was conducted to the sanctuary of the Eleusinian Temple.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, the initiate pronounced the following sentence: "I have fasted; I have drunk the kykeon; I have taken out of the kiste and placed into the kalathos; and I have taken out of the kalathos and put into the kiste." Kykeon, kiste, and kalathos mean potion, sacred objects, and basket respectively. The sentence is highly symbolic. Probably it means that the candidate has acknowledged his or her soul had descended from immortality to a mortal state and that by purification the candidate would re-ascend to his or her former state of perfection.

The veiled truths expressed here so impressively in symbols are indicative of the care taken to preserve philosophic and mystical teachings from those whose lack of preparation might lead to a misinterpretation of their intent. That all such teachings were so protected is attested by Plutarch in his Isis and Osiris. He describes a statue of Isis seen in her temple at Sais in Egypt with this inscription: "I am the whole, that which was and that which is to be and no mortal has ever penetrated my veil."

As for the great Egyptian Mysteries, there is little chronological record. Tradition alone speaks for it. However, it seems probable that the two divinities Osiris and Serapis were

gradually identified with the positive, male principle in contrast to Isis who represented the negative, feminine principle. The divinity worshipped in Egypt as Isis was the type of Mother Goddess also represented by Demeter or Ceres.

### The Immortality of the Soul

In his treatise on the soul, Plutarch makes the following comment: "People call the day of birth *genethlia* (beginning of labors) because it proves to be in a way the starting point of great efforts . . . and they call the body *demas* (bundle of necessarily connected elements) because the soul is tied to the body contrary to its real nature since nothing exists as it was originally placed by nature. . . . This violent connection of the soul with the body, which people conceived and called bios (struggle), is a derivative from the noun *bias* (force). . . . Therefore, we say that those who die rest because they are freed from the compulsory and unnatural nexus of earthly life."



A page from Plutarch's *Vitae illustrium virorum*, Rome, 1470. Printed by Ulrich Han (Udalricus Gallus). University of Leeds Library.

Because the dogma concerning the immortality of the soul promised a blessed life after death to all initiates of the Eleusinian



Mysteries, the Athenians were not only eager to undergo the trials necessary for initiation, but also desired that others from distant parts of Greece become petitioners for acceptance. To what extent the salvation of the soul was considered necessary is indicated by the fact that those who had neglected initiation did everything they could to become initiated in the last days of their earthly life. However, only Athenians were accepted for initiation. Others, after naturalization as citizens of Athens, could be presented by initiated sponsors, who served as guarantors of the petitioners' virtuous life. The only exception ever made was Hippocrates, who was accepted without the customary formalities because he was a benefactor of the city of Athens.

The Eleusinian Mysteries had a continuous existence to 381 CE and were finally abolished by Emperor Theodosius. Their worldwide fame brought Roman potentates and nobles to Athens to study philosophy and plead for initiation. The Emperor Hadrian showered rich monuments upon Athens and its environs. Nevertheless, he was initiated into the mysteries only after hiring a teacher of philosophy from among the priests of the Eleusinian temple to serve as a catechizer. It would be impossible to mention all of the other Romans who sought initiation into these mysteries, but two other emperors who received initiation were Marcus Aurelius and his son Commodus.

Eleusis was the shrine of the ancient Greeks because it had the good fortune to receive the imprints of Demeter's steps. There was hardly a thing in the land that was not reminiscent of the goddess. It was there that she appeared in all her divine glory and taught the secrets of her worship. It was there that the spirit of ancient Greek philosophy reached the apogee of its glory and greatness. No wonder that so many from all parts of Greece came to the annual ceremonies either for initiation or to benefit from the sanctifying atmosphere.

As practiced at Eleusis, religion presaged the growing eclectic spirit of the ancient world. The Eleusinian Mysteries embodied Greek mythology and a syncretism of the Egyptian mysteries and religious doctrines, tempered by a philosophical argument for rational, moral living. Later, Christianity was to encounter these elements of fusion. Some of the precepts of the Eleusinian Mysteries, and others such as Neoplatonism which were inspired by them, were to leave their impression on Christianity.

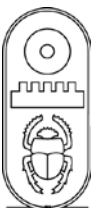
### **Influence of the Mystery Teachings**

Once dogmatic foundations are excluded, one can see the influence of the mysteries on later religions and philosophies. The similarity to modern initiatic orders such as our own is obvious. The mysteries contributed greatly to the development of doctrines concerning future judgment, retribution for all sinful acts performed in the present earthly life, and the immortality of the soul.




*Academy of Plato. Mosaic from Pompeii.*

During the period of testing, which lasted a year or more, the initiates were taught not only the fundamental religious dogmas, but also the practice of virtues such as sobriety, temperance, justice, kindness, tolerance, and freedom of conscience and belief. These




truths shine brightly in the writings of the wise sages of antiquity who were for the most part initiates of the mysteries. They were presented in the works of Plato in such a manner as to win for him the appellation of the Attic Moses. Saint Augustine says that Plato's dogmas hardly differ from those of Christ. "The dogmas of Plato are not strange to those of Christ."

In addition to monotheism, the initiate acquired knowledge of metaphysics, physiology, ethics, and other fields of knowledge. Gradually, initiates came to see that the plethora of gods and the symbolism and allegories of the myths represented the physical forces by means of which the Creator of all formed inanimate nature and preserved creation through eternal laws. The initiate was shown that Zeus stood for the sky; Hera, his wife, for air; and from the union of the two resulted such phenomena as rain, hail, snow, lightning, and thunder. Because of these different phenomena, Zeus was described by the poets as blue-browed, cloud-mover, rain-producer, thunderer. In Sophocles' great tragedy, Oedipus begs for protection and help, crying, "O great Ether! O Zeus!"



The explanation of the religion of the ancient Greeks as provided by the Eleusinian Mysteries superseded the dogmas of polytheism and the superstition of the masses. It became the worthy and highly metaphysical religion of a wise and noble nation.



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masses. It became the worthy and highly metaphysical religion of a wise and noble nation. At one point in the ritual, the Hierophant addressed himself to the initiate thus: "Admire the Master of the Universe; He is the only one and His presence is everywhere."

In the sixth century BCE Pythagoras, upon his initiation into the mysteries in Egypt and in Greece, adopted the idea of a single and almighty God. Preserved by Stobaeus from the work of Ocellos, the Lucanian, a pupil of Pythagoras, is the statement: "Harmony preserves the whole world, and God is the author of this harmony."

Later Plato echoes Pythagoras's teachings. "The God that I announce to you is one, unique, unvaried, boundless." Anaxagoras said, "A God, unique, made matter and created the world."

Saint Augustine, Lactantius, Justinus, and Athenagoras agreed that the ancient philosophers recognized the sole God and considered the Creator to be the basis of the mysteries. These sages of antiquity, creators of the mysteries, were aware of the unconquerable needs of human nature. They understood the law of analogy by means of which fire is not only kept burning but also spreads destruction when placed in the hands of thoughtless people. Therefore, they allowed the profane to establish gods to be adored on Mount Olympus. These gods were the personifications of the passions and wickedness of humans. Truth was kept for the few. It was hidden in symbolic legend so that it could gradually and harmlessly spread itself and become accessible to all people.

In this way knowledge was divided into two parts: the esoteric or metaphysical for the purified and spiritually strong, and the exoteric or allegorical for the masses. When truth fails to be understandable, it becomes error. Heraclitus's characteristic and comprehensive philosophical reflection is to the point. "What is God? An immortal

human. And what is a human? A mortal God!"



Parchment containing the beginning of Phaedrus in Codex Clarkianus 39 in the Bodleian Library. The document was written for Arethas of Patras (later of Caesarea), one of the most important figures in the history of Byzantine books. It was bought by Dr. E.D. Clarke in 1802 from the monastery of St. John on Patmos.

It is ridiculous to believe that polytheism reigned in Greece, the country of light, knowledge, and science. Athens especially was the magnificent city where the select of mind and heart came to meet together, and such philosophers as Anaxagoras, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, the Eleatics, the Pythagoreans, and others proclaimed the sole God. Unparalleled human minds were active in all branches of theoretical science. Such beliefs as these are the bases of the Eleusinian Mysteries, and they explain the secrecy of the mysteries.

Plato in his Timaeus says, "Now that which is created must, as we affirm, of necessity be created by a cause. But the Creator and maker of all this universe is past finding out; and even if we found the Creator, to tell of the Creator to all men and women would be impossible. And there is

still a question to be asked about the Creator: Which of the patterns had the Artificer in view in creating the world: the pattern of the unchangeable or of that which is created? If the world be indeed fair and the Artificer good, it is manifest that the Artificer must have looked to that which is eternal; but if what cannot be said without blasphemy is true, then to the created pattern. Everyone will see that the Creator must have looked to the eternal; for the world is the fairest of creations, and the Creator is the best of causes."

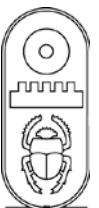
In *Phaedrus* Plato refers to the mysteries:

"There was a time when with the rest of the happy band they saw beauty shining in brightness—we philosophers following in the train of Zeus, others in company with other gods—and then we beheld the beatific vision

and were initiated into a mystery which may be truly called most blessed, celebrated by us in our state of innocence, before we had any experience of evils to come, when we were admitted to the sight of apparitions innocent and simple and calm and happy, which we beheld shining in pure light, pure ourselves and not yet enshrined in that living



Stained glass window of Plato in the Church of St. Dennis in Esslingen. Photo © 2009, Eclan.



tomb which we carry about, now that we are imprisoned in the body, like an oyster in his shell. Let me linger over the memory of scenes which have passed away.

“But of beauty, I repeat again that we saw her there shining in company with the celestial forms; and coming to earth we find her here too, shining in clearness through the clearest aperture of sense. For sight is the most piercing of our bodily senses; though not by that is wisdom seen; her loveliness would have been transporting if there had been a visible image of her, and the other ideas, if they had visible counterparts, would be equally lovely. But this is the privilege of beauty, that being the loveliest she is also the most palpable to sight.

“Now he who is not newly initiated or who has become corrupt, does not easily rise out of this world to the sight of true beauty in the other; he looks only at her earthly namesake, and instead of being awed at the sight of her, he is given over to pleasure, and like a brutish beast he rushes on to enjoy and beget; he consorts with wantonness, and is not afraid or ashamed of pursuing pleasure in violation of nature. But he whose initiation is recent, and who has been the spectator of many glories in the other world,

is amazed when he sees anyone having a godlike face or form, which is the expression of divine beauty; and at the first a shudder runs through him, and again the old awe steals over him; then looking upon the face of his beloved as of a god he reverences him, and if he were not afraid of being thought a downright madman, he would sacrifice to his beloved as to the image of a god.”

This indicates that the mysteries were thought to be imitations or repetitions of the soul's experience in the Cosmic Plane before birth. Note too that the apparition or vision which the initiate saw was bathed in light. He or she who is newly initiated more easily rises to experience this Cosmic Realm. And the change in the initiate is also a moral change; it helps to develop the initiate mystically, psychically, and morally, to say nothing of physically.

### Content of the Mysteries

Thomas Taylor describes the nature of the Eleusinian Mysteries:

“But let us now proceed to the doctrine of the Greater Mysteries: and here I shall endeavor to prove that as the dramatic shows of the Lesser Mysteries occultly signified the miseries of the soul while in subjection to body, so those of the Greater obscurely intimated, by mystic and splendid visions, the felicity of the soul both here and hereafter, when purified from the defilements of a material nature, and constantly elevated to the realities of intellectual (spiritual) vision. Hence, as the ultimate design of the Mysteries, according to Plato, was to lead us back to the principles from which we descended, that is, to a perfect enjoyment of intellectual (spiritual) good, the imparting of these principles was doubtless one part of the doctrine contained in the aporrheta, or secret discourses; and the different purifications exhibited in these rites, in conjunction with initiation and the epopteia (or highest degree) were symbols of the gradation of virtues requisite to this re-ascent of the soul.



The Orpheus Grotto in the Castle Helbrunn Gardens, Salzburg. Photo © 2008, Matthias Kabel, Wikimedia Commons.

“And hence, too, if this be the case, a representation of the descent of the soul (from its former heavenly estate) must certainly form no inconsiderable part of these mystic shows; all of which the following observations will, I do not doubt, abundantly evince.”

Clement of Alexandria says, “But Pindar, speaking of the Eleusinian Mysteries, says: ‘Blessed is he who, having seen those common concerns in the underworld, knows both the end of life and its divine origin from Jupiter.’”

The concept of God presented by the mysteries is explained in two Orphic Hymns, part of which follows:

*He is the One, self-proceeding; and from him  
all things proceed,  
And in them he himself exerts his activity;  
No mortal Beholds Him, but he beholds all.*

*There is one royal body in which all things  
are enwombed,  
Fire and Water, Earth, Ether, Night and  
Day,  
And Counsel, the first producer, and  
delightful love,  
For all these are contained in the great body  
of Zeus.*

*Zeus, the mighty thunderer, is first; Zeus is  
last;  
Zeus is the head, Zeus the middle of all things;  
From Zeus were all things produced. He is  
male, he is female;  
Zeus is the depth of the earth, the height of the  
starry heavens;*

*He is the breath of all things, the force of  
untamed fire;  
The bottom of the sea; Sun, Moon, and Stars;  
Origin of all; King of all;  
One Power, one God, one Great Ruler.*

*Greatest of the gods, God with many names,  
God ever-ruling, and ruling all things!  
Zeus, origin of Nature, governing the universe  
by law, All hail!*

Xenophanes, the founder of the Eleatic school of philosophy, expressed himself in this way:

“There is only one God who is almighty, and who resembles mortals neither in body nor in mind.”

He also said, “Homer and Hesiod attributed to the gods all things which are disreputable and worthy of blame when done by men and women; and they told of them many lawless deeds, stealing, adultery, and deception of each other.”

From Homeric times, the ancient Greeks acknowledged Zeus as the supreme and almighty ruler of the world, who as the father of the human race always rewarded the virtuous and punished the wicked. Therefore, outside of mythological language and their fondness for the narrations dealing with the illicit romances of Zeus, the Greeks’ concept of God differed little from that of present-day Christians.

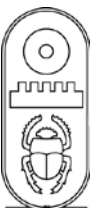


“For ‘many,’ as they say in the mysteries, ‘are the thyrsus-bearers, but few are the mystics,’—meaning, as I interpret the words, ‘the true philosophers.’”



Pausanias calls Zeus “the Supreme God”; sometimes he refers to him as the “Supreme.” On the Pnyx in Athens, there was a temple dedicated to the “All-highest Zeus.” The priestesses of the ancient temple of Dodona, known as Peleiadai, sang the following phrase: “Zeus was, Zeus is, Zeus will be. O, supreme Zeus!”

When he visited Athens, the Apostle Paul came upon an ancient altar dedicated to the “Unknown God.” This substantiates



the argument that long before Paul's time the Greeks had been trying to define the concept of God.

### Benefits of the Mystery Teachings

Since long before the appearance of philosophy there existed in Greece a movement for the formulation of what might constitute true religion, the admission must be made that it was already being taught secretly in the Eleusinian Mysteries. It was this teaching which cleansed the lives of the initiated, abolished superstitions, exalted the human mind, and contributed greatly to the elevation of the spirit and character of the Greek people by not only promoting the philosophical attitude but engendering nobility of feeling as well. This was no small accomplishment, which hardly could have resulted from polytheism or idolatry.

Moreover, those initiated into the Eleusinian Mysteries were taught that the requisites for happiness in this life and in that after death were purification from sin, irreproachable conduct, wholehearted and sincere love, continuous practice of charity toward all, and love for and the preservation of freedom. It was the concept of freedom, especially, which drew from monotheism new strength, direction, and purpose.

As for the doctrine of the immortality of the soul with which all initiates became acquainted, who can deny that it ennobled humanity and placed human beings far above all other creatures? Those who came in contact with this teaching's flame were kindled with love and enlivened with the hope of eternal happiness. They were taught that such happiness could be experienced only after an ardent search for the truth, the practice of moderation, and service for the benefit of their fellow beings. It was this teaching and nothing else which kept the initiate's lamp of philosophy

and science burning. It encouraged people to scorn dangers, trials, struggles, and death itself.

In order to become worthy of receiving the great and noble truths of the Greater Mysteries and to make sure that strict secrecy would be preserved always by all, it was required that everyone be prepared first through the Lesser Mysteries. Only after passing through severe trials, until the authorities deemed him purified, was the candidate considered worthy of entrance into the advanced teachings. For these reasons, persons of illegitimate birth, slaves, immoral persons, degenerates, traitors, deserters, and those indifferent to the good of society were prevented by their intrinsic unworthiness from becoming candidates.

The priests of Demeter exercised their privilege of denying participation in the ceremonies to whomever they wished. It is said that the Hierophant of the Eleusinian temple even refused to consider the petition of Apollonius of Tyana when he went to Athens. The basis for the refusal was that Apollonius was considered a magician. It must be remembered that not all of the profound truths were revealed to the initiates at one time; nor did all become holy persons.

Plato gives evidence of this in the *Phaedo*. "For 'many,' as they say in the mysteries,



Ruins of the Temple at Eleusis. Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.

‘are the thyrsus-bearers, but few are the mystics,’—meaning, as I interpret the words, ‘the true philosophers.’” The thyrsus was a wreathed wand.

Diogenes, who was not an initiate, is said to have exclaimed when he heard the verses of Sophocles describing the initiated as blessed and the uninitiated as condemned to eternal suffering, “What sayest thou? Will a thief of potatoes meet with better luck in the hands of destiny when he dies, because he is an initiate, than will Epaminondas?”

### The Initiation Ceremony

About the beginning of September, when the ceremony of initiation was performed, the Hierokeryx (Herald), the youngest of the first priests of Demeter’s temple, drove those who were being catechized away from the temple with the words, “Away, away, you profane.” But he led the faithful, who were known as *epoptai*, into the temple.

Inside the threshold stood the second priest, the Dadouchos (Torchbearer), who received the *epoptai* for further purification by confession and baptism.

The third priest, the Archon Basileus (Magistrate) and Epimeletai (Superintendent of the Procession), attended to all particulars involved with sacrificing and prayed with the *epoptai*.

The fourth priest, the Hierophant (High Priest), who held first rank in the priestly hierarchy of the temple, represented the Creator. Those chosen for this position were always of advanced age and had to be descendants of the ancient family of the Eumolpids. It was necessary that the Hierophant also be a man of high culture. Since the position was held for life, the candidate had to meet rigid requirements. He had to be perfect in body and soul.

After his election, the Hierophant had to acquire additional qualifications. It was required of him to so bear himself

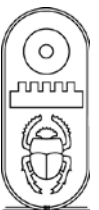
that his body, posture, and walk appeared magnificent. As for his voice, it had to be powerful and distinctive. Finally, in order to be a perfect symbol of the Creator whom he represented, he was wrapped in an expensive mantle, wore a precious gold crown, displayed amulets and other symbols on his chest, and nourished a long and expansive beard. His hair flowed in waves over his shoulders.



Remnants of the Temple complex at Eleusis. Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.

The other three priests were descendants of ancient families, and they were also magnificently dressed in robes ornamented with symbols, some of which represented the sun, moon, and planets. Even the deacons, the servers, were vested ornately.

That the priests of Demeter’s temple were wise and extraordinary men is attested by the fact that Emperor Hadrian was taught philosophy by one of them. It is also known that during the ascendancy of Neoplatonism many philosophers served as Hierophants at Eleusis. The ideas which these philosophers taught in the mysteries, as the ecclesiastic writer Theodoretos attests, were of a philosophic nature and were written in liturgical books to give a natural interpretation of theology. This testimony



supports the fact that the teachings of the mysteries dealt with the belief in one God, immortality of the soul, and future judgment and retribution.

Continuing the initiation ceremony, the epoptes appeared before the Hierophant, and confessed anew, promising final repentance and strict secrecy. Then the candidate baptized him- or herself in the sea. In the sense that the old in the candidate had died, he or she came out of the sea as a new man or woman entirely sanctified and clad him- or herself in a white toga which the candidate preserved for a shroud. The candidate then took an oath, promising unwavering belief in the doctrines that were taught, clean living, and freedom from all sins. Finally, very late at night, the candidate entered the inner part of the temple.

Everything performed therein appeared to be supernatural. It was this which made Clement call the initiations mystical dramas. The walls and floor of the temple shook. There were lightning and thunder. Macabre phantasms and awful shadows pictured the frightening condition of Tartaros (hell) and the future lot of the individual condemned to go there. All these effects were accomplished by means of mechanical devices employed as in theatrical displays. The intent was to keep the epoptes in continuous fear and anxiety.

Immediately after this pictorial presentation of Tartaros, a blinding light descended from the apex of the temple, heralding the arrival of God. This light also revealed the Elysian Fields, richly decorated with flowers. Incense filled the surroundings, and a heavenly melody

was heard praising the Supreme Creator of all. These effects were intended to invoke an impression of the transcendent and blessed abode of the just which is reserved for those who have lived virtuously on earth.

About this ritualistic presentation and especially about the soul-stirring fright, Plutarch has this to say in his essay *Concerning the Soul*: “At the moment of death the soul feels a kind of suffering which resembled that felt by those who go through the great initiations. . . . After death the soul is surrounded with a wonderful light and comes to wonderful lands and meadows where the other souls receive it with joyous cries, dances, stirring psalms, and many dignified manifestations.” Plutarch here compares the death struggle with the initiatic mysteries.

On the initial day of formal ceremonies, known as *Aghyrmos*, the people were called together at the Painted Stoa in the Agora of Athens and invited to be initiated into the mysteries. The Hierokeryx repeated the proclamation, which probably was: “Whosoever has not pure hands, whosoever has not an intelligible voice, let him not

assist at the initiation. The impious are threatened not only with punishments of the law if they should be discovered, but especially and in all cases by the implacable anger of the gods.”

On the second day, known as *Halade Mystai*, all participants went to the sea for the rite of lustration, the required cleansing. The next two days were dedicated to sacrifice, prayer, and expiatory performances. The fifth day, known as *Iacchos*, was the most magnificent



The olive tree at Acropolis of Athens, Greece, which, according to the myth, was Athena's gift to the city and earned her the right to name it, being more useful than Neptune's water. Photo © Tim, Wikimedia Commons.



and solemn of all. The priests and the duly initiated, crowned with myrtle and bearing lighted candles, transported the statue of Iacchos, the son of Demeter, from Athens to Eleusis. They departed from Athens through the Sacred Gate and reached Eleusis over the Sacred Road.

The procession passed through a large grove of olive trees, remnants of which still exist in the outskirts of Athens. The religious retinue took another road. It went through the north side of Corydalos, a mount well forested with pine trees, and came suddenly in sight of the sea and the wave-bathed, glorious island of Salamis. Thus they arrived at Salamis, the sacred city of the ancient Greeks, built at the center of the shore line of the bay. In the suburbs of the city as well as on top of the hill, there existed many sacred establishments and many beautiful country houses of Athenian and Eleusinian citizens. Usually more than fifty thousand of the faithful followed the carrying of the statue of Iacchos and unceasingly sang the song dedicated to him. Aristophanes gives the hymn and the procession in *The Frogs*:

*Iacchos, O Iacchos! Iacchos, O Iacchos! . . .  
 Thou that dwellest in the shadow  
 Of great glory here beside us, Spirit, Spirit, we  
 have hied us  
 To thy dancing in the meadow!  
 Come, Iacchos; let thy brow  
 Toss its fruited myrtle bough;  
 We are thine, O happy dancer; O our comrade,  
 come and guide us!  
 Let the mystic measure beat:  
 Come in riot fiery fleet;  
 Free and holy all before thee,  
 While the Charites adore thee,  
 And thy Mystae wait the music of thy feet!*

The songs were accompanied by musical instruments which at certain periods of the ceremony ceased playing for the performance of sacrifices or for some other reason relative to the dance.

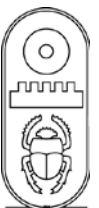
An enormous crowd took part in the procession; there were not only the priests, the mystai, and the Ephebes who escorted the Hieria, but the initiated of former years, and an immense number of inquisitive spectators. Plutarch remarks, "Under these conditions, it was necessary to omit the sacrifice usually offered along the road during the passing of Iacchos."



The 1902 Trinity College (Toronto) Dramatic Society performed Aristophanes' *The Frogs* in the original Greek in its entirety in the picturesque ravine on the college grounds.

Our knowledge of the mysteries is imperfect, and accounts of the activities vary, especially of the last days. Immediately upon arrival at Eleusis, the statue of Iacchos was conducted to the temple of Demeter, where the leader of the procession, the Archon of Athens, offered special sacrifices for the prosperity of the city.

For the duration of the festival, legal prosecution was postponed and no seizure or attachment against a debtor was permitted. Even in time of war, Athenians always signed a truce with the enemy and gave written permits to all who desired to go to Eleusis either for initiation or for participation in the celebrations. At the termination of the



festivities, the Supreme Court of the land severely punished all those who had disturbed the peace during the ceremonies. Not only heavy fines were administered, but also death was decreed in some instances. If order and proper reverence were to be maintained, strict application of the law was necessary to keep the heterogeneous pilgrims in their place and in the right sacrificial mood.

On the sixth day, the initiates rested, fasted, and sacrificed. The seventh day, the second at Eleusis, was spent preparing for the climax of the mysteries that night. The ceremony included revelation of the *Hiera*, the basket with the sacred objects. What these were, we do not know. There may have been a symbolic marriage, and at some time during the rites there was a symbolic descent into Hades or Tartaros representing the death of humanity and nature. Hence, there must have been a symbolic rebirth and Golden Dawn.

Either the fourth or the eighth day was called *Epidauria* (from Epidaurus, the home of Asklepios) because on that day Asklepios was initiated. According to the story, Asklepios, said to have been delayed, arrived for his initiation after the ceremonies were over. Thereafter, to honor the god of medicine, it was customary to add an extra day to the festival for the sake of latecomers. This increased the number of festival days.

The ninth day was given the title *Plemochoe*, which was the word for pouring. On that day, all sacrifices ended. In accordance with the name of the day, two clay vases of wine were emptied as libations, one in the morning and the other in the evening. One fast was ended as the worshipers drank the *kykeon*, a drink, compounded of water, honey, flour, and mint. It was considered a sacred drink because of Demeter's consent to drink it when she was consoled by *Iambe*.

In addition to fasting, confession of sins was also considered indispensable for

purification by those to be initiated into the mysteries, for without it none was granted the right to initiation. As Plutarch narrates, when Lysandros, wishing initiation into the Kabeirian Mysteries of Samothrace, was ordered by the priest to confess all the sins he had committed, he asked the priest, "Must I, then, do this as something demanded by you or by the gods?" "By the gods!" answered the priest. "Disappear then from my presence," said Lysandros, "and I will inform them of whatever they may ask me."

The Temple of Demeter at Eleusis, one of the four most important and best-known temples of ancient Greece, was pillaged and burned by the Persians in 480 BCE. However, it was rebuilt by Pericles and others. The new edifice was much more magnificent than the earlier one. The excavations carried out in modern times brought to light the greater part of the ruins of the temple complex.

Since it was built primarily for the performance of the mysteries, it was lighted from above. The spectacular lighting, it was related, caused all who entered to be struck with awe. The actual mysteries were performed in the subterranean area of the temple. Over the entrance was the following inscription: "They who are not initiates must not enter here."



Remains of the Temple of Demeter at Eleusis. Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.

The external enclosure of the temple was spacious. It was about fifty-one meters square, and part was cut out of the living rock of the side of the acropolis.

Many answers have been given to the problem of the nature of the climax of the Eleusinian Mysteries. There is disagreement about what the basket or sacred objects contained and what it was the initiates saw. Thomas Taylor's opinion is given in *The Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries*:

“Now, from all this, it may be inferred, that the most sublime part of the epopteia or final revealing, consisted in beholding the gods themselves invested with a resplendent light; and that this was symbolical of those transporting visions, which the virtuous soul will constantly enjoy in a future state; and of which it is able to gain some ravishing glimpses, even while connected with the cumbrous vestment of the body.”

The rituals of the Eleusinian Mysteries included three elements: the Dhromena (things done), the Dheiknymena (things shown), and Legomena (things spoken). Together these constituted the secrets or Aporrta. The Dhromena were those in which the Hierophant with the priestesses performed the drama of Persephone and Demeter. The Dheiknymena were the sacred objects, especially the Hieria. The Legomena were the secret words and ritual formulas.

### Significance of the Mysteries

Beyond doubt the Eleusinian Mysteries were the apex of ancient Greek religion. According to Ernest Renan, they were the core of everything that was best in ancient religion. As such, they fascinated all antiquity. Their immeasurable value lay in the fact that the Greeks were taught through them to believe in one supreme and absolute God. Through them they came to understand the immortality of the soul and appreciate that eternal life depends on the exercise of piety, purity, and justice in the present life. It was

because of these values that philosophers, historians, government leaders, and poets have had the profoundest respect for the mysteries. Every person of importance—Pindar no less than Plato, Socrates no less than Cicero—unequivocally recognized and appreciated the soul-saving and mind-elevating forces of the Eleusinian rites.

Pindar, who had respect and reverence for every god, wrote of the Eleusinian Mysteries: “Blessed is the individual who dies after seeing these things; for then such a person knows not only life's purpose, but also its divine origin as well.”

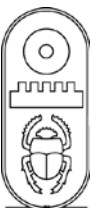
What Isocrates says in the sixth chapter of his Panegyrics about the blessed life which the initiate lives is even more clear and emphatic:

“When Demeter at last arrived in the land in her wandering quest for her daughter and became well-disposed toward our ancestors because of the services they had rendered her—which only those initiated can hear about—she gave them two valuable gifts: grain and the ceremonies of the mysteries. With the former, she helped mankind to live above the beasts; with the latter, she imbued the participants with the best of hopes for a life hereafter and for existence in general.”

Between such hopes and their realization, which were privileges of the initiated, stood the ideas of suffering and tribulation in regard to life after death, which were



*Triptolemus and Kore*, tondo of a red-figure Attic cup, ca. 470–460 BCE, found in Vulci. Louvre. Photo by Marie-Lan Nguyen.



dominant in the minds of the uninitiated. It was Triptolemos, the first initiate of Demeter in Eleusis, who, as one of the three judges of Hades, separated the initiated from the uninitiated and the impious and led them to their place of honor in Hades.

Those who were not initiated were deprived of all communion with the gods, of the privilege of seeing the vision of the ever-burning light, and were further compelled to suffer untold torments. Of the different scenes of the abode of Hades, depicted by Polygnotos on the walls of the clubhouse at Delphi, one showed two women “filling” two pitchers without bottoms. An epigram under it stated that they were not initiates.



St. Augustine speaks favorably of the mysteries, saying they cleansed human beings of every sin and freed the human soul from the chains of ignorance and superstition. Cicero assures us that by means of the mysteries the Athenians spread concord and philanthropy.



This idea of punishment for the uninitiated is mentioned in the Hymn to Demeter, where Hades says to Persephone: “Here thou wilt be mistress of every living creature, of everything that crawls over the surface of the earth. Here thou wilt receive the greatest of honors. As for those humans who have lived in iniquity, there is in store for them here eternal punishment. Amongst them, of course, there will be those who did not appease thee with sacrifices by failing to fulfill obligations to thee as prescribed.”

Plutarch in *The Soul's Immortality* says, “The perfect person is the initiate. The initiate walks freely and celebrates the mysteries undisturbedly, wearing a crown on his or her head. The initiate lives with the purified and the healthy while looking at the uninitiated masses on earth and at the unpurified beings submerged and lost in darkness and filth. The initiate also walks past the fear and malice of death to Hades’ happiness.”

The founders of the mysteries of antiquity, as well as the mystai, have surrounded death with an extraordinary veneration, for to them it was not one tremendous mystery but the continuation of life with new horizons and better conditions.

St. Augustine speaks favorably of the mysteries, saying they cleansed human beings of every sin and freed the human soul from the chains of ignorance and superstition. Cicero assures us that by means of the mysteries the Athenians spread concord and philanthropy. Socrates, Hippocrates, Aristotle, and a great number of other important sages of antiquity expressed themselves likewise about the Eleusinian Mysteries.

Plato, being an initiate, spoke of the mysteries with respect, calling their founders excellent spirits and divine individuals. In the *Phaedo* he says, “Virtue is the purification of the soul from pleasures, fears, and sorrows, and from all other similar conditions. Temperance as well as justice, bravery, and wisdom are, each in its own way, such purifications. Therefore, they, who established for us these ceremonies (Eleusinian), evidently were not superficial people because the allusion has been made from time immemorial that those who arrive in Hades uninitiated or without having participated in the ceremonies will remain in mire; but those who have purified themselves and have taken part in the mysteries will, when they arrive there, dwell among the gods.”

The preceding quotation affirms the value of the Eleusinian Mysteries. However, the following from the *Phaedo*, in which Plato explains the reasons why suicide is illegal and forbidden by dogma, deserves special attention and study. During the performance of the mysteries, as Virgil certifies, the Great Hierophant loudly proclaimed to the *epoptai* the prohibition of suicide as a divine commandment, because of his or her abandonment of the station in this ephemeral and futile world allotted to him or her by the Creator.

Therefore, what Plato personally heard as an initiate of the mysteries is significant: “What is said secretly concerning them is that: ‘We as humans are guards in a garrison from which we must not detach ourselves or run away,’ and it seems to me that it cannot be easily overlooked.” This quotation from the *Phaedo* shows clearly that the dogma of the immortality of the soul was not only explained philosophically but also religiously.

Mistaken notions about the mysteries should be corrected. One writer has declared, “The celebration of the ‘Greater Mysteries’ took place every year in September at vintage



Koliva, used in memorial ceremonies of the Orthodox (Byzantine) Christian tradition. It is made of boiled wheat kernels, pomegranates and other sweets and nuts. Predating Christianity, *kollyvo* originally meant cereal grain. In the Ancient Greek *panspermia*, a mixture of cooked seeds and nuts were offered during the festival of the *Anthesteria*. For this reason, in Greece koliva is also called *sperma* (i.e., “seed”).

time on which they depended. The celebrants consumed a considerable quantity of wine, indulging in debaucheries with impunity. The festival was considered closed when the Hierophant of the Eleusinian Temple retired with the wife of the ruling Archon.”

Nothing is further from the truth. The celebration of the Minor as well as the Major Mysteries was uninfluenced by and wholly independent of worldly events. The moral tone of both mysteries was carefully watched over by the *epoptai*, or elder initiates. Certainly, nothing remotely similar to an orgy took place. To one acquainted with the Hierophant’s lifelong practices of abstinence, the idea of improper conduct on his part at such a time borders on the blasphemous.

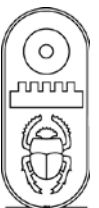
Quite unreported, however, is the fact that the pomegranates were ripe, and these the celebrants ate with real enjoyment. The fruit has long been an esoteric symbol of hidden sweetness.

1. Its seeds are thought to be the link joining Hades and Persephone.

2. In Freemasonry, the pomegranate figures among the ornaments of the two symbolic pillars, the opened fruits representing the bounty of the coming season.

3. In the Greek Orthodox Church and those Churches that follow Byzantine usage, a commemorative Liturgy is celebrated for departed loved ones forty days after their death. On that day a mixture of boiled wheat, dried fruit, and pomegranate seeds is made.

4. In Greece, too, according to a very old custom, a ripe pomegranate is thrown on the floor on New Year’s Day. At the same time, the following wish is made: “May this New Year be rosy and happy.” The stain on the floor made by the fruit is then “read” for its prediction for the coming year.



## The Minor and Major Mysteries

The mysteries were divided into Major and Minor. The Minor Mysteries were also known as the Agraiian Mysteries because of the name of the hill that was near the banks of Ilissos. These Minor Mysteries were introductory and included a purging and refining of the emotions, indispensable to all initiates.

The Major Mysteries, known as the Eleusinian Mysteries in the time of Herodotus, were performed every five years. Later, however, they were performed annually, about the middle of September, or Boedromion, as that month was then known. This ceremonial festival was the greatest and most majestic of all the festivals of the ancient world and lasted from twelve to fifteen days or more. No one was allowed to participate in the Major Mysteries unless he or she had already prepared him- or herself in the Minor Mysteries. Preparation lasted for one year, in some cases longer. Initiates of the Minor Mysteries were permitted to attend the ceremonies of the Eleusinian Mysteries, but because they were not considered prepared for actual participation, they were forced to stand outside the temple entrance.

We must not forget that the most symbolic forms of the Eleusinian Mysteries were adopted by the early leaders of Christianity. Some can even now be detected as elements of the ceremonials of the Eastern Orthodox Church. During the first centuries of Christianity, Catechumens, those studying the Catechism, were not permitted to remain within the church while the sacraments were being transported. They were warned to depart by the priest, who said: "The doors! The doors!" The form still remains in all liturgies of the Byzantine Church, although its observance is no longer required.

It was necessary for all desiring full initiation to pass hierarchically through every station of established teaching. Only thus could they obtain the secret reward of knowledge of the true divinity. It was because of this that initiation had a number of successive degrees.

The teaching is said to have ended with *cogx* and *pax*, probably ritual mantras or vowel sounds, and the admonition of the Hierophant, "Depart now in peace. Be just. Worship the Creator of all, who is without beginning, endless, and incomprehensible, with all thy soul and mind. The Creator is the Light and the Truth which only a holy person can understand, approach, and meet face to face."

Theon of Smyrna said the first part of the Eleusinian Mysteries was purification, the third, reception, the fourth, investiture (the binding of the head and fixing of the crowns), the fifth was the friendship and communion with God. What the second part was, he does not say. The Lesser Mysteries represented the miseries of the soul in subjection to the body, while the Greater Mysteries signified the felicity of the soul both here and hereafter when separated from the influence of the body. Proclus said initiation and revealing are symbols of the



Many symbolic forms from Eleusis can be detected from Eleusis and other Ancient Greek celebrations in the Eastern Orthodox Church. The Great Blessing of Water at Uspenski Cathedral (Helsinki) on the Feast of the Theophany (January 6). Photo © 2009 Whoiswho, Wikimedia Commons.

ineffable silence, and of union with mystical natures through intelligible visions. The most sublime part of the final revealing consisted in beholding the gods themselves invested with a resplendent light. The purifications were symbols of the disciplines required for the re-ascent of the soul to its divine condition.

Since you may want to read further on this subject, we are listing some books which will be of assistance:

Angus, Samuel. *The Religious Quests of the Graeco-Roman World*. London: John Murray, 1929.

Eliade, Mircea. *Birth and Rebirth*. New York: Harper, 1958.

Eranos Yearbooks. *The Mysteries*. New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1955.

Kerényi, Carl. *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter*. New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1967; now published by Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

Mylonas, George E. *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961.

Plutarch. *On Isis and Osiris, Moralia, vol. 5*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936.

Taylor, Thomas. *The Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries*. New York: J.W. Bouton, 1891.

Wright, Dudley. *The Eleusinian Mysteries and Rites*. London: Theosophical Publishing House, n.d.



The late 15th century was a period of great Egyptian power after the conquests of Tuthmosis III, and one in which the mystery cults of Isis and Osiris seem to have been well established in Egypt and the Levant. Since Egyptian faience plaques of the type placed under the corners of temples have been found at Mycenae dated to the reign of Amenophis III (1405-1367), I have no difficulty in accepting the possibility that the Eleusinian cult of Archaic Greece was the descendant of an Egyptian foundation made there 700 years earlier.

– Martin Bernal,  
*Black Athena.*

