

ELEUSIS: THE SECRET AND MEANING OF THE MYSTERIES

Richard G. Geldard

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Queen of fragrant Eleusis,
Giver of Earth's good gifts,
give me your grace, O Demeter.
you, too, Persephone, fairest,
maiden all lovely, I offer
song for your favor.

—Homer

The Mysteries celebrated at Eleusis from Mycenaean to Late Roman times were part of a long tradition of initiatory rituals among the Greek-speaking peoples. Some of these rituals and their elements must have been inherited from Near Eastern sources going back another four or five thousand years and transmitted through Crete and the Minoans in the Bronze Age. Other elements arrived from the north from as early as Paleolithic times in the rituals of the nomadic hunting tribes. Purification, procession through a labyrinth, sacrifice, isolation in the darkness, and final epiphany in the light are all characteristic of initiatory rites.

The Mysteries were rituals of death and rebirth, both seasonal and personal. The *mystai* (or initiates) “died” to the old self just as seeds “die” awaiting germination in the earth, and then, like the sprouting grain, the new souls were reborn into the company of those who had gone before (*epoptai*). In the rebirth was an implicit affirmation of immortality, a hope closer in concept to the Christian belief than to the traditional Olympian system. In fact, in the Mysteries the virgin mother bears the savior

for mankind. The Mysteries were also bound up with the lunar and solar cycles—with the dying of the sun in winter and the rebirth of the light in the birth of the son.



Remains of the Telesterion of Eleusis. Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.

Another major difference between the Eleusinian Mysteries and traditional beliefs was the focus at Eleusis upon the worshiper rather than upon the god who is worshiped. The *mystai* were the center of attention, and the great Telesterion where the final secret was unveiled, probably with the aid of an entheogen, or mind-enhancing drug, was a space specially designed for a carefully controlled mystical experience. The purpose of the ceremony, then, was not so much to invoke an epiphany of the goddess within the ceremonial space, but rather to induce an internal epiphany in the participant, to recreate the myth of Demeter-Kore for the individual. Therefore, in its internal sense, the great secret of Eleusis was, as Kerényi

has said, *arrheton* (ineffable), which means unknowable as well as “under the law of silence.”

Ineffable though it may have been, the experience was very real, and its reality has made the ceremony an event of considerable interest and importance throughout subsequent history.

History

In the ancient world, Eleusis was the site of the Greater Mysteries, that secret ritual of initiation that for nearly two thousand years was so central to Greek life. So important was it that in AD 364, when the Emperor Valentinian ended all so-called “nocturnal rites,” he was persuaded to lift the ban on the Eleusinian Mysteries on the grounds that life for the Greeks would end without them. The Greeks believed, in fact, that the Mysteries held the universe together, that without them the cycle of birth, growth, decay, death, and rebirth would cease. If the Olympian gods were too remote, even indifferent to human suffering, the Mysteries revealed a compassionate and immediate Mother who promised eternal life to the initiate.

The origins of the Mysteries at Eleusis are obscure. This much is known: settlement on the slopes of the hill of Eleusis has been traced back to the eighteenth century BC, or the Middle Helladic Period, prior to the domination of the Mycenaean culture. The



The mountains of Eleusis. Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.

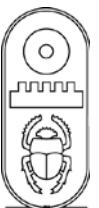
early structures appear to have been simple houses, and no temple or sanctuary has been located. Later, during the Mycenaean Period, about 1500 BC, a simple *megaron* was built on the spot where much later the famed Telesterion, or ceremonial chamber, appeared. The *megaron* seems to have been designed and built for ritual purposes and may mark the beginnings of the annual rites, but no other evidence has emerged of early initiatory activity.

Some of these rituals and their elements must have been inherited from Near Eastern sources going back another four or five thousand years and transmitted through Crete and the Minoans in the Bronze Age. Other elements arrived from the north from as early as Paleolithic times in the rituals of the nomadic hunting tribes.

Archaic and Classical Times

Gradually, from at least Homeric times onward, the Eleusinian Mysteries developed into a Panhellenic rite celebrating the divinity of Demeter and her daughter, Kore. In the seventh century BC, when Solon the lawgiver was influential in Athens, the sanctuary at Eleusis was greatly expanded, indicating the growing number of people who took part in the annual rites. From this period up to the Persian invasions the sanctuary continued to grow and was under Athenian control.

During the great period of building and expansion under the leadership of Pericles in mid fifth century BC, the sanctuary of Eleusis was further expanded, repaired, and transformed into an international center for transmission of the Mysteries to a much broader range of participants. After





Colossal statue of Antinous as Dionysos-Osiris (ivy crown, head band, cistus and pine cone). The synthesis of Dionysus and Osiris harkens to the Egyptian origins of the Mysteries, and also their Underworld connections. Marble, Roman artwork. Museo Pio-Clementino, Sala Rotunda. Photo © 2006, Marie-Lan Nguyen.

the fall of Athens in 404 BC, Eleusis fell from its position of splendor for a time but maintained its rites and physical integrity. No power would commit the sacrilege of harming the inner sanctum, regardless of the animosities aroused or the allegiances involved. Thus, through the Macedonian period and the chaos of the Late Hellenistic times the sanctuary remained relatively unharmed.

Rise and Fall under Rome

The Romans showed a great interest in Eleusis, mostly because its rites were so universal and the secret of its initiation so appealing. The early emperors were lavish in their support of the sanctuary and made many changes in the design of the site. Many of the remains we visit now are Roman, but despite a general tendency to overwrought design on the part of Roman architects and builders, the remains at Eleusis retain a Classical Greek flavor. No doubt the priests of the sanctuary held their sacred ground when it came to extensive changes in the character of the site.

The later Roman period, when the first Christian emperors took control of the empire, saw the first signs of the end of the

sanctuary. As indicated, the beginning of the end came in AD 364, when the Emperor Valentinian put an end to all nocturnal rituals as anti-Christian, presumably because they were considered of the Devil. Such a conclusion was natural enough, since for years the Mysteries had been associated with the worship of Dionysos, and they were chthonic in nature. But Valentinian amended his edict when it became apparent that Greek spiritual belief was so bound up with the rites at Eleusis that an end of the Mysteries would mean an end to the Greek people. Initiation meant life itself.

Only thirty-two years later, however, in AD 396, Alaric the Goth swept down upon Eleusis from the north and destroyed the sanctuary. The Mysteries might have survived even this physical destruction had it not been for the internal subversion by the Greek priesthood, who permitted and perhaps even encouraged the destruction, so



Statue of Demeter, holding an offering, fourth century BCE, terra cotta. Discovered in the Sanctuary of Ariccia, Lazio, Italy. Museum of the Baths of Diocletian, Rome.

perverted had the rites become by that time. As with many of the ancient sites in Greece, the modern period saw general desecration and neglect until the nineteenth century AD when excavation began and a great world treasure was once again revealed.



Statue of Kore, ca. 530-520 BCE, found in the Acropolis. Acropolis Museum, Athens.

Mythology

Although there is evidence of a pre-Homeric myth of Demeter from Crete, most of the mythology upon which the Eleusinian Mysteries are founded has come down to us from one source, the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, which was written in the eighth century BC, probably not by Homer. The elements of the myth were woven into the general patterns of initiatory ritual to form the unique character of the Mysteries.

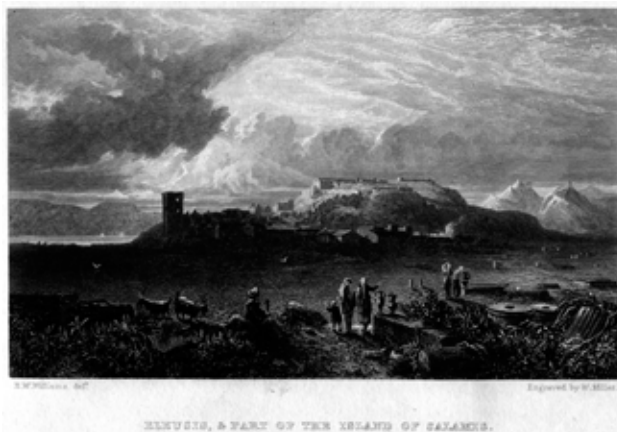
The myth is based on the story of the two goddesses, Demeter, or Mother Earth, and Kore, the

Maiden, also known as Persephone, goddess of the underworld and wife of Hades. The name “Persephone” was seldom used because it was considered part of the secret of the Mysteries and was not to be uttered lightly. A similar practice in the Jewish faith is writing “G-d” to keep the name of the Lord sacred and pure.

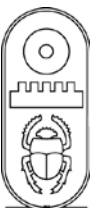
The Myth of Two Goddesses

Demeter was the daughter of Cronus and Rhea, and the sister of Zeus. She was worshiped as the Earth Mother, giver of life and provider of grain and the other fruits gathered from cultivation. Demeter had one daughter, Kore, by Zeus, her brother. One day Kore was gathering flowers with her companions. It was a day of great beauty, full of sun, welcome breezes, and new flowers. She wandered from her friends, attracted by the beauty of the narcissus (*narkissos*):

It was a thing of awe whether for the deathless gods or mortal men to see; from its root grew a hundred blooms and it smelled so sweetly, so that all wide heaven above and the whole earth and the sea's salt swell laughed for joy. And the girl was amazed and reached out with both hands to take the lovely toy; but the wide-pathed earth yawned....



William Miller after H. W. Williams, *Eleusis, and Part of the Island of Salamis*, from *Select Views in Greece with Classical Illustrations*, 1829.





Varrese Painter, *Demeter and Metaneira*. Detail of the belly of an Apulian red-figure hydria, ca. 340 BCE. Photo by Bibi Saint-Pol, Wikimedia Commons.

Hades, god of the underworld, emerged in his chariot, seized Kore, and bore her to his home below. There he made her queen of the dead, confined to rule forever in the darkness. In the depths, Kore refused to eat or to accept any advances from the lord of the dead. Meanwhile, Demeter mourned the loss of her daughter and roamed the heavens for nine days searching for her. Finally, she gleaned from the all-seeing sun what had transpired, and in a rage she left the company of the deathless gods and came to the earth, to Eleusis, where she appeared as a crone, alone and in mourning.

She sat in sadness beside a well until she was approached by the four daughters of King Celeus of Eleusis. She was invited to the palace, where she was received by Queen Metaneira in the great hall. The grace and bearing of the old woman was such that Metaneira urged her to stay and become nurse to her newborn son, Demophoon. Demeter, still mourning the loss of her daughter, agreed to nurse Demophoon, who under her care grew strong and noble.

Demeter's care of the young prince included the slow process of making the boy immortal by placing him at night in the burning coals of the hearth. The queen,

curious as to how her son was growing into such a godlike figure, stole one night into the nursery, only to see the boy being placed onto the coals. She screamed, whereupon Demeter revealed herself in all her immortal splendor and said, "You mortals are thoughtless and unknowing; you cannot distinguish between evil and good." The goddess then left the palace and demanded that a great temple be built for her nearby, where she would be worshiped.

Because Kore remained with Hades, Demeter caused the earth to dry up and freeze and remain barren throughout the year. No grain grew, no olive or fig trees bloomed, and no animals could feed or reproduce their kind. The gods were without sacrifices from human beings. All was dead. Knowing this could not continue, Zeus dispatched Hermes to command Hades to release Kore and thus restore the fruitfulness of the earth. Hades appeared to agree and relinquished his bride, even returning her in his chariot. But before she left the underworld, Kore ate one seed from a pomegranate, an act that sealed her union with Hades.

In the power struggles among the gods, rights and privileges must be maintained. Laws must be honored. All-powerful Zeus is all powerful only to a point. Demeter demanded the return of her daughter. Hades demanded his due. Because Kore ate the seed, sealing her union with Hades, she had to serve her husband as queen of the dead for one-third of the year. For the other two-thirds she returned to her mother.

Thus, the earth remains barren for four months and is fertile for eight. Demeter restored the fertility of the earth for those eight months of the year. She also celebrated her partial victory by teaching her rites to humanity, initiating all who desired to know

her mysteries. As a final gift, she selected one of the noble youths of Eleusis, Triptolemos, and instructed him in the arts of cultivation, so that human beings could settle in one place and enjoy the fruits of agriculture.

Spiritual Meanings of the Myth

Modern interpreters of the myth of Demeter-Persephone fall into three categories: those who see the myth in terms of nature and seasonal cycles of growth and decay; those who see the myth primarily in human terms—both cycles of birth, death, and resurrection and psychological cycles of separation, initiation, and return; and finally, those who see the myth in spiritual terms, as a description of the triumph of consciousness over repressive subconsciousness, or the sublimation of the soul's struggle with earthly desire.

The Classical understanding of the human soul, or *psyche*, as a unique and structured entity within each individual was developed by Socrates (as related to us by Plato). He taught that the soul was the center of life, the reason for being, and the object of philosophical and spiritual attention. The soul had a structure, just as an individual did. It had a body, a mind, and a spirit, just as an individual did. And as this soul was vital to existence, it became important to discover the nature of the soul and the laws by which it operated.



The soul struggled just as the individual did to deal with its earthly and divine situation.

It sought release through the perfection of its divine attributes, striving for rhythm (*eurhythmia*) and harmony (*eurharmostia*) with the gods.



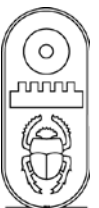
The myth of Demeter-Persephone is related to these Classical ideas about the soul in that the Mysteries, which grew out of the myth, were intended to be the initiation of the individual soul into the company of the saved. The soul struggled just as the individual did to deal with its earthly and divine situation. It sought release through the perfection of its divine attributes, striving for rhythm (*eurhythmia*) and harmony (*eurharmostia*) with the gods.



Hades and Cerberus in the Museum of Archeology, Crete. Photo © 2009, Aviad Bublil and Stella Maris, Wikimedia Commons.

Although the myth has agricultural connections and can be read at that level and also has psychological connections that can be applied to physical and mental existence, the most important interpretations have to do with spiritual transformation. Certain themes that have become associated with the Eleusinian Mysteries and its Homeric myth appear again and again in the history and conduct of the rites.

The first is the marriage of the Olympian sky gods to the chthonic gods of the underworld, or the marriage of conscious and subconscious forces and the resulting containment and transformation of the latter.



Demeter is the Olympian spirit of the earth, a force of conscious spiritual power. Hades is an underworld god, king of the dead, keeper of souls, a symbol of subconscious power, but as brother to Zeus is still a spiritual force. Persephone is the innocent maiden abducted to the underworld against her will. She is a savior of mortals, queen with Hades and yet virgin (pure spirit) on Olympus, where she lives eight months of the year with her mother. Her return is the affirmation of immortality possible in the purified soul of a human being.

The second theme of importance in the Mysteries is the initiation ceremony and its spiritual significance. Here the themes of spirit (consciousness), earthly desire (subconsciousness), repression (separation and denial), and sublimation (transforming subconscious desire into consciousness) are played out in the myth. Persephone is innocent earthly desire, attracted to the sensuous narcissus and swept underground to marry Hades (repression). If she eats the food of death (the pomegranate provided by Hades), she will forever repress her desires and become captive to them, unable to transform them into conscious spirit. Because she represents the human condition in this myth, Persephone eats a seed from the pomegranate taken from Hades' orchards and appears condemned. She has something within her that must be sublimated and transformed. Demeter represents spirit unblemished by earthly desire, which has the power of transformation.

As the result of intervention by Zeus (Bright Consciousness), Persephone is permitted, despite having eaten the fruit of death, to return for most of the year. She is thus able to transform her state through grace and through her mother's power over nature. To sublimate rather than repress desire means to keep a pure spirit and heart in spite of contrary desires and to be obedient to the

spiritual powers who are working on behalf of salvation. Thus, the key to this mystery is the difference between unhealthy, destructive repression, and healthy, life-enhancing sublimation.

Repression means to cover, to separate, to deny, to hide. It means to internalize to the point of spiritual stagnation. It is the route of cynicism, the path of darkness, and it produces destructive guilt. Sublimation, on the other hand, means to transform, to uncover, to join, to affirm, to open. It involves trust and conviction, and it is the path of light. To know the difference when faced with earthly desire is to know the proper path to enlightenment. To be able to exercise the will to follow that path is to know enlightenment. To accept help from spiritual guides and gods is to understand the nature of human limitation; it is the key to successful sublimation.

The Sacred Rites

The old Archaic myth of the two goddesses became ritual in the two major celebrations associated with the Mysteries: the Lesser Mysteries in Athens and the Greater Mysteries in Eleusis. There appeared in the rites an additional element from the Orphic tradition in which Persephone gives birth to a male child, the result of her



The Triumphant Return of Dionysus, part of a larger Tunisian mosaic from Sousse, ca. 200 CE. Photo © The Man in Question, Wikimedia Commons.

abduction by Hades. The child is identified frequently with Dionysos, particularly in Classical times. The cry “Iakche” (ee-a-kay), which is associated with the Mysteries and with other celebrations of Dionysiac revels, refers to Iakchos, a demigod often identified with Dionysos himself.

Candidates for initiation into the Mysteries had to be adults—slave or free, citizens of Athens or aliens—who presented themselves as pure of hands (no murderers, for example) and able to speak or understand Greek. The language requirement seems to have been based on the need to understand the instructions and the ability to sing the various hymns and call out the sacred words that were so important a part of the ritual. Although only adults were initiated, one boy was specially chosen each year to take part, presumably to represent the figure of Iakchos or Dionysos in the ceremony. The boy and his family would be much honored that year.

The Lesser Mysteries took place in Athens in a sanctuary called Agra near the Ilissos River. This sanctuary dedicated to Artemis should not be confused with the Eleusinion in the Agora. The Agra site is located on the Arditos Hill near the present site of the modern Olympic Stadium. The date for the Lesser Mysteries was the twentieth of Anthesterion (in mid-February), and the candidates for initiation, the *mystai*, gathered at a small temple of Meter, mother of the gods, for purification and sacrifice. This ceremony was a necessary part of the initiation and could not be missed if the initiate wished to participate in the Greater Mysteries seven months later.

Little is known of the details of the Lesser Mysteries, except that the candidates were “consecrated” at this time as proper *mystai* through purification rites in the *myesis*, or beginning of the ritual of initiation. In all probability, one of the elements would have been the acting out of the abduction of Persephone into the underworld. According

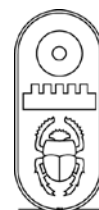
to the late poet and scholar Robert Graves, the Lesser Mysteries enacted a marriage between Dionysos and a minor goddess, Thyone (or Semele). Many commentators suggest the working out of sexual themes as central to these rites.

The Greater Mysteries

The Greater Mysteries began on the fourteenth of Boedromion, which in the modern calendar generally falls on September 22, and lasted for nine days, corresponding to the wanderings of Demeter in search of Kore. On this day the officials from Eleusis, including the high priestess, the Hierophant (high priest), and the Dadouchus (torchbearer), left the sanctuary at Eleusis and marched along the Sacred Way to Athens, a distance of just over 12 miles (20 km). The procession was met by



Ninion, *Votive Plaque of the Eleusinian Mysteries*, fourth century BCE, discovered in the Sanctuary of Eleusis. The figures in the primary scene are arranged in two rows. At the summit, Demeter is presides, seated on the Secret Cistus. Persephone holds a torch and the carrier of the Iakchos torch is located below, accomodating the procession of the initiates, men and women, who arrive at the sanctuary. In the middle of the lower line, the omphalos is decorated with a crown and two bakchoi intersected, symbols of the ritual mysteries. The third divinity, below on the right, is not identified with certainty. The pediment depicts the participants of the pannyichis, the night feast, where a flute player, on the left, accompanies them. All the participants are crowned and hold flowering branches and sticks, while the women have the kernos, the crowned vessel, fixed on their heads. National Archaeological Museum, Athens.



youths from Athens assigned to conduct the official party to the Eleusinion in the Agora, where the cult objects (*heira*) were deposited temporarily.

The fifteenth of Boedromion (September 23) was regarded as the first official day of the Mysteries. On this day the officials of the Athenian *polis*, including the *archon basileus*, the festival leader, whose task it was to maintain the Athenian religious calendar, met with the Eleusinian party to inaugurate the Mysteries. Sacrifices were made on the Acropolis to ask Athena for her blessing, and a ceremony took place in the Agora to bless the *mystai*.

The Pig Sacrifice

On the sixteenth of Boedromion (September 24), early in the day, throughout Athens the cry was heard, “*Mystai* to the sea.” A procession formed in which each initiate took a sacrificial pig to the sea, washed both it and himself, sacrificed the pig, and then buried the body in a deep pit. This sacrifice enacted a symbolic death for each initiate—a letting of blood and a burial in which the personal self or ego died so that the new, greater self could be born at Eleusis during the secret nocturnal ceremony.

The sacrifice of the pig was a significant act. The death of the animal, especially on such a personal, individual basis—one for each participant—created a genuine psychological space within the initiate, an emptiness that had to be filled or replaced with something else. The intention was that the space would be filled with light, signaling the birth of a new life for the soul. The death and burial of the pig forced the initiate to strip away the old, material view of existence and to live with the resulting emptiness until it was filled, more than a week later, with a new spiritual realization.

Preparation and Procession

The next two days were spent in preparation for the procession to Eleusis.

Additional sacrifices were made and the participants from the different cities were gathered together. A special celebration for Asklepios was held, honoring the god of healing and affirming the ancient practice of allowing special dignitaries to enter late into the ritual as, legend had it, Asklepios himself had done. It is also worth noting that Asklepios in his capacity as a healer was associated with Hades, god of the dead. As one having power over life and death but also a compassionate god, Asklepios was an integral part of the ritual.

On the nineteenth of Boedromion (September 27) all the participants gathered for the procession to Eleusis. The day was known as *agrymos*, the gathering. This day marked the beginning of the rule of secrecy. As a result, the details from this point on are both sketchy and intriguing, since we realize



Marble Bust of Eubouleus, 330-320 BCE, found at Eleusis. The bust depicts the mythical Eleusinian chthonic hero Eubouleus, brother of Triptolemos. Eubouleus is associated with the mystery cult at Eleusis. According to tradition, he was a swineherd. When Persephone was abducted by Plouton, he was grazing his herd near the point where the earth opened to receive the god's chariot and a few of his pigs fell into the chasm. This episode of the myths is related to the practice of throwing pigs into subterranean chasms during the festival. Photo © 2007, Marsyas, Wikimedia Commons.

that the rule of secrecy meant that what was regarded as *arrheton*, or ineffable, contained within its awesome aspect the power to create a mystical experience among the *mystai*.

The procession formed at the Eleusinion in the Agora. The officials from Eleusis, including the priestesses carrying the sacred objects in baskets on their heads, led the *mystai* and a whole crowd of celebrants through the Agora, through the Kerameikos, and out the Sacred Gate. At the head of the procession a priest carried a wooden statue of Iakchos, the boy god whose birth would be a culminating event in the secret ritual.

Myrtle leaves were woven into the hair of the initiates and each carried a myrtle bough, sacred to Dionysos and symbolic of the death of the old life and the birth of the new. (The myrtle, for example, was carried by Greek colonists when they left their home to start a new home in a distant land.) The participants also sang hymns along the way and chanted sacred words and phrases, all designed to keep the mind focused on the object of devotion, in this case the statue of Iakchos.

One of the familiar aspects of any initiation is the so-called hazing or mockery that greets the candidate who desires inclusion into a secret society. This mockery is usually intensely personal and is meant to humiliate and to reveal for the initiate the folly of his or her gross existence. The procession to Eleusis included such mockery. As the line of initiates crossed the Kephisos River in Athens, on the bridge spanning the river groups of mockers greeted each initiate with insults. Thus exposed, the old self literally died for shame.

After the *gephyrismoï*, or “bridge jests” as they were called, the procession began the long climb up to the pass at Daphni, where ritual stops were made at temples sacred to Apollo and Aphrodite. In Euripides’ play *Helen* we learn that it was Aphrodite who managed with beautiful music to

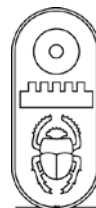
relieve Demeter’s mourning during Kore’s confinement with Hades. Gifts of this kind and the power to relieve sadness were celebrated during this solemn procession. At this point, too, the procession came in sight of the twin peaks of the island of Salamis, which to *mystai* of the Classical Period would have suggested the great victory over the Persians and the miraculous advent of the mystical *mystai* on that occasion.

Some archaeologists locate the bridge-jesting ceremony closer to Eleusis, at the crossing of the Eleusinian Kephisos River, where a Roman road and bridge have now been uncovered on the left side of the National Highway leading into Eleusis. The weight of evidence, however, seems to place the bridge in question closer to Athens.


As night fell on the procession, the torches were lit as the throng came down the pass and approached the sanctuary of Eleusis. The darkness must have matched the mood of the participants, who by this time were tired, thirsty, and hungry, having fasted all day. During the Archaic Period, a large dancing ground outlined the famous Well of the Beautiful Dances, where initiates or specially chosen dancers enacted in ritual movements the arrival of Demeter in Eleusis after her nine days of fruitless searching.

The Nights of the Mysteries


As the initiates arrived in Eleusis and entered the sanctuary, they came, as had Demeter, searching for Kore, which in their case meant searching for the return of an innocent “soul” from the ravages of the underworld. The actual events of the next two nights are obscured by the rule of secrecy. What is available to us now are unconnected details: descriptions from literary accounts, illustrations from pottery and sculpture, and interpretations based on archaeology and anthropology. In addition, new evidence for the use of a hallucinogen during the ceremony is capturing greater attention.



In the abstract, the initiates were now exposed to the horrors of the underworld—to its darkness, uncertainty, fear, and loneliness. Even in a crowd, this experience must have left each participant feeling isolated and empty from this temporary but vivid separation from all that was ordinary and familiar. For the next two days the individual was exposed to the drama of the Demeter-Persephone myth.



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Before the candidates entered the Telesterion, they took part in further sacrifices and rites of purification, both at or near the ancient well and at the Cave of Hades, or as it was known then, the Precinct of Plouton, god of the underworld. At the entrance to this cave was an *omphalos*, or world navel, which marked the transition from the world of light to the world of darkness. The *mystai* had prepared for this moment by fasting (to what degree is uncertain) and the twelve-mile march. This moment and this place marked the symbolic descent by Kore into the underworld, the place of death from which only the purified may return to “live again.”

Within the Telesterion, the huge building specifically designed for this ceremony, the participants moved among a grove of columns in dim light provided by torches and then sat, huddled together, on the rows of narrow steps that line the sanctuary. In the middle of the Telesterion was another


small building, the *anaktoron*, entrance to which was reserved for the high priests and priestesses and from which a great fire would burst at the crucial moment of the ritual.

A Christian writer, Hippolytos, wrote that at a crucial moment in the ceremony the high priest shouted out, “The Mistress has given birth to a holy boy; Brimo has given birth to Brimos; that is, the Strong One to the Strong One.” Piecing together the evidence has led to the conclusion that it was here that the young boy, representing both Demophoon in the Homeric myth and Iakchos in the Orphic tradition, played his part in the ceremony. Ringed by torches, the boy emerged in a fiery birth from the womb of the returned goddess. The transformation sought by the *mystai* is here represented by the birth of the new soul in fire, a burning away of the old self and the birth of the new out of the ashes. There is evidence of cremation near the Telesterion, which would also connect the sacred fire with ceremonies of death and rebirth.

During this drama, which may well have involved symbolic or actual intercourse between the high priest and priestess, the participants enacted ritual movements with the sacred objects that had been carried to and from Athens in baskets the week before. The baskets contained sacrificial cakes, sheaves of grain, and perhaps phallic objects that were used during the ceremony by each initiate to mimic implanting the seed of life into the fertile goddess of the earth.



“The Mistress has given birth to a holy boy; Brimo has given birth to Brimos; that is, the Strong One to the Strong One.”



Just prior to the fiery manifestation, the priestesses passed through the crowd and distributed in small bowls the *kykeion*, or sacred drink, which was composed of barley, water, and mint. Emerging research from scholars who have devoted years to the study of entheogens, or revelatory stimulants, strongly suggests that the priests of Eleusis had mastered the art of using ergot (a fungal growth from barley) and a particular wild grass growing in the Rarian Plain near Eleusis, to make an effective hallucinogen.

Ergot was isolated by Albert Hofmann, a Swiss chemist working for the Sandoz Corporation. In 1943, while studying the effects of ergot, he isolated LSD and sampled some, with the effects now well understood. To illustrate the relationship between the rites in the sanctuary and Hofmann's experience, the following excerpt from his notes in 1943 may be instructive:

Everything in my field of vision wavered and was distorted as if seen in a curved mirror. I also had the sensation of not being able to move from the spot. . . . The dizziness and sensation of fainting became so strong at times that I could no longer hold myself erect. My surroundings had now transformed themselves in more terrifying ways. Everything in the room spun around, and the pieces of furniture assumed grotesque, threatening forms. They were in motion, animated, as if driven by an inner restlessness Even worse than these demonic transformations of the outer world, were the alterations that I perceived in myself, in my inner being. Every exertion of my will, every attempt to put an end to the disintegration of the outer world and the dissolution of my ego seemed to be a wasted effort. . . . At times I believed myself to be outside my body. . . . Now, little by little, I could begin to enjoy the unprecedented colors and plays of shapes

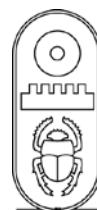
that persisted behind my closed eyes. Kaleidoscopic, fantastic images surged in on me, alternating, variegated, opening, then closing themselves in circles and spirals, exploding in colored fountains It was particularly remarkable how every acoustic perception . . . became transformed into optical perceptions.



Marble sarcophagus with a relief about the hunt of the Calydonian boar on its main face, from the Archaeological Museum of Eleusis, second century CE. Photo © Tkoletsis, Wikimedia Commons.

Such images may well have been the sensations of the *mystai*, contributing to their experience of what followed. At the close of the ceremony, to the awesome sounds of a huge gong or drum that must have filled the Telesterion and the surrounding countryside with thunder, a great light burst forth from the *anaktoron* and in a moment of epiphany the Kore appeared. Her appearance at the crucial moment of the ritual affirmed the content of the myth and the hope of the *mystai* for a renewed life.

After the rites in the Telesterion, the newly initiated poured out of the great hall into the darkness, led by torchlight, and gathered in the nearby meadow. Chanting, dancing, and feasting released the tensions of many days of intense anticipation. The release was also an affirmation of life and must have also brought with it a sense of renewal. Seeing daily existence in a different light was quite literally an aim of the ritual,



and this different “seeing” began as the moon rose over the celebrants and they experienced the release from what may have seemed a lifetime of darkness.

The Secret of the Mysteries

Demeter, as Mother Earth, gave the secret of agriculture to human beings, establishing the gift of divine aid and suggesting tangible divine presence. It is through this myth that a connection to divinity is maintained and the hope is sustained that human beings may yet become reunited with the gods. In the myth the barren conditions wiped out the natural fruits of the earth upon which life depended. Certainly the last glacial period and numerous droughts remained in human memory to fuel such myths.

The Demeter myth describes these events quite accurately. After Demeter successfully wins the return of her daughter from Hades and settles for keeping her for eight months out of twelve as an expression of the laws of Nature, human beings are able to see the connection between the natural law and the divine presence for which they long. The Eleusinian Mysteries provided a ritual through which the Greeks could reenact the shift from nomadic to agricultural life, acknowledge the real loss of their gods in a period of glacial darkness, and be reunited (or forgiven) once again. This ritual pattern is the source of all initiation mysteries.

The secret of the Mysteries is the moment of reunion, the appearance of Persephone



The Eleusis Relief: Triptolemus received wheat sheaves from Demeter and blessings from Persephone, fifth century BCE. National Archaeological Museum of Athens.

as she emerges from the underworld, with the experience aided by the entheogen. At this moment the initiate experiences the emotional and psychic release from the dark night of the soul and is reborn to the light. The journey of the maiden is the human journey from its grain-gathering nomadic ways to the paralyzing darkness and cold of the underworld only to return again into the light and fecundity of earthly paradise, a Garden of Eden still occupied by divinity. Human beings need to know that they have not sacrificed union with the gods for the



Genrich Ippolitovich Semiradsky, *Phryne at the Poseidonia in Eleusis*, 1889. State Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg.

seeming comforts of civilization. Demeter is the forgiving mother, nurturing her children and providing for them the means to return to her bosom after life is over.

This level of meaning helps to explain why, in AD 364, the Roman Emperor Valentinian was persuaded to allow the Mysteries to continue. To fail to reenact the ritual would be to bring the darkness back to the earth once more. The guilt for having created civilization (a state of being known only to the gods before Prometheus stole fire for human beings) could only be assuaged by this ritual. To offend Athena might result in the destruction of Athens, but to offend Demeter would destroy life itself—forever.

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The Nature of the Secret

In the ninth discourse of the Bhagavad-Gita, it is said that the great secret of the universe, of life itself, has several characteristics that mark it as a true secret. First, the secret has to be intuitional, that is, capable of being known by anyone wishing to know it and not dependent upon outside teaching or being revealed by an adept. Second, it has to be righteous, that is, consistent with cosmic law. And third, it has to be pleasant beyond measure, that is, the secret has to be life-enhancing and exceeding the pleasures of earthly existence.

These principles suggest that any great cosmic secret, such as that of the Eleusinian Mysteries, has to be available to all, full of light (and thus goodness), and must exceed all the pleasures of the earth in its greatness.

After all, if the great secret of the universe did not exceed the greatest joys of the earth, seekers would not care very much what it was, but would strive for the ultimate earthly delights as the true aim of life.

The secret of Eleusis was the miraculous experience of the event, the miracle of which would remain valid only if the secret was kept. The labyrinthine journey from Athens, the fasting and sacrifices, the terrors of the darkness, the drama of the birth from fire, and the return of the beloved goddess from the underworld under the influence of a carefully prepared agent of illumination worked together to do in ritual what for many could not be done by philosophical inquiry and devotion alone. As Hofmann wrote of his experience, “Exhausted, I woke the next morning refreshed, with a clear head, though tired physically. A sensation of well-being and renewed life flowed through me....The world was as if newly created. All my senses vibrated in a condition of highest sensitivity, which persisted for the entire day.”

