

## **The Eleusinian Mysteries**

Girard Falzon  
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Ancient Greece

Isocrates, in enumerating a host of Athens' contributions to the benefit of mankind, names first the twin gifts of Demeter: cereal grain, and the Mysteries of Eleusis. The cult center at Eleusis played a thousand year role in the culture and psychology of the ancient Mediterranean and Near East, outliving the political father that sired it and continuing its legacy even through Roman agency. The "Burning Man" of its age, the Mysteries was a pan-Hellenic cult open to all with no regard for social position and legal status; there is no evidence of any institutional prohibition or legal pressure to obstruct the participation of women, or even that of children, orphans, and slaves. As a functioning cultural enterprise, the cult complex has a documented, continuous contribution to the ancient mind from at least the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE until its official demise in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. Some scholars wager that the Mysteries appeared in the pre-Classical historical record only after a birth in the Mycenaean age, with roots in shrines dating as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> century. While the site is home to a much older shrine dedicated to the same Goddess, it is the sanctuary's association with Athens from the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE that impressed it so firmly in Occidental history. The character played by Eleusis in the historical drama is an enduring one whose appeal was both popular and esoteric, capable of drawing the energy of celebratory crowds, cultural and artistic personalities, philosophers, and devotees. Whether by wise and clever design and

improvisation of the successive priesthoods, or by virtue of some objective “good” or element of religious truth in the Mysteries, the cult at Eleusis clearly offered a valuable experience in the pan-Hellenic market of religious institutional participation. Against a back-drop of obligatory civic cults and hierarchical sacrificial communities, the Eleusinian Mysteries announced openness to all comers, with the Archon Basileus decrying in the agora of Athens that anyone who “could speak Greek and was free of the pollution of murder was invited to take part in Demeter’s rites.” Though obscure in many places, there is sufficient evidence to outline the basic curriculum of the Mysteries and to investigate their place within a broader cultural landscape. The birth, life, and death of the cult are enshrined in historical record in stones and in law and literature, and the Mysteries as they exist at each stage of their life serve to testify to the character of the society around them.

Archaeological evidence and subsequent scholarship has concluded that Eleusis was home to a shrine to Demeter since the Mycenaean age. The oldest structure excavated in the complex is a small sanctuary built on man-made terraces and surrounded by a *peribolos* wall, a feature that would be retained throughout the life of the cult center at Eleusis. The terraces shared Mycenaean features common to all extra-urban cult centers of 9<sup>th</sup> century Greece, Delos and Delphi among them. As the principle architecture remained unchanged, a feature we will examine later, we might

reasonably, say that the impact of the Mycenaean site was profound (a preserved through antiquity into the Classical Era; the Mysteries then, in some form, were practiced for almost 400 years before the first historical construction in the temple complex. If the Mysteries' rituals were in fact connected to the Mycenaean megaron in the Temple Complex, as history suggests, then the historical character of the Mysteries is born of Mycenaean parentage, at least in its original form.

We might say that the father of the Mysteries, consistent with occidental notions of patrimony, was the Mycenaean feudal landscape, a hierarchical dynamic whose tension against nature was typified in their artistic depiction of the Lion-Hunt. The aggressive and virile character of the Mycenaean social order (and consequently martial institutions with a rigidly stratified chain-of-command) shaped the political and cultural world around Eleusis at the time of its birth. Attributing a mother to the Mysteries is less in the realm of fantasy, as they were by their nature a festival honoring nature and the earth as personified by Demeter, the very mother of life. We might speculate that the lasting appeal of the Mysteries lay in the fact that it reconciled the polar tension between classical notions of Father and Mother, or more specifically it afforded the hyper-masculine, Bronze-Age warrior-subject a perspective and experience capable of alleviating the tensions built by a social system whose authority lay in coercion, conquest, dominance and submission. This is still speculation, but the lifting of class and gender

restrictions, the voluntary participation, and the absence of blood-shed (a claim examined later) all demonstrate elements that are at odds with the cultural values in which the Mysteries operated.

The 8<sup>th</sup> century sanctuary crowned the Southeast side of a hill overlooking the Bay of Salamis, and was seemingly directed to the small temple building, called *the Anaktoron*. While the areas surrounding the *Anaktoron* house altars and sacred sites, there is no evidence of altars (as a locus for animal sacrifice) within the temple space. This basic lay-out, the fortified temple precinct, bare of altars, ringed by public space with its own religious iconography and shrines, remained unchanged despite centuries of systematic architectural improvements and renovations, suggesting an important ritual element necessary to sustain the original cult of Demeter. This will be examined later when we look at the program of the Mysteries themselves.

Participation in and association with the Mysteries was evidently a mark that conferred distinction and honors upon Hellenic citizens, as politicians periodically demonstrated their piety and prosperity through renovation efforts. Eminent names like Pisistratus, Cimon, Pericles, and Lycurgus are all associated with remodeling and enlargement of the Temple Complex. Atop the earliest 8<sup>th</sup> century temple is a 14x24 meter oblong building with a 3x12m room in the southwest. This building is dated to the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE and also features the *peribolos* wall and Demetrian shrines

and objects outside this boundary. This building is itself replaced in the 6<sup>th</sup> C by a larger roofed temple, called the *Telestrion*. This new building measured 25x27 meters, and despite being double the size of the old structure, proved too small or otherwise inadequate and was enlarged once more in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. This latter renovation required a new *peribolos* wall and was commissioned by Pisistratus, whose other contributions included Athens' first library. The final stages of renovations occurred in the 5<sup>th</sup> century in the Periclean building period and saw a further enlarging of the temple complex. The product of this final renovation was 4 times larger than the archaic model, measuring 51x51 meters, and featured indoor seating for several thousand people on the eight step-benches lining the walls.

The temple complex at Eleusis grew and changed in accord with the ambitions of rulers and the demands of the growing popularity of the Mysteries. Three centuries of renovations and building projects, however, remained true to the form of the original layout. Demeter's temple is always crowning a man-made terraced hill and surrounded by *peribolos* walls, a feature that may be constant because of its logistical and defensive plausibility. The public courtyard where pilgrims amassed and reveled, the altars, and the Kallichoron Well that received piglet sacrifices remained outside the sacred precinct of the *telestrion* throughout the lifespan of the Mysteries.

Though the cult began as a local phenomenon and rule over it was restricted to local family authority, its popularity against the backdrop of the rising eminence of Athens ensured its annexation into the broader Athenian hegemony. The existence of Athenian regulation before 460 BCE implies a developed network and cultural hierarchy that needed to utilize the growing complexity of government in order to efficiently function. An Athenian Decree dating perhaps to the time of a dispute with Aetolia, for example, regulates the selection and dispatching of heralds for the truce obliged by the coming of the Festival. Statues of community member/initiates erected by the people and by Temple institutions suggest that Initiation in the Mysteries had a public, that is, civic, purpose or element. By the era of the final renovations the Mysteries at Eleusis were the subject of Athenian legal control, indicating that the importance and appeal of the cult celebration was too great to be left to the administration of a small community of priests and family patrons. By the 5<sup>th</sup> century Eleusis was fully integrated into the Athenian political system but were awarded “independent control of the Mysteries” by treaty. Still, the Eleusinians “in all things else were to be subject to the Athenians.” The administration and legal ordering of the cult deal with a myriad of issues, stressing the importance of competent bureaucratic upkeep and active circles of interested parties. Authorities ruled, among other things, on matters of age limits, the right to bestow Initiation, and the duties of the Eleusinian ruling

families whose roots were in the most ancient Demetrian priesthoods, and the regulations are fortunately carved in stone at the temple complex. The importance of the Mysteries to Athenian politics is further illustrated by the fact that one of the earliest, and one of the latest preserved decrees from Athens concerns the regulation of the Mysteries.

The earliest literary record of the Eleusinian cult comes from the “Homeric Hymn to Demeter.” This poem, “the most significant literary record of the Eleusinian Mysteries,” is the canon of Demeter worship for the Greek world and outlines the mythic role of Demeter, the rape and captivity of Persephone, and other related mythological motifs. While the Hymn is a rich source of some of the more esoteric and religious elements within the Mysteries, the fact that the role of Athens is downplayed or written out makes its legitimacy suspect. The Hymn details the places and families associated with the drama of Demeter and Persephone, placing them squarely at Eleusis while neglecting entirely any role Athens would later play, which is indicative of a political bias restricted to a particular time period. This smear on the pride and primacy of Athens explains why there is no direct mention the “Hymn to Demeter” in Greek literature until a much later period.

The Mysteries at Eleusis began long before the Classical period, but nevertheless their form seems to have been retained throughout. The festival began toward the end of the month of Boedromion, a month that



corresponds to the period between about September and October 15<sup>th</sup> by the reckoning of our calendar. In their earlier days they would have been entirely limited in space to the area immediately around Eleusis, but by the time of Athenian integration some time in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the celebrations and rites had been expanded to include Athens as well. The festival began after a formal declaration in the Athenian agora, and the first day in Athens was dedicated to “the round-up,” also noted as the “victim-hither.” This entailed the collection of the piglets to be sacrificed upon arrival to the temple complex; the pilgrims would carry these piglets in their procession, but only after having ritually purified them in the sea. This purification occurred on the second day of the festival in Athens, called, “Mystai to the Sea.” The piglets rounded up on the first day were either chosen by the would-be Initiates or allocated, and their procession walked from Athens to the sea where they ritually bathed themselves in addition to the piglets.

The festival did not continue until 2 days later, following unrelated celebrations, sacrifices, and government assemblies in Athens. This is evidence, according to scholars, of Athens’ attempt to dislodge Eleusis from its traditional place and relocate it to Athens. The *sacra*, Demeter’s sacred objects, were taken in procession from Eleusis to Athens before the Mysteries festival, and it was around them that crowds gathered for the round-up and their journey to the sea. For the rest of the few days that the *sacra* were in Athens, there was no public activity dedicated to them. We

can deduce therefore that the original Mysteries probably followed the same program but in Eleusis and without punctuation by Athenian activities. The fact that crowds gathered around the *sacra* at Eleusis and accompanied the objects to Athens to hear the official declaration of the beginning demonstrates that Eleusis as a cult center retained its power despite the maneuvers of Athenian legislation.

From Athens, adherents walked in procession 14 miles down the Sacred Way to the temple complex at Eleusis. Priests, priestesses, government officials, and guards called *ephebes* carried the *sacra* down the road, leading the prospective initiates along the way. An offering of meal, the *pelanos*, was offered to Demeter by the priests upon arrival. The prospective initiates spent their first full day in Eleusis in the public space fasting and visiting the Kallichoron Well with their piglet sacrifice in preparation for the nocturnal rites, the *teletai*. The pig was believed to be in possession of magical powers, and its fecundity was believed to be transferable to soil. The pigs were thrown, alive, into a compost heap that was renewed annually by pilgrim sacrifices and tapped as a source of rich soil for the Demetrian cereal cult.

At night after the *pelanos* the *mystai* passed through the gates to the sacred courtyard of Demeter's sanctuary, entering the *telestrion* to witness and partake in the Mysteries of Demeter. The diurnal fast was broken by drinking *kykeon*, a beverage rendered from meal and water and mixed with

mint leaves. The role of the *kykeon* is the subject of heated scholarly debate, but its significance to the Mysteries is indisputable. Regardless of its function, as a communion, as the induction of a hallucinogen, or any other interpretation, *kykeon* is drunk by Demeter in The Hymn and must have at least had that character in the Mysteries. Clement of Alexandria, whose legitimacy in regard to the Mysteries is admittedly argued, reports that entry beyond the gates was gained by the uttering of a kind of password, the *synthema*. According to Clement, an initiate upon entering the *neos* would say "I fasted; I drank the *kykeon*.." Joseph Campbell asserts that the *kykeon* contained the psychedelic compound ergot, a mold that grows on grains and contains lisergic acid, or LSA. (LSD is the synthesized form of naturally occurring LSA) The nocturnal rites were performed in secret and subject to oaths of secrecy, but the cult's thousand year popularity has nevertheless left history with some scant record of its initiation and ample room for speculation.

Scholars can agree that the *teletai* were divided into three categories, the dromena, Legomena, and deiknumena, commonly interpreted as "things done, things shown, and things said." Little, if anything, is known of the *teletai*, though the common consensus teaches that initiates were treated to a play featuring the drama of Demeter and Persephone. It is said that initiates actually joined Demeter in the desperate search for Persephone within the temple compound, and that Persephone was revealed to them, reborn and

reunited triumphantly with her mother. This drama was heightened by the atmosphere of religious fervor, elaborate music, and the chanting of the priests. Others reject the very notion of a play and assert that the things done and shown were a sacred dance performed by the initiates, designed to induce a trance-like state. The fact that the final *telestrion* took the form of an enclosed theatre with seating for thousands along raised benches would lend weight to the claim that the *teletai* contained at least an element of performance. The last day featured libations in honor of the dead, and then, once outside the sacred enclosure, public and civic sacrifices. The festival ended in the public courtyard with celebratory dancing and revelry open to initiates and non-initiates alike. The *sacra* remained in the sacred enclosure until the following year and the Mysteries were concluded, leaving pilgrims to file homeward with none of the pomp, spectacle or organization of the beginning procession.

The architecture of the complex, in addition to helping us deduce the character of the *teletai* indicates an ideological implication, that sacrifice was not part of the actual *teletai* and forbidden in the sacred precinct. No ritual accommodations were made for flesh offerings within the walls of the temple or its courtyard, though the piglet sacrifice, and other smaller altars to various deities, did utilize the traditional rites beyond the *peribolos* wall in profane, public space. Greek sacrifice took on an elaborate and hierarchal character, delineating in a very Confucian way the ritual and

spiritual legitimacy of a political order. That the Mysteries were open to all who were willing regardless of class, and that they forbade the sacrifices that among other things, expressed stratification, suggests to us that the Mysteries themselves had an almost egalitarian character.

The Mysteries outlived the political primacy of their Athenian usurper/patrons and survived into the Christian era. The popularity and emulation of Greek philosophy and religion in Rome made the introduction of the Mysteries to Roman life inevitable, and prominent Romans took pride in their initiation; Cicero heralded their acclaim in his *De Legibus*:

“Among the many excellent and divine institutions that your Athens has developed and contributed to human life, there is none, in my opinion, better than these mysteries, by which we have been brought forth from our rustic and savage mode of existence, cultivated and refined to a state of civilization; and as these rites are called "initiations" so, in truth, we have learned from them the first principles of life and have gained the understanding, not only to live happily, but also to die with better hope.”

No amount of pride and endorsement could save the Mysteries from the broader, international political climate around it, and by the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE Eleusis was dwindling in its scope. Plutarch's reporting of the Mysteries communicates a different vision than earlier literature, though he is examining a time when the Sacred Way itself was unsafe to travel. By 220 AD the region was unstable enough to limit traffic, even during the

festival, so that the procession required a fully armed detachment to protect itself. The soldiers were included in the affairs of the Mysteries, as Plutarch said, "Since we require them to journey over so long a road, it is right for them to share in the sacrifices and libations and paeans along the road." The temple of Demeter was sacked by Sarmatians in 170 CE, leaving the Emperor Marcus Aurellius to rebuild it. No amount of renovation, however, could dam the tide of rising Christianity, and the Mysteries declined in importance. The apostate emperor Julian tried with limited success to resurrect the cult center in his reign, but he was doing so against history. In an effort to consolidate imperial power through expansion of clerical legislation, the emperor Theodosius officially closed the Mysteries in 392 CE. Alaric's Gothic army is commonly blamed for the final destruction of the temple in its last days, but archaeological evidence does not support the claim that a rampaging army attacked the complex; rather, it seems as though the temple and outlying buildings were systematically dismantled with an effort to retain the structural integrity and resale value of the materials, as though in accordance with imperial legislation or edict.

If we are to trust to the testimony of the ancients, then we must conclude that the Eleusinian mysteries are a principle building block of occidental history. By virtue of unidentified properties and qualifications, the Mysteries played an important role in the culture of the Mediterranean,

initiating prominent and important men alongside slaves into a cult of Demeter.

The lessons learned in the dark of night in the sequestered courts of the *mystai* may remain a mystery to us forever, but to those who participated, they served as an engine that propelled man to the light of the heavens.

Speaking to initiates of the abode of the pious in the celestial sphere,

Socrates says,

“There the initiated have a special place of honor and there too the holy ceremonies are performed. You therefore will surely be the first to share the privilege, being as you are a kinsman of the gods.”

Whatever may have occurred behind the walls at Eleusis, it continually inspired the people who participated, and continues to trouble our own calm with its intrigue. Abandoning the stratified and controlled social climate around it, the cult center maintained its autonomy and spread the influence of its perspective across the ancient world. Barring the discovery of some concrete documentation that might put the issue to rest forever, the Mysteries may still forever serve as a western model for enlightenment and inspire its proponents with its influence, popularity, and longevity.

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