

## History of the Eleusinian Mysteries

We often think of the imposing grandeur of the Parthenon on the Acropolis as embodying the highest sublimity of ancient Greek religion, but the unimposing, flat expanse of foundations now visible at Eleusis is the real holiest of holies in Ancient Greece. Most of the evidence for the initiation ceremonies there in honor of Demeter, the goddess of grain, is inferential, since no ancient writer revealed the secret. But the "Homeric" Hymn to Demeter, which tells the story of Hades carrying off Persephone to be his queen in the world of the dead and the wanderings of Demeter as she sought her lost daughter until she was finally restored (for part of the year) to the upper world, is taken as the Eleusinian foundation myth, upon which the ceremonies were modeled, especially details consequent upon Demeter's coming to the palace at Eleusis, where she served as nursemaid for a time to the infant son, Demophoon, whom she was making immortal by putting him each night into the fire until interrupted by his frightened mother.

"Happy is that one of mortal men who has seen these things..." Indeed, happiness in this life and in the next was the promise of the mysteries (secret initiation ceremonies). The prerequisites were simple enough: you had to have clean hands (no blood pollution), a pure heart and speak Greek. You could be male or female, native or foreigner, free or slave.

The preliminaries included a purification in the Lesser Mysteries in Athens on the 20<sup>th</sup> of Anthesterion (about March 1<sup>st</sup>), which you could attend under the terms of a 55-day travel truce. Under a second 55-day travel truce six months later, you would return (on the 13<sup>th</sup> of Boedromion, the end of September) for the Greater Mysteries, which would cost you 15 drachma (fifteen days' wages for a skilled craftsman).

Pageantry would start the festivities, with the cadet corps of Athens riding horseback to Eleusis to bring back the priests (an inherited office). The priestess of Demeter rode back in a cart with the *cistae*, caskets containing the mysterious objects to be revealed at the climax of the initiation, and placed them below the Acropolis. Each of the around one thousand initiates would pay a fee to his or her individual mystagogue (tour-guide/instructor), since the mysteries emphasized privacy and intimacy.

On the second day, you would don a bathing suit and wade into the ocean where you would have a sacrifice and a meal of the meat. Day 4 would find you shut up indoors, alone, fasting, resting, contemplating. On day 5, you would walk to Eleusis; carts were forbidden, enforced by a narrow bridge and a large fine. You would carry a change of clothes and a myrtle branch tied with wool. Ritual obscenities and insults would be hurled at you by by-standers until you arrived, in the dark at the Initiation Hall, the Telesterion (about half a football field in size), after passing through a gateway carved with representation of grain, poppy, *cistae* and *boukrania* (ox heads). You could see, well within the sanctuary, a cave cut into the rock.

On day 6, you fasted and sat on a stool covered with a ram's fleece while someone winnowed grain over your covered head. At night, you drank the *kykeon*, a mixture of barley, mint and water, recalling the drink given to Demeter when she first came to the palace at Eleusis, and you learned the *synthema*, the password of the initiates: "I have fasted, drunk the *kykeon*, worked with the sacred objects from the *cistae*."

Day 7 was the day of *dromena* ("things done"), *legomena* ("things said") and *deiknumena* ("things shown"). After a priest carried off the priestess to the cave (whence they disappeared via a secret

stairway at the back of the cave) you ran around with your torches looking (in vain) for Persephone. Within the *telesterion* you could see the outside of the *anaktoron*, the holy of holies, the inner shrine where secret objects were kept. Now you manipulated (in some way) the objects (whatever they were) in the *cistae*. Christian literature paints the objects as disgusting, but we really don't really know what they were. Perhaps a mortar and pestle with which you ground a small amount of grain? Cakes, salt, poppies, snakes, models of human sexual organs? Whatever they were, when you had finished the manipulation, the sudden crash of a gong was followed by a call for Persephone. In a sudden blaze of firelight from the *anaktoron* came the climactic revelation; the high priest (Hierophant: "shower of sacred things") was seen to reveal the sacred thing (s) – perhaps an ear of wheat.

On the last day, your name was entered in to the register of the initiated, you called "hoo-eh" and "koo-eh" ("rain, conceive") and finally knew the ends of life and were assured a rosy afterlife.

What were the sources of the wondrous effects? Mind-altering drugs? Poppies? Hallucinogenic mushrooms? (both represented in the Eleusinian iconography). LSD (derived from ergot, a fungus produced by mushrooms and found on various grains and grasses)? The latter is water soluble and could have been given in the *kykeon*. Or was it simply a matter of heightened imagination? The mysteries remain mysteries to us because none of the ancients who underwent initiation revealed the secrets in any writings which have come down to us. There is, in fact, good reason to believe that initiates kept the secrets totally.