

# The Eleusinian Mysteries



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Our topic is the Eleusinian Mysteries, perhaps one of the best-known mystery cults of all time. They are rooted in a very ancient time, long before the city state of Athens or the official worship of the Olympian Gods ever existed. Despite this, they have retained their sacrality and commanded respect within various eras and cultures, almost as if they have their own secret and magical way of evoking something in the soul or subconscious of man. I am not sure which term to use – the citizen of classical Greece, Imperial Rome, Enlightenment Europe or even our own Digital reality. There is a host of very proliferous narratives and legends around the theme of these Mysteries. Yet their accuracy is questionable since true initiates took a heavy oath of silence bestowed by the goddess herself. So let us try to make sense of what information we do have.

## What and When



In one prophecy to the Athenians relating to the worship of Dionysus Elefthereos – Latinised to Pater Liber - the Delphi oracle reminded the citizens that the god had returned to the city together with Demeter during the reign of the King of Athens Pandion. The goddess did not stay, but went to Eleusis where she was received by King Keleos. This prophecy would put the inception of the Eleusinian Mysteries at around the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC. However, it is more or less certain that they actually date to the Minoan period when the worship of the Great Goddess predominated. In the Homeric hymn, Demeter reveals that she arrived from Crete; and according to Diodorus the Eleusinian initiation was administered legitimately at Knossos since antiquity .

The name Eleusis itself means advent, or arrival. So who comes where to seek what? Demeter sought the lost part of herself – her daughter Persephone – in the underworld; the initiate seeks an initiation – perhaps a lost or forgotten aspect of himself, or a gnosis that will help him know the other world. Sophocles, Pindar and Plutarch all speak of this, saying of the initiates into the sacred mysteries that they are blessed, for they know that in Hades there is only life, where the uninitiated fear there is only misfortune.



The ancient temple was burned by the Persians in 480 BC. Pericles had it rebuilt according to the design of Iktinos, the architect who designed the Acropolis, and it was decorated by the most famous sculptor in antiquity, Phidias. This new temple was destroyed by Alaric's hordes nearly 900 years later, in 395 CE, at which time the Mysteries also ended.

Let us turn now to the ritual aspect of the Mysteries as it is generally understood.

### **The Initiation**

The initiation ritual took place in three parts.

The first was the Lesser, or “mysteries in Agra,” the second the Major, or Great Mysteries, and the third, the “epoptia” or Charge, took place after the Great Mysteries at Eleusis, with those who had been initiated at least a year earlier as participants. Prior to the start of the celebrations, the “spondoforoi” or libation bearers declared the sacred armistice, which lasted for two months for the Great mysteries, and ten days for the lesser ones.



### **The Mysteries in Agra**

The Mysteries in Agra took their name from the place where they were conducted: Agra, a suburb of Athens on the banks of the river Ilissos. They took place in the month Anthesterion, in other words in February. It is thought that this was a preparation for the Great Mysteries, perhaps with a narration of the preparatory initiatory myth, along with purification in the river Ilissos. According to tradition this ceremony was established in order to initiate Heracles, who was not eligible to take part in the Great Mysteries as he was not an Athenian citizen. This mythical ceremony

then gave the right to initiation to all Greeks. These mysteries were not sacred to Demeter but to Dionysus and Persephone.



It has also been suggested that it was a far older local observance which merged with the Eleusinian mysteries after the expansion of Athens.

### **The Great Mysteries**

Seven months later, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month Boidromon, the Great Mysteries began. They lasted for nine days – as many days as Demeter wandered in search of the Maiden Persephone. On the eve of the ceremonies the Sacred Articles were brought from Eleusis to Athens by the Hierophant and Daduch/Torch-bearer heading a procession of ephebes/adolescents. They were placed in the “en asti Eleusinion” – Eleusinion in the City, a small sanctum on the northern slope of the Acropolis. It is thought that the Articles were small Mycenaean clay idols which had been preserved through the centuries as heirlooms, and that were carried in the “kistes,” special ceremonial containers which accompanied totems of the Eleusinian deities.

The announcement (prorrasis) of the commencement of the Mysteries took place on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Boidromon and was called ‘agyrmos’ – meaning gathering of the candidates for initiation. The herald would invite all who wished to participate, rejecting only those who “were not clean of hand” or “imprudent of voice”, in other words criminals and gossips.

The second day was named “elassis” from the call of the Herald: ‘To the sea with the adepts.’ They would bathe in the sea at Faliron to purify themselves, along with the pig that was to be sacrificed to the Goddess.



A day of mourning and fasting followed. It was called “Iereia devro,” apparently from the command for the ‘victims’ to be brought to the altars at the City Eleusinium by the Acropolis. Each candidate was symbolically sacrificed, while the pig was thrown into the flames in his place.



The fourth day was called Epidavreia or Asclipeia, in remembrance of the delayed arrival of Asclepius from Epidavros. They then moved the Sacred Articles from the City Eleusinium at the Acropolis to the Temple of Asclepius.

Following on the 19<sup>th</sup> of Boidromion was the joyous “day of Iakchus. Iakchus is referred to as the son of Demeter or Persephone, or in variants of the myth, as husband of Demeter and a youthful aspect of Dionysus.



*Iakchus and Hekate*

In the Dionysiaca, Nonnos writes that he was the son of Dionysus and the nymph Avra/Aura, raised by Athena and then given to the Bacchae at Eleusis. He is also named as the “third Dionysus” following Dionysus Zagreas and the son of Zeus and Semele. On this day only the older adepts remained in Athens to offer sacrifices to Dionysus. The rest of the candidates, crowned with myrtle leaves, formed a grand procession which accompanied Iakchus and the “Sacred Articles” down the Sacred Road on their return to Eleusis, about 22 km away. They made stops and libations at the sanctuaries they met on the way, including that of Aphrodite and at the Riti, two small lakes sacred to Demeter and Persephone. The procession approached Eleusis at nightfall, and bearing torches, entered the Temple of Demeter. Scholars have speculated that the night was spent with ceremonial dancing around the « \_\_\_\_\_ » - shaft of beautiful dances – and that the dancers held on their heads ‘kernos’, ceremonial containers filled with seeds and fruit.



*Kernos*

The sixth day began with sacrifices to the Eleusinian deities, conducted by the ruling ‘Vasileas’ the highest ranking religious leader of Athens and the stewards of Eleusis. And so we reach the 21<sup>st</sup> of Boidromion., the most important day of the mysteries. According to tradition the Herald would appear at the Great Gates (Great Propylaia) and shout “ekas, ekas oi veviloι”, meaning “away, away with the profane.”



*Great Gates (Great Propylaia)*

Then there would follow the actual initiation itself, composed of three aspects, known as: the ‘proceedings,’ the ‘shown’ and the ‘spoken.’

The spoken part, from the word alone indicates some kind of narrative to catechize and teach, and may well have come first, for as Aristotle says, candidates for initiation were obliged *“not to learn anything, but to be affected in a certain way and put into a certain frame of mind”*.

So there was no complicated doctrine or teaching for them to study and attempt to penetrate, but an introduction to a drama which they themselves had to experience. The “proceedings” were probably reconstructions of the Goddess’s misfortunes. We should bear in mind that tragic drama was born out of mystery ceremonies and led the audience from drama to catharsis. Clemes of Alexandria, writing in the first centuries of the CE, confirms this, saying that the Eleusinian Mysteries comprised a secret drama of Demeter and the Maiden, which sheds light on her seduction, abduction and their grief. Finally, the “shown” may well have been ancient sacred symbols revealed by the Hierophant.

The following night was dedicated to the Charge: the highest initiatory degree. The candidates would enter the Telesterion, and there, as tradition has it, they would see the Maiden appear to them. The Telesterion was a large square building, each side measuring 54 metres, and with graduated rows which could seat up to 3000 people. At its centre was the Anaktoron, a rectangular room with a door to the NE, where the Sacred articles were kept. This was the most ancient structure around which the Telesterion was later erected. Outside the door to the Anaktoron was the throne of the Hierophant. The Telesterion had no windows. It had only a central shaft over the Anaktoron, the Opaion, for the smoke to rise out of and where the theophany, or appearance of Persephone, was visible.

Much speculation surrounds the optical illusion which could have created the impression of the magical appearance of Persephone, though it must have been very impressive in order to trick such a large crowd which at some point included Sophocles, Euripides, Plutarch and Pindar. As far as archeological evidence goes, findings have shown that there were no hidden spaces in the Telesterium which might have supported special effects to mislead the adepts.

At the climax of the ceremony the Hierophant would open the door of the Anaktoron and declare: “The Worshipful Mother has given birth to a son, the strong has begotten the strong one. The Sacred Articles were then displayed as the adepts called to the sky “ie” – rain, and then bending to the earth: “Kye” – be fruitful.

The Charge was complete when, according to Hippolytus, the Hierophant presented the “great, miraculous and most perfect mystery of the Charge, an ear of grain in silence harvested.”



*Demeter and Persephone*

The ceremonies ended at sunrise on the next day, the 23<sup>rd</sup> of Boidromion, known as “plimochoe” and dedicated to the worship of the cthonian powers of the underworld and of the dead. On that day two clay jars (plemochoai), probably filled with water or wine, were respectively placed to the East and to the West. When the ceremony finished they were overturned and smashed. Incidentally, even today in many regions of Greece, when someone has died custom dictates that a dish is placed at the entrance of the home. When the ritual is completed and the corpse is removed, a close relative smashes the plate on the ground.

This was the basic outline of the Eleusinian initiation ceremonies for the high-ranking initiates – of whom Pindar said that they were blessed, for they know that which is beneath the earth, and they wield power in the next world bestowed by Zeus himself.

At the heart of initiation mysteries we usually find specific myths. It is generally acknowledged that the most representative account is the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, dated to around the end of the seventh century BC.

## **Hymn to Demeter**

The hymn narrates how Aidoneus – or Hades – was dazzled by Persephone’s beauty, and so asked for – and was granted – the permission of his brother, Zeus to make her his wife and queen of Hades.



The Maiden was playing in a meadow, accompanied by the Oceanids and the young goddesses Artemis and Athena. At some point she wandered away from her friends and saw a beautiful narcissus flower. As she reached out to pick it, the ground opened and Aidoneus leaped out on his golden chariot led by black horses, and seized her. Only the ancient goddess Hecate lurking in her cave heard Persephone’s cries and only Helios saw what occurred. The last plaintive wail of the Maiden echoed as they disappeared into the underworld, and its echo reached her mother. The goddess

dressed in black and began to seek her high and low. For nine days, she wandered without rest, holding two lit torches. On the tenth day, she met with Hecate who was also holding torches, and who told Demeter all she knew.



*Demeter holding torches*

They both ran to Helios who revealed that Persephone had been seized by Hades by permission of Zeus. In a rage, Demeter left the other gods and wandered in the world of men. She reached Eleusis and sat under an olive tree, near a well, the having transformed herself into the form of a barren old woman. There she met the four young daughters of King Keleus, who did not recognize her. The goddess said that she was from Crete and had been taken by pirates as their slave. When their ship made harbour she managed to escape, and was now seeking a noble household where she could work as a nanny or housekeeper.

The girls invited her to their home where their mother, Metaneira had just had a young son. The black-clad goddess entered slowly, but the light emanating from her made the queen rise from her throne and offer her seat. Demeter would not accept and sat on a stool brought by a servant, Iambe. Iambe's jokes were enough to make her laugh once more and then the queen offered her a cup of red wine. Demeter refused and asked for a drink known as "kykeonas" (mixture/medley)

Metaneira tried to comfort Demeter, advocating patience and saying that it is the only way to "bear the gifts of the gods which sit as burdens on the backs of men." She then delegated the task of raising her son, Demophon, to the goddess. Demeter raised the young prince like a god, not feeding him with mortal food but anointing him in ambrosia and putting him in the flames of the hearth at night. His miraculous development surprised his mother, who one day decided to spy on them. When she saw what was happening she screamed out in anger. Then the goddess angrily shed her mortal form, and revealing her identity said: "You humans are thoughtless and ignorant. You don't know when you are looking at good and when at evil." She then ordered the Eleusinians to build her a temple and an altar where they would offer sacrifices and participate in sacred orgies to placate her. And so she remained seated far from the immortals, drowning in grief. No seed would grow in the earth and the human race was in danger of being wiped out by famine – an eventuality which would deprive the immortals from sacrifices and offerings. And so the gods grew worried. Zeus therefore sent all the gods, one after the other, with gifts and offerings to soften Demeter's rage, yet they all failed. She said that she would not return to Olympus nor allow the earth to bear fruit until she saw her daughter. Zeus then sent Hermes to Hades to bring Persephone back to her mother. Aidonevs obeyed, and as he talked softly to Persephone of her return, gave her some pomegranate seeds to eat.



*Persephone holding a pomegranate*

The pomegranate used to be associated with death, but it had – and has – a second meaning as a fertility symbol. This scene could be interpreted as a symbolic marriage rite, but also as a union with the underworld through a kind of communion. Hermes then took Persephone to Eleusis, but as her mother held her, she suspected foul play and asked whether she had eaten anything while in the underworld. The Maiden confirmed Demeter's suspicions, and told the whole story of her abduction. Holding each other, they resigned themselves to the idea that for one third of the year the Maiden would live in the depths of the underworld, and for the other two thirds she would ascend to the realm of the immortals. Hecate also took her place as protectress of Persephone. Finally at peace, Demeter let the world be overgrown with leaves and flowers. She then went to Eleusis and showed the sacred rites to Triptolemus, Diocles, Evmolpos and Keleos and the sacred orgies to Triptolemos, Polyxenos and Diocles. Those mysteries whose origin are unknown, and which cannot be transgressed against nor made public.



*Triptolemos, Demeter and Persephone*

According to the text, blessed is he who has witnessed the mysteries, for he will not have the same fate as the uninitiated even when in Hades, and most joyful is he who lives on earth and is beloved of the goddesses, for they send the generous Pluto to bestow his gifts on him.

## **An Approach to the Mysteries**

I will retain these phrases from the original text to begin my approach and interpretation from a point of note: At the end of the hymn there is a reference to Pluto, as he who offers mortals gifts from the gods.

Plutos – meaning wealth – also suggests wheat. He used to be considered the son of Demeter who gave well-being to human kind. Later the association with Pluton predominated as the name given by the Hellenes to the ruler of the underworld. That is the most familiar association today, yet it is not referred to at all in the text, and it

sounds like something of an oxymoron if there is an association: the lord of the gloomy underworld, and therefore of death, to be offering gifts to those whom the goddesses favour. If the darkness of Hades is meant as a gift of love – then maybe it would be better not to be loved at all! Unless it has a different interpretation.

Between the lines of the Hymn there is a resounding omission. Nowhere do we meet the masculine mystery god Dionysus, or even his younger aspect, Iakchos. Might there be an implied presence? In a way there is. When Demeter calmed down with Iambe's jokes, the queen offered her a cup of red wine, which she refused, saying it would be improper. Why improper? Red wine is a symbol of Dionysus, and sacred to him, and with it a libation was poured before drinking. Drinking the wine after a libation of the blood of Dionysus is a kind of communion which signifies a spiritual union with the god. It would most certainly be improper if Demeter had an issue with Dionysus – if for example, he was the abductor and her unwelcome son-in-law.

Aristedes the rhetorician confirms that the Kyrikes (Heralds) and Evmolpids set up Dionysus as consort to the goddesses at Eleusis and Plutarch states that Dionysus was consecrated with Demeter. At the time of Aristophanes at the Linaia the Daduch (Torch-bearer) at the Eleusinian mysteries names him: \_\_\_\_\_ (Giver of riches, Iakchos of Semele). Semele is Dionysus' mother; so in other words the giver of riches, Iakchos and Diobnysus are the same entity. And to conclude, we might note that Heraclitus, despite being no friend of the mysteries, and even Euripides among others, all conflate Dionysus with Hades.

From the 4<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Pluto-Hades more or less disappears, and is replaced by Dionysus in the exclusive role of consort to Demeter and the Maiden in the mysteries.

The Homeric hymn is dated to around 600BCE, when there is some measure of confusion. The deities are not classified in their more familiar classical form, as the twelve gods of Olympus.

Let us observe the protagonists in the text.

We should note that Athena and Artemis (and I could add her twin brother Apollo) are still almost children, playing with flowers in a meadow. They have not yet taken up their divine stature, privileges, or duties.

We observe the all-seeing Zeus, whose power on earth is, apparently, limited, and his brother, lord of Hades. We could also add their third brother, Poseidon, who despite not being named in this hymn, is referred to in a contemporary text as having attempted to rape Demeter.

This text calls Zeus "the all-seeing," but the one who actually seems to see everything that is happening on earth is Helios, son of the Titan Hyperion and more ancient than the gods. As the narrative says, he is distanced from the younger gods, receiving human offerings in a temple of his own.

And beneath the earth in a subterranean cave, her lair, where traditionally chthonian deities were worshipped, we find Hecate. The ancient Great Goddess, whom even Zeus did not dare to challenge or remove her powers, called *true queen of the universe*

by Hesiod, and who remained a loyal friend to Persephone. Finally we have Demeter, Mother Earth who makes life unbearable for mortals and immortals alike when angered.

So in summary, we actually have Zeus and his two brothers ruling, or trying to rule the world, and the three feminine deities who are related to or who establish the mysteries.

At this point I would like to better support my interpretation by briefly referring to some anthropological sources which reveal the developmental progression of the myth.

### **Seasonal and Divine Drama**



We referred to Crete, where the goddess said she originated, and where Diodorus tells us, the Eleusinian initiation was legally conferred since antiquity. In Minoan Crete which dominated the Mediterranean for centuries, the prevalent figure was the Mother Goddess. Her form derives from the early societies which were really large extended families, living as nomads, hunter-gatherers, and with a matriarchal structure. The lunar cycle had become identified with the archetypal woman, who has the power to bring forth life, while their protector, the Great Mother/Goddess/Earth guards her children and ensures their fertility and the rebirth of nature with new seedlings and fruits. She is a lunar goddess and simultaneously a chthonian one – for in the earth the seeds will die in winter, yet life also revives within her. She provides for her mortal children and holds them forever when they die.

Here perhaps we have the first example of the double symbolism noted in association with the pomegranate – both fertile and chthonian.

In these early societies, men went on long hunts, unconcerned of their role in reproduction, while the women managed the community made up of themselves, the elderly or incapacitated, and the children. They first established totem worship based on the lunar seasonal calendar and with a central focus on fertility, and to these were added cleansing and purification rites, as well as tribal initiations, comprising of trials to test the young members of the tribe in order to be successfully accepted as adults. An archetypal image that is as powerful today as it must have been then is that of the Sacred Mother and her divine child; a child that dies each year to be reborn in the form of one of the young members of the tribe, thus perpetuating the seasonal drama of the rebirth of nature. It was also a rebirth of hope which for the tribe lay in the darkness of the Underworld – not as a hostile end of life, but a way through which all must pass to regain youth and vitality through rebirth. This heroic passage through the underworld is the core of the archetypal myth at the heart of nearly all the mysteries.

Since the year was calculated in lunar cycles, the lunar calendar comprises 13 months and 3 seasons, as do all ancient sacred calendars. The three seasons are personified in the three ages or aspects of the moon: the young developing Maiden, the Woman as dominant full Moon, and the Crone whose powers wane with the moon.

The women in charge of the community at some point originated agriculture and developed it with the help of the children. Thus we repeatedly encounter a Mother Goddess – Demeter in this case – who knows the secret and teaches it to a young prince – Triptolemus in the narrative – to teach it to mankind.

In antiquity “Basileus” which later denoted royalty, was a sacerdotal title and not a political or military one as it later became. Thus the mother-goddess and her divine child as queen and princeling are equally an archetypical motif which through various migrations retains its meaning in our time.

Agriculture and frequent harvesting eventually removed the need for nomadic existence, and led to early urbanization and the accumulation of wealth. This wealth along with the city need guarding, and here the masculine role is promoted and lays claim to a religious position, for which his physical prowess is the key. Thus man takes over the role of the divine child with the sacred privileges of being king for a year, and the son is reassigned the role of the lover, as power still passes through the feminine goddess.

This begins to indicate an interpretation to the question arising from the presence of the same god beside a goddess in the simultaneous roles of son, husband and also lover. To come full circle in our rather large aside: at some point an overbearing sacred king-basileus, with complete control of power, but whose title was dependent on the queen – came to establish their son as sole legal heir to their dual authority; both sacerdotal and political. Thus the matrilineal line of inheritance became patrilineal. Then, in order to reconcile the new conquest with past traditions, the annual change of royal figure became a symbolic one, while the same individual retained his position: and so the ritual becomes a Divine drama, where the king is identified with the dying god and the queen with the high priestess and Great Goddess. At this point a god corresponds to each goddess and a high priest to each high priestess. This was retained at the Eleusinian mysteries where beside the Hierophant or the altar priest there was a feminine equivalent, and so forth

In a city, religion essentially belongs to a pyramid of authority with the absolute lord at the summit, who also demands to be worshipped as a god incarnate. The mysteries are banished since they no longer have a place in such a structure, though they are preserved in rural areas with the seasonal rituals. This is more or less the period that interests us, and this because: The primordial Minoan matriarchal domination disintegrated, whether due to the eruption of Thera/Santorini, or for some other reason which is not relevant here. Yet the Greek myth that inspired Freud, allowing him to develop his theory of the structure of the psyche, may hide much between its lines.

The seizure and rape of the ancient feminine deities by the newly instituted Olympians may be no more than the poetic rendition of a real conflict between the matriarchal Minoan and Mycenaean civilization with the patriarchal cattlemen of the Achaian and Doric tribes that had arrived and established themselves in the region and were in the process of conquering it altogether.

Herodotus himself narrates that with the invasion of the Doric tribes, the worship of Demeter disappeared from the Peloponnese, and that only the mysteries were left. Then, after the Dark Age and the depopulation of the Hellenic region, towards the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century a sudden leap in demographic development began. The Athenians occupied the surrounding towns and the sacred centre which linked them all together became the centre of Athens. Around the time when the Homeric hymn was written, Peisistratus would gain control of Athens, legalise the mysteries that had survived hidden in the rural areas and grant permission for a sacerdocy of Dionysus to be instituted, while he organizes the Great Dionysia in Athens. Through the liberation provided by the mystery ritual, theatre and tragedy would be born.

So, even though the Athenians had their city as their religious centre, they preserved the Eleusinian Mysteries in their sacred location as they perceived their significance to the people. Instead, they were cleverly linked to older ceremonies of Athens, hence the addition of the Minor Agra Mysteries which also predated them. To further establish them in their city-state, the myth of the initiation of Theseus is also promoted, who like all initiatory heroes, descends into the Underworld. This was overshadowed by the later Doric myth of Heracles, as it reveals that the Athenian hero did go to Hades – but he was captured, and so Heracles had to be initiated in order to descend and rescue him. With these two causative myths in place, the Eleusinian Mysteries opened beyond the small circle of Eleusinian residents, and became available to all Hellenic speaking peoples.

### **Gods and Men**

With these perspectives in mind I would now like to reexamine the deities that appear in the Homeric hymn. The main triad is the Kore, Demeter and Hecate, who correspond to the three aspects of the ancient Mother moon goddess: the Maiden, Mother and Crone. A point which often escapes notice is the tripartite division of the year. Persephone dwelt in Hades for the one third of the time, and on the earth for the other two. However, there are not three seasons in the solar calendar. This can only make sense in the framework of a memory of a more ancient time when the tripartite lunar calendar was in use; the three seasons corresponding to the three aspects of the goddess. The names themselves reflect such awe-inspiring and powerful goddesses. Etymologically, the name Demeter comes from the ancient “da” + “meter”, meaning mother earth. She was also known as Brimo, an alliteration which has a common root with a lion’s roar (\_\_\_\_\_) and meant the ‘terrible,’ the ‘fearful,’ and of course, ‘the powerful.’

Persephone’s name derives from the words ‘\_\_\_\_ + \_\_\_\_\_’, or “she who brings destruction.” In Athens she was also known as Persefatta, from “Ptersis and efapto” – she who scatters destruction...” In Rome she was called Proserpina, meaning “the terrible.”

Finally the name Hecate refers to the hundred lunar months for which the sacred king was bound to rule before he faced the future intended lover of the goddess in a fight to the death. In much later times, archaeological findings reveal that the names are of course aspects or attributes of the same goddess. In Delos for example, a sign was found, inscribed with the words “Property of Demeter, the Eleusinian goddess, both Maiden and Woman.”

In his *of Isis and Osiris* , Plutarch writes that:

“Demeter and Maiden are the names given to the attribute of manifestation through the land and the fruit of the land.”

Through their conspiracies, rapes and compromises, the masculine gods of this initiatory myth, Zeus and his brothers, depict the attempt of the Olympian hierarchy to assert their power. This is also apparent elsewhere: in yet another well-known Orphic initiatory myth, Zeus, having overthrown his father Chronos/Saturn deliberately permits his son Dionysus Zagreas to be eaten by the Titans. Following their punishment, he creates humans – who are his subjects and therefore the factor that consolidates his authority. The poet’s view of the new gods is heard through the words of Metaneira when she advises the disguised Demeter to “Be patient with the gifts of gods that sit as a burden on the backs of men.” Zeus and his brothers know that if they do not pacify the goddess they will have neither subjects nor sacred offerings and so are obliged to compromise. They retain the religion in their city and leave the Mysteries well alone to thrive in the rural areas and in small clusters of new city-dwellers.

The mortals who appear in the myth belong to two families: a reflection of their early origins in primitive tribal societies. When these tribes grew larger, it was the original families, or clans, who would retain the sacerdotal rights and privileges.

King Keleos was also named Dysavlis by the goddess after the death of his son.

Dysavlis can mean an evil or unlucky flute, and flutes were used at the mysteries or in mourning processions. The name can also mean a poorly tilled piece of land – since the secret of the right method of cultivation was given by the goddess to his son Triptolemos.

The children of Keleos bred animals, and this might reflect the connection between the nomads and the farmers who established the first urban areas. Demeter selected the young bucolic Triptolemos because, according to the other myth, he was the only one who recognized her and gave her information. He told her that one day, his swineherder brother Evboulos saw the ground crack open, and his herd of swine disappeared into the crack. A chariot leapt out from beneath the ground and the charioteer was holding a screaming girl. Evboulos narrated the story to his other brother Evmolpos, a shepherd, and he turned the story into a song. The name Evmolpos means “he who chants well,” and from his line came all the hierophants who passed on the secrets of the ancient mysteries and symbols.

Evboulos – Evbouleus means he who means well, but Evboulos is a common name used for both Dionysus and Hades. In antiquity swineherders were believed to have powers of prophecy, and the Great goddess was sometimes depicted in the form of a swine who bestowed abundant gifts. We should bear in mind that Eumaïos, the swineherder who worked for Odysseus is sometimes called “dios” – or divine. One simple interpretation may be that the ancient, bestial wealth of the nomadic shepherd would disappear into the earth and become the more steady wealth of agriculture, the gift Demeter gave to Triptolemos. And a deeper meaning may also relate to the idea that tangible, material wealth must disappear into the ground so that the wealth of the hereafter can be claimed.

The name Triptolemos may have been identified with the initiate of the mysteries. Its etymology comes from the name Triptolemaïos-Triptolemy: he who dares or

undergoes three trials or purifications: breaking down into three journeys to three lands as they were seen then: those of the earth, the sea and of Hades. Demeter had given him a wooden chariot, pulled by snakes of wisdom and rebirth, and sent him into the world to pass on her gift, which was a bag full of grain. Both grain and snakes symbolized a death followed by a rebirth which would offer new life and untold wealth.

There also seem to be two levels of initiation within the text. It says that “Demeter herself showed to the just kings: Triptolemos, Diocles, Evmolpos and Keleos, the sacred mysteries, and then revealed to Triptolemos, Polyxeinios and Diocles the sacred orgies. So there was one part known to Evmolpos, who was the first in a line of hierophants, but also a deeper mystery, known firstly to the Eleusinian Triptolemos, the child who recognised the goddess and understood the mystery of riches gained through death, and took it upon himself to teach to mankind. It was also revealed to Diocles, who had helped Demeter in her quest. He was the king of Ferres, a city of Thrace where temples to Brimo survived into later times, and in which she was honoured with orgies of the maenads. Orphism was also born and preserved as a practice in Thrace. Finally, Polyxeinios is the name of two ancient heroes. The first is the son of Medea, who according to one account, had helped her escape from Athens to avoid the fury of Theseus. The second is the lord of Hlida, the hero of the Trojan war and grandson of King Augeas whose stables Heracles once cleaned as one of his twelve labours. Polyxeinios can also simply mean “the Hospitable one” and in combination with Triptolemos and Diocles may denote the acceptance of all non-Eleusinian citizens into the deeper mysteries.

## **Initiation**

The sophist Aristeides tells us that for the initiates of the Eleusinian Mysteries, birth and death no longer had any hold over their lives. One may speak endlessly of the afterlife, he adds, but if he has not descended into Hades, he doesn't know what he is talking about. Little is known of the actual initiation ritual, due to the secrecy imposed by Demeter and later consolidated by the Athenian laws. However I would like to add some evidence which may suggest – though I wouldn't go as far as to say prove – some points on this, and which are worth taking a brief look at.

### **The Eleusinian Initiation**



In the Nazionale delle Terme museum in Rome there is an urn known as the Urna Lovatelli. The relief decorating it depicts the initiation of Heracles at Eleusis.



Beginning from the right, we see the hero, wearing the lion skin and reaching the altar where he offers up a swine as a sacrifice.



The priest is sprinkling water on it from a jug, and in his other hand holds a tray. The purification through water at Faliron has already taken place, and this sacrifice seems to be a purification through fire, as the swine being burned on the altar replaces the initiate as a victim.

The central panel shows the head of the initiate covered with a cloth.



The lion-skin has been removed and he is wearing some other garment. The priestess is swinging a crucible, or crib over his head. The word "liknon", roughly translatable as crib, is the basket used in agriculture through which the wheat was separated from the chaff. Gods and men also rocked their children in it, perhaps as an act of sympathetic magic. The newborn is separated from, or cleansed of all futile or polluted things, and, like a seedling, begins the new cycle of life and death. The head-covering of the initiate may symbolically depict the necessary passage from the Underworld, the chthonian path that he must complete and emerge from reborn, like all the heroes and demigods that followed the same path. The motion of the crib over the head may also suggest a kind of purification through air, completing the set of four elements following the order of water, fire, earth and air.

Finally, on the left, the initiated Heracles stands before Demeter herself.



The goddess is looking sideways to where the Maiden is sitting, and both of them are holding the characteristic lit torches. Demeter sits on the Sacred Kistis, the container holding the sacred articles of the ceremony. A snake is coiled around it and the initiate is reaching towards it. *There is much speculation on the content of the Sacred*

*container, common to the Dionysian mysteries.* We know that the usual phrase of recognition between initiates was as follows: “I have fasted, I have drunk of the kykeon/, I have received from the Kistes/container, and tasting, I have placed it in the basket and from the basket into the Kistes.” So the initiate states that he fulfilled the required pre-initiatory fast, took part in a reconstruction of Demeters quest, like her, he drank the kykeon, or mixed drink, took something out of the sacred container in a kind of communion, and something was placed in a basket, and from there back into the container.

The basket must be the crib. There are references suggesting that it was filled with grains, and in the centre there was a covered phallus, which a priestess would reveal, possibly as a symbol of the reborn initiate. Similar references exist for the Kistes or container, where supposedly the hidden objects were seeds and grains and a phallus as well as snakes. All of this of course, at various points in time gave moralists the occasion to accuse the participants of sexual deviancy and denigrate the mysteries as play-acting with silly and childish symbolism.

In ‘his book, “Reciprocity and Ritual”, Seaford points out that “in esoteric ritual, what is monstrous in a myth may not only emanate from the logic behind the ceremony, but can also be an element added by those who were barred from participating. For example, as found in the accusations of infanticide and cannibalism raised against early Christians, and similar claims regarding idolatrous practices.”

Thus the seeds and grains could well have been a part of the content of the kistes and crib, since the initiate himself represented a new seedling. The phallus may have been the result of a folk version of the fertility references of the mystery drama. The snake towards which the initiate is reaching in the relief, and which in other depictions is shown as if rising out of the sacred container, stands for the ancient lunar symbol of wisdom and rebirth, a symbol of the gnosis that the initiate had to acquire in order to reach his own spiritual rebirth.

Finally, we have a narrative from a fanatic opponent of Christianity, dating from the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, Firmicus Maternus. He reveals a very interesting piece of evidence, and describes in horror a reconstruction of the trials of Dionysus Zagreas that he witnessed. The sacred container preceded the fraternity in procession, the members playing the role of the murderous Titans. The container held only the heart of the young god, all that had been salvaged from his dismemberment, and which stood for the sacred element that could cleanse the chthonian remnants of our corruptible flesh, which Zeus himself permitted to be made corruptible in order to consolidate his own authority.

I would like, by way of summary, to look at one last element of the Homeric hymn; the presence of Narcissus.



*Narcissus (Caravaggio)*

The hymn describes how Persephone and her friends were playing carelessly in a mythical place, the Nysian plain, homeland of Dionysus. To seduce her, Hades placed a narcissus flower there. As soon as she smelled it, the young goddess was bewitched and the borders between the worlds fell away, beginning a fall into matter. So who or what was Narcissus? He was the son of the nymph Leiriope and the river Kifisos, of whom Tiresias had prophesied that he would live to a great age as long as he never knew his true self. This inevitably echoes of the Biblical Genesis, in which the first man and woman lived, innocent as children in a mythical garden, and had been told that they would have eternal life as long as they did not eat from the tree of Knowledge. So what is that knowledge or gnosis, whose price is the fall? According to the myth, Narcissus saw his own reflection in a spring, and then came to know and fell in love with his own image. Finding unrequited longing unbearable, in other words seeing without being able to possess what he saw, he killed himself. So can our own reflection be a gnosis? Let me also note that it was by way of a mirror that the titans led the young Zagreas into the torture inevitably caused by the material world. This reflection was dramatic for the young god, but his tragedy birthed our world, which is not an underworld – unless of course it is and we are unaware of it.

Plotinus and Proclus defined the anagoge or ascent of the spirit into itself as a return, and compared it to a mirror reflecting itself into another mirror; or the spirit reflecting itself, and so in philosophy it was named “reflection,” being the reflective function of consciousness.

Indeed, what do we see when we look in a mirror? What is that reflection looking back at us? And what happens when one smells a narcissus? Does it really give one a vision of his “chthonian” or other, complementary self, and does this vision really cause such a disorientation and fall into Tartara, which lasts until balance can be brought between the two worlds, and two selves?

The joy or relief caused by the return or salvation from the underworld doesn’t mean that Hades does not exist or that we can pretend to ignore its existence. It simply means that the path is no longer an unknown quantity, and that the need to accept a progressive existence in both those worlds has been understood. Persephone has to live in Tartara/Hades, for a time, and the spirit has to seek its complementary aspect and come to know or accept its chthonian reflection.

## **Epilogue**

By the time of the classical age, the Eleusinian Mysteries were already ancient and despite having disappeared for centuries, they were preserved in secret and revived when the city needed to draw on the power they could exert on the people. Since then, the secrecy that surrounded them has allowed for the expression of every kind of

fantastical misinterpretation. Even regarding those who really did take part in the Eleusinian Rites, In Phaedo, Plato has Socrates say that the ‘narthex bearers were many, but the Bacchi few.’

Over millennia symbols can change their meanings, meanings can change their purpose, and then, just what do we do? Where can we seek?

A few kilometers from here, in Thrace, every year a true Bacchic rite is revived. The Dionysian Mysteries were born in Thrace, reached their peak here, and seem to have found a way to preserve themselves.

The “anastenarides” (they who sigh), appear in public once a year at the end of Spring, usually in Langadas and a few other areas of Thrace. They are a small group of men and women from all walks of life and all parts of Greece. They were named for the sighs they emit when the saint possesses them and they dance their endless, monotonous dance.



The “saint” has the form of Constantine the Great; the emperor who created the Byzantine Empire and who essentially enforced its Christianity. But in this ceremony he is named ‘Mikrokonstantinos’ (little Constantine) and is pictured together with his mother, Saint Helen. In older icons, they were shown differently and his mother was dancing. But during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, some priests burned those icons and they were replaced with classic Byzantine ones.



Helen and Constantine: Christian saints with no relation to Bacchic rites. What do the words mean? Helen and Constantine – Selene and the Powerful (Constant), a queen and her child who are not Demeter and Iakchus, nor Persephone and Bacchus, in a ceremony that as in antiquity, seeks the fertility of the earth, a good harvest, and the assured protection of the people’s wealth. Thus the common people, by changing the outer form of the symbol, found a way to perpetuate it. The Anastenarides call their gatherings ‘agyrmous,’ which was also the name of the first day of the Eleusinian Celebrations. This celebration lasts for three days, from the 20<sup>th</sup> to the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May. They then display the Sacred Objects which, as in antiquity, spend the year hidden in their sacred space; and then the dance begins. The heirlooms are the sacred icons, the

musical instruments: the lyre, bagpipes and the great sacred drum which, say the Anastenarides, echoes of its own accord, “feeling the invisible presence of the saint.”



Finally, we have the sacred, multicoloured but mostly red kerchiefs, the ‘amanetia’. The anastenarides hold them during the dance, drawing strength and confidence from them. They offer them when they invite a new member. None that they all wear them around their shoulders, and recall the sheet with which Hercules’ head was covered, a piece of material we know covered the shoulders of the initiated Bacchi. In the *Argonautica*, Appollonius of Rhodes tells us that the initiates wore ‘red sashes,’ the same colour that predominates in the ‘amanetia,’ meaning something given as a kind of guarantee, or forfeit.



Finally their objects include the tools of sacrifice: the sacred axe, knife, and the board where the sacred Dionysian animal, fattened for six months, would be sacrificed. In older times it would have been a bull, which of late – mainly due to the expense – has been replaced by a black ram. We know nothing about their initiatory rituals because absolute secrecy is kept. The dance starts on the afternoon of May 20<sup>th</sup>, to the same monotonous and repetitive sound. They continue early the next afternoon, after the church service in honour of the two saints. At some point the leader (Archianastenaris) gives the order for the fire to be lit in the square, by the individual with that hereditary privilege. Just as in antiquity, the functional roles are hereditary, being passed down the families. So here there is a family responsible for lighting the fire, and others, as is claimed, for looking after the musical instruments.



They say: “People, light the fire for Constantine to enter.” They approach the fire which has died down, leaving burning coals, and dance around them. Not all the anastenarides are firewalkers, not even their leader. Only those who fall into a trance and who feel the god within them ask them to dance and step on the fire do so. But all of them are equally necessary to the fraternity and its ceremonies.

Briefly, these are our anastenarides. They do not know how they got their tradition, scientists don't know what power protects them so they don't get burned, they keep no library for us to seek documentation, nor are they gathered in one town or region so they can be studied. they are everywhere and nowhere, and the knowledge they carry is well hidden in their souls and cells.

I began this epilogue with the question: 'where can we look?'  
Where there are no texts to read, no images to compare. With the passage of centuries everything changes, everything becomes dust except for man himself, his soul and Memory.

Ladies, gentlemen, my friends.  
The Dynamic world in which we live and that world of symbols that watches us through a mirror must be bridged, and that is something only we can do.

And then the voice of the hierophant will thunder once again:

Take courage, initiates of the saved god. It is through our toils that salvation comes.

*All the photos from "Anastenaria" are from mr. Christakos ([www.flickr.com Christakos](http://www.flickr.com/Christakos)).*