



The Mysteries of the Great Earth Mother at Eleusis

Very little is known of the Great Mysteries of the Gods that were performed by the ancient Greeks. Much of what we do know is derived at second-hand from people concerned to condemn them. Nevertheless scholars, supported by archeological research at the site, have managed to piece together from various, often fragmentary, sources, enough for us to get some idea of what happened at the greatest of them all, the Mysteries of the Great Earth Mother Demeter at Eleusis.

THE WORD "MYSTERY" derives from a Greek word meaning 'to close'. It meant either the closing of the lips or the eyes. The Greek word for initiate was *Mustēs*, derived from the fact that, firstly, the initiates kept their lips closed about the Mysteries and what they did and heard there; and secondly, before their initiation their eyes were "closed", so that they could not see the light, but they would be opened as they were initiated.

The Hierophant

A significant feature of initiation into the Mysteries at Eleusis was when a priest took certain sacred objects from a chest and *showed* them to the new initiate.

"Showing the sacred objects" was such an important part of the Mysteries that a special name was given to the priest concerned, "One who shows sacred things." Hence the title Hierophant: *HIERO-* [sacred things] *PHANTēs* [One who shows].

Eventually only the chief priest was allowed to show the sacred objects to initiates or to expound their sacred significance.

The highest stage of initiation into the Mysteries was that of *Epotheia* or *Beholding*. This is summed up in the quotation from the Greek lyric poet Pindarus. [see box]

Demeter, Persephonē and Hades.

The Mysteries at Eleusis focused upon the goddesses Demeter and Korē. Demeter probably means "Grain Mother." Korē is the "Maiden". Because of her sojourn with Hades in the underworld, she is usually identified with Persephonē, the queen of the Underworld.

Demeter is the personification of the mature grain bearing its seed, at the time of the spring harvest [around February/March]. Korē is the newly planted grain of the autumn sowing [around September/October].

Originally a family agricultural festival

The Mysteries at Eleusis seem to have originated in agricultural festivals commemorating the yearly sowing of grain around the time of the Greek month Boedromion [September/October]. It was originally conducted by a local family, the Eumolpidae. From the beginning, these rites seem to have had a particularly personal significance for those taking part. This led to incorporation of ceremonies of

On the *Mustēs*

"Blessed is the one who goes under the earth after seeing these things. That person knows the end of life, and knows the Zeus-given beginning."

— Pindarus, 518 b.c.e. to 438 b.c.e.

*"Mankind is a dream of a shadow; but when the god-given
brightness comes, a radiant light rests on men, and a noble life."*

— Pindarus, 518 b.c.e. to 438 b.c.e.

initiation into the annual festival. Unlike other mystery cults, the mysteries at Eleusis were not restricted by age or sex. Thus, their significance was potentially universal.

At an early stage, the rites were opened up to include people living around Eleusis outside of the members of the Eumolpidae *whanau*. The more extended Maori term *whanau* probably captures the sense of the ancient idea better than either of the English words *family* or *tribe*.

At around 600 b.c.e., when the mysteries of Demeter and Kore were still being conducted by an independent Eleusis, the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* [see *Magic Pentacle*, Winter, 1991] was introduced into the rites.

Eligibility for initiation widened

When Eleusis was incorporated into a unified Attica, of which nearby Athens was a prominent city, eligibility for initiation was made available to Athenian citizens and women.

The Hierophant of the Eleusinian mysteries was always drawn from among the Eumolpidae at all stages of its 1000-year history, but the control of the sacred site and its ceremonies was extended to include the Kerukai *whanau*, who had family connections at both Eleusis and Athens. The Torchbearer [*Daduchos*] and the Herald [*Kerux*], who were the other two chief officers of the Mysteries, always came from among the Kerukai.

Eventually, initiation into the Mysteries at Eleusis was opened to all who could speak Greek, provided that they were free from pollution. The ceremonies and preparations for the annual initiations became more and more elaborate.

The Lesser and Greater Mysteries

Personal preparations began in January, in order to be allowed to be admitted to the Lesser Mysteries. The purpose of the Lesser Mysteries was twofold:

Purification and Instruction. Candidates bathed ritually in the River Ilissos, which flowed into Athens from a nearby mountain. They took place in the month Anthesterion [our February/March], six months before the Greater Mysteries which lasted throughout most of the month of Boedromion [September/October].

While the initiations themselves were secret, the processions and other festivities that preceded and followed them were public, although there were certain classes of people who were excluded from taking part. Who these were was proclaimed by a herald at a solemn assembly of the citizens of Athens on the 15th Boedromion.

On the following day, there was a procession to the sea, where the candidates for initiation undertook a sacred bath. Each candidate also washed a pig, an animal sacred to Persephone. These pigs were then sacrificed, probably by burning. The roasted meat might even have been eaten by the priests and worshippers.

On 17th Boedromion, official sacrifices to Demeter and Persephone took place. The candidates for initiation rested on the 18th.

The great Iacchus [see footnote] procession from Athens to Eleusis, a distance of 14 miles, took place on the 19th day of Boedromion. So many thousands took part that it raised clouds of dust like a mighty army. The procession included dancing, and singing, as well as many stops for special rites and sacrifices along the way.

Do not think of this as a solemn or dignified procession. The nearest to it in modern days are the Mardi Gras processions in New Orleans or the

Iacchus, meaning 'a loud cry', was the name given to the resurrected Dionysus, the vegetation god, after he had been torn to pieces by the Titans. Dionysus has been variously described as the child of Zeus and Demeter, Persephone or Semele. The myths are very tangled.

Carnivals of Rio de Janeiro. The film *Black Orpheus*, shown recently on Television New Zealand [at 2.00 am in the morning!], which retells the Orpheus Myth, was filmed during a Rio de Janeiro Carnival. It also includes genuine Voodoo rites.

At Eleusis

The Iacchus procession concluded with an all-night festival at Eleusis itself.

Less is known about the various ceremonies that took place at Eleusis during the following days, inside the Telestrion, the great hall in which the rites took place. Excavations have shown that there was seating for 4000 people in the Telestrion, which had a raised platform in the centre on which stood a small chamber, an Inner Sanctum from which the Hierophant emerged from time to time to display the sacred images of the Mysteries. These objects included various kinds of cakes, pomegranates, poppies and an image of a woman's genitals. These objects were kept in a Chest that was brought from Athens to Eleusis as part of the Iacchus procession.

Hippolytus of Rome said that an important part of the rites was the cry: *Hye Kyè*, while water was poured upon the earth, symbolising the pouring of rain upon the earth to make it fruitful. There was also the proclamation of the Hieros Gamos or sacred marriage. In the earlier centuries, this was between Hades and Persephone, but as Athenian patriarchal ideas took over, the rite increasingly referred to Zeus.

There is a curious tradition that at Eleusis in its later days proclaimed the holy union between Zeus and the partners of the Earth, in the words:

The Bull is the father of the Dragon;
And the Dragon is the father of the Bull.

This was explained thus:

Zeus, in the form of a Bull, had sex with his sister Demeter, who gave birth to the earthly Korè-Persephonè. Zeus, in the form of a Dragon, then had sex with Korè-Persephonè, who gave birth to the bull-like Dionysus. However, there is some evidence that, originally, the partners in the Hieros Gamos, were unnamed and known simply as 'the Goddess and the God.'

The Deeper Mysteries

The deepest rites of the Mysteries were held in a chamber far underground at a place some distance from the Telestrion. Our knowledge of what happened there is minimal. We can say that the initiates were given the experience of moving from Darkness to Light. There is frequent mention of the darkness being overwhelmed by a great burst of brilliant light.

The final initiation has perhaps been most reliably described by Hippolytus [c.170 c.e.]. Although he was a Christian, he was Greek by birth. He might himself have been admitted into the Mysteries before his conversion. He says of the central initiatory rite:

"The Phrygians [i.e. the worshippers of the goddess Kubelè] say that the God is a 'green ear of corn reaped.' Following the Phrygians, the Athenians when initiating anyone into the Mysteries at Eleusis, also show to those who have been made Epoptes [i.e. those who have received the Vision] the mighty and wonderful and most perfect mystery there is for an epopt - a green ear of corn reaped in silence. This ear of corn is for the Athenians the great and perfect spark of Light from the Unportrayable One.

"The Hierophant at Eleusis is not castrated like Attis, but is rendered a eunuch by drinking hemlock and so cut off from fleshly generation. He celebrates the ineffable Mysteries by night at Eleusis beside a huge fire and cries aloud: 'Noble Brimo has brought forth a holy son Bromios.'"

"This means," so Hippolytus says, "that the strong has given birth to the strong. For noble is the generative act which is spiritual or heavenly or sublime, and strong is that which is thus generated."

Brimo "Terrible One" is a name of Hekate and Persephone. Bromios "Noisy One" is a name of Iacchus [Dionysus]. Persephone brings forth Dionysus.

In modern terms, by coming to terms with our dark side, our anima, we can give voice to the one who can cry aloud at the wonderment of the Brilliant Light that integration between outer and inner, light and dark sides, can bring.

