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The Eleusinian Mysteries

The Eleusinian Mysteries, held annually in honor of Demeter and Persephone, were the most sacred and revered of all the ritual celebrations of ancient Greece. They were instituted in the city of Eleusis (west of Athens) and probably continued for almost two thousand years. Masses of worshippers from all over Greece (and later, from throughout the Roman empire) would gather to make the holy pilgrimage between the two cities and participate in the secret ceremonies, generally regarded as the high point of Greek religion.

Eleusis was by no means the only place in Greece that featured yearly festivals in honor of a goddess of grain

and the annual renewal of life. Similar rituals were characteristic of many centers of ancient eastern Mediterranean civilization, including islands as far north as Samothrace, as far east as Cyprus, and as far south as Crete.

The origin of the Eleusinian Mysteries is unknown, but many scholars today favor the view that the cult of Demeter probably derived from Thessaly or Thrace. They base this conclusion partly on references in Homer and other ancient authors to some evidently pre-Dorian temples to Demeter in the Thessalian towns of Thermopylae, Pyrasos, and Pherai; partly on certain etymological links connecting key words in the

rites of Demeter to prehellenic dialects from the north. But in any case, whether the specific cult of Demeter at Eleusis originated in northern or southern Greece, the undeniable parallels with worship of grain goddesses in other parts of the eastern Mediterranean region point to frequent contacts and the cross-fertilization of religious ideas.

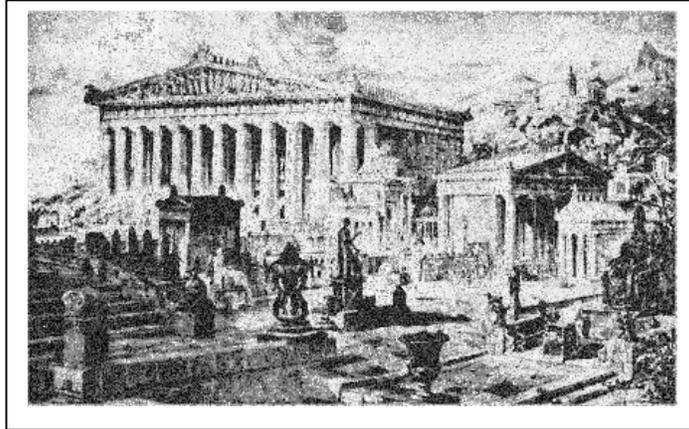


The Hymn to Demeter, 495 verses in length, is the canonical work associated with the Eleusinian Mysteries. Although traditionally attributed to Homer, it was probably written somewhat later, in the seventh century BCE. The hymn recounts the story of Demeter and Kore

(the Maiden, i.e., Persephone), how they were separated when Hades snatched Persephone up in his chariot as she was gathering flowers in a meadow and bore her down with him to the underworld. The story continues that Demeter, disconsolate over her daughter's loss, searched all over the world for her in vain. Finally, with the help of Hekate and Helios, she learned of her daughter's abduction and discovered, besides, that it had been approved in advance by Zeus himself.

At this point, the narrative introduces a lengthy interlude to explain how Demeter came to Eleusis and established her cult there. At the same time, the episode establishes her credentials as the

bringer of immortality to humankind: When the goddess realized the role of the other Olympians in her misfortune, she abandoned her divine form and set forth disguised as an old woman from Crete. Eventually she reached Eleusis and set herself down by an old well (the Maiden Well, which later figured prominently in the Mysteries), her heart overflowing with grief. At this point she was accosted by the four lovely daughters of Celeus, a local chieftain, who befriended her and introduced her to their mother, Metaneira. So impressed was



Metaneira by the old woman's dignified bearing that she offered her the position of nurse for her own infant son. Demeter accepted, and under her care the child thrived marvelously well. What the mortals didn't know, however, was that Demeter was secretly treating the infant with a series of mystical practices. Every night while the palace slept she would anoint his limbs with ambrosia and then put him into the fire. The child might have become ageless and deathless had the procedure continued; but unfortunately, Metaneira spied on Demeter one night, and when the boy was put into the flames she screamed in fright. At this, the indignant goddess broke off the treatment, revealed herself in her full divine majesty, and demanded that a temple be built in her honor. There, she would teach the people her special rites. And with that promise, Demeter disappeared.

After the Eleusinians had built their temple to Demeter, she stayed there and pined for her daughter, refusing to rejoin the other gods on Mount Olympus. Moreover, she refused to make the seeds sprout in the dark earth, and all the world began to suffer famine. Even the gods suffered from the lack of gifts and sacrifices. Father Zeus sent Iris and other gods to intercede with her, yet Demeter would not relent. Finally, the king of the gods dispatched Hermes down to

Hades, bidding the lord of the underworld to give Persephone up and return her to her mother.

Hades reluctantly agreed, but first he contrived to make Persephone taste a small morsel of food -- consisting of a single pomegranate seed--just enough to ensure, by a kind of divine symmetry, that she would always have to spend one third of every year with him (during the winter). And so Persephone was able to leave the underworld and return to the light, where she was reunited at last with her mother. The poem ends with an invocation of the two goddesses and a promise of rich

rewards to their devotees, both in this life and the next.

Only those who spoke Greek and had shed no blood (or had subsequently been purified) were eligible to participate in the rituals at Eleusis. Each new initiate, known as a "*mystes*," would receive preliminary instructions and guidance from an experienced sponsor, or "*mystagogos*," who was often from one of the leading families of Eleusis. A *mystes* who returned a second time to Eleusis for induction into the highest levels of esoteric knowledge was known as an *epoptes*.

When early Christianity began to spread into the regions where the Mysteries had been practiced for so many centuries, it found itself competing with claims of how to obtain immortality. As far as the Mysteries were concerned, it was acceptable to be a member of the Mysteries and a Christian. But, Christianity demanded that members have nothing to do with the Mysteries. The Mysteries were increasingly condemned by the early Church fathers, however, that the celebrations and rituals of the Mysteries continued for centuries, exercising considerable influence on the formation of early Christian teachings and practices.

SOURCE: <http://users.erols.com/nbeach/eleusis.html>

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