

THE RITUAL PATH OF INITIATION INTO THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES

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The Eleusinian Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone are the oldest of the Mysteries in Greece, sharing rituals and beliefs with Egypt, Crete, Anatolia, and Thrace, with roots deep in the Neolithic age and the agrarian revolution. The Mysteries at Eleusis, called *ta Mysteria*, lasted almost two thousand years, from approximately 1450 BCE to 392 CE. The Greater Mysteries were celebrated in the early fall at Athens and Eleusis, in the middle of the Greek month *Boedromion* (roughly equivalent to our September), near the time of the autumnal equinox.

The Greater Mysteries (as the Eleusinian Mysteries were also called) were presided over by the Mother Goddess,¹ but the story of both the Mother and Daughter constellates the center of the Greater Mysteries, serving as chrysalis and catalyst for the initiates' spiritual illumination and transformation. In these rites of initiation, initiates participated in a reenactment of the *mythos* or sacred

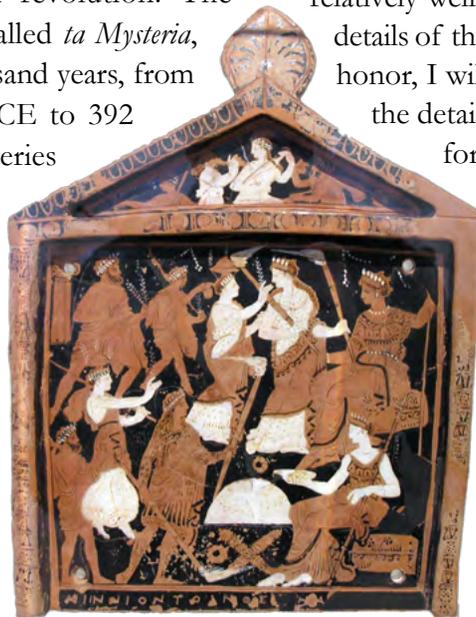
story of Demeter and Persephone, their unwilling separation and joyful reunion.

The myth and the rites are closely intertwined. Since the *mythos* of the Greek Mother and Daughter Goddesses is relatively well known compared to the details of the rituals celebrated in their honor, I will focus here primarily on the details of the ritual. The ritual

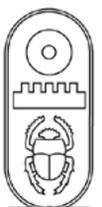
form was finely tuned over many centuries with the intent of manifesting an experience that itself was ineffable.

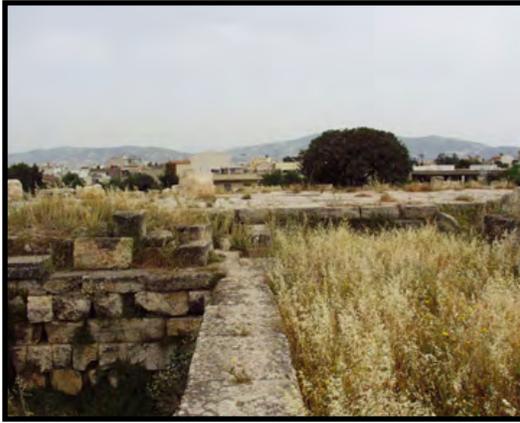
The rites at Eleusis were considered essential to the survival of humanity, and it was said that "the life of the Greeks [would be] unlivable, if they were prevented from properly observing the most sacred Mysteries, which hold the whole human race together."² Demeter's

rites enshrined the natural laws of the birth, growth, death, and regeneration of humans, the crops, and all nature. As British classicist Jane Ellen Harrison explained it: "These two things...food and children, were what...[people] chiefly sought to procure



The Ninnion Tablet (ca. 370 BCE), seen here, depicts Iacchus leading a procession of initiates into the Eleusinian Mysteries, being received by Demeter and Persephone.





Ruins of the Temple at Eleusis. Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.

by the performance of magical rites for the regulation of the seasons.”³

I first came to celebrate the Demeter-Persephone *mythos* by welcoming the arrival of spring in spiritual circles with women friends, and then later, too, with men. This myth also spoke to me powerfully of the loving bond shared by mother and daughter, a closeness that my own mother and I had enjoyed; and it also spoke to my sense of great loss when we were separated by her death. I wondered how the ancient Eleusinian Mysteries had honored this mother-daughter bond, and how the ritual might bring me closer to an understanding of the role of the Sacred Feminine powers of the cosmos. I began to research and reenact these rites. I know others are interested in traversing the ritual path of the Mysteries as well, which were open to all, young and old, male and female, enslaved and free.⁴

The Power of Experience

The power of a ritual is transmitted through a person’s experiencing it. Classics scholar Carl Kerényi, guided by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, explained the experience of an initiate of the Eleusinian Mysteries by contrasting it with the experience of a person who views a tragedy performed in a theatre:

Aristotle investigated both what happened in the minds of the audience at a tragedy and the experience offered by the annually recurring venture of Eleusis. The spectator at the tragedy had no need to build up a state of concentration by ritual preparations; he had no need to fast, to drink the *kykeon* [communion drink] and to march in a procession. He did not attain a state of *epopteia*, of “having seen” by his own inner resources. The poet, the chorus, the actors created a vision, the *theama* [spectacle], for him at the place designed for it, the *teatron* [theatre]. Without effort on his part, the spectator was transported into what he saw. What he saw and heard was made easy for him and became irresistibly his. He came to believe in it, but this belief was very different from that aroused by the *epopteia* [the vision of the Mysteries]. He [the spectator at the theatre] entered into other people’s sufferings, forgot himself and – as Aristotle stressed – was purified. [But] in the Mysteries, a purification – *katharmos* – had to take effect long before the *epopteia*.⁵

In contrast to the cathartic experience of watching a tragic drama whereby (according to Aristotle) the spectator is purged of the negative emotions of fear and pity, an initiate of the Mysteries would undergo physical, emotional, and spiritual cleansing in preparation for the main part of the ritual – a spiritual identification with the Mother and Daughter in their separation and suffering and then joyful reunion, a transformation from death to rebirth. Through her or his own inner spiritual desires and participation in the rites, the initiate was prepared to receive a “seeing” into the deepest mysteries of life.

Initiates of the Eleusinian Mysteries were forbidden by Athenian law, on penalty of death, from revealing the secrets of the Mysteries. It was feared that revealing the secret rites would profane the Mysteries. But these rites had originally been open to all. In the sixth century BCE, Herodotus, the father of Greek history, wrote: “Every year the Athenians celebrate a festival in honor of the Mother and the Maid, and anyone who wishes, from all Athens or elsewhere, may be initiated in the mysteries.”⁶

Aristotle also underscored the openness of the rites when he explained about the Greek tragic playwright Aeschylus (525-456 BCE), who lived in Eleusis: “[he] did not know it was a secret,’ Aeschylus said of the Mysteries.”⁷

However, after the Persians attacked Greece in 490 and again in 480 BCE, foreigners who could not speak Greek were barred from the Eleusinian Mysteries.⁸

In the first century BCE, Greek-Sicilian historian and ethnographer Diodorus wrote of Demeter’s Mysteries on the beautiful island of Krete (Crete), that these remained open to all.

Elsewhere such rites are communicated in secret, but in Krete, in Knossos, it had been the custom since time immemorial to speak of these ceremonies quite openly to all and, if anyone wished to learn of them, to conceal none of the things which elsewhere were imparted to the initiate under a vow of silence.⁹

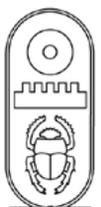
In keeping with the openness of Demeter’s rites in Krete rather than the secretiveness required by fifth century BCE Athens, I have chosen to present my own vision of the path of initiation into the ancient Eleusinian Mysteries, based primarily on the ancient Greek sources. I understand that the rites changed over time,¹⁰ and that no picture of the secret and ineffable rites can be definitive.

Rites Open to All

While the rites were open to young and old, male and female, enslaved and free, initiates had to prepare for half a year, or a year or more for initiation into the Greater Mysteries. Their instructions began with the rites of the Lesser Mysteries which celebrated the arrival of spring (in late February, in the Mediterranean



Thesmophoria by Francis Davis Millet, 1894-1897, depicts a group of women performing the Eleusinian Mysteries. Image via Brigham Young University Museum of Art.





A rendering of what the Acropolis might have once looked like, in a late-nineteenth- or early-twentieth-century drawing provided by Penn State University Library via Flickr.

climate). The Lesser Mysteries included a preparatory ceremony for the Greater Mysteries, consisting of rites of atonement, for no one with unatoned bloodguilt on their hands could be initiated into the Greater Mysteries.¹¹

In the middle of the month prior to the beginning of the Greater Mysteries (approximately mid-August), special messengers or heralds, called *Spondophoroi*, were sent from Athens and Eleusis across Greece to invite Demeter's worshippers to attend the festival of the Eleusinian Mysteries.¹² At each city or village, the messengers would pour out libations of peace which proclaimed the cessation of warfare and signaled the beginning of the two-month long Sacred Truce, to which the diverse Hellenic populations consented, in order to provide for safe passage for pilgrims travelling to and from the Mysteries.

The sequence of the ritual is important to the realization of its overall influence. It is also important to remember that each "day" begins in the evening after sunset, at first starlight. Nighttime began the new "day," with the possibilities of refreshing rest and revelatory dreams.

The Day before Day One

The day before Day One, on the fourteenth of the month called *Boedromion* (in mid-September), the priestesses of Demeter and Persephone took the basket of Sacred Objects (*Hiera*) of the Goddess from her temple in Eleusis to Athens, and carried it on their heads along the Sacred Way (*Hieros Hodos*) that initiates themselves would soon traverse in their approach to the Two Goddesses.¹³ Along the way they rested by a shrine of Demeter and Persephone near Demeter's sacred fig tree on the outskirts of Athens.¹⁴

The procession along the twelve miles of the Sacred Way, accompanied by an honor guard from Athens and villagers, would have arrived at Athens at the end of the day, no doubt being welcomed by celebrants already in the city. A priest of Demeter climbed up to the Akropolis to announce the arrival of Demeter's sacred objects and her entourage, to the priestess of Athena.¹⁵ In this way, the relationship of these two Goddesses and of their two, once-independent regions, were accorded mutual respect.

Day One: *Agyrmos*, the Gathering

According to the fifth century CE lexicographer Hesychios, the *Agyrmos*

was “of the Mysteries the first day.”¹⁶ The initiates, dressed simply, assembled with their teachers in the Athenian *Agora* or marketplace, in front of the *Stoa Poikile*, the Painted Portico, together with thousands of celebrants who came from all around Greece, and beyond. Very likely the blessings of Zeus and Athena, as well as of Demeter and Persephone, were invoked for the beginning of the festival.

As part of the proclamation (*prorrhesis*) of the Mysteries, the initiates, called *mystai*, were given a warning to refrain from initiation if one had unatoned killing on their hands.¹⁷

A vow of silence was required of the initiates, not to reveal the experiences of the rites.¹⁸ I interpret the initiate’s vow of silence also as a promise to remain silent during the days of initiation. Such a “fast” from speaking would have allowed the person to quiet the cognitive mind and to rest down into one’s deeper mind and spiritual center. I experience this sacred silence as nourishing and spacious, an opportunity for deeper explorations into Spirit.

Initiates were also instructed to fast each day from dawn until sunset, following the example of Demeter who would neither eat nor drink while searching for her lost Daughter.¹⁹ In the evenings initiates could eat and drink, except for the traditionally forbidden foods: meat, fowl, red mullet fish, red wine, apples, pomegranates, and beans.²⁰ Fasting, as we know, is a means of

cleansing the body, a time when the body’s cells and tissues dispel impurities.

To conclude the first evening of ceremonies, the procession of priestesses, priests, initiates, and other celebrants would have paraded through the Agora up to the sacred precinct of Demeter in Athens, called the *Eleusinion*, between the Agora and the north slope of the Akropolis. There, Demeter’s *Hiera*, her Sacred Things, would have been taken into her temple, with singing and dancing.

Day Two: *Alade! Mystai!* “To the Sea, Initiates!”

On Day Two, initiates were heralded early in the morning with the call, *Alade! Mystai!* “To the Sea, Initiates!”²¹ Initiates, with their teachers, families, and friends paraded the handful of miles to the seashore south of Athens, to the Bay of Phaleron. This day was also called the *Elasis*, a day for banishment or letting go.²² Likely the initiates saw their immersion in the sea as returning to the womb-waters of Mother Earth. This process of physical cleansing and spiritual purification was further preparation for the initiates’ pending experience of death and rebirth.

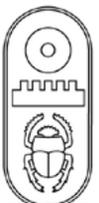
In Greece as elsewhere, the salt sea is believed to have healing properties. It was believed that, “The sea can wash clean all the foulness of [hu]mankind.”²³

Day Three: *Heireia Deuro!* “Bring Sacred Offerings!”

During Greece’s Classical Age, Day Three was called *Heireia Deuro!* or “Bring



Seen here in Piraeus, Greece, are some of the remains of Conon's Walls, built on the Bay of Phaleron in 394 BCE.



Sacred Offerings!”²⁴ The official state ceremonies in Athens, on the evening following the day at the sea, included the sacrifice of a suckling pig by each initiate, as well as of other animals by officials, to be used for the evening’s feast.²⁵ The meaning of this sacrifice is not clear. Was it a sacrifice made from gratitude for the abundant gifts of the Mother Goddess? A symbolic gesture of purification from one’s moral mistakes and spiritual failures? A prayer for the success of a new harvest? Perhaps all that, and more.

Because there is evidence that in earlier times Demeter preferred “the gentler foods of fruit and grain”²⁶ to the blood sacrifice of animals, I expect there were also individual gift-offerings of grains and fruits, singing and dancing, and gratitude offered to “the Two Goddesses,” as Demeter and Persephone were called.

In addition, tithes of the grain harvests were brought by official delegations from various city-states. In the latter part of the fifth century BCE, these offerings of first fruits—which at first were an offering of thanks to Demeter for the ending of famine—became required by the Athenian city-state during its war with Sparta, to strengthen Athens’ alliances and security.²⁷ Demeter’s Priestess refused complicity with what in effect were war taxes.²⁸

Day Four: *Asklepia/Epidauria*, Healing Dreams

Day Four was named *Asklepia* and *Epidauria* in honor of Asklepios and his healing center to the south at Epidaurus.²⁹ It was said that on this day, the cult of Asklepios and Hygeia joined the Eleusinian Mysteries rites in Athens.³⁰ Evening rites of sacrifices were held at Demeter’s Eleusinion temple in Athens to honor Asklepios, God of Healing; Hygeia, Goddess of Health; and Demeter



This statue of a sacrificial pig is in the Eleusinion Museum. Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.

and Persephone, who also were revered as healing deities.

Special blessings were invoked for doctors and healers, and perhaps healing practices were offered at Demeter’s Eleusinion temple in Athens to all who came for them. Later that evening, initiates participated in a “night-watch.”³¹ I think that probably they spent an all-night visit at the Asklepeion precinct on the south slope of the Akropolis, using this time to focus on the healing of physical ailments, emotional distress, and spiritual limitations. The temple of Asklepios was built near the enclosure of a sacred spring in a small cave.³² There was a dormitory or *abatou* for sleeping.

As in the healing rites at the great healing center of Asklepios, Hygeia, and Apollo, on the Peloponnesos at Epidaurus, where dream incubation played an important role,³³ this night too would have been a time for healing dreams. Since the ancients believed that illness stemmed from a person not being aligned with their divine destiny, those seeking healing would prepare for a night of dreaming by inviting a visitation of divine presence and purpose into their lives. Such a visitation in one’s dreams could bring a healing of soul and

body, providing the conditions for health and wealth, well-being and abundance.

After a night of dreaming, initiates would tell their dream to an attendant of Asklepios or Hygeia, called *therapeutes* (the source of our word for “therapist”).³⁴ It was incumbent on the initiate to follow the divine guidance and to perform some action, as directed by the deity, in order for healing to be fulfilled.³⁵

Day Five: *Pompe*, Grand Procession

On Day Five, many thousands of exuberant celebrants joined the *Pompe* or Grand Procession from Athens to Eleusis, led by the priestesses of Demeter and Persephone carrying the basket of the Goddess’s Sacred Things or *Hiera*. Celebrants left early in the morning from Athens’ Sacred Gate (at the northeast corner of the Agora) and proceeded along the Sacred Way to Eleusis.

The event places visited by the jubilant procession of celebrants were recorded by the second century CE Greek author Pausanias, himself an initiate of the Mysteries.³⁶ Just outside the Sacred Gate at Athens, celebrants stopped at the shrine of the Sacred Son, Iakchos, who joined in leading the exuberant crowds.³⁷ They paused at the River Kephisos, where youths offered a lock of hair (probably a coming of age ceremony).³⁸ The procession rested at Daphni at the temple precinct of Apollo, Demeter, Persephone, and Athena;

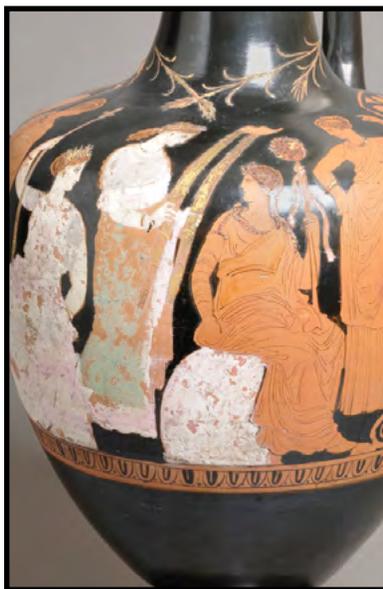
and then visited the nearby sanctuary of Aphrodite, where votive offerings could be made to the Goddess of Love, Laughter, and Beauty.³⁹ At the boundary between Athens and Eleusis, beside the river and lakes called *Rheitoi*, initiates were met by descendents of Krokos (the first inhabitant there), who tied a saffron-yellow strand to the right wrist and left ankle of each initiate, which signaled their connection to the Mother Goddess.⁴⁰

A high point of hilarity for the rites came just outside of Eleusis, when initiates crossed over the Bridge of Jest, mocked by masked jesters, led by a raucous old woman named Baubo or Iambe.⁴¹ The procession finally arrived at Demeter’s sanctuary, with torches, rejoicing.

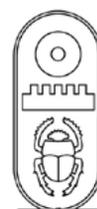
Day Six: *Pannychis*, Nightlong Revelry

Day Six began in the evening with a Nightlong Revelry, the *Pannychis*, with torchlit dancing by women around *Kallichoron*, the well “of beautiful dances” near Demeter’s temple at Eleusis.⁴² The revels included a *kernophoria*, a special dance led by women carrying First Fruits of the Harvest, using a ritual vessel worn on the head, called the *kernos*. They were joined in dancing by all the celebrants.⁴³

Probably the offering of sacred bread, the *pelanos*, was celebrated in front of Demeter’s temple at Eleusis, the *Telesterion*. It was baked from the first fruits of the grain harvest of wheat from Demeter’s sacred fields on the Rharian plain, the most fertile land of Attika.⁴⁴



In this detail from a water vase dedicated to the Eleusinian Mysteries dated to the fourth century BCE and currently housed in the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon, Demeter, at left, watches Persephone tilt two lighted torches towards Dionysus, seated on the right.



After this nightlong revel, the following morning and afternoon allowed time for rest, and for further dedications or sacrifices for the Two Goddesses and other Deities in the family of the Greek pantheon. At Eleusis there were shrines just outside of Demeter's temple precinct for Artemis of the Portals and for Poseidon, Lord of the Sea; and perhaps also for Hekate, triple-aspected Goddess of Crossroads; and Triptolemos, the hero of Eleusis, said to have taken Demeter's gift of agriculture throughout the known world.⁴⁵

**Days Seven and Eight:
Mysterioides Nychtes,
Nights of the Mysteries**

Days Seven and Eight were called *Mysterioides Nychtes*, the Mystical Nights or Nights of the Mysteries. Little is known with certainty of what happened during these culminating nights. The initiates, called *mystai*, together with their teachers, called *mystagogoi*, entered Demeter's temple, her earthly home. Perhaps, like the Orphics, initiates needed a password taught them by the teacher of the mysteries which allowed them entry to the Telesterion, the Hall of Completion.⁴⁶

Inside Demeter's temple, fragrant with incense, there were things said (*logomena*), things enacted (*dromena*), and things seen (*deiknymena*).⁴⁷ Probably the Homeric

Hymn to Demeter (or a similar hymn) was chanted by the Priestess of Demeter and the Hierophant, who was said to have a most sweet voice.⁴⁸ The priestesses and priests, along with initiates, reenacted portions of the sacred drama of the Mother and Daughter.⁴⁹ A communion drink called *kykeon*, made of boiled barley water and mint, was shared.⁵⁰ A brass gong sounded.⁵¹ A great fire blazed forth inside the temple.⁵² The highest stage of initiation—the *epopteia*, a vision, a special state of seeing—was received.⁵³

The Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* from the Archaic Age (ca. 700-600 BCE) is our primary source for the *mythos* which related the sacred drama of the Mother and Daughter's separation and reunion. It begins with the abduction of Demeter's Daughter by Hades, according to the plan of Zeus.

Lord Hades, with his deathless
horses... seized her,
Unwilling, lamenting, screaming,
calling for help from Her
Father!

...

The peaks of the mountains
echoed and the depths of the
oceans rang
With the immortal voice of the
Daughter – and Her Holy
Mother heard her!



This image shows a detail of a statue by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, made in 1622, that is the Roman version of the Greek myth of Hades abducting Persephone.

...
 Anguish more bitter and cruel
 now struck the great heart of
 Demeter,
 Her rage against Zeus erupted,
 against the storm-clouded Son
 of Kronos.
 She abandoned the assembly of
 Gods and heights of Mount
 Olympos
 To live in human cities and fields,
 hiding her beauty for a long
 time.⁵⁴

When Demeter, desolate over the loss of her Daughter, withdrew her fertility from the Earth, humans were faced with famine. Zeus, having lost the gift offerings from humans, suffered the diminishment of half his powers.

According to the myth, after Demeter came to Eleusis, she was invited to the home of Keleus and Metaneira, where she was asked to nurse their new son, Demophoon. The following key passage from the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* can be read as indicating ritual actions which Demeter taught by her own example.

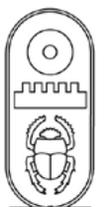
And Demeter, Bestower of
 Seasons and Bright Gifts,
 would not sit down on
 The glistening chair, but waited
 unwilling, her beautiful eyes
 downcast,
 ‘til thoughtful Iambe brought Her
 a low bench and threw a silvery
 fleece over it.
 Sitting down, Demeter drew Her
 veil across Her lovely face with
 Her hand,
 And stayed there on the bench,
 grieving silently, not speaking
 to anyone
 By a single word or gesture,
 unsmiling, tasting neither food
 nor drink.

She sat longing, consumed by
 desire for Her finely adorned
 Daughter,
 Until thoughtful and wise Iambe
 joked with the holy Lady,
 With bawdy stories making Her
 smile, and laugh, and have a
 gracious heart.
 And ever after, Iambe’s ribald
 humor brought delight to the
 Goddess’s rites.
 Metaneira brought Her honey-
 sweet wine, but the Divine
 Lady refused it,
 For it does not accord with sacred
 custom to drink such wine at
 this time.
 Demeter asked to be given instead,
 barley and water freshly boiled,
 Mixed with soft pennyroyal—a
 mintsweetened brew to end
 Her fast.
 Metaneira made the *kykeon* as
 asked, she gave it to the Lady
 to drink,
 And the Great Goddess Deo
 [Demeter] received it in
 affirmation of Her rites.⁵⁵

Reading this passage, we can also imagine the initiate sitting in the dark



Demeter and Metanira are seen here in a detail on pottery dating ca. 340 BCE, currently in the Altes Museum, Berlin.



temple at Eleusis at the beginning of the Nights of the Mysteries, veiled, fasting, silent, identifying with Demeter in her grief and anger, missing her lost child, the loss of love and happiness, of life itself.

After wise Iambe (Baubo) came to jest with the Goddess, and restored her to laughter and her generous nature, Demeter, her heart open again, agrees to care for the newborn son of Keleus and Metaneira. Probably the ceremony of the adoption of the “hearthchild” occurred at this point in the rite.⁵⁶ Perhaps it was then that initiates received the special potion, the *kykeon*, of boiled barley water, sweetened with pennyroyal mint – tasting like mother’s milk.⁵⁷ Perhaps now, each initiate was crowned with a chaplet of flowers and ribbons in confirmation of Demeter’s adoption of each one of them.

Finally, in order to regain the offerings of humans, Zeus ordered the return of Demeter’s Daughter Persephone to her. The high point of the ritual was the joyful reunion of the Mother and Daughter, following the Daughter’s sojourn and suffering in the Underworld. Persephone’s return from the realm of the dead symbolized the rebirth of all life. Since initiates identified with the Two Goddesses, they too would experience the return of the suffering soul to its loving source.

The Homeric poet writes of the reunion of the Mother and Daughter with these words:

Then all day long, Their hearts in communion, in this blessed presence,
Embracing and full of love, finally relinquishing sorrow,
Happy at long last together, held close in each other’s arms,
Each receives joy from the other, each gives joy in return!
Hekate comes near to embrace, with great love, Holy Deo’s Daughter.
Now to Her, this elder Queen will become priestess and devoted companion.⁵⁸

Demeter and Persephone reunited were then joined by the loving and devoted Grandmother, Hekate. This love among Mother, Daughter, and Grandmother has rarely been given its full place in our own mythic memories, our literature, or religious rites in the West.

Demeter then returned her fruitfulness to the world, and she went to the kings and princes of Eleusis and “revealed her rites for all.”⁵⁹ In the fourth century BCE, the Athenian orator and initiate Isokrates wrote: “Demeter bestowed on us two gifts, the greatest gifts of all: first, the fruits of the earth, thanks to which we have ceased to live the life of

beasts; and second, the mysteries; and they who are initiated thereto have brighter hopes both for the end of their life and for all eternity.”⁶⁰

Demeter’s agricultural rites included the laws or *thesmoi* by which crops



The Return of Persephone,
Frederic Leighton, 1891.

were successfully cultivated. Demeter's bestowing the gift of grain to humanity was depicted in a great marble relief which must have stood inside the Telesterion temple, of Demeter placing a stalk of ripe wheat into the hand of young Triptolemos, a prince of Eleusis, the hero of the Goddess who spread her gift to the known world.

Two important ritual elements not mentioned in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* were a Sacred Marriage and the Birth of a Holy Son. These elements may have been added at a later point, perhaps during the early Christian era. However, these two sacred events would have been in keeping with the rites of the Mother-Daughter Goddesses in Greece, in ancient Crete, and elsewhere, which were enacted to magically induce the procreation of the crops and the Earth. Perhaps there was a *Hieros Gamos* (Sacred Marriage) of Demeter, embodied by her Priestess, and the Hierophant, inside the Anaktoron, the stone-enclosed shrine inside the temple, to invoke the fertility of all life. According to Homer, there was a Sacred Union of Demeter and the hero/god Iason in Crete: "So too fair-haired Demeter once in the spring did yield/ To love, and with Iason, lay in a newploughed field."⁶¹

Perhaps this was when the great fire burned so brilliantly in the temple, atop the Anaktoron. Perhaps sometime after this, the birth of a Holy Son was announced. The Christian

commentator Hippolytus (third century CE) wrote that the Hierophant proclaimed, "Potnia [the Great Goddess] gave birth to a sacred boy. Brimo, Brimos!"⁶²

As initiates moved through a death-like experience to rebirth, they received a special vision. In the fifth century BCE, the Greek lyric poet Pindar wrote of this experience of the Eleusinian Mysteries and those initiated who pass on to the Elysian Fields:

...near them blossoms a flower of perfect joy.

Perfumes always hover above ...

From the frankincense strewn in the deep-shining fire of the gods' altars.⁶³

Happy is he...having seen these rites...;

for he knows the end of life and he knows its god-sent beginning.⁶⁴

In the fourth century BCE, Plato alluded to the culmination of the Eleusinian Mysteries in the *Symposium*, where one received a vision into the "vast sea of beauty"⁶⁵ all around. Plato also alluded to the Eleusinian Mysteries in the *Phaedrus*:

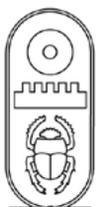
But at that former time they saw beauty shining in brightness, when, with...a blessed company...they saw the blessed sight and vision and were initiated into that which is rightly called the most blessed of Mysteries, which we celebrated in a state of perfection, when we were

without experience of the evils which awaited us in the time to come, being



This marble votive relief was found in Eleusis and is dated ca. 440 BCE.

It depicts the Eleusinian deities of Demeter, at left, and Persephone, at right, offering wheat and blessings to Triptolemos, the son of the Eleusinian king. Image via the National Archaeological Museum Greece.





Demeter and Kore (Persephone) are seen here in a marble relief in the Archaeological Museum of Eleusis Museum, dated ca. 500 BCE.

permitted as initiates to the sight of perfect and simple... and calm and happy apparitions, which we saw in the pure light.... Beauty... shone in brilliance among those visions.⁶⁶

After the mysterious nighttime, daytime, and second nighttime within Demeter's Temple, celebrants probably emerged from the Temple at dawn and then walked to Demeter's fertile grain fields of the Rharian Plain, to invoke the rebirth of the crops and nature, reciting the ritual formula that invoked the fertility of Sky and Earth: "Hye! Rain! Pour down! Kye! Conceive! Give birth!"⁶⁷

What was the effect of these Mysteries? In the *Phaedo*, Plato (like Pindar a century earlier) indicated the shared belief that those who were initiated would experience a good life after death. "Those persons to whom we owe the institution of the mystery-rites are not to be despised,

inasmuch as they have in fact long ago hinted at the truth by declaring that all such as arrive in Hades...purified and initiated shall dwell with Deities."⁶⁸

Cicero, the first century BCE Roman political leader and author (initiated at Eleusis while a young man of seventeen studying philosophy in Athens) also indicated that a shared belief in a better life on Earth and hope for an afterlife was imparted to him during his initiation.

Among the many excellent and indeed divine institutions which... Athens has brought forth and contributed to human life, none, in my opinion, is better than... the Mysteries.⁶⁹

We have been given a reason not only to live in joy, but also to die with better hope.⁷⁰

The Greek philosopher and public official Themistios, a pagan and probable initiate of Demeter's Mysteries during the fourth century CE, wrote an essay "On the Soul" which compared the experience of the soul at the moment of death to the experience of the Eleusinian Mysteries:

The soul [at death] has the same experience as those who are being initiated into great Mysteries... at first one wanders and wearily hurries to and fro, and journeys with suspicion through the dark as one uninitiated: then come all the terrors before the final initiation, shuddering, trembling, sweating, amazement: then one is received into pure regions and meadows, with voices and dances and the majesty of holy sounds and shapes: among these he who has fulfilled initiation wanders free, and released and bearing his crown joins in the divine communion, and consorts with pure and holy people.⁷¹

Day Nine: *Plemochoi*, Libations, and *Epistrophe*, Return

Day Nine was called both *Plemochoi*, Pourings of Plenty, and *Epistrophe*, Return. This day was a time for offering libations (to the deities? to the ancestors?), and it began the transition back to one's own home, family, community, and work—to the rest of one's life, with a new way of seeing.

Special ritual vessels called *plemochoi* were used for pouring libations.⁷² Perhaps these were libations to the dead, libations for the ancestors. The Athenians called those who had died, *Demetrioï*, the People of Demeter.⁷³ For me, this is a time to remember the beloved dead, to pour libations to the memory of deceased family and friends. I revisit memories and feelings both positive and negative, recalling our relatedness, our truths, and love.

Epistrophe implies re-crossing the boundary between the liminal realm of sacred ritual to return to the more ordinary experiences of daily life. I also find this a good time to reflect upon what inside me has died and been left to the past; what new life has found rebirth inside; and on what the future can be, what will be my life's calling, how this can be brought more into harmony with divine purpose, more akin to the Two Goddesses and to the miraculous divinity of life. I ponder what it means to embody the teachings of the Mysteries – *Gnoothi sauton!* “Know Thyself!” and *Meden agan!* “Nothing in Excess!”⁷⁴

In the Eleusinian Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone, a person could experience the renewal of his or her humanity and also the renewal of their connection to divinity, nature, community, and the cosmos. As the rites concluded, the initiates returned home with a new



A plemochoe with a lid dated to the late sixth century BCE, currently housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. They were designed with a curved lip to prevent spilling.

vision of life, blessed by the mysterious gifts of beauty and love.

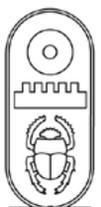
ENDNOTES

¹ Douris of Samos, cited by the Scholiast on Aristophanes *Ploutos*, line 1031; see also Athenaios, VI 253D; Hippolytus, *Philosophoumena* V.8; Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (London: Merlin Press, [1903, 1907 2nd ed., 1962] 1980.), 559; George Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 240.

² Zosimos, *Historia Nova* IV.3.3, ed. Ludwig Mendelssohn (Leipzig, 1887); see Carl Kerényi, *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, [1967] 1977), 11-12.

³ Jane Ellen Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1913), 50.

⁴ Franciszek Sokolowski, *Lois Sacrées des Cités Grecques: Supplement* (Paris: Éditions E. de Boccard, 1962) 13-18, inscription # 3; see Kevin Clinton, *The Sacred Officials of the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Association, 1974), 12; Margaret Miles, *The Athenian Agora: The City Eleusinion*, vol. XXXI (Princeton: The American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1998), 51; Helene P. Foley, ed. *The Homeric “Hymn to Demeter:” Translation, Commentary, and Interpretive*



Essays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 66.

⁵ Kerényi, *Eleusis*, 113.

⁶ Herodotus, *History* 8.65, trans. Aubrey de Selincourt, in *Herodotus: The Histories* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1954); see Marvin Meyer, ed., *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook of Sacred Texts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 31.

⁷ Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea* (*Nichomachean Ethics*), 3.1111a 10-11, trans. W.D. Ross, in

Introduction to Aristotle, ed. Richard McKeon, (New York: The Modern Library, 1947), 351.

⁸ Isocrates, *Panegyrikos* 4, 157-158, trans. G. Norlin, in *Isocrates*, George Norlin and Larue Van Hook, eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, [1928] 1980).

⁹ Diodorus V, 77, 3; see Kerényi, *Eleusis*, 24. I also use the Greek spelling for Crete (*Krete*).

¹⁰ Mara Lynn Keller, "The Eleusinian Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone: Fertility, Sexuality and Rebirth," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 27-54.

¹¹ Isokrates, *Panegyricus* IV.157-158; Theon of Smyrna, *Expositio rerum mathematicarum ad legendum Platonem utilium*, 14.23. Recension by E. Hiller (Leipzig, 1904); see also Lewis R. Farnell, *Cults of the Greek States*, vol. III (Wayne, NJ: Caratzas Brothers, [1906] 1977), 344-345.

¹² *Inscriptiones Graecae/Greek Inscriptions* 3 704E; see Clinton, *Sacred Officials*, 23.

¹³ Plutarch *Lives: Phocion*, xxviii.2-4; *Inscriptiones Graecae/Greek Inscriptions* II2 1078; *Corpus Inscriptionum Atticarum* III.5, see Harrison, *Prolegomena*, 151 and note. 2; Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 245, 246; Clinton, *Sacred Officials*, 14, 69; H.W. Parke, *Festivals of the Athenians* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 59; John Travlos, *Pictorial Dictionary of Ancient Athens* (New York: Hacker, 1980), 198.

¹⁴ Pausanias, *Guide to Greece, Central Greece*, vol.1, I.37.2, trans. Peter Levi (London: Penguin Books, [1971] 1978), 104; Philostratos, *Lives of the Sophists* II. 20; see Clinton, *Sacred Officials*, 40.

¹⁵ *Sylloge* 4 vol. 2, no. 885, l.16; see Clinton, *Sacred Officials*, 95; see Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 236 and note 113.

¹⁶ Hesychios, see under *Agyrmos*; see Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 247-248.

¹⁷ Isokrates, *Panegyricus* IV.157-158; Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars: Nero* 34.4; Theon of Smyrna, *Expositio*, 14.23; Origen, *Cels.*3.59; Libanios, *Decl.* 13.19,52; see Farnell, *Cults*, 344-345; Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 247- 248; Clinton, *Sacred Officials*, 46 and note 263, 78 and notes 12, 13; Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 286, note 13; Foley, *Homeric Hymn*, 67.

¹⁸ Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars: Nero* 34.4.

¹⁹ Homeric "Hymn to Demeter," lines 200-201; Ovid *Fasti* 4.535.

²⁰ Porphyry, *De Abstentia/ Abstinence from Animal Food*, IV.16.

²¹ Hesychios, see under *alade mystai*; *Corpus Inscriptionum Atticarum* IV No. 385d, line 20 p 103; *Sylloge*4 vol. 2, no. 540; Polyaeus *Stratagems* III.11; Plutarch *Lives, Phocion*, 6.3; see Harrison, *Prolegomena* ([1903, 1907 2nd edn., 1962] 1980), 152 and note 3; Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 249 and note 122.

²² Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek English Lexicon*. A new edition revised and augmented by Henry Stuart Jones (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1843] 1953), 528. *Elasis* is related to the English term "elastic."

²³ Euripides *Iphigenia in Tauris*, line 1193, in Euripides' *Three Plays: Alceste: Hippolytus: Iphigenia in Tauris*, trans. Philip Vellacott (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, and New York: Penguin Books, [1953] 1980).

²⁴ See Jon D. Mikalson, *The Sacred and Civil Calendar of the Athenian Year* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

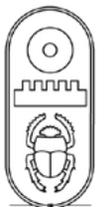
²⁵ Lysias VI, 4; *Corpus Inscriptionum Atticarum* IV, 2, no. 385d; *Sylloge*4 vol. II, no. 540; see Harrison, *Prolegomena*, 152-153; Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 250 note 127.

²⁶ Porphyry, *Abstinence from Animal Food*, IV.16; Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, I.14.3, trans. W. H. S. Jones, Litt. D., vols. III, IV (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, [1935] 1975); Harrison, *Prolegomena* [1903, 1907 2nd edition, 1962] 1980), 147-149.

²⁷ *Inscriptiones Graecae/Greek Inscriptions* I2, 76 (= SIG 83 = LSCg #5); see Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 67-68.

²⁸ Clinton, *Sacred Officials*, 70; Ronald S. Stroud, *The Athenian Grain-Tax Law of 374/3 B.C.* (Princeton: The American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1998), 9.

- ²⁹ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, II.26.8, Philostratus *Vita Apollonii*, IV, 18, see Edelstein and Edelstein, *Asklepios* (1945), 316, #565; C.A. Meier, *Ancient Incubation and Modern Psychotherapy*, trans. Monica Curtis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), 118.
- ³⁰ *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*, xxv. 226, 10-12.
- ³¹ Aristotle, *Athenian Constitution*, 56.1, 4;
- ³² Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, I.21.4.
- ³³ Solinus *Collectanea Rerum Memorabilium*, Cp. 7, 10; Strabo *Geographica* VIII.6.15; see Edelstein and Edelstein, *Asklepios*, #735, #738, 380, 381.
- ³⁴ Strabo, *Geographica* VIII. 6.15; see Edelstein and Edelstein, *Asklepios*, 380.
- ³⁵ Edelstein and Edelstein, *Asklepios*, #441, 254; Charitonidou, A[ngeliki]. “Epidaurus: The Sanctuary of Asclepius” in *Temples and Sanctuaries of Ancient Greece: A Companion Guide*, ed. Evi Melas. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), 94, 89-99.
- ³⁶ Pausanias, *Guide to Greece*, I.36.3-38.1
- ³⁷ Dikaios quoted by Herodotus VIII.65; Aristophanes, *Frogs*, lines 340-353, 395-396; 325-335, Scholium on Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, 326. Plutarch *Phocis* 28.2, Plutarch *Kamil*. 191; see Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 254-255, 238; Kerényi, *Eleusis*, 8-9; Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 287 note 13.
- ³⁸ Pausanias, *Guide to Greece*, I. 37.2; Plutarch *Alkibiades* XXXIV.4; *Inscriptiones Graecae/Greek Inscriptions* II2 1078.29; see Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 252- 258; Clinton, *Sacred Officials*, 102-113; Nanno Marinatos. *Art and Religion in Thera: Reconstructing a Bronze Age Society* (Athens: D. & I. Mathioulakis, 1984), chaps. 4 and 5.
- ³⁹ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, I.37.6, 7.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., I.38.1; Bekker *Anecdota* I, 373; see Paul Foucart, *Les Mysteres d’Eleusis* (Paris: Auguste Picard, Editeur, [1914] 1978), 337; Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 256; Nanno Marinatos, *Minoan Religion: Ritual, Image, and Symbol* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 141.
- ⁴¹ Scholiast on Aristophanes *Plutus* 1014; see Allair Chandor Brumfield, *The Attic Festivals of Demeter and their Relation to the Agricultural Year* (New York, Arno Press, 1985), 195 note 16; Kerényi (1967), 65 note 6; Winifred Milius Lubell, *The Metamorphosis of Baubo: Myth of Women’s Sexual Energy* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1994), 33.
- ⁴² Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, I. xxxviii.6, trans. Jones; see Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 72-73, 97-99.
- ⁴³ Aristophanes *Frogs*, lines 327-352, trans. Rogers; in Aristophanes, *The Complete Plays of Aristophanes*, ed. Moses Hadas (New York: Bantam Books, 1962).
- ⁴⁴ *Inscriptiones Graecae/Greek Inscriptions* I 2nd ed. 76 line 35; *Inscriptiones Graecae/Greek Inscriptions* II 2nd ed. lines 280, 284; Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, I.38.7; see Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 68.
- ⁴⁵ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, I. xxxvii.6; *Inscriptiones Graecae/Greek Inscriptions* I2 5; see Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 168-9; Kerényi, *Eleusis*, 70.
- ⁴⁶ Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus/Exhortations to the Greeks* II.18.
- ⁴⁷ Galen, *de Usu Partium* VII. 14 #469, emphasis in original; see Harrison, *Prolegomena*, 569 and note 2.
- ⁴⁸ Sophocles *Oedipus at Colonus*, lines 1049-1053, trans. Robert Fitzgerald, in Sophocles, *Sophocles, I: Oedipus the King*, trans. David Grene; *Oedipus at Colonus*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald; *Antigone*, trans. Elizabeth Wyckoff, Edward Grene and Richmond Lattimore, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954); Philostratus, *Apollonius* IV, 18; *Lives of the Sophists*, ii, 20. The first Hierophant, Eumolpos, who came from Thrace, defended Eleusis from conquest by Athens during the Bronze Age. His name means “good song” or “good music.”
- ⁴⁹ Clement, *Protreptikos*, II. 18.
- ⁵⁰ Homeric “Hymn to Demeter,” lines 208-209, 211; Ovid, *Fasti* IV, 531-548.
- ⁵¹ Pindar – citation not given in Harrison, *Prolegomena*, 561; Apollodoros, *Fragment* 36; see Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 264 and note 170; Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 288 note 29.
- ⁵² Apollodoros, 42.2 F 110; see Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 288, fn 20.
- ⁵³ Plato, *Symposium*, 210d, Plato, *Phaedrus* 250 B-D; Milan Papyrus no. 20.31, in *Papiri della R. Università di Milano* I, 177; Hippolytos, *Refutatio* V.8.39; see Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 305-310; in Kerényi, *Eleusis*, 84 and note 20, 94 and note 50.
- ⁵⁴ Homeric “Hymn to Demeter,” 2.90-94, trans. Mara Lynn Keller, in Mara Lynn Keller,



“The Greater Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone, Mother and Daughter Goddesses of Ancient Greece” (unpublished manuscript), 194.

⁵⁵ Homeric “Hymn to Demeter,” lines 193-211, trans. Keller, in Keller, “Greater Mysteries,” 200.

⁵⁶ See N.J. Richardson, *Homeric Hymn to Demeter: Translation and Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 231; Foley, *Homeric Hymn*, 50-51. Since the hearth-child was chosen for this occasion by Athens, this part of the rite was probably added after Athens gained hegemony over Eleusis, at some time during the seventh or sixth century BCE.

⁵⁷ This is how the *kykeon* tastes to me when I prepare it for reenacting the Mysteries.

⁵⁸ Homeric “Hymn to Demeter,” lines 434-440, trans. Keller, in Keller, “Greater Mysteries,” 218. See also *The Homeric Hymns: A Verse Translation* by Thelma Sargent (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, [1973] 1975), 13.

⁵⁹ Homeric “Hymn to Demeter,” 2.475-476, trans. Keller. See also Foley, *Homeric Hymn*: “...she revealed the conduct of her rites and taught her Mysteries.”

⁶⁰ Isocrates, *Panegyrikos* 4. 28, in Norlin, *Isokrates*.

⁶¹ Homer, *Odyssey* 5.125, trans. Harrison, in Harrison, *Prolegomena*, 564.

⁶² Hippolytus, *Refutation omnium haeresium/Refutation of All Heresies*, 5.8.40; Clement, *Protreptikos*; see Harrison, *Prolegomena*, 561, 563; Mylonas, *Eleusis*, appendix; Kevin Clinton, *Myth and Cult: The Iconography of the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Stockholm: Distributor Paul Åströms Förlag, 1992), 92.

⁶³ Pindar cited in Rodney Castledon, *Minoans: Life in Bronze Age Crete* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 8.

⁶⁴ Pindar, *Fragments* 102 (Oxford); see Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 285.

⁶⁵ Plato, *Symposium* 210D, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in Plato, *Symposium* (Indianapolis: The Library of Liberal Arts, Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, [1948] 1977). Diotima taught Socrates about the lesser and greater mysteries of erotic and universal love (*Symposium* 207a-212a).

⁶⁶ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250 B-D, trans. William S. Cobb in Plato, *The Symposium and the Phaedrus: Plato's Erotic Dialogues*, trans. William S. Cobb (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

⁶⁷ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, I.38.7; Athenaios, *Diepnsophistai/The Learned Banquet* XIII, 71, in *Ephemeris* 1885: 150; Hippolytos *Refutation of All Heresies*, V.7.34 Proklos, In *Timaios* 293 C. Kleidemos, fr. 27; (*Bulletin ee Correspondence Hellenique* 20, 1896: 79-80; see Harrison, *Prolegomena*, 161 and note 1; Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 231, note 30, 270, notes 113-116, 186; Kerényi, *Eleusis*, 141-142.

⁶⁸ Plato *Phaedo* 69 in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, (New York: Bollingen Series LXXI, Pantheon Books, 1961); see Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 266.

⁶⁹ Cicero, *De Res Publica de Legibus*, 2.14.36, trans. C.W. Keyes, (1928).

⁷⁰ Cicero, *The Laws*, 2.14.36, trans. Edith Hamilton, *Mythology* (New York: Penguin Group, 1969); see Kerényi, *Eleusis*, 15; Anthony Everitt, *Cicero: The Life and Times of Rome's Greatest Politician* (New York: Random House, 2001), 65.

⁷¹ Themistios fragment 168 (= Stobaeus *Anthologium* 4.52.49), trans. Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 91- 92; see Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 264-265, note 171; Foley, *Homeric Hymn*, 70. Themistios' essay was preserved by the anthologer Stobaios in the fifth century CE.

⁷² Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists*, translated in C. B. Gulick, *The Deipnosophists* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927-41. 7 vols.) vol. 1933: 211-213); see Miles, *Athenian Agora*, 95.

⁷³ Plutarch, *De facie in orbe Lunae*, 28; see Harrison, *Prolegomena*, 267, 599.

⁷⁴ Plato, *Protagoras* 343A, trans. W.K.C. Guthrie, in *Collected Dialogues of Plato*, Hamilton and Cairns; Pausanias, *Guide to Greece*, X.24.1.