

Mystics in Antiquity

THE ANCIENT GREEK MYSTERIES

— Bruce MacLennan

PLATO ON THE MYSTERIES

- ✘ “The design of the Mysteries is to lead us back to the perfection from which, as our beginning, we first made our descent.”

MYSTERIA AND RELATED TERMS

- ✘ *Mysteria* (Latin, *Initia*) = festival of initiation
- ✘ *Mystes* (pl. *Mystai*) = initiate(s)
- ✘ *Myein* (Lat. *initiare*) = to initiate (basic meaning: “to close”)

- ✘ *Telein* = to accomplish, celebrate, initiate
- ✘ *Teletê* = festival, ritual, initiation
- ✘ *Telesterion* = initiation hall

THE UNSPEAKABLE AND THE FORBIDDEN

- ✘ *arrhêton* = unspeakable, ineffable
- ✘ *aporrhêton* = forbidden, secret

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF MYSTERIES

- ✘ Initiation per se
- ✘ Agrarian aspect
- ✘ Sexual aspects
- ✘ Sacred myths
- ✘ Overcoming death

PRIMARY KINDS OF MYSTERIES

- ✘ Mystery proper
 - + e.g., Eleusinian Mysteries
- ✘ Mystic cult
 - + e.g., Dionysian Mysteries
- ✘ Mysteriosophic cult
 - + e.g., Orphic Mysteries
- ✘ (“cult” here means “a system of religious veneration and devotion directed toward a particular figure or object” – *Am. Her. Dict.*)

HISTORY

- ✘ Neolithic basis
- ✘ Problem of personal fate after death as individualism spreads in 7th–6th cent. BCE
- ✘ Mysteries apparent by 600 BCE
- ✘ Clan & family mysteries
- ✘ Often connected to a place
- ✘ Find Great Mother, Pure Maiden, Divine Child protected by masked men dancing around it

THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES

HISTORY

- ✘ Functioning by Mycenaean times, c. 1500 BCE
- ✘ In one year for which we have records, over 2000 were initiated
- ✘ Men, women, Greeks, foreigners, slaves, so long as:
 - + spoke Greek
 - + no blood guilt
- ✘ Destroyed in 396 CE when Alaric, King of Goths, invaded Greece

TESTIMONIALS

- ✘ “Blessed is he among men who has beheld this. Never will he who has not been initiated into these ceremonies, who has no part in them, share in such things. He will be as a dead man in sultry darkness.” — Homeric Hymn to Demeter
- ✘ “We have been given a reason not only to live in joy but also to die with better hope.” — Cicero

MORE TESTIMONIALS

- ✘ “Blessed is he who, after beholding this, enters upon the way beneath the earth; he knows the end of life and its beginning given by Zeus.”
— Pindar
- ✘ “Thrice blessed are those among men who, after beholding these rites, go down to Hades. Only for them is there life; all the rest will suffer an evil lot.” — Sophocles

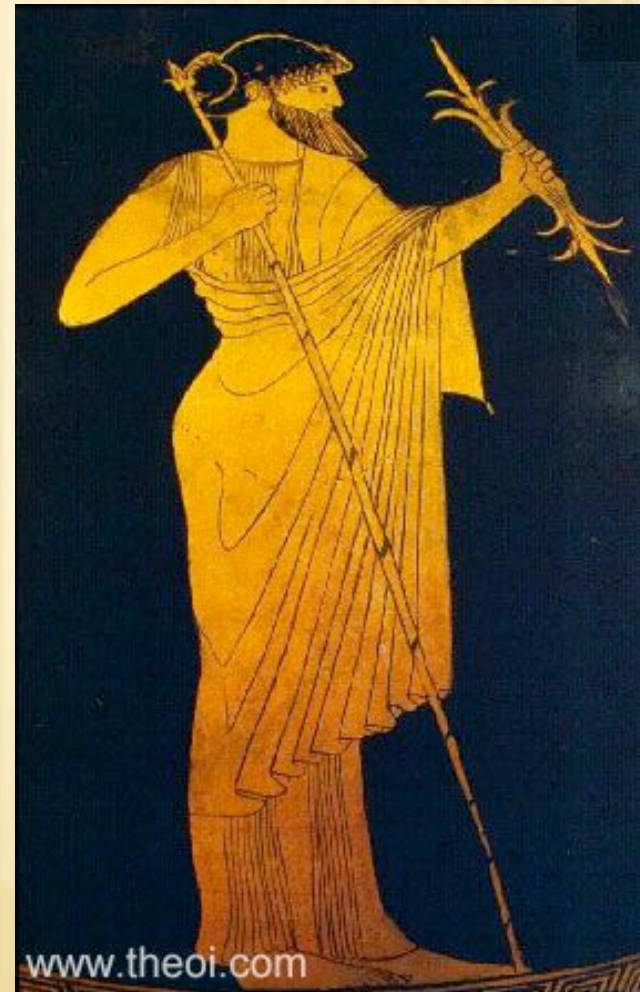
AND MORE

- ✘ “I escaped from evil, I found the better.”
— Demosthenes
- ✘ “I came out of the mystery hall feeling like a stranger to myself” — Sopatos
- ✘ “these gods appear to mankind and bring unexpected aid to those initiates of theirs who call upon them in the midst of perils”
— Diodorus Siculus

THE MYTH

ZEUS (JUPITER)

- ✘ Father of gods and mortals
- ✘ Son of Rhea
- ✘ Demeter bore Persephone to him
- ✘ A sky god
- ✘ but with a dark side: Subterranean Zeus



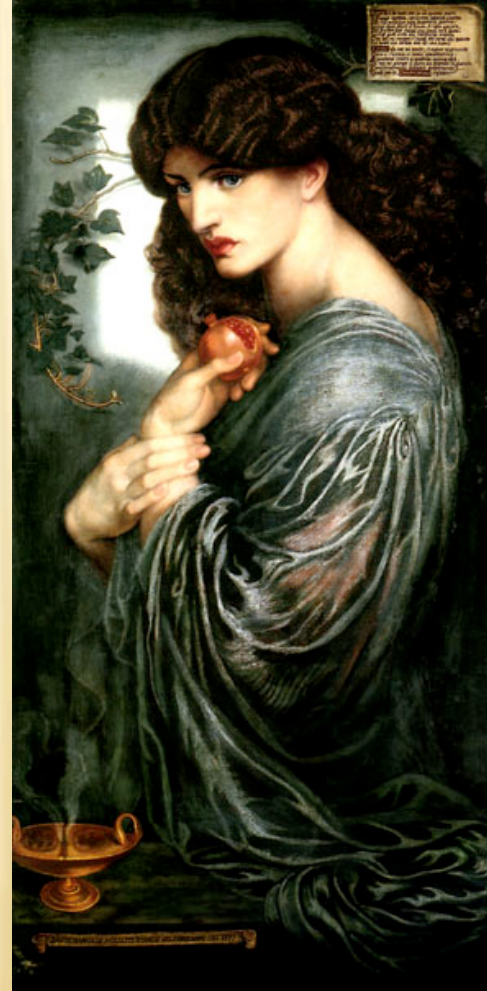
DEMETER (CERES)

- ✘ Name Dê-meter means Earth-mother
- ✘ Specifically Mother of the Grain
- ✘ Outward face of The Two (Goddesses)



PERSEPHONE (PROSERPINA)

- ✘ Daughter of Zeus and Demeter
- ✘ Inward face of The Two
- ✘ A reluctance to name her
- ✘ so frequently called *Kórê* (the Maiden)

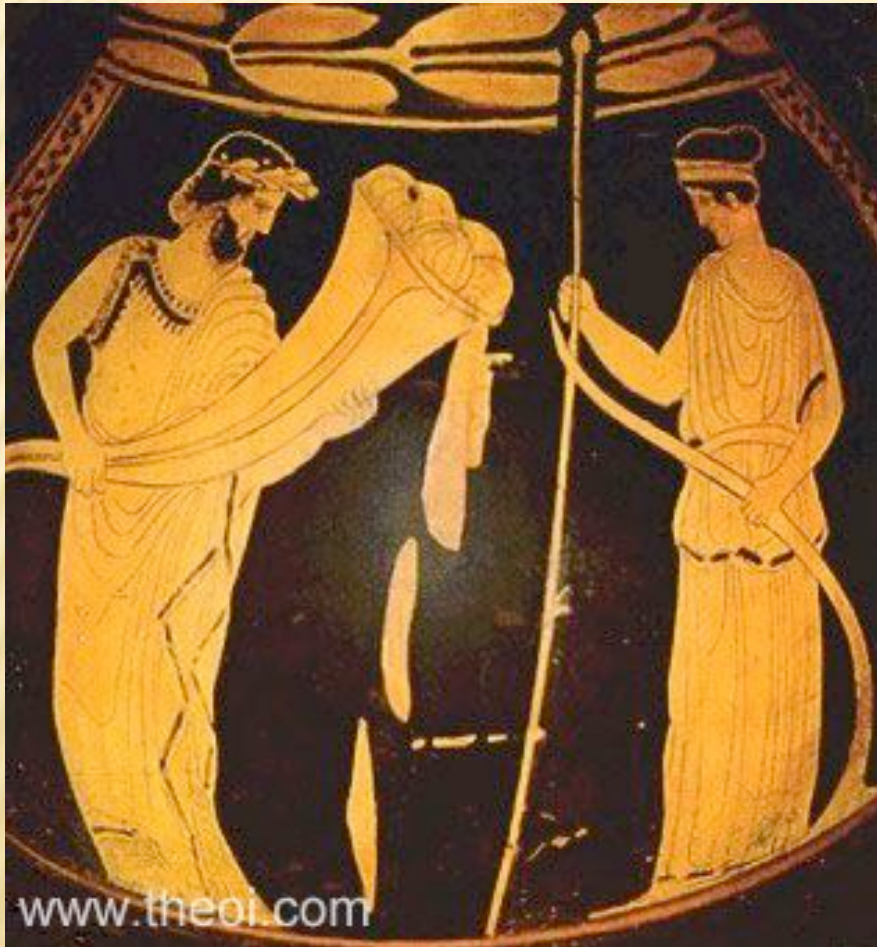


HADES (PLUTO), GOD OF UNDERWORLD

- ✘ Brother of Zeus
- ✘ Rules Underworld
- ✘ Often considered a dark double of Zeus (Subterranean Zeus)



PLOUTOS, GOD OF RICHES



- ✘ Often identified with Hades
- ✘ A younger Hades
- ✘ Rich because all things eventually go under the earth
- ✘ Riches also come from the earth (grain, metal, gems, even animal life)

THE NARCISSUS

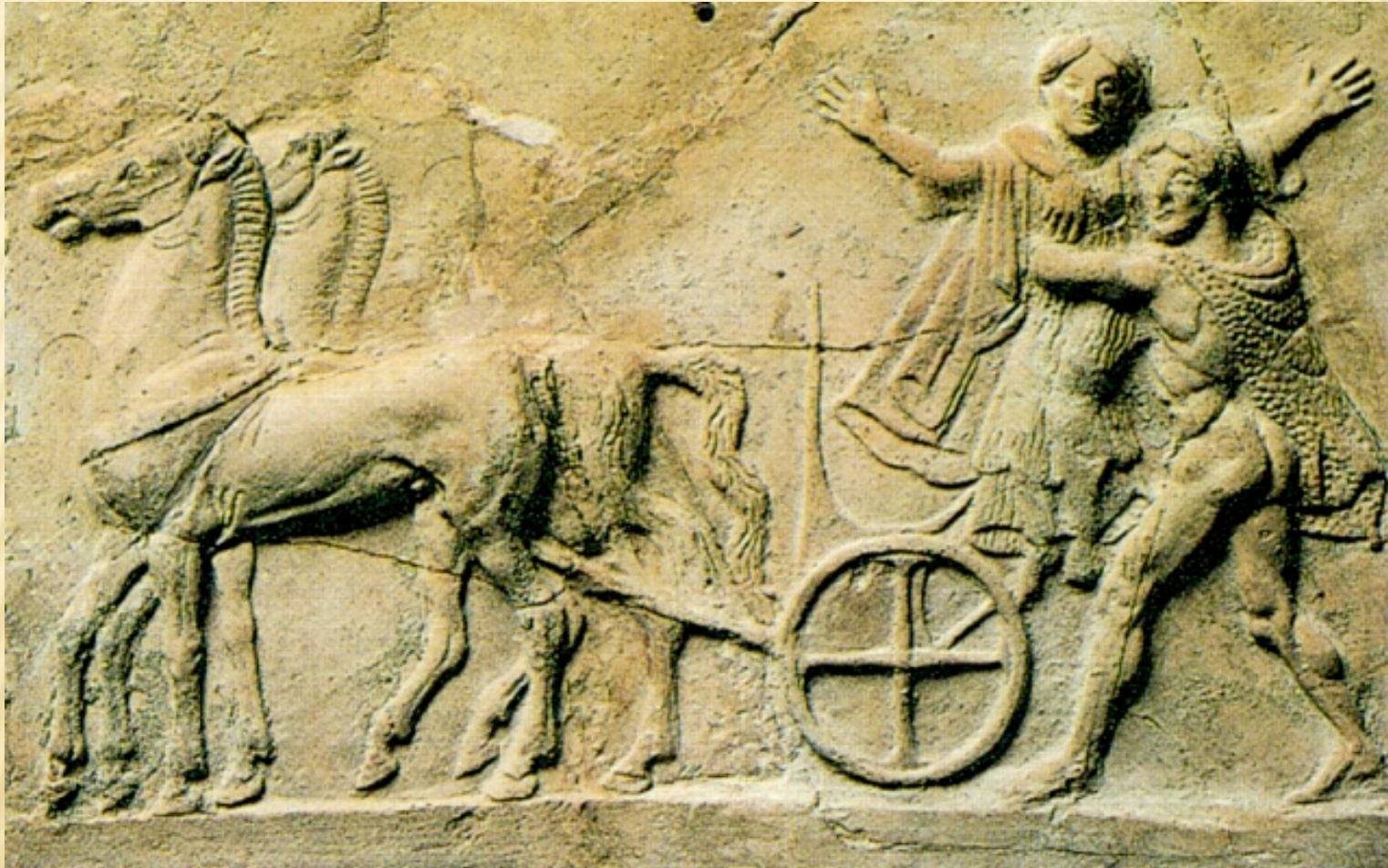




PURSUIT



PERSEPHONE SEIZED...











- ✘ The Maiden cries out to her Mother
- ✘ Only the Sun (who sees all things) knows what has happened to her



DEMETER'S QUEST

- ✘ Demeter hears daughter's cry
- ✘ Searches for nine days
- ✘ Neither eating nor sleeping
- ✘ Searches by torch light



THE VIRGINS' WELL



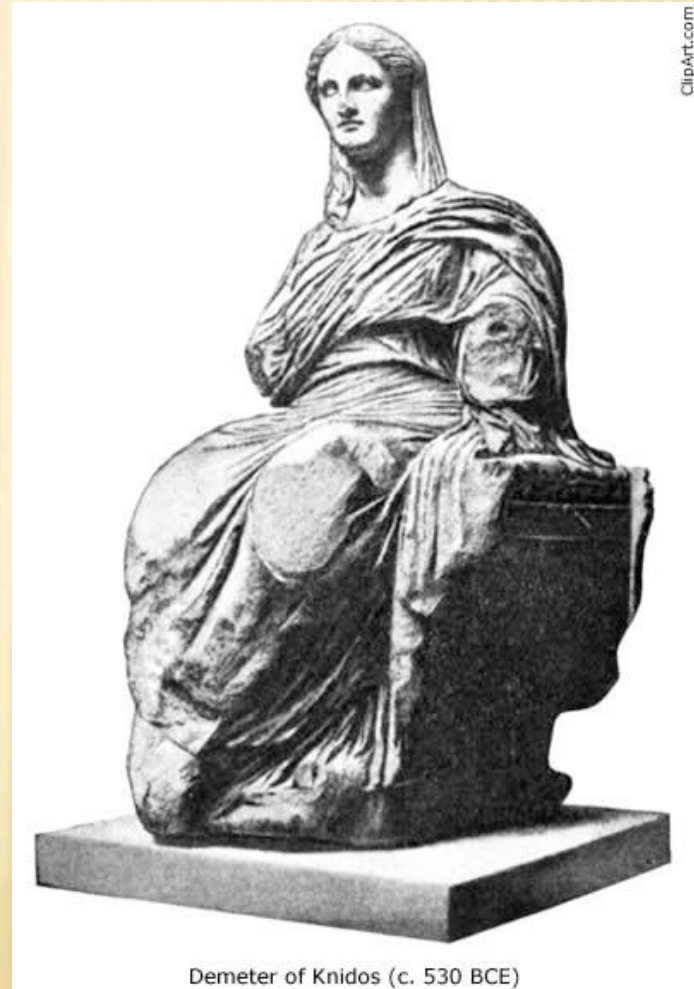
- ✘ Demeter stops by the Virgins' Well
- ✘ Also called:
 - + Well of Flowers
 - + Well of Beautiful Dances
- ✘ Meets the daughters of the King and Queen
- ✘ Offers to be nurse maid

EPIPHANY ON THE THRESHOLD



THE UNSMILING STONE

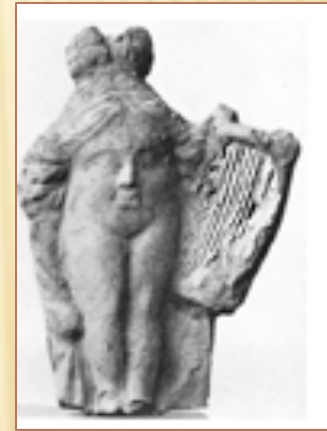
- ✘ Refuses queen's chair
- ✘ lambe spreads white sheep skin over rock (or simple chair)
- ✘ Rock is near Ploutonion (Underworld entrance)
- ✘ Veils herself, sits in silence
- ✘ Fasts



Demeter of Knidos (c. 530 BCE)

IAMBE / BAUBO

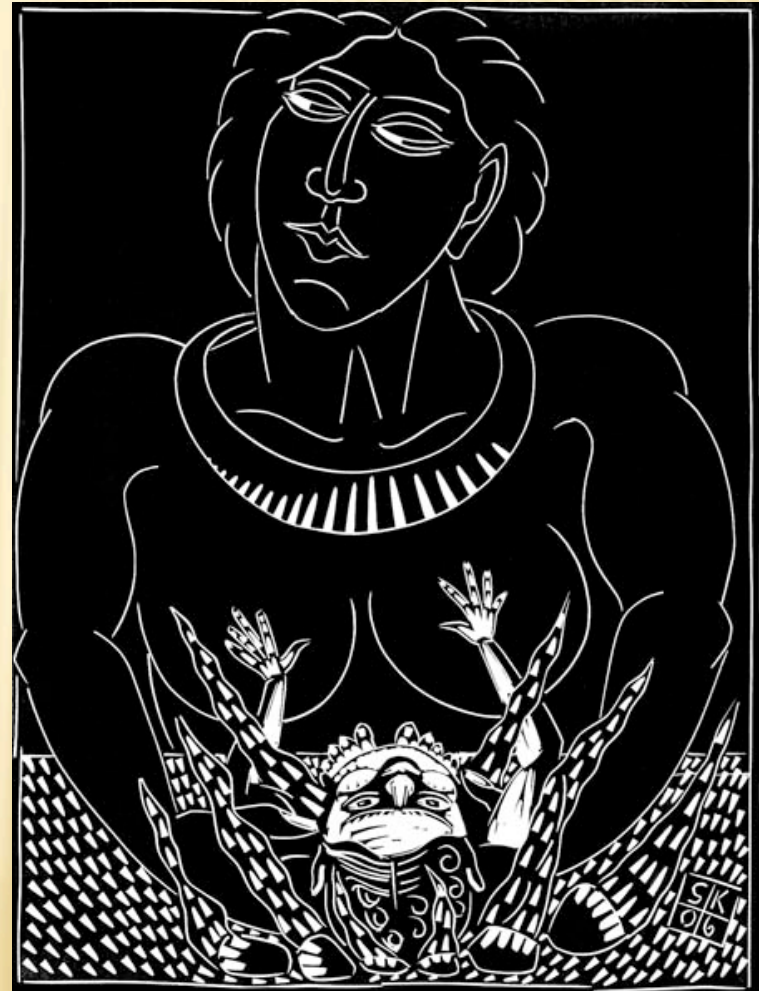
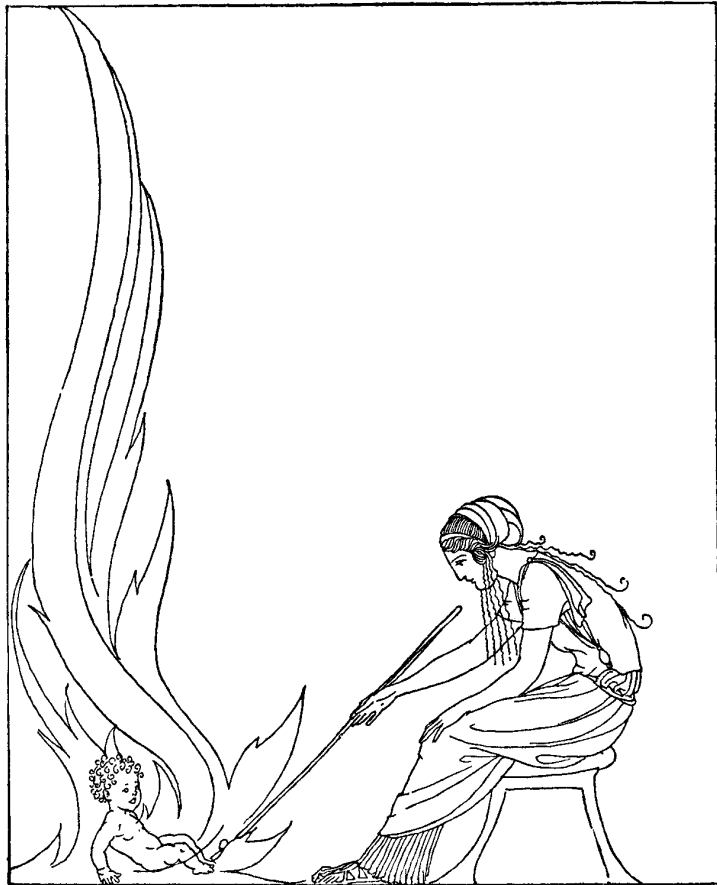
- ✘ Serving woman in palace
- ✘ lambe < iambic meter, the meter of satyric feminine verse
- ✘ Baubo = Belly
- ✘ Obscene gestures make Demeter laugh
- ✘ but do not relieve grief



KUKEÔN

- ✘ Demeter breaks fast
- ✘ but refuses wine
 - + (because Hades/Pluto is really subterranean wine god, Dionysus)
- ✘ *Kukeôn* means mixture or potion
- ✘ Roasted barley groats, water, fresh pennyroyal

IMMORTALIZATION OF DÊMOPHOÛN



EPIPHANY



- ✘ “Unknowing are ye mortals and thoughtless; ye know not whether good or evil approaches.”
- ✘ Orders temple built, to which she retires in grief

THE WITHERED AND BARREN EARTH



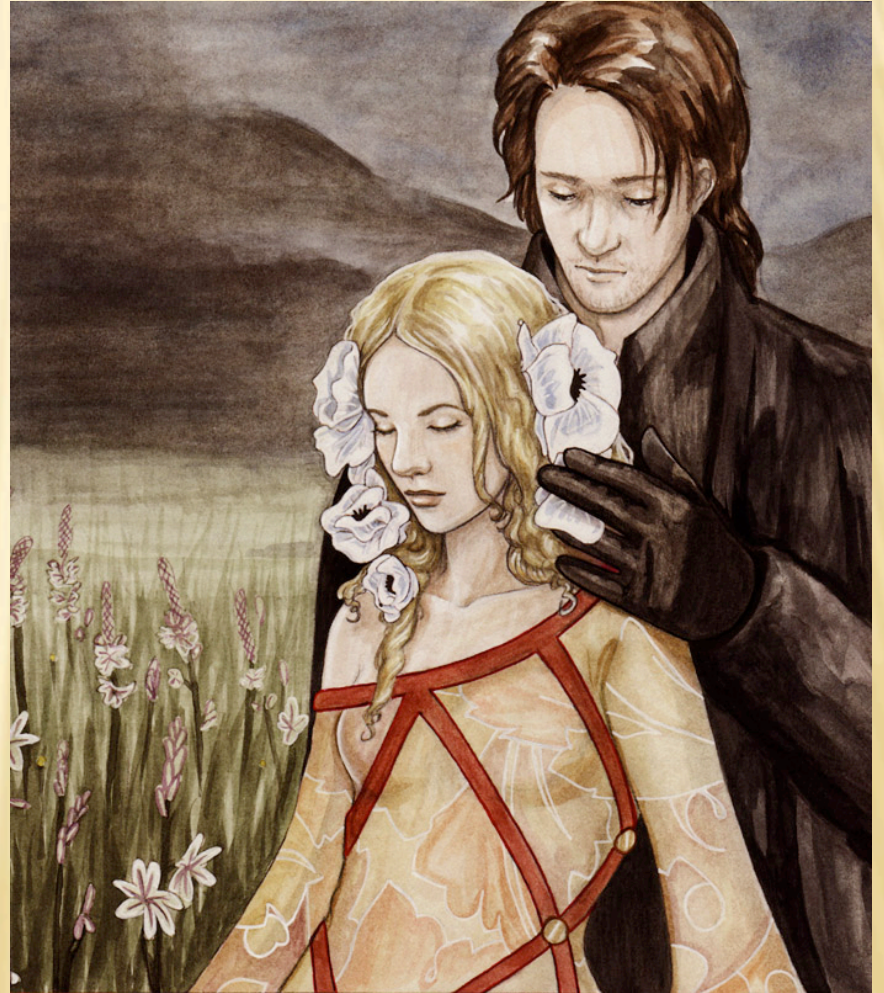
PERSEPHONE, QUEEN OF UNDERWORLD





Persephone, Queen of the Underworld, and her husband, Hades.





NEGOTIATING THE RETURN



THE POMEGRANATE







THE RETURN



- ✘ Rhea convinces Demeter to restore life to earth
- ✘ Demeter is the first to experience the Mysteries
- ✘ Ever after, all Mystai recapitulate her initiation

THE NEW ORDER



- ✘ Daughter reigns in underworld for part of year
- ✘ Stays with her mother the rest

THE OUTER BLESSING: AGRICULTURE

- ✘ Demeter instructs Triptolemos to spread knowledge of agriculture around world
- ✘ Also spreads civilization
- ✘ And awareness of the Mysteries





THE INNER BLESSING: THE MYSTERIES





THE LESSER MYSTERIES

- ✘ Exactly 7 lunar months before Greater
- ✘ Purification
 - + Pig sacrifice
 - + Bloodless sacrifice
 - + Ram-skin purification
- ✘ Instruction



Woman sacrificing a pig; vase painting, c. 450 BCE.

THE GREATER MYSTERIES

TIMING

- ✘ Begins at full moon in September
- ✘ Waning moon: the Mother-Daughter, who has lost half herself
- ✘ Descends into darkness
- ✘ The crone withers until the maiden returns
- ✘ Mysteries last 9 days = days Demeter fasted

DAY 0

- ✘ Last day before full moon
- ✘ Day before Mysteries proper begin
- ✘ The “Sacred Things” are brought from Eleusis to Athens

DAY 1: THE GATHERING

- ✘ Hierophant invites:
- ✘ “Everyone who has clean hands and intelligible speech”
- ✘ “He who is pure from all pollution, and whose soul is conscious of no evil and who has lived well and justly.”
- ✘ Fasting begins

DAY 2: “TO THE SEA, O MYSTAE!”

- ✘ Mystae bathe with their piglets in sea
- ✘ A purification
- ✘ Piglet is sacrificed
 - + Dies instead of initiand
 - + Descends to underworld like Persephone
 - + Blood sprinkled on initiand (a kind of rebirth)
- ✘ Mystae dress in new, plain clothes

DAY 3: HITHER THE VICTIMS

- ✘ Sacrifices to the Two Goddesses on behalf of the city
- ✘ Day of mourning for Demeter's loss
- ✘ Fasting

DAY 4: ASCLEPEIA

- ✘ Celebrates arrival of Asclepius and Hygeia (god of healing, goddess of health) in Athens
- ✘ They were also initiated into the Mysteries
- ✘ Initiands stay at home, fasting
- ✘ Libations to Dionysus (god of wine)
- ✘ Initiands abstain (like Demeter) and prepare *kukeon*.

DAY 5: PROCESSION

- ✘ First Day of Mysteries proper
- ✘ Secrecy begins
- ✘ From Athenian cemetery along Sacred Way to Eleusis (14 miles)
- ✘ Escort Sacred Things back to Eleusis
- ✘ Led by statue of Iacchos (alter ego of Dionysus)
- ✘ Shouts of “Iacch’ O Iacche!”
- ✘ Swing myrtle branches (*bacchi*)
- ✘ Plain dark clothes & pilgrim’s staffs

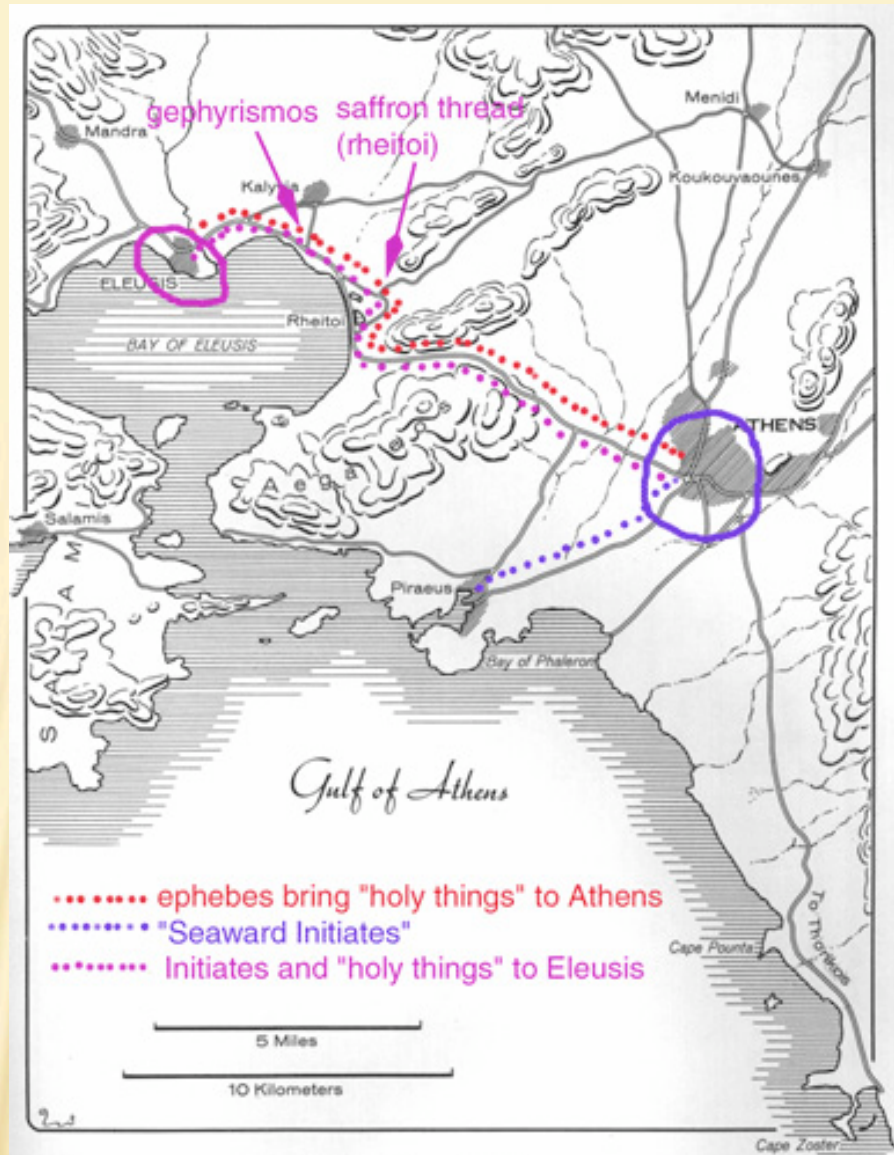




*Statue of a young
Eleusinian initiate*



Dadouchos on red-figured
stamnos.



THE ROUTE

BRIDGES

- ✘ “Bridge jests” at the boundary stream (Kephisos)
- ✘ Drink *kukeon*
- ✘ At Krokon’s Palace, a narrow bridge across the salty Rheitoi:
- ✘ Priest attaches thread to right hand and left foot of initiands

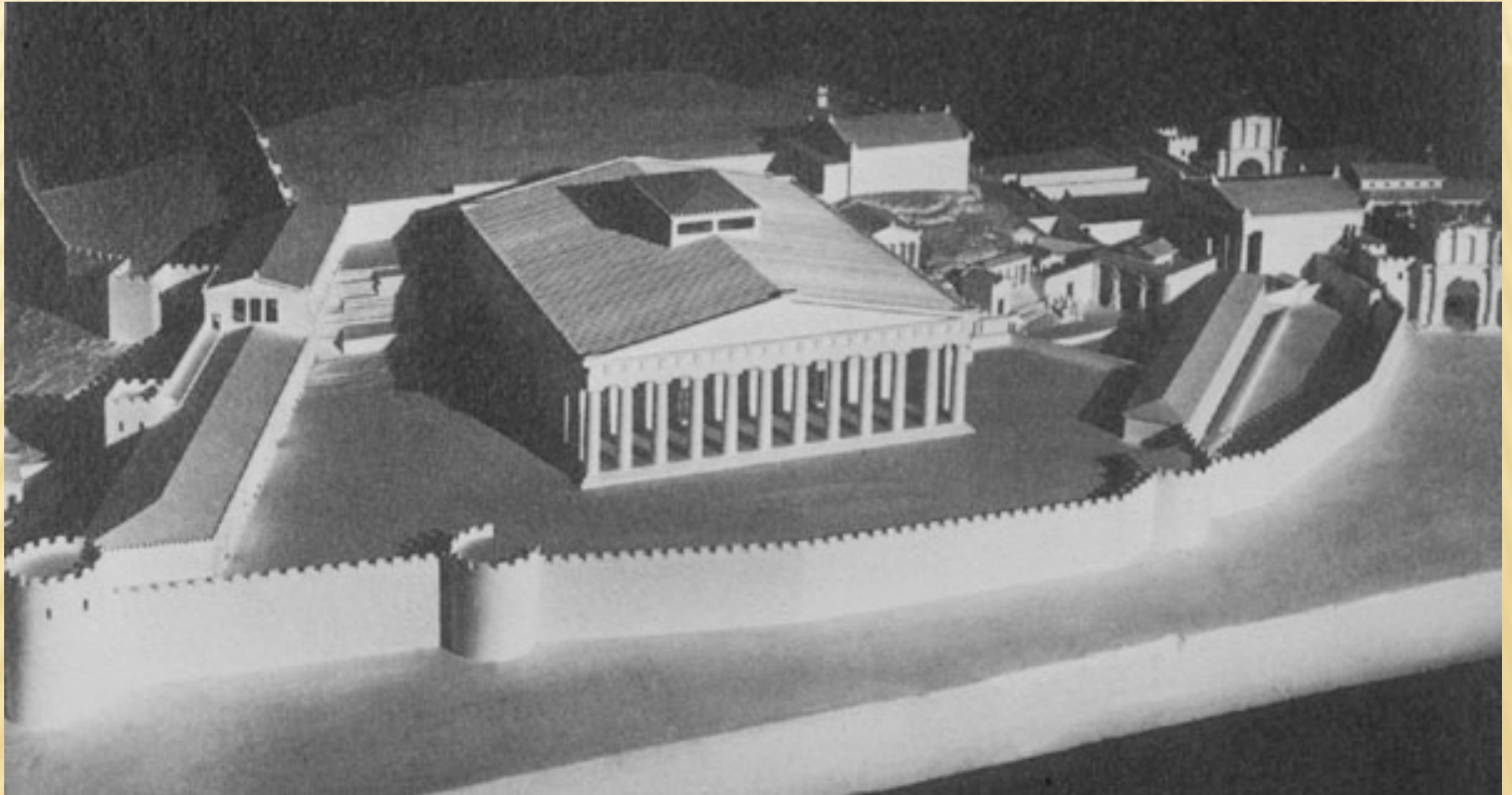
PASSWORD

- ✘ Initiands say: “I have fasted, drunk the *kukeon*, taken things out of the big basket (*kistê*) and, after performing a rite, put them in the little basket (*kalathos*), whence I have put them back in the big basket.”
- ✘ Kalathos ~ Persephone, Kistê ~ Demeter?
- ✘ What was moved?

DAY 6

- ✘ New day begins at sundown
- ✘ When stars visible, break fast (like Demeter)
- ✘ Drink *kukeon* (like Demeter)
- ✘ Sleep in vicinity of sanctuary
- ✘ Resting, fasting, purification, sacrificing.

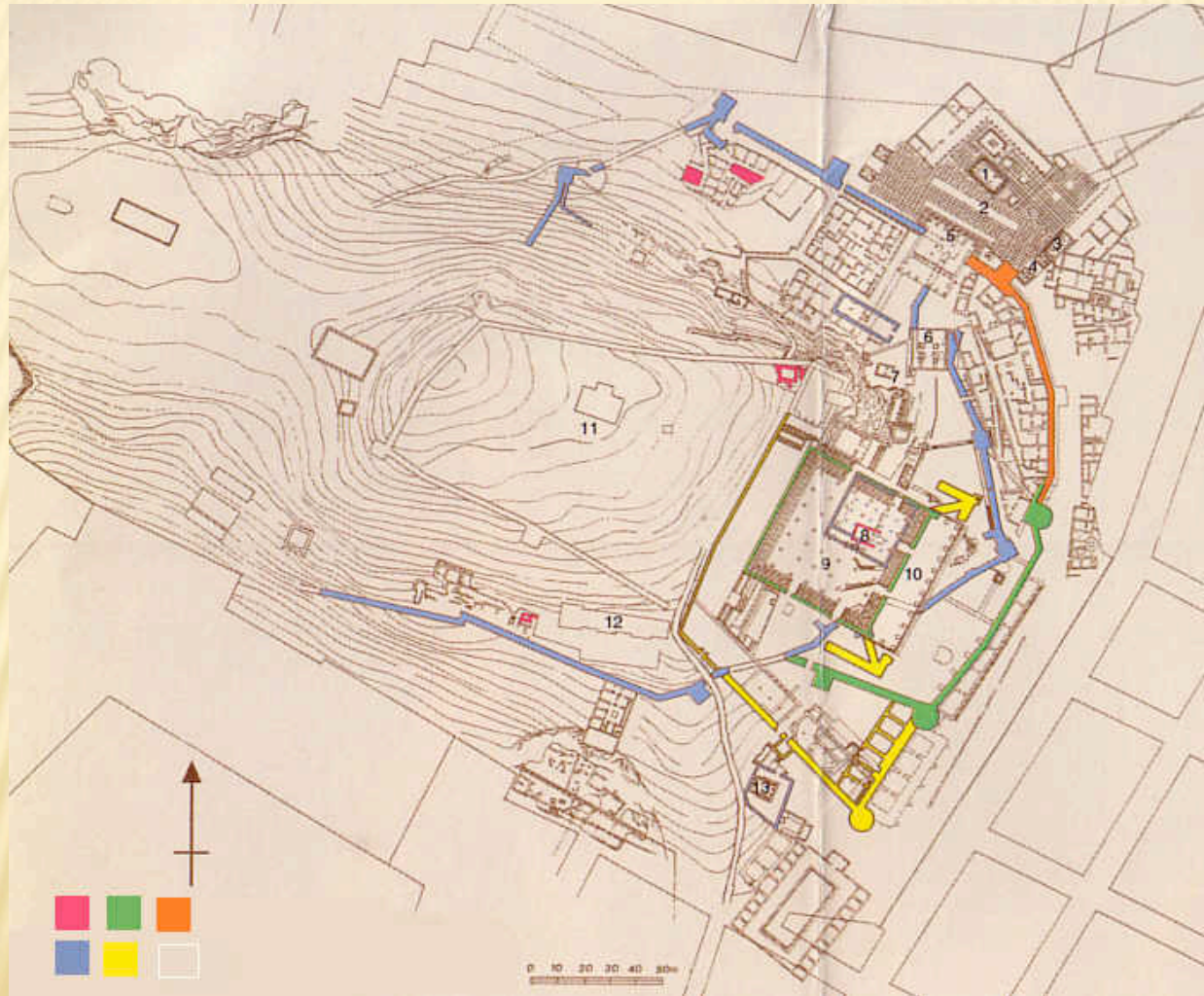
RECONSTRUCTED SANCTUARY OF ELEUSIS

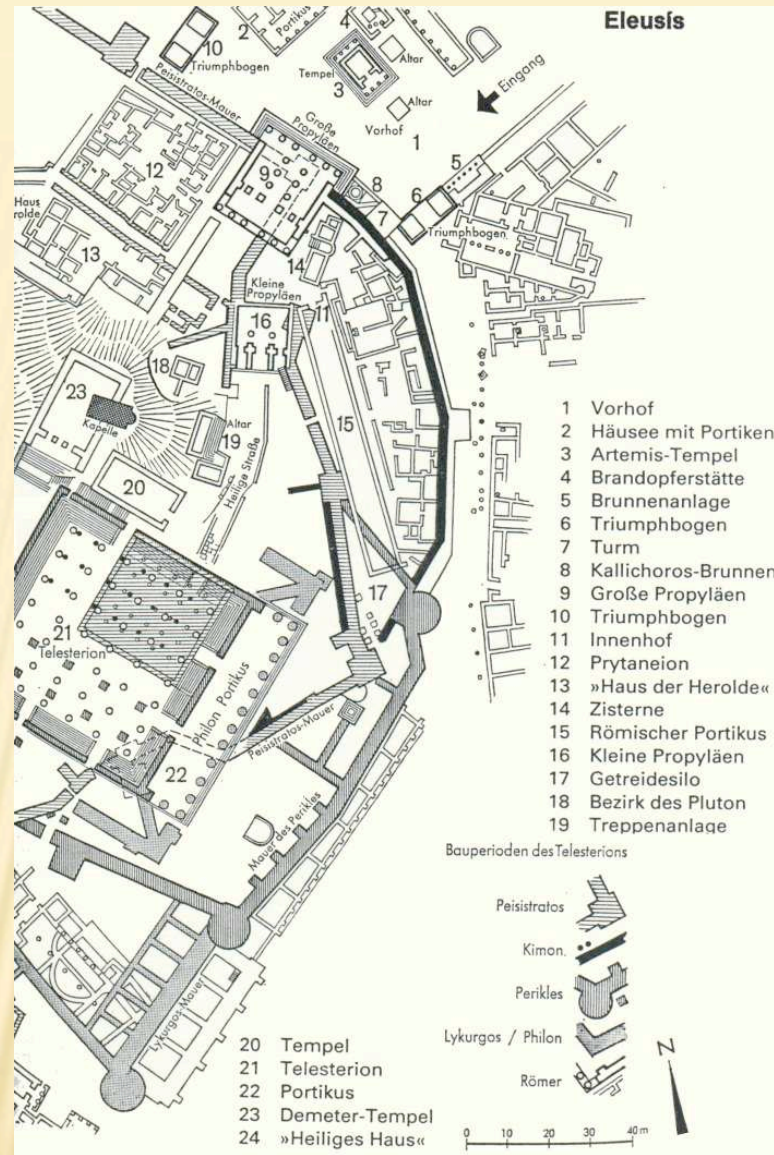


TODAY



PLAN





DAY 7: INITIATION “THE NIGHT OF TORCHES”

- ✘ A terrifying wandering through the dark (like Demeter)
- ✘ Procession led by Hierophant (1st Priest), Dadoukhos (“Torch Bearer” = 2nd Priest), Priestesses, and Mystery Heralds
- ✘ Priestess leads “the Boy of the Hearth”



THE OUTER COURT

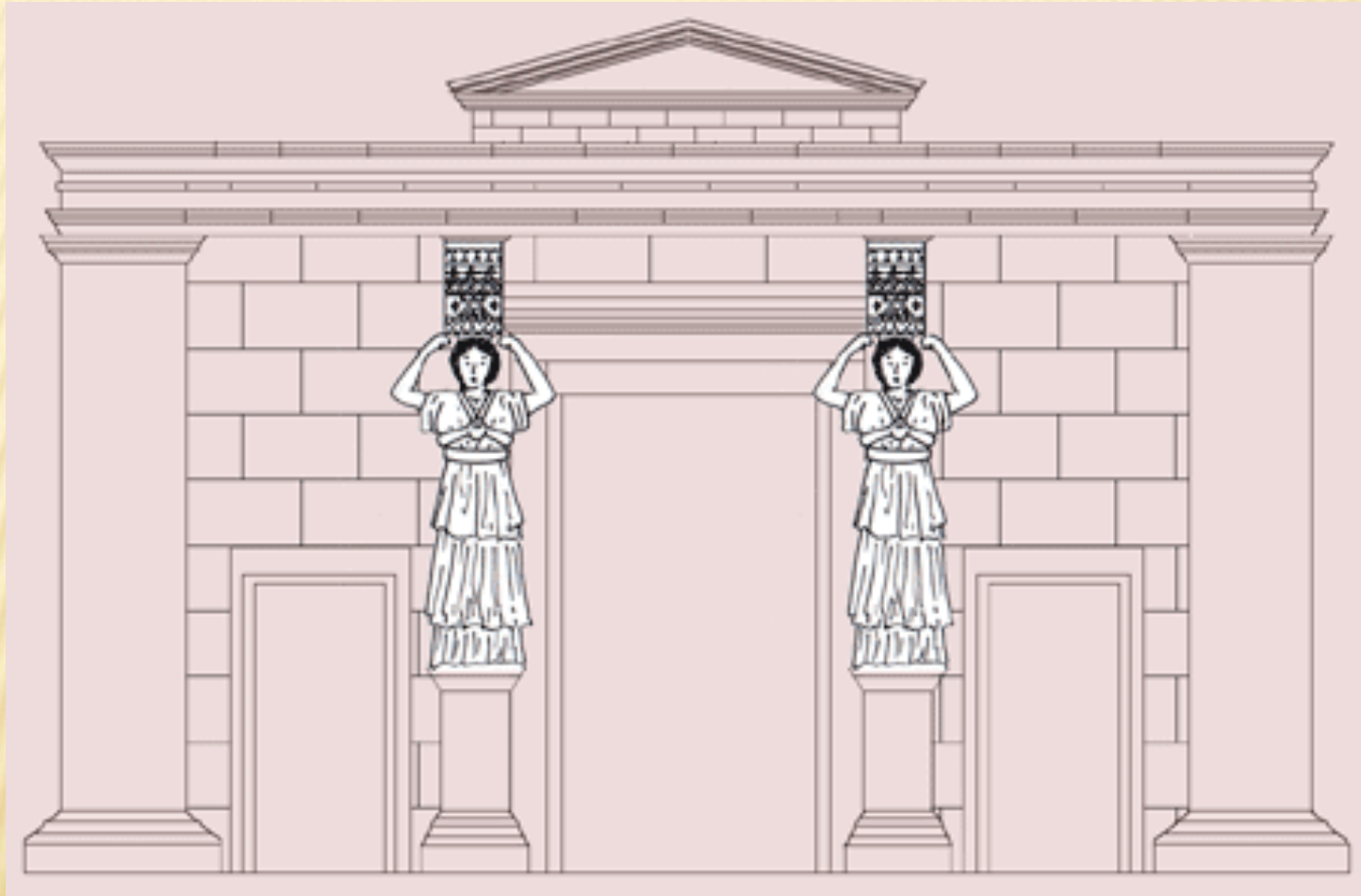
- ✘ Assemble before Great Gate
- ✘ Temple for Guardian of the Gate (Hekate / Artemis)
- ✘ Sacrificial hearth for gods of underworld
- ✘ Well of Beautiful Dances



INNER COURT

- ✘ Procession led by Torch Bearer
- ✘ He represent Eubouleus (Good Council)
 - + who was involved in abduction
 - + instrumental in opening way to underworld
- ✘ In myth: torch-bearing Hekate leads women as torch-bearing Iacchos leads men
- ✘ Pass through Inner Gate

GREAT GATE





PLOUTONION

- ✘ An underworld entrance
- ✘ An *Omphalos* (navel stone) was probably there
 - + bond of divine and human realms
- ✘ Unsmiling Stone



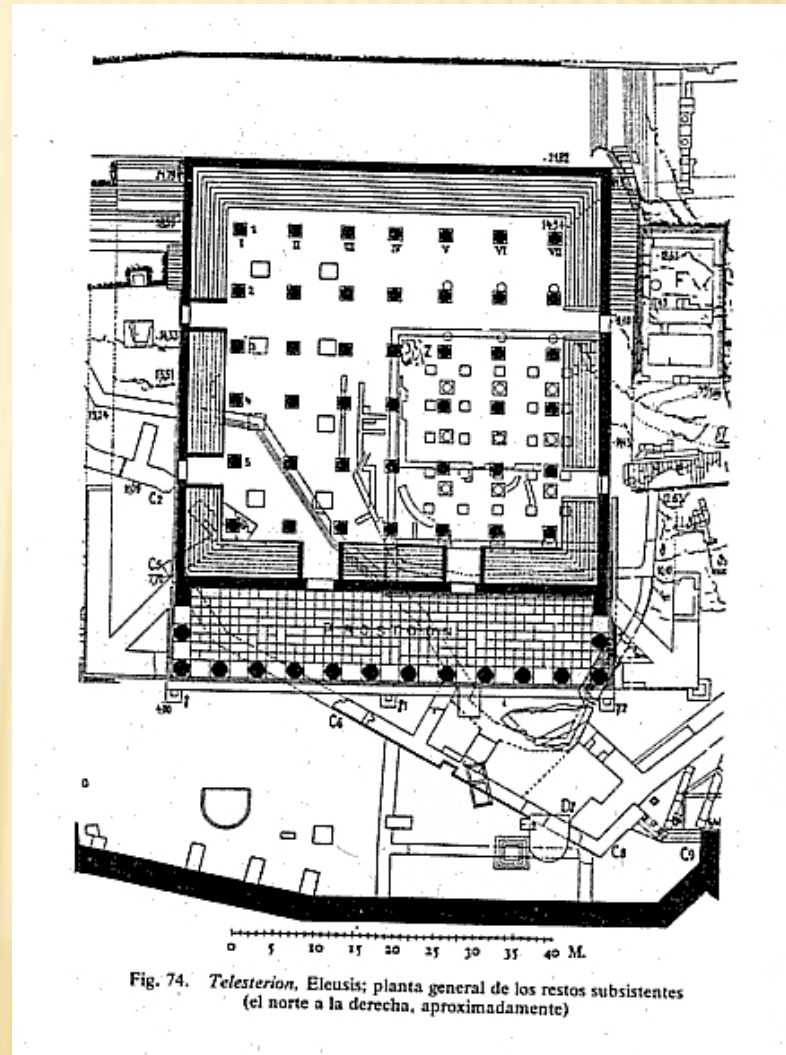


FESTIVE GATHERING IN COURTYARD

- ✘ Between Inner Gate and Telesterion (Hall of Initiation)
- ✘ Boy of Hearth presides (under guidance of priest)
- ✘ He corresponds to Demophoon

TELESTERION (HALL OF INITIATION)

- ✘ Enlarged over the centuries
- ✘ Finally about 170 feet square
- ✘ Initiands stand on steps
- ✘ Filled with 42 (6×7) columns



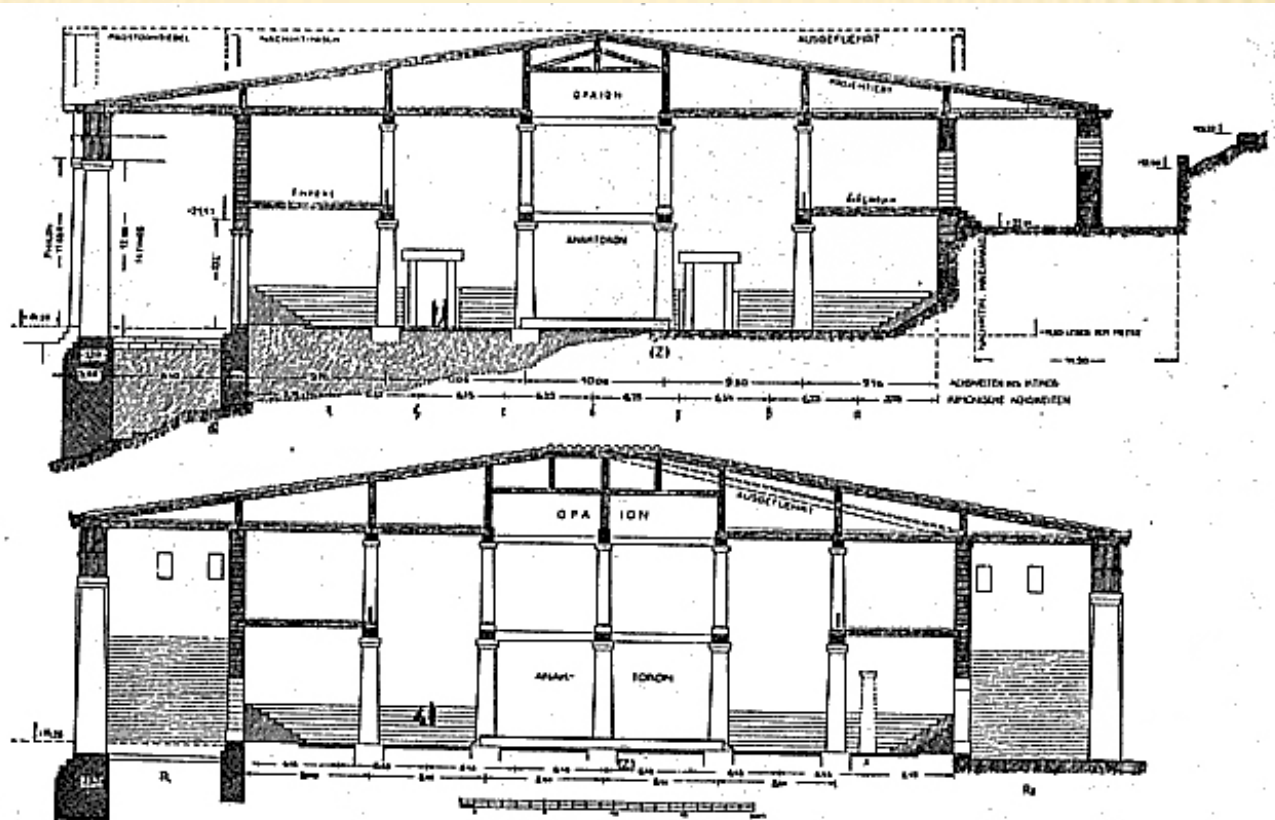


Fig. 76. *Telesterion*, Eleusis; proyecto de Ictino, conjeturalmente reconstruido. (a) arriba: sección este-oeste, con indicación adicional del proyecto en realidad terminado, incluyendo el pórtico de Filón. (b) abajo: sección norte-sur, con indicación adicional de la mitad de la derecha (norte) del proyecto de cubierta que se llegó a realizar, así como de una de las columnas interiores posteriores (x). Bajo cada figura se ofrece una comparación entre los intercolumnios del proyecto de Ictino y el anterior, de Cimón, con las medidas interaxiales

TODAY

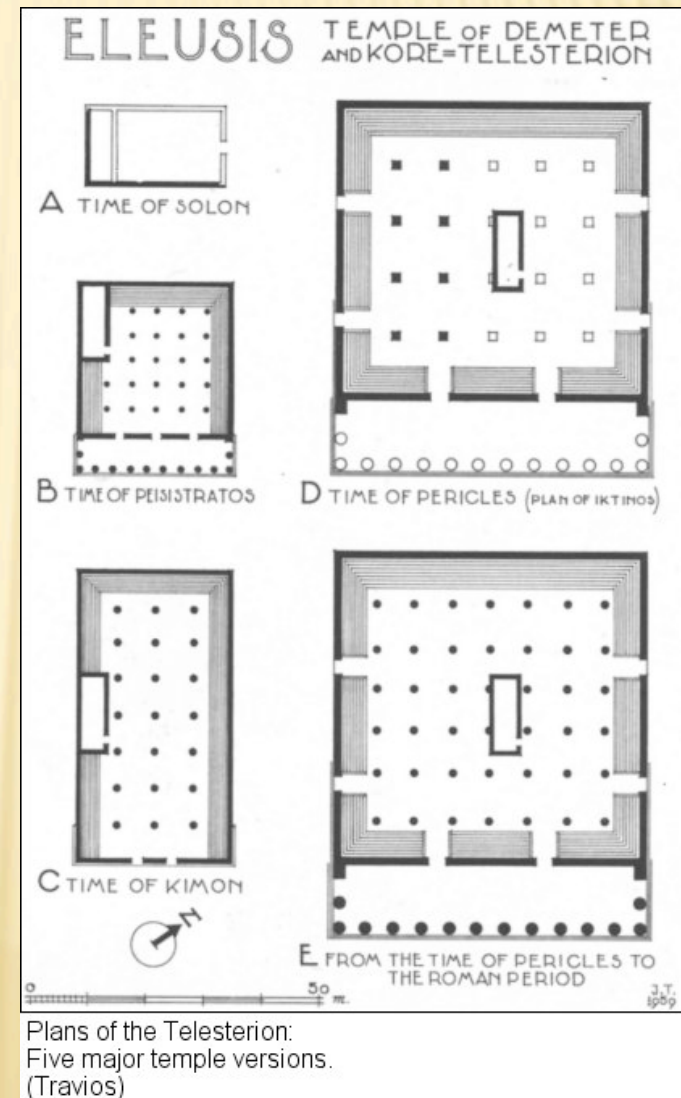




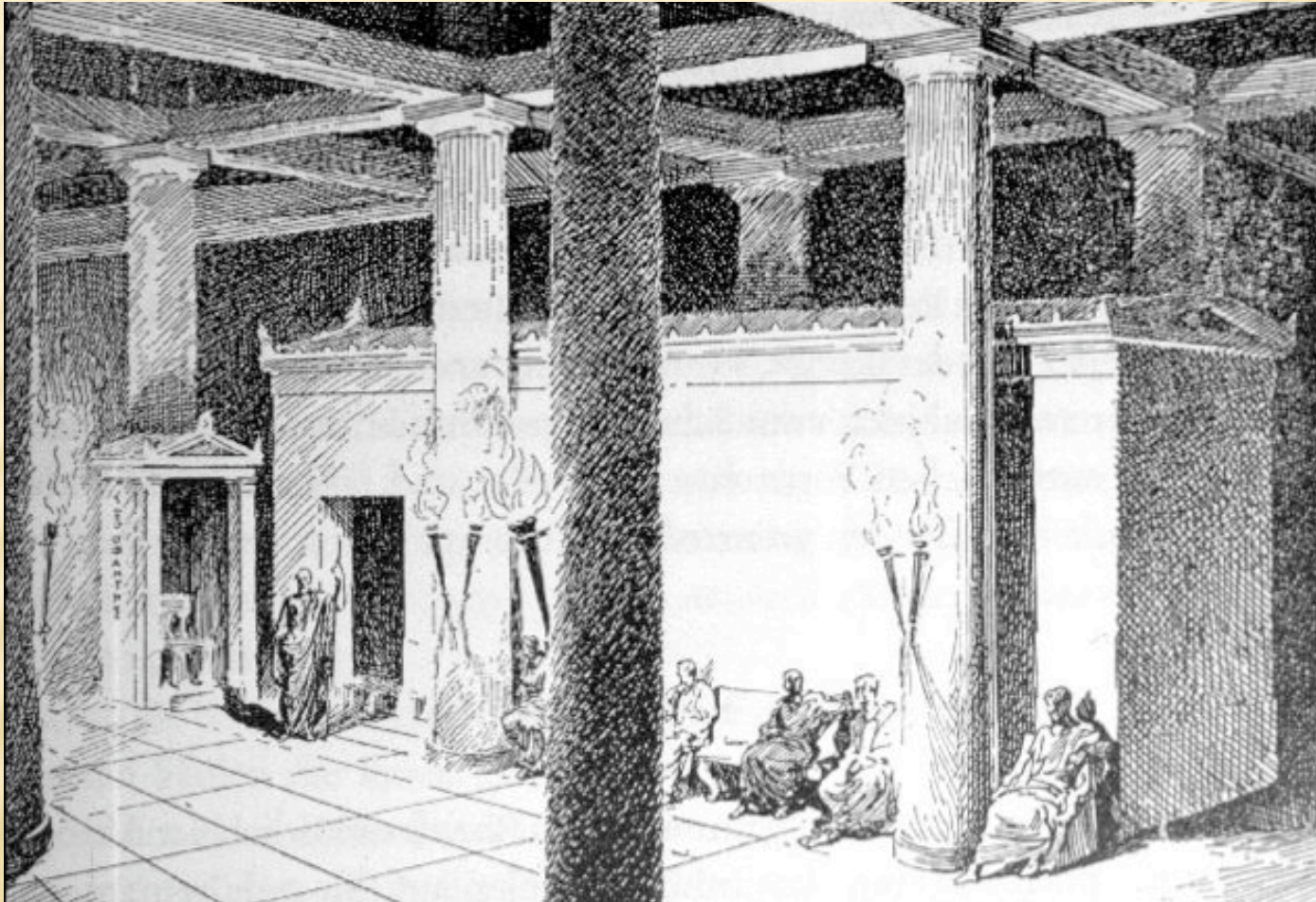


ANAKTORON

- ✘ Not quite in center
- ✘ Never moved
- ✘ Never enlarged
- ✘ About 46' × 16'
- ✘ Entry forbidden
- ✘ Hierophant has a throne on outside, facing door
- ✘ Attains state of passivity & attention



ANAKTORON IN TELESTERION



THUNDER GONG

- ✘ Bronze (metal of underworld)
- ✘ Probably part of archaic rites for the dead
- ✘ Thunder comes from underworld
- ✘ From Subterranean Zeus
- ✘ Hierophants beats gong and intones call to Korê

ILLUMINATION

- ✘ Great light when *anaktoron* opened
- ✘ Fire blazes up
- ✘ Epiphany of Korê



HIEROPHANT'S PROCLAMATION

- ✘ “The Mistress has given birth to a holy boy. Brimo has given birth to Brimos!”
- ✘ (i.e., “the Strong One to the Strong One”)
- ✘ Foreign names for Mother and Son
- ✘ Brimo is a name for Queen of Dead (Demeter, Korê, Hekate)
- ✘ Goddess of Death gives birth in fire.

MOWN EAR OF GRAIN

- ✘ Later, in complete silence, Hierophant exhibits a mown ear of grain.
- ✘ Returns initiates to world of tangible things
- ✘ May summarize Eleusinian message:
 - + Demeter brought gift of grain
 - + Korê brought gift of birth in the underworld

DAY 8: RITES FOR THE DEAD

- ✘ Libations and rites for the dead
- ✘ Two vessels inverted to east and west in cleft in earth
- ✘ *Hue! Kue!*
Flow! Conceive!
- ✘ Invocation of male and female powers of creation



DAY 9: RETURN HOME

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

EFFECTS OF INITIATION

- ✘ “It is like Aristotle’s view that men being initiated have not a lesson to learn, but an experience to undergo and a condition into which they must be brought, while they are becoming fit (for revelation)” — Synesius
- ✘ “Within this hall, the mystics were made to experience the most bloodcurdling sensations of horror and most enthusiastic ecstasy of joy.”
— Aristeides

EFFECTS...

- ✘ “They cause sympathy of the souls in a way that is unintelligible to us, and divine, so that some of the initiands are stricken with panic being filled with divine awe; others assimilate themselves to the holy symbols, leave their own identity, become at home with the gods, and experience divine possession.” — Proclus

WHAT WAS EXPERIENCED?

- ✘ What wasn't:
 - + a mystery drama
 - + a statue
- ✘ What was: A vision of the Korê



ENTHEOGENS?

- ✘ Alcohol?
- ✘ Poley oil?
- ✘ Ergot?
- ✘ Mushrooms?
- ✘ Or is the problem that we moderns cannot imagine a non-chemically induced vision of divinity?

CYCLE OF LIFE

- ✘ “One buries children, one gains new children, one dies oneself; and this men take heavily, carrying earth to earth. But it is necessary to harvest life like a fruit-bearing ear of corn, and that the one be, the other not.” — Euripides
- ✘ Around Athens, burial grounds sown with grain to purify them and return them to the living
- ✘ Plant shoots = *korai*

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER



MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

- ✘ Daughter becomes Mother
- ✘ The Two are cyclically One
- ✘ Separation and Reunion
- ✘ But Persephone is eternally:
 - + Queen of Dead
 - + Daughter/Mother



THE SACRIFICED GOD

- ✘ Many myths in which a divine being dies
- ✘ The death is only an apparent death
- ✘ Henceforth mortal's deaths are only apparent, if they recapitulate the divinity's death
- ✘ A dual continuation (not entirely distinct):
 - + divine
 - + plant-like (unindividualized life)
- ✘ After human suffering & death, a divine/plant life without suffering & death
- ✘ Persephone reveals the way to reach her

ARCHETYPAL REBIRTH AND EVOLUTION

- ✘ Depth psychology: the gods (archetypes) are unconscious structures, shared by all people, regulating perception, motivation, and behavior.
- ✘ Rooted in the human genome.
- ✘ By surrendering the ordinary consciousness to these archetypes we experience ourselves as part of the human species
- ✘ Through your individual life (*bios*) you allow life (*zôê*) to continue and evolve.

SOURCES

- ✘ Homeric Hymn to Demeter
 - + www.sacred-texts.com/cla/demeter.htm
 - + www.stoa.org/diotima/anthology/demeter.shtml
- ✘ Kerényi, *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter*
- ✘ Burkert, *Greek Religion*
- ✘ Willoughby, *Pagan Regeneration*
 - + www.sacred-texts.com/cla/pr
- ✘ Taylor, *The Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries*
 - + www.archive.org/details/eleusinianbacch00tayluoft