Mystics in Antiquity

THE ANCIENT GREEK MYSTERIES

— Bruce MacLennan
“The design of the Mysteries is to lead us back to the perfection from which, as our beginning, we first made our descent."
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

Telesêterion = 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
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
“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
“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
“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
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)
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)
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
PERSEPHONE SEIZED...
- The Maiden cries out to her Mother
- Only the Sun (who sees all things) knows what has happened to her
Demeter hears daughter’s cry
Searches for nine days
Neither eating nor sleeping
Searches by torch light
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
EPHIPHANY ON THE THRESHOLD
Refuses queen’s chair
Iambe spreads white sheep skin over rock (or simple chair)
Rock is near Ploutonion (Underworld entrance)
Veils herself, sits in silence
Fasts
Iambe / Baubo

- Serving woman in palace
- Iambe < iambic meter, the meter of satyric feminine verse
- Baubo = Belly
- Obscene gestures make Demeter laugh
- but do not relieve grief
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 DĒMOPHOŎN
“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 the Underworld, and her husband, Hades.
NEGOTIATING THE RETURN
THE POMEGRANATE
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
Demeter instructs Triptolemos to spread knowledge of agriculture around the 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
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
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.
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 lacche!”
Swing myrtle branches (bacchi)
Plain dark clothes & pilgrim’s staffs
Statue of a young Eleusinian initiate

Dadouchos on red-figured stamnos.
THE ROUTE

- Red dashed line: epheses bring "holy things" to Athens
- Blue dotted line: "Seaward Initiates"
- Black dotted line: Initiates and "holy things" to Eleusis
“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
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?
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.
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
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
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, conjunturalmente reconstruido. (a) arriba: sección este-oeste, con indicación adicional del proyecto en realidad terminado, incluyendo el pártilo de Fílón. (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 *anterion*, de Ción, con las medidas interaxiales.
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

Plans of the Telesterion: Five major temple versions. (Travlos)
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
Great light when *anaktoron* opened
Fire blazes up
Epiphany of Korê
“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.
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?
“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
“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?
“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
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
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

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