

# A RE-EXAMINATION OF THE CULT OF DEMETER AND THE MEANING OF THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES

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Scholarly research relating to the Eleusinian Mysteries is contradictory, ambiguous, confusing and, often, questionable. The polarities in approach seem best exemplified by Mylonas,<sup>1</sup> who insists that the Mysteries have remained mysterious, and Kerényi,<sup>2</sup> who maintains that the themes at Eleusis are basic to the religious experience of man and are penetrable. On the one hand there is a reasonable amount of exoteric material, on the other, the hidden means and meaning that is nowhere directly revealed.

The origin and antiquity of the Eleusinian Mysteries, like those of Dionysos and Orpheus, are not indisputably known. What is known tends to suggest extremely archaic rituals and beliefs, for the mysteries of Demeter and Kore were celebrated at Eleusis centuries before it became a Panhellenic religious center. Mircea Eliade states rather decisively that "the Eleusinian initiation descends directly from an agricultural ritual centered around the death and resurrection of a divinity controlling the fertility of the fields."<sup>3</sup> On this point there seems to be general agreement, as well as recognition of the difficulty of tracing the stages by which an agricultural ritual was transformed into a mystery of regeneration bringing individual salvation. However, to attempt to assign an origin to the cult of Demeter is to plunge immediately into diverse opinions backed by what appears to be sound scholarship.

Nilsson, for example, assigns a Minoan origin to Demeter, for the myth does tell of her journey from Crete to search for her daughter Kore (Persephone), who had been gathering flowers on the plain of Nysa with the daughters of Oceanus, when she was carried off by Hades to the Underworld.<sup>4</sup> When Kore disappears, Demeter causes the earth to become barren, and when she is released for a stipulated period of time each year, the earth produces abundantly. The idea of a goddess of fertility dying each year "is un-Greek; moreover, it does not occur in Asia in this form, and must therefore be considered an original product of Minoan religious genius."<sup>6</sup> In the Near East, Sumerian mythology recounts the rape of the young goddess, Ninlil, and her subsequent descent to the underworld, but fragmentary cuneiform texts merely hint at possible seasonal meaning.<sup>7</sup>



A primary authority, however, is George Mylonas, who has worked intensively at the site of the mysteries. Mylonas denies Demeter's Cretan origin. In spite of the fact that the Homeric Hymn says she was from Crete, he contends that Crete was a convenient name for the indefinite often used by ancient poets.<sup>8</sup> No Cretan objects have been found at Eleusis in 150 years of excavations.<sup>9</sup> Since Egypt has also been suggested as the country of origin of the Demetrian cult,<sup>10</sup> Mylonas is careful to note that no Egyptian objects have appeared either. So, for Mylonas a Cretan or Egyptian origin is not justifiable. There is no proof, although he does not take account of the fact that those objects recovered at Eleusis date from relatively late periods. He favors a northern origin for Demeter, possibly Thrace or Thessaly,<sup>11</sup> since they were agricultural societies as opposed to the Cretan thalassocracy. Personal preferences are, of course, no proof. Neither is it anywhere suggested that because Crete was a maritime culture it adopted a sea-goddess as its major deity. All evidence points to the traditional mother-goddess, i.e. an earth-goddess, in Minoan civilization.

As additional proof of Demeter's Minoan origin Nilsson also mentions the *kernos*, a ritual object used in Crete and also found at Eleusis.<sup>12</sup> The *kernos*, a clay vessel with a number of smaller clay cups attached to it, was ceremonially filled with grains, fruits, oil, wine, etc. and presented as offerings to the deity. Mylonas insists, however, that the *kernos* at Eleusis was an independently developed form based on ritual need, just as the *kernos* of East Christian worship developed out of particular ritualistic needs, although the general type existed in Crete.<sup>13</sup> This is, of course, quite possible, but Mylonas' statement does not prove the lack of an equally possible continuing tradition.

Mylonas also points to the goddess' name. "Demeter" is most Greek.<sup>14</sup> Kerényi agrees. "Da was a primitively ancient name for Ga or Gaia. Da-meter or Da-mater was probably so named in her quality of 'Earth-mother' . . ."<sup>15</sup> But name changes for deities are common to most ancient cultures. The etymology of "Demeter" does not serve to prove that the cult did not originate elsewhere.

For Mylonas an additional reason for the rejection of Crete or Egypt as originating centers lies in the Eleusinian temple forms.

"The Megaron-temple of Demeter . . . is of the normal Greek type and has nothing to do with the shrines of either the Egyptians or the Minoan Cretans. It is a native form developed locally, belonging to the mainland of Greece. This fact will invalidate the argument of the Egyptian or Minoan origin of the cult based upon the square plan of the later telesteria."<sup>16</sup>

That the form of a Greek building should be characteristically Greek has nothing to do with the origin of a cult. The most that can be said is that the building form is not based on Egyptian or Cretan models.

The question of origin is also dealt with by Legge, who points out that in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, her trials on earth, as well as those of Kore, occurred partly in Eleusis and partly in Asia Minor.<sup>17</sup> Concurring with this viewpoint, too, is Saxl, but his comments draw Dionysos into the Eleusinian picture, complicating it still further.

"The two mystery gods of Greece were Demeter and Dionysos . . . Both are vegetation deities. Both are connected with the underworld and with rebirth. Derived from widely different origins the two divinities met at Eleusis and from the classical Greek period onward there was a certain blending of the mysteries of Eleusis with the cult of Dionysos. The third element in this amalgam is the Great Mother from Asia Minor, who came to Athens before the Persian Wars, and was completely assimilated with the Greek Mother-goddess, Demeter."<sup>18</sup>

That Crete and Mycenae had some cultural interchange cannot be ruled out as the means by which Demeter was absorbed into the Greek mainland. It must also be acknowledged



that Crete had extensive trade relations with Egypt and Asia Minor, which allowed for the flow of ideas as well as material goods. Nor were the Mycenaeans strangers to Egypt, having served as mercenaries in the expulsion of the Hyksos from Egyptian soil. Nevertheless, Mylonas very carefully demolishes all arguments attempting to prove, from artifacts, ancient texts, etc., that the cult of Demeter existed before Mycenaean times, or had its roots in cultures removed from the Greek mainland. His empirical orientation gives a certain weight to his arguments, but considering the ancient and universal character of the earth-mother, the fragmentary finds, the lack of negative or positive proof, he may easily be wrong. There remains the uneasy feeling that for Mylonas proof of a Greek origin seems a necessity. Yet his own admission of uncertainty is clear when he eloquently, and romantically, speaks of standing amid the ancient ruins on moonlit evenings hoping that the proof he longs for will appear.<sup>19</sup>

Quite a different orientation appears in Kerényi for whom external proof seems far less important than meaning. When Kerényi writes of Demeter, the Earth-mother, he writes, too, of the Primordial Child, both certainly adhering to the Mysteries at Eleusis.

“We cannot with any certainty derive it from Crete, nor ascribe it exclusively to the sphere of old Mediterranean culture. We can, however, assert that in Crete there existed an older sphere of culture . . . the spirit of which was more fundamentally mythological . . . the mythologem of the Primitive Child is characteristic not of this recent but of an older mentality.”<sup>20</sup>

Drawing from all sources in an attempt at a collective statement, it seems that Crete, Mycenae, and Asia contributed to what became a specifically Greek phenomenon.

The second half of the 15th century B.C. is the traditional date for the introduction of the cult of Demeter, as well as for the first sowing of wheat on the Rarian Plain at Eleusis.<sup>21</sup> This is derived both from indications in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter and from excavations.<sup>22</sup> The earliest Temple of Demeter, the one believed mentioned in the Hymn, was found on the east slope of the citadel of Eleusis in 1931.<sup>23</sup> Sacred places have a way of remaining sacred and building after building was erected on the same site even though the terrain was not always the easiest to deal with. Mylonas carefully examines the results of the excavations, dealing with successive periods and successive political rules, right up through Roman times until the end of the 5th century A.D. when the Sanctuary was destroyed, probably by Early Christians.<sup>24</sup>

Of all the religions of the Greeks, it was the Mysteries of Eleusis that drew the attention of the entire Hellenic world. Sometime in the autumn of each year messengers proclaiming the Sacred Truce, to ensure peace for the ceremonies, were sent to all countries where there might be Athenians. It was under Solon (6th century B.C.) that the Mysteries formed part of the Athenian sacred rites as provided in his special laws,<sup>25</sup> although their Panhellenic nature is already indicated by the *Proerosia*, a festival and sacrifice held as early as 760 B.C.<sup>26</sup> On some autumnal day, then, a great crowd would gather for a festival that lasted almost two weeks. After the worshippers had congregated there was the “proclamation of the hierophant that none but those unpolluted by crime and of intelligible speech, i.e. not barbarians, might take part in the Mysteries.”<sup>27</sup> Then a procession of initiates looked at the sacred objects, never specified, that had been brought from Eleusis under guard and placed in the Eleusinion at the base of the Acropolis. This was followed by the celebrants going to the harbor of Phalerum to wash themselves and the animals intended for sacrifice in salt water, believing that the sea washed away their sins.

“After a time spent in sacrificing and austerities very proper for bringing the worshippers into a receptive state of mind, there was formed a long procession which paced the Sacred Way, twelve miles long, from Athens to Eleusis, beguiling the road with hymns and choruses addressed to Iacchos, the infant



Dionysos, who was supposed to lead the procession from his Athenian temple, the Iaccheion, with a pause at the bridge over the Cephissus, where the crowd exchanged coarse jokes and sarcasms in a manner peculiarly Attic."<sup>28</sup>

The coarse jokes refer to those told to Demeter by Iambe, a servant of Queen Metaneira, at whose palace Demeter paused in her search for Kore. Legge continues with a step-by-step detailing of events: the arrival by night at the Telesterion (Hall of Initiations) at Eleusis, where the sky was light from the many torches, then more sacrifices, a sacred banquet, and possibly "the mystic cyceon or consecrated drink was partaken of..."<sup>29</sup>

Surrounding the Hall were temples to Demeter, Hades, and Kore, and after appropriate sacrifices there, the initiates supposedly viewed a sacred drama, the actors being the priests of the cult. The priesthood was restricted to two ancient families, the Eumolpidae and the Kerykes, thus heredity, and Legge, adds, "highly paid."<sup>30</sup> There is some question regarding the "dramatic" presentations. "... a visit to the telesterion of Eleusis is convincing evidence that a drama, in the scenographic sense of the word could not have been enacted there."<sup>31</sup> Nor were simulated Underworld journeys possible.<sup>32</sup> Mylonas believes "that the story was developed in and out of the Telesterion, around the very landmarks supposed to have been consecrated by the actual experience and presence of Demeter."<sup>33</sup> It is more than a little difficult to envision great crowds of people moving around the Sanctuary with any semblance of the order that attaches itself to religious ceremony. It is far more likely that the ritual was a formal one. "... early Greek religion, at least, is largely a matter of performance, and this was the basis of the Mysteries."<sup>34</sup>

There were three degrees of initiation at Eleusis: preparation and probation (katharsis), initiation and communion (muesis), and blessedness and salvation (epopteia). These had their visual and ritual parallels in the history of Dionysos shown at the Lesser Mysteries; the rape of Kore and Demeter's wanderings at the Greater Mysteries; and the Epopsy, shown only to second-year initiates, which revealed the sacred marriage of Zeus and Demeter, and the birth of Iacchos, the new Dionysos. Demeter is the corn-mother, the grain-producing earth. Her union with Zeus, the sky-god, becomes a necessity, for without heavenly events, the warmth of sun, the wet of rain, it would do little good to bear the seed.

But how was this shown when "the archeological findings are decisively against the supposition of a mystery-theatre, either in the Telesterion or outside it. And not a single text speaks a word in its favor."<sup>35</sup> Could it have been a mystery dance, as Kerényi suggests, and the "secret" of Eleusis an injunction against telling *how* the mystery was presented? "Dancing formed part of the initiation ceremonies of the ancient Mysteries, and to such a degree of refinement was it carried that the theologies of certain sects were said to be more clearly expressed by gesticulations than by... words..."<sup>36</sup> Richardson, in examining the Homeric Hymn, also indicates the likelihood of dancing with torches.<sup>37</sup>

The Temple of Demeter did not primarily serve to house a cult image as other Greek temples did.<sup>38</sup> However, it did contain a place for sacred objects; more importantly, services of some sort were held there for large crowds of initiates. Through some ritualistic sequence the stories of Kore, Demeter, and the sacred marriage were unfolded.

"In the Eleusinian mysteries the 'holy marriage,' ... and the birth of the child that succeeded to this, were signs of salvation: 'Is not the gloomy descent there, and the solemn meeting between the hierophant and the priestess, he alone and she alone? Are not the lamps extinguished? And does not the vast and countless assembly of the people believe that what they two accomplish in the darkness means their salvation?' And when the torches were lit once more the saviour's birth was solemnly announced to the people. Thus sexual union was... this Power and had the form of a saviour..."<sup>39</sup>



The symbolism of light and darkness, the birth of a child, and the ear of corn are elements obtainable from the hymn.<sup>40</sup>

The Dionysos born of the sacred marriage was not the god of wine (Thebes) but Dionysos Zagreus, the hunter (Crete).<sup>41</sup> Occasionally Dionysos is referred to as resulting from the union of Zeus, in the form of a serpent, and his daughter Kore; this from an Orphic story.<sup>42</sup> And Zeus of Eleusis was not the Zeus of Olympos. He was invoked at Eleusis as Zeus Chthonios (infernial), Zeus Eubuleus (good counsel), Pluton (bringer of riches), etc., but he was always king of the dead.<sup>43</sup> Dionysos, too, was referred to by Heraclitus of Ephesus as being the same god as Hades, thus also king of the dead. "In this double capacity, Dionysos was therefore the brother, father, and spouse of his consort Demeter, of whom he was also the child. He might therefore be considered one of the first instances known in the history of religions as a god who was, according to the way in which he was regarded, either father or son."<sup>44</sup>

Fusion is reflected in the goddesses as well, for they too had this special unity in which each was the other, each an aspect of one goddess.

"The goddess by whom Zeus begat Persephone was originally his mother Rhea: Demeter appears as a third party interposed between mother and daughter, both of whom appeared earlier in Greece than she did. She is described as Rhea's alter ego, yet she is also identified with Persephone: Zeus begat Dionysos . . . by Demeter or by Persephone."<sup>45</sup>

The iconographic symbols that accrue to Demeter-Kore seem entirely appropriate to a goddess of fertility and resurrection. As a figure for nourishment, votive statuettes of pigs, or reliefs showing initiates holding pigs, have been found at Eleusis. The pig was sacred to Demeter (as well as to Isis)<sup>46</sup> and appears mythologically in the form of Eubuleus and his herd of swine disappearing into the earth with Kore after witnessing her rape. The sow is apt to have a large litter, and since the piglets all manage to be suckled simultaneously it is not surprising that it became a symbol of sustenance. Kerényi calls the pig the "uterine animal" of the earth.<sup>47</sup> The sow was each initiate's sacrificial offering at the beginning of the autumn festival, and at that time, too, the putrified remains of the preceding year's pigs were retrieved, mixed with corn and placed on the altar in commemoration of Eubuleus and to promote good crops.<sup>48</sup>

Nor is it surprising to find heads of wheat associated with the Goddess(es), and the pelanos, a sacred cake of wheat and barley was offered as sacrifice in the Greater Mysteries.<sup>49</sup> Demeter is the Corn-goddess and the Mother-goddess: grain and motherhood in symbolic union. Within the framework of the myth Demophon (Demophon), Queen Metaneira's son, is treated as grain, placed in the fire in order to make him immortal.<sup>50</sup>

"Does the goddess, perhaps overstep the bounds of the humanly possible by reason of her sovereignty in that other domain of hers, which includes the fate of the grain? And not only by reason of her power, but because of her form? It would seem so, when we consider that the Demetrian fruit is perfected for human nourishment in the fire. Whether it is parched or baked as bread, death by fire is the fate of the grain."<sup>51</sup>

Another fundamental symbol of the Mysteries of Eleusis is the torch. Whether it is "one torch, two torches held by the same goddess, three torches in a row, or the crossed torch with four lights, all these occur as attributes of both Demeter and Persephone."<sup>52</sup> Are the torches, as light, symbols of knowledge? Is the flaming torch the Divine Child, the light of the world? Pindar, in the opening passage of his work on reincarnation and life after death, equates the child with light and knowledge.<sup>53</sup> A flame is never still, it connotes time and movement, it consumes. If the lighted torch is associated with the Divine Child, there must have been an automatic association with the future.<sup>54</sup> The tendency is to see the "child's" transformation into youth and adult, while carrying



within him qualities of innocence and perfection. In this sense the child image is a hope image. Dionysos, as the fruit of the sacred marriage, becomes the male counterpart of Kore.

The Eleusinian mysteries, like other Greek mysteries, were based on divine myth, and the myth of Demeter is, in effect, the unfolding of her nature. The sequence of rites at Eleusis, then, symbolically reactualized the ancient mythological events: in this way the mystes were led by stages into the presence of the divine. By participating in ritual, i.e. searching for Kore, rejoicing when found, etc., time was annihilated and the events occurred there and then.<sup>55</sup> It was a move toward mythological time, sacred time. "It is by virtue of the nearness of the Goddesses, and finally of their *presence*, that the initiate will have the unforgettable experience of initiation."<sup>56</sup> It is subjective experience plus the sacramental acts that combine to bring about the change. The initiate already knew the myth and was probably not taught any secret doctrine, although the form which the myth took in the mysteries themselves must have differed considerably from their presentation in literature.<sup>57</sup> It was Clement of Alexandria who wrote of the sacred formula: "I fasted, I drank the *kykeon*, I took out of the chest, having done the act I put again into the basket, and from the basket into the chest."<sup>58</sup>

Initiation is a transition, a rite of passage, and indicates a new beginning, and thus a rebirth. "... those adopted by the deity in the mysteries were looked upon as *deuteropotmoi*, 'those to whom a second destiny was given'."<sup>59</sup> Considering the awe and terror inspired by the great deities of the Underworld who controlled men's lives on earth and after death, what would prompt the mystes to submit voluntarily to initiation, involving as it did the dread oath of secrecy, which injunction even the Homeric Hymn preserves? Later writers, i.e. Sophocles and Pindar, told of the unhappy fate of sinners and the uninitiated, for the underworld was seen as a place of physical decay, a hell of mud and slime. Initiation brought the hope or the assurance of an ineffable state of existence, if not now, at least in the future when the mysterious transition from life into death took place. "Everywhere there is this spiritual regeneration, a *palingensis*, which found its expression in the radical change in the mystes's existential status."<sup>61</sup> The constituent elements necessary for this to occur were the goddess' summons, the neophyte's own readiness, and the performance of rituals. The initiated, men and women alike, regarded themselves as being one with the goddess, and to experience the Demetrian passion to the full was to pass through events that led to the ultimate understanding of what it meant to suffer mortality and to be born again.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>George E. Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries*, (Princeton, N.J., 1961).

<sup>2</sup>Carl (Károly) Kerényi, *The Gods of the Greeks*, (London and New York, 1951).

<sup>3</sup>Mircea Eliade, *Birth and Rebirth*, (New York, 1958), p. 41.

<sup>4</sup>Martin P. Nilsson, *Minoan-Mycenaean Religion and its Survival in Greek Religion*, C.W.K. Gleerup, Lund, 1950, p. 528.

<sup>5</sup>*The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, ed. by N.J. Richardson, (Oxford, 1974), p. 75.

<sup>6</sup>Nilsson, *op. cit.*, p. 528.

<sup>7</sup>Samuel Noah Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer*, (Garden City, N.Y., 1959), pp. 84-88.

<sup>8</sup>Mylonas, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup>P. Foucart, *Les Mysteres d'Eleusis*, (Paris, 1914), pp. 20-40.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>12</sup>Nilsson, *op. cit.*, pp. 450-453.

<sup>13</sup>Mylonas, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>15</sup>Kerényi, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

- <sup>16</sup>Mylonas, *op. cit.*, p. 49. The "Telesterion" is the Hall of Initiation.
- <sup>17</sup>Francis Legge, *Forerunners and Rivals of Christianity*, (New Hyde Park, N.Y., 1964), p. 38.
- <sup>18</sup>F. Saxl, *Lectures*, (London, 1957), p. 27.
- <sup>19</sup>Mylonas, *op. cit.*, p. 281.
- <sup>20</sup>C.G. Jung and C. Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology*, (New York, 1963), p. 65.
- <sup>21</sup>Mylonas, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
- <sup>22</sup>Richardson, *op. cit.*, pp. 4 & 13. The Hymn dates from the 7th-6th century, B.C. and reflects a relatively late stage in the development of the cult. Richardson confirms that for the early stages, archeology, other versions of the Hymn, and the testimony of later writers must be consulted.
- <sup>23</sup>Mylonas, *op. cit.*, p. 34.
- <sup>24</sup>S. Angus, *The Mystery-Religions and Christianity*, (New York, 1925), p. vii. Angus more specifically states that the Sanctuary was destroyed by the fanatic monks in the train of Alaric in 396 A.D.
- <sup>25</sup>Mylonas, *op. cit.*, p. 63.
- <sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 7.
- <sup>27</sup>Legge, *op. cit.*, p. 38.
- <sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 39. Iacchos was identical with Dionysos at least as early as the time of Sophocles.
- <sup>29</sup>*Ibid.* Kykeon was a mixture of barley flour, water, and mint, the drink offered to Demeter by Queen Metaneira, to refresh her after his unsuccessful and exhausting search for Kore.
- <sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup>Angus, *op. cit.*, p. 58.
- <sup>32</sup>F. Noack, *Eleusis, die baugeschichtliche Entwicklung des Heiligtums*, (Berlin, 1927), p. 236ff.
- <sup>33</sup>Mylonas, *op. cit.*, p. 263.
- <sup>34</sup>Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
- <sup>35</sup>Jung and Kerényi, *op. cit.*, p. 141.
- <sup>36</sup>Harold Bayley, *The Last Language of Symbolism*, New York, 1951, p. 196.
- <sup>37</sup>Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
- <sup>38</sup>Mylonas, *op. cit.*, p. 79.
- <sup>39</sup>C. Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Manifestation and Essence*, (New York, 1963), p. 369, and Richardson, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-27.
- <sup>40</sup>Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
- <sup>41</sup>Legge, *op. cit.*, pp. 46-47.
- <sup>42</sup>Kerényi, *op. cit.*, p. 252.
- <sup>43</sup>Legge, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
- <sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>45</sup>Kerényi, *op. cit.*, p. 252.
- <sup>46</sup>Bayley, *op. cit.*, p. 90.
- <sup>47</sup>Jung and Kerényi, *op. cit.*, p. 119.
- <sup>48</sup>E.O. James, *The Ancient Gods*, (New York, 1960), p. 161.
- <sup>49</sup>Mylonas, *op. cit.*, p. 219.
- <sup>50</sup>Jung and Kerényi, *op. cit.*, p. 116.
- <sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 118.
- <sup>53</sup>Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 318.
- <sup>54</sup>Jung and Kerényi, *op. cit.*, p. 110.
- <sup>55</sup>Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 315. The present tense is used in the closing lines of the hymn.
- <sup>56</sup>Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 110.
- <sup>57</sup>Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 306.
- <sup>58</sup>Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 110.
- <sup>59</sup>Van der Leeuw, *op. cit.*, p. 529.
- <sup>60</sup>Richardson, *op. cit.*, pp. 310-315.
- <sup>61</sup>Jung and Kerényi, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

