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ANCIENT MYSTERIES

CHARLES STEIN

I Introduction

The institutions known as “mysteries” in Ancient Greece consisted of rites of initiation that offered individual access to the presence and power of the gods. Some of the mysteries were celebrated as early as Mycenaean times but had affinities with, and probable sources in, even earlier shamanic, goddess-cult, and Neolithic practices. In the Classical age, we find mysteries of Demeter and Persephone, The Great Mother, the gods at Samothrace and Andania. The mysteries of Dionysus were performed throughout Hellas, as were the mysteries of the ancient poet-prophet-hero Orpheus, probably in private settings. Later, in the Hellenistic period, there were mysteries of Isis and Osiris. And in Imperial times, mysteries of Mithras competed with Christianity for spiritual hegemony in the Empire. By far the most well known were the mysteries of Demeter and Persephone celebrated at Eleusis outside of Athens.

The ancient Greek language has two words for “that which is not to be spoken of”: *arrheton* and *aporrheton*. The first translates as “the ineffable”: that which, in principle, *cannot* be brought to speech; the second refers to that about which discourse is *forbidden*. The prohibition against speaking or writing of the ineffable may be statutory, as in classical Athens, or self-imposed, following from religious conviction.

The word “mysteries” (*ta mysteria*) comes to us directly from the Greek *mysterion*, “a secret rite,” which derives from two linked verbs: *myo* and *myeo*. *Myo* means to close up or conceal, as in closing the eyes and stopping the ears or as when a flower closes itself at nightfall. *Myeo* means to initiate – for example, to initiate someone into the mysteries. The mysteries in Ancient Greece concealed initiatory secrets that were both incapable of being rendered verbally and of which the initiate was forbidden to speak. The secret or

secrets of each had to do with the experience of the deity. At Eleusis, it seems that the celebration culminated in a theophany of Demeter and/or Persephone, in which the celebrants participated.

2 The Eleusinian Mysteries

The Eleusinian Mysteries (or, more specifically, their culminating events) occurred fourteen miles west of Athens on the Bay of Salamis and were framed as a festival of Demeter and Persephone. They were held annually until the Christian authorities destroyed all pagan rites and attempted to eradicate authentic knowledge of pagan traditions. Initiation took place in two phases: (1) The Lesser Mysteries, known as *myesis*: initiation. Initiates were called *mystai* (singular, *mystes*); (2) the Greater Mysteries, the *epopteia*: “things seen.” Persons who had completed them were *epopts*.

Prospective initiates came from everywhere and every walk of life. Even mythical personages such as Herakles were said to have sought initiation. There were two conditions for participation: knowledge of the Greek language and innocence of blood guilt. These conditions satisfied, all were welcomed who could afford the fees charged by the Eleusinian officials and the price of certain sacrificial animals.

What we actually know of the rites, beyond the archaeological remains, derives from fragmentary remarks in speeches, poems, and plays and from the writings of ancient scholiasts, Church Fathers, and philosophers. From these, we can learn something of the circumstances surrounding the mysteries, their mythology, and their history – along with a few tantalizing details about what *might* have occurred during the rite in the Telesterion, the temple hall where the *epopteia* took place. From hints, guesses, and hearsay remarks (by persons not necessarily sympathetic to Eleusis such as early Christian heresiologists), scholars have deduced that the Hierophant (the high priest) invoked the presence of the goddesses by removing certain sacred objects from the recesses of the temple, one of which was an ear of grain; that Persephone had given birth to an infant (possibly Dionysus) in the Underworld; and that at the decisive moment a special gong sounded, an enormous fire flared, the Underworld opened, and apparitions of Persephone and/or Demeter rose in the hall. All this transpired in an atmosphere of holy hush and pious expectation. We also know that in early Imperial times, as many as three thousand *mystai* celebrated together, and that the potential *epopts* imbibed a potion known as the *kykeon*.

It has been argued, with some plausibility, that the content of the *kykeon* was a psychotropic agent derived from the ergot on rye grown in Demeter’s

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honor and pharmacologically similar to lysergic acid diethylamide.¹ An attempt to challenge the plausibility of this hypothesis has been offered by Walter Burkert in his *Ancient Mystery Cults*,² and I have attempted to rebut Burkert and restore its plausibility in *Persephone Unveiled*.³ In any case, some synergy of mythic representations, physical exhaustion, fasting, dancing, theophanic dramaturgy, consumption of entheogens, not to mention a year and a half of training, would have made possible the transforming effect.

The most important single piece of evidence concerning the mysteries is a poem from approximately the seventh century BCE, written in the same poetic tradition as the Homeric texts and recounting the famous story of Demeter and Persephone, including Demeter's founding of the mysteries. (I give a translation and exegesis of the *Hymn* in *Persephone Unveiled*.) The founding of the mysteries appears toward the end of it, only after Demeter has attempted to bestow immortality on the son of the king of the Eleusinians. This fails when the king's wife sees Demeter working her magic on the child and fears for his life. Demeter interrupts the procedure, rages at mortals for their incapacity to recognize the presence of a deity, reveals herself as a goddess, and commands the people of Eleusis to build a temple in her honor. The lesson seems to be that if there is to be commerce between gods and humans, some special form of mediation must be devised. The mysteries are instituted to allow the overwhelming experience of divine immanence to occur without resulting in disastrous misunderstanding. As we shall see, it may be that true contact with the divine subverts the very basis of human values and must itself be contextualized so that it can be made to serve human institutions.

The *mysis*, the Lesser Mysteries, were celebrated in Classical times, not in Eleusis but in Agrai on the banks of the Illisos just outside of Athens. The Greater Mysteries, culminating with the *epopteia*, were performed in the Telesterion at Eleusis. The Lesser Mysteries were purificatory in character and began the initiates' training; to facilitate this, a *mystagog* (trainer) was assigned to each initiate. A year and a half elapsed between the two phases, during which time the *mystes* would have been occupied to some degree with the issues, myths, beliefs, and practices connected with initiation.

The Greater Mysteries consisted of a week-long series of events at Athens, followed by a procession on the Sacred Road to Eleusis, and finally the Holy

¹ See Gordon R. Wasson, Albert Hoffman, and Carl A. P. Ruck, *The Road to Eleusis: Unveiling the Secrets of the Mysteries* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2008).

² Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

³ Charles Stein, *Persephone Unveiled: Seeing the Goddess and Freeing Your Soul* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2006), 104ff.

Night during which the climactic *teletai* (the rites themselves) were performed. The *hiera*, the holy objects, stored during the year in the Anaktoron, the inner core of the Telesterion, were brought to Athens at the beginning of the week and then returned to Eleusis in the ritual procession along the Sacred Road. They were carried in mystical *kistai* or baskets on the heads of the priestesses of the mysteries. During the week in Athens, each initiate underwent special purifications and performed the sacrifice of a pig sacred to Demeter. In the procession, at the end of the week, the initiates were led back to Eleusis by Dionysus himself in the form of a wooden statue of Iacchus. On the road to Eleusis, the initiates sang energetic sacred songs and paid homage to various sacred sites along the way.

Just outside Eleusis, the procession crossed a long, narrow bridge over the river Kephisos, thought to be haunted by Underworld spirits, who assaulted the celebrants and attempted to impede their way to the temple grounds. As part of the effort to ward off these entities, various comic personages would accost the procession, relieving for a moment the solemn mood. This part of the mysteries was known as “bridge jests” and deployed a troop of actors impersonating and mocking well-known local dignitaries. Among the jesters would be Baubo, a portly, impish creature with a face painted on her belly, who ran about lifting her skirts and shouting lewd jokes. The entire event, both terrifying and bawdy, served to open the spirits of the celebrants to unimagined events to come. Their energy, piety, and enthusiasm for initiation merged with abject terror as the *mystai* walked along the haunted bridge. Then the initiates were further agitated by a spirit of mockery and hilarity.

On arrival at the temple grounds, the initiates passed under arches and in front of monuments, gazed at sculptures and painted scenes (depicting images from Eleusinian mythology), and visited a small temple dedicated to Hekate. The procession stopped at the Ploutonion, a shrine consecrated to Hades. The Ploutonion was a cave in the hillside thought to be an access to the Underworld and above which stood the citadel of Eleusis. Before entering the Telesterion, the *mystai* participated in sacred dances – initiatic processes in their own right, bringing the somatic energies of the *mystai* into both mimetic and dynamic alignment with events to come. At some point in these proceedings, the initiates imbibed the *kykeon*. After the dances, the *mystai* entered the temple, passing first through the outer and then the inner *propylaea* (monumental gateway). Within the latter were large statues of the priestesses with the *kistai* on their heads as caryatids about the entranceway.

Once on the temple grounds, the identification of the *mystai* with mythological figures and stories sacred to the mysteries would have grown ever

richer and more compelling as image imitated image, and the concrete reality of what the *mystai* enacted became still more complexly represented by what they saw around them. Statues representing the timeless identities of the bearers of the holy objects were seen by the initiates as soon as they began to enter the inner chambers of the sacred precinct, each new entrance conducting them closer to the innermost recess of the Telesterion where the secret itself (perhaps revealed as the inner meaning of the sacred objects) awaited them.

Various other pedestals and friezes, some of which survive in fragments, depicted the procession itself, so that the ceremonial space, replete with such imagery, would have contributed to the identification of the *mystai* with the meaning of the procession. At the end of the sequence of these images would have been the two goddesses themselves, Demeter seated, Persephone on a dark throne behind her, so that there would have been a continuous flow of initiatory events leading directly to the goddesses. The *mystai* moved ever closer to the place where the mystical manifestation of the goddesses would occur, and this sense of approach would have been reinforced by the celebrants' relation to the imagery that appeared along the way.

Although identification with the images would have reached a crescendo of intensity in this manner, it is important to realize that it is not this identification that constituted the secret. The ordinary identities of the *mystai* were being exchanged for identities associated with the mysteries, so that, as we shall see, at the culminating moment, identity as such could be released or transformed.

We know something of the external events that induced this transformation from reports and surmises. The Hierophant, the leading official, whose name means "the one who causes the holy things to appear," is said to have revealed the *hiera*, the secret objects sacred to Demeter. A mighty light is reported to have arisen from the *Anaktoron* as a fire that could be seen for miles around. *Phantasmata* – ghostly appearances – are reported to have floated and trembled about the Telesterion, culminating in the phantasmic appearance of Persephone herself. Persephone also appeared among the flames with the infant Dionysus in her arms or with her mother, Demeter; or Persephone and Demeter appeared as one. The Hierophant showed a single ear of grain to the initiates. A special gong was struck, creating the effect of deep-echoing thunder bellowing from the Underworld. The Hierophant proclaimed in a high voice, "The Mistress has given birth to a holy child. Brimo [The Strong One] has given birth to Brimos [The Strong One]."

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Undergoing the *epopteia* left the *epopt* in a state of profound awe of the gods and in some way possessed of a new confidence in his or her relation to existence beyond the grave. When the initiate entered the space of the gods – a world replete with divine figures, gestures, meanings, stories, attitudes – it would have become possible for the secret to be experienced directly.

3 The Secret of the Eleusinian Mysteries

Any attempt to theorize about the “the ineffable secret” must necessarily be highly speculative. Nevertheless, it is possible to formulate a reasonable conjecture as to what may have been imparted at Eleusis, based on the aforementioned testimonia, as well as knowledge of classical Greek thought and culture. The only rules governing such a conjecture are that it must not only accord with but also illuminate the available evidence – and it must offer some account of the secret that can shed light on why so many of the ancients found their experience at Eleusis to be profoundly life changing.

The Greeks, as is commonly known, valued clear forms in their art, clear concepts in their philosophy, fixed prerogatives for their gods, and determinate identities for themselves. “Count no man happy until he is dead,” said Solon to Croesus, because the quality of one’s existence – what we would call our true identity – could not be ultimately defined without the closure of death. In the most explicit rendition of the afterlife from the Hellenic world – the eleventh book of *The Odyssey* – we are shown a tableau of ghost-souls, each of whom has a well-defined identity, but each of whom also finds this condition an abject misery. The suffering of the dead is precisely the loss of the open possibilities of life that are cut off by fixed identity.

The mysteries offered to their initiates an experience that alleviated the fear of death. But what could this experience have been? Would it not have had to offer something beyond the grim termination of possibilities that *The Odyssey* so vividly portrays? The Eleusinian Mysteries culminated in a vision of the divine, the *seeing* of which transformed the initiate. It cannot be far from the mark to say that this seeing afforded a connection, even an identification, not simply with the figures of the Demeter/Persephone myth but also with the numinous background of all existence, which some of the later Greeks, in particular the Eleatic thinker Parmenides, knew as Being itself. Carl Kerényi in his major study of Eleusis imagined that such an experience amounted to something like the Beatific Vision in Christian theology.⁴ In

⁴ Carl Kerényi, *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967).

Persephone Unveiled, I develop the idea that the Parmenidean vision provides us with a better model for understanding the Eleusinian experience.

In general, the prospective initiate approached initiation familiar with the myths and provenances of the relevant gods. These myths would be quite exoteric, that is, associated with public festivals. But initiates came from all over Greece. Varying, contrasting, and contradictory versions of the myths would have been current among them. Stories about Persephone, for instance, existed in a plethora of variants; although participants would have most likely known at least one of them, no one myth fit all. The Eleusinian secret has been thought by some simply to have been the replacement of these mythic variants by a single version unique to Eleusis. But even if it could be proved that there was a unique Eleusinian myth (and it cannot), it could not have been this that constituted the secret of Eleusis.

We have various testimonies that the experience within the Telesterion involved great disorientation, to be alleviated only by the culminating moment when the secret was revealed. Certainly confusion and perplexity may have begun to be stimulated during the bridge jests and exacerbated by ecstatic dancing and the imbibing of the *kykeon*. Add to this the fact that the mythic imagery surrounding the initiate would have been unfamiliar to many, that hallucinatory phantasmata and strange sounds would have filled the darkened sacred temple interior. One can see that a state of spiritual darkness, disorientation, and perplexity would have been induced. The spiritual content of this perplexity would have involved both the nature of the divine and the nature of one's self, that is, the question of the identity of one's own being in relation to the gods would have been raised and brought to a fevered pitch. Perhaps for the first time, the initiates would have felt an unrelieved sense of inner darkness. This inner darkness would have corresponded to the physical darkness in the Telesterion prior to the moment of *epopteia*, and the confusion about the divine realm would have been emphasized by the dramatic, not to say chaotic events occurring there.

I wish to suggest that the essential sense of the initiatic darkness and perplexity was the breakdown of a fixed sense of personal identity with which the *mystes* would have entered the mysteries, and that the revelatory experience of *epopteia*, induced in such a context of psychic confusion, opened the initiate to the possibility of a state of being beyond fixed identity.

Given that Hellenic culture put such a high premium on the clear definition of character, the revelation of an experience beyond identity would have introduced certain values beyond those that Hellenic culture in general tended to affirm. It has often been asserted that Hellenic culture knew no experience of "unitive mysticism": the union of the individual soul with an

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all-embracing divine principle, such as is common in Indian religion and even in some forms of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Initiatic secrecy conceals an essential irony: The highest and most sacred experience offered by Hellenic mystery cults was subversive of Hellenic culture's principal values. If this is the case, one need look no further for why the experience of the mysteries had to be kept secret.

The mysteries also lent glory and legitimacy to the cities with which they were associated. Athens financed Eleusis and provided political protection, while Eleusis was allowed a free hand in all matters pertaining to the celebration of its rites. Athens, in turn, enjoyed prestige for its sponsorship of the rites. The numinous aura of the mysteries legitimized the Athenian state and its gods. As long as no one was permitted to speak or write of it, the holy character of the *epopteia* could benefit the very culture that it secretly subverted.

4 Other Mysteries

Space forbids a detailed treatment of the other mysteries of the ancient world. They were for the most part internally linked at least through the deities that were celebrated in them, and by the two-phase rhythm that characterizes their dramatic structure: one of veiling-dissolution-darkness, followed by revelation-reconfiguration-illumination.

Four unique gods were celebrated at Samothrace, but Dionysus, Hephaistos, Poseidon, and Demeter also had important roles. Dionysus himself, as we saw, is possibly the figure that was revealed in the Eleusinian *epopteia*. Samothrace seems to have involved an inversion of Eleusinian practice: In Eleusis, those who had committed violent crimes and/or could not speak Greek were excluded. Samothrace was founded by criminals, and initiates had to swear an oath that they had committed crimes against the gods and had to learn an indigenous tongue to participate in the mysteries. Thrace, just north of Samothrace, played a role in both Dionysian and Orphic mythology. Dionysian mysteries were celebrated throughout Greece and involved, mythologically, the dismemberment and rebirth of Dionysus himself. Their rites featured forms of psychic disintegration and rebirth brought on by inebriation probably associated with some pharmacological enhancement of ordinary wine. Orphic theogonies elevated Dionysus himself to a supreme divine principle and invoked concepts adopted from Persian cosmologies, bringing them into contact with the later Mysteries of Mithras. The Mysteries of Isis and Osiris were predicated on an assimilation