INTRODUCTION

Ancient Greek religion had a strong public character and served, in many ways, as a mechanism for integrating the individual into the sociopolitical network of the *polis*. Alongside this mainstream religion existed also other cults, which were voluntarily selected by the individual and which aimed at providing hope for a better lot in the afterlife.[1] Because they related to the individual's inner self, privacy was important and secured through initiation rituals, secret ceremonies that bestowed on the participants a new status in relation to the gods. The Greeks called those cults *Mysteria*.[2]

Mysteria (or simply Mysteries, as they are commonly referred to in English) are a religious phenomenon that for centuries dominated the ancient Mediterranean. The oldest, most venerable, and best-known Mystery cult was that of Demeter and Kore at the Sanctuary of the Two Goddesses at Eleusis. For more than a thousand years people from every corner of the Greco-Roman world and from a wide range of ethnic origins and social standings sought spiritual comfort and the hope for a blessed afterlife through initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries. In antiquity itself, and in our memory of antiquity, the Eleusinian Mysteries stand out as the archetype of ancient Mystery cults.

Despite the tremendous popularity of the Eleusinian Mysteries, we know very little about their true essence and content. The violation of the oath of silence taken by the initiates was punishable by the Athenian state with death, and there are known cases of offenders who were either executed or came close

to be executed for disclosing what was meant to remain secret. The Eleusinian Mysteries were guarded feverishly by ancient writers until the emergence of Christianity, when some secret elements were disclosed. Even then, however, the information recorded was biased, as Christian writers aimed at discrediting their pagan competitor rather than revealing the facts.

Given this silence or bias of the sources, the wall of secrecy that covers the Eleusinian Mysteries can be penetrated only with the help of archaeology. It is the physical remains of the cult, those that have been excavated and those that still await excavation, that preserve whatever hope we have for illuminating this important part of our cultural history. The first systematic excavations at the Sanctuary at Eleusis were conducted by the Athens Archaeological Society in the late nineteenth century and continued on and off until the end of the twentieth. The early excavators unearthed most of the buildings of the Sanctuary and made possible the general reconstruction of the ancient rituals. Modern scholars of Eleusis and its Mysteries owe a tremendous debt to Demetrios Philios, Andreas Skias, Konstantinos Kourouniotes, Ioannis Travlos, and George Mylonas, those pioneers who, with selfless dedication and endless passion, meticulously uncovered the ruins of this revered place.

The classic book on Eleusis, Mylonas's 1961 *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries*, still remains the standard work on the site and the cult, unsurpassed in Mylonas's ability to synthesize vast amounts of archaeological and textual data and to present them in a coherent and meaningful way. In the more than seventy years that have passed since the publication of Mylonas's book, research at Eleusis has progressed and a great deal of new information has come to light, largely thanks to Kevin Clinton's patient and exhaustive study of the vast inscriptional evidence and Kalliope Papangeli's methodical excavations in the modern city of Eleusis. Despite these studies and excavations, one important aspect of the Eleusinian Mysteries that has not been settled is their formation and early development. Given the tremendous popularity of this cult in the ancient world and its influence on our own cultural history, this is an important issue. As Robert Parker eloquently put it, "The mystery of all the mysteries is the origin of the form itself."[3]

What we do know is that the Mysteries had been established by the sixth century BC and that they were celebrated annually and almost without interruption until the end of antiquity. Theories about their origins range widely, but there are two main schools of thought. The first is based on cultural diffusion and considers the Eleusinian Mysteries imports from other parts of the Mediterranean, most notably Egypt or Crete. The second, deriving from anthropological theories about prehistoric fertility rituals and rites of passage, considers the Eleusinian Mysteries a product of indigenous development. It is exactly this problem – the origins and early development of this cult – that is the subject of the present work.

My main objective is to explore the site and its ruins in order to understand the processes by which the Eleusinian Mysteries were formed. Because our focus is the early history of the site, emphasis is placed on the Bronze Age, the archaeological evidence for which is presented in detail. The Bronze Age is complemented with a discussion of the archaeology of the site from the Early Iron Age to the end of antiquity. This discussion is not exhaustive, but I have made an effort to provide recent updates on the major archaeological issues of these periods. The archaeology of the site is placed against the wider background of Eleusis' myth and cult, landscape and environment, and research and exploration. The theories about the origins of the Eleusinian Mysteries are discussed in the final chapter and a hypothesis is put forward that explains, reasonably I believe, the processes by which the Mysteries were formed.

PART I

MYTH AND CULT

CHAPTER ONE

MYTHS AND LEGENDS

FOUNDATION MYTHS

The origins of Eleusis are lost in the mythical past of Greece. The Orphic version of the Homeric Hymn, which probably represents local Eleusinian foundation myths, mentions that the first inhabitants of Eleusis were autochthonous: Baubo, Dysaules, and three herdsmen, Triptolemos (cowherd), Eumolpos (shepherd), and Eubouleus (swineherd).[1] Eumolpos became the founder of the sacred *genos* of the Eumolpids and the first *hierophant*.[2] The other sacred *genos*, the Kerykes, derived their ancestry from Eumolpos's son, Keryx.[3] These two *gene* were in charge of the cult until the end of the life of the Sanctuary and, on the basis of a late second- or early third-century CE dedicatory inscription from the Athenian Agora, it appears that, at least in the Roman period, their members intermarried.[4]

Other legends connect Eleusis with Boeotia. Pausanias mentions that Eleusis was founded by the Boeotian hero Ogygos, the first king of Thebes.[5] The site was named after the hero Eleusis or Eleusinus, who was the son of Ogygos with Daeira, one of the daughters of the Ocean and a rather obscure divinity connected to agricultural fertility and associated with Persephone or with Hecate. At Eleusis she had a separate priest, the *daeirites*, and was worshipped in several Attic demes during the *Proerosia* festival.[6] Eleusis/Eleusinus was also the father of Triptolemos who, according to some sources, was killed by Demeter when he caught her exposing Triptolemos to the fire.[7] Hesychius

writes that the ancestral name of the site was Saessaria, after Saessara, one of the daughters of Keleos.[8] Of Boeotian inspiration is also another tradition, according to which the city of Eleusis was originally located near Lake Kopais or by the river Triton.[9] These Boeotian connections may reflect Theban efforts for a reappropriation of the Eleusinian Mysteries, perhaps transferring to the sphere of cult the early fifth-century political antagonism between Thebes and Athens.[10]

THE RAPE OF PERSEPHONE AND THE HOMERIC HYMN

The core myth associated with Eleusis – the dramatic tale of the abduction of the beautiful daughter of Demeter by the brutal god of the Underworld – is one of the most popular stories in western literature.[11] Persephone was playing in the fields when she reached to pick up a flower (narcissus in the Orphic version, violet in the Sicilian version). Suddenly, the earth split open and Hades appeared in his chariot and horses to carry her to his dark realm. Demeter searched for her daughter all over the earth and finally arrived to Eleusis where, disguised as an old woman, she sat by one of the wells of the city.[12] There she was met by the daughters of Keleos, the king of Eleusis, who brought her to the palace to meet queen Metaneira.[13] Demeter became the nurse of the young prince Demophon, whom she attempted to make immortal by holding him over the fire. Surprised by Metaneira, she revealed her true identity and ordered the people of Eleusis to build her a temple. For a year she closed herself up in that temple and caused famine all over the earth. Zeus was forced to compromise, and Persephone reunited with her mother at Eleusis, but not before she had tasted the food of the Underworld. For eternity she was to spend part of the year with her mother and part of the year with her husband.

The myth appears to have been created sometime in the early Early Iron Age. It could be as early as the ninth century, as by the eighth century Persephone has already been established as the undisputed queen of the Underworld, and Hesiod's reference to her abduction suggests the existence of earlier hexameter poems.[14] Possible additional support for a ninth-century date comes from a *Hymn to Demeter* composed by the pre-Homeric poet Pamphos, which suggests that by the eighth century the story had already become traditional.[15] As for the place of origin of the myth, some scholars have suggested that there is not one place of origin, but rather that the story was independently conceived in the different locations where Persephone was worshipped. The main argument for this is that the Eleusinian connection in the Homeric Hymn was considered "forced," in the sense that Demeter had no reason to end up at Eleusis.[16] To my mind, this is exactly the reason for which the story was of Eleusinian origin: the only reasonable explanation for the central place that Eleusis holds in the story is that it was the place where the story was created, and therefore,

it had to play a central role to the plot. An Attic, if not Eleusinian, origin is also suggested by the Attic-Ionic dialectic idiosyncrasies found in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and by the fact that Pamphos was an Athenian poet. Because of these reasons, it is likely that the core plot of the myth was created at Eleusis and that local variations developed subsequently.[17]

The story survives in several versions, which, although agreeing with each other in the general plot, differ in details. Local adaptations of the myth are known from various parts of Greece, including Sicily, Argos, Sicyon, Pheneos, Kos, and Paros,[18] but the most widespread versions are two. The first is the Orphic version, which seems to have been based on one or more poems attributed to Orpheus. None of these poems survive; there are only references to them in the Orphic papyrus (fr. 49), the Orphic *Argonautica*, and passim references by ancient authors. Other poems in the Orphic tradition were said to have been composed by Musaeus and published by Musaeus's son Eumolpos after the establishment of the Mysteries, although the uncertainty about the number of poems composed and the fragmentary nature of the surviving passages make it impossible to establish whether or not there was one unified "Orphic" version.[19] What we do know is that in the Orphic hymn Demeter herself descends to Hades, accompanied by Euboulos (or Eubouleus), who carries torches.[20]

The best-known version of the myth is found in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, one of thirty-three religious songs known as "Homeric Hymns."[21] These hymns, especially the four longer ones to Demeter, Hermes, Apollo, and Aphrodite, narrate episodes central to the lives of these gods. The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* appears to have been composed sometime in the late seventh or early sixth century BC in dactylic hexameter, employing epic formulae.[22] It was perhaps intended for recitation at public festivals, perhaps the *Eleusinia* or the *Balletys*.[23] The poem carries multiple meanings and can be read at many levels.

As a manifestation of the cosmology of the Greeks, it sets the boundaries between gods and mortals and establishes the balance of power among the gods themselves. Within this framework, it reflects Zeus's shifting position in relation to the other gods in the early stages of his reign, as he consolidates his power through deals and compromises with other major gods.[24] One such compromise is the offer of his own daughter, Persephone, to Hades, as compensation for the gloomy lot that Hades drew.[25] Faced with Demeter's fury and unable to make her submit to his will, Zeus is forced to draw a new compromise, this time with Demeter, yielding to the formidable power of female fertility and the power of the goddess.[26]

From the psychoanalytical point of view, the poem brings to the forefront not only the experiences of loss, violence, death, and personal trauma but also the ways humans deal with such experiences. Demeter denounces her life as a goddess to become a sorrowful old woman who has lost all hope and

joy; she substitutes her lost child for another (Demophon) and eventually is overpowered by intense rage.[27]

As a tale of women, the focal point of the myth is the identity and journey of a woman through life.[28] Much like the mortal women of ancient Greece who lived in a strict patriarchal society, Persephone becomes a pawn in the chess game between powerful men: her father betroths her to an older man, whom she has never met and who removes her violently and abruptly from the warmth and love of her mother. As Persephone unwillingly descends into her new husband's household, her old self dies – marriage for her is death.[29] The transition from girl to woman and the violent assumption of a new identity reflect the archetype of mother-daughter relationship[30] in the face of the adversities of a male-dominated society.[31] Despite the fact that the rape of Persephone is a result of the actions of two male gods, in reality it is Demeter and the women of Eleusis who have a voice in the myth and it is Demeter who brings, through her actions and against the male gods' will, the resolution to the drama by securing her daughter's release.[32]

Finally, as discussed in the next chapter, the myth provides an aetiology for the core elements of the theology and the festivals of Demeter at Eleusis.[33]

WARS WITH ATHENS AND THE SYNOECISM

Another set of myths relates to the wars between Athens and Eleusis. Tradition holds that at some point in its history Eleusis was forcefully annexed by Athens, but in the sources there is disagreement about the date of this annexation. Thucydides, Pausanias, and Apollodoros write that a war between the two cities broke out when Athens was ruled by Erechtheus and Eleusis by a king named Eumolpos.[34] Erechtheus and either king Eumolpos or his son Immarados were killed, but Athens emerged victorious thanks to the sacrifice of Erechtheus's youngest daughter and, as a result of the war, Eleusis was brought under Athenian rule.[35] Eumolpos was joined by the seer Skiros, a son or grandson of Poseidon, who was killed fighting the Athenians and buried at the place of his death, named Skiron after him. His grave was located next to the temple of Demeter (where the goddess had planted the first fig tree) and where the procession of Athens ended during the festival of Skira.[36]

Another chronology for the war is mentioned by Pausanias and Strabo, who date it to the time of Ion: Eleusis attacked Athens, but the Athenians defeated them thanks to Ion's superior strategy.[37] A third possible date is offered by Plutarch, who records a war at the time of Theseus, when the great Athenian hero removed Eleusis from the rule of Megara and brought it under Athens.[38]

Whether and to what degree these legends reflect historical events is unclear. The general confusion about the genealogy of the ancient Athenian kings notwithstanding,[39] Mylonas thought that the legend about the war between