

Examine the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* from the perspective of its ability to explain, and its influence on, ritual practices in Greece.

Homer's *Hymn to Demeter* is part of the oral tradition. The hymn would most likely have been sung at a festival before an epic such as Homers *Odyssey* or *Iliad*. These hymns were prayers to honour the gods. The hymn to Demeter is seen as more religious than some of the other myths. This could possibly be because of the way that the hymn to Demeter influenced ritual practices in Greece and more particularly the cult to Demeter at Eleusis. Even though there are still many secrets surrounding the cult quite a lot is known about the cult. An example of this is that there are often depictions of the cult of Eleusis on vase paintings.¹ I am going to look into how the Hymn to Demeter is able to influence and explain the mystery cult of Eleusis. Firstly, I am going to look into the importance of torches within the hymn and then the cult. Then I am going to explore what we know about the initiation rites and how the hymn explains these. Finally, I am going to explain the benefits gained from the cult of Eleusis and how it can help you in the afterlife.

When Demeter was searching frantically for her daughter Persephone after she had been abducted by Hades she used torches.² This may be because the torches are associated with purification and the bringing of fertility.³ The bringing of fertility is appropriate because Persephone was a young girl and Hades had

¹ see figure

² Homer, *Hymn to Demeter*, 48

³ Foley 1994: 38

just abducted her and taken Persephone for his wife. They are also used in bridal processions and Persephone is now the bride of Hades. The carrying of torches became very important within the mysteries of Eleusis. This can be seen through the vase painting depicting the cult of Eleusis.⁴ In this vase several of the figures are carrying torches. This contemporary evidence proves that the carrying of torches must have been fairly important within the cult of Eleusis. The torches also might have symbolised the emergence of light and therefore, light in the darkness.⁵ This suggests that the torches might be there to symbolize that in the end there will be light coming at the end of the darkness for Demeter and Persephone and that they will be together again. The mention of torches within the hymn and use of torches within the vase painting firstly explains the use of torches in the cult through the evidence in the hymn and secondly provides evidence that torches were important in the rituals of the cult of Eleusis.

Even though the cult of Eleusis was supposed to be a mystery there is still quite a lot known about the initiation rites. Demeter's search for her daughter or period of wondering can be paralleled to the initiation into the cult of Eleusis. This is because the initiation ceremony like Demeter's search for her daughter was very emotionally confusing.⁶ This is because of the way that Demeter is confused by her daughter Persephone going missing, grief at the discovery of her kidnap and eventual joy when Persephone and Demeter are reunited. The initiates follow this emotional path because they seem to depict Kores return from the underworld

⁴ see figure

⁵ Foley 1994: 38

⁶ Ian Jenkins 1983: 137-45

and her reunion with Demeter in a ritual drama. Secrecy was of greatest importance within the cult at Eleusis. In this way the initiates were kept ignorant, so they were able to experience the transition from confusion at the start of the initiation to joy at the end of the ceremony when they join the cult. As well as this many of the things that happen within the hymn are part of the initiation ceremony. Examples of this are the initiates staying silent fasting and not drinking wine. The hymn explains part of the cult in this way by explaining why the initiates had to perform certain tasks such as staying silent and also explaining why the initiation ceremony could be emotionally confusing. This is because they were mirroring Demeter's feelings and actions whilst she was searching for Kore.

Aristotle when writing on the cult emphasised that the initiate does not learn something but is made to experience the mysteries and change his or her state of mind.⁷ This shows that through the cult at Eleusis the initiate gained more emotionally than physically. This also suggests that although the mystery cult is obviously meant to be a mystery a lot of people knew about it. This is because the requirements to join were not being a murderer. Also, that the fact that Aristotle was writing about the cult possibly suggests that as many people already knew about the cult as long as he did not write about the ceremonies and rites of the cult in detail than that might have been alright. This may suggest why even though the cult was a mystery cult there are many written accounts and other evidence available to tell us about the cult today such as vase paintings.⁸ This is a possible explanation for why we know so much about the mystery cult

⁷ Foley 1994: 69

⁸ see figure

today because it was not very difficult or expensive to join therefore a lot of people knew about the cult. So possibly it was not the actual cult that was a secret but what went on inside it that was not meant to be discussed in too much detail.

The final section I am going to explore is how the mysteries benefited the initiates to the cult. This cult was supposed to affect their worldly lives and their after lives. This is because the Greeks believed that the cult was able to help the initiates in the afterlife and also with worldly success.⁹ At the end of the poem Demeter gives her mysteries to the natural world and helps them with the harvest whereas Persephone makes the underworld accessible to human world because of her annual ascent and descent.¹⁰ This meant that the Greek world now had a permanent link between heaven earth and the underworld. The initiates received benefits in the underworld because it was rumoured that they did not have the same fate after death.¹¹ This is because at the end of the poem it states that Persephone was able to distinguish between initiated and uninitiated into the mysteries.¹² If one had been initiated into the mysteries they would be greatly honoured above all others within the underworld. This would have been of great comfort to the Greeks because it would have been able to help them with the common symptom of worrying about what comes after death or in the life after this. The reason that it would be able to help them is because of Persephone they would know that death would not have been as much of a mystery and if

⁹ Foley 1994: 63

¹⁰ Foley 1994: 89

¹¹ Foley 1994: 71

¹² Hom., *Hymn to Demeter*, 364-69

they had been initiated into the mysteries they would know that they would be honoured in the underworld. This section of the hymn is able to explain how the cult was supposed to benefit the initiate and also touches on the Greeks views on death and the underworld.

Throughout the majority of the poem Homer writes in the past tense but at the end of the hymn he refers to the Elusian mysteries in the present tense.¹³ By doing this Homer brings his reader back to the present day and makes the hymn more relatable to his readers in the Ancient Greek world. Also, in this way Homer acknowledges the cult and its relationship to the hymn of Demeter. The relationship between the earth and underworld had been altered by the kidnap of Persephone but the mysteries of Eleusis attempt were able to re-establish this relationship.¹⁴ Although this section of the hymn does not explain anything about the cult Homer does acknowledge the existence of the cult at the end of the poem which proves the link between the hymn and cult.

To conclude I believe that the Homeric Hymn to Demeter greatly influenced and explained about the Mystery cult at Eleusis. The hymn can explain certain rituals such as the use of torches or elements within the initiation ceremony such as fasting and being silent. More importantly the hymn manages to create a link between the underworld and the mortal world. This is because not only has

¹³ Claude Calame 2007

¹⁴ Claude Calame 2007

Persephone been to the underworld but she came back. Therefore, the Greeks were able to know more about the underworld.



Initiation rites at Eleusis- The Ninnion tablet

<https://www.revolvy.com/main/index.php?s=Ninnion%20Tablet> [Accessed: 9th January 2018]

Homer *Hymn to Demeter* (perseus)

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