

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY FOR THE STUDY OF ANCIENT RELIGIONS

Myth and Religion (mystery cults)

CLCL7003

Ancient Mystery Cults

Mystery cults:

- Initiation rituals
- Secrecy of content and beliefs
- Closed to the uninitiated
- Religious

Various ancient mystery cults

- Cult of Demeter and Kore at Eleusis
- Cult of Isis and Serapis/Osiris (especially from Hellenistic and Roman times)
- Cult of Mithras (primarily from the Roman Imperial period)
- Orphic cult / Orphism
- Cybele and Attis



Mithras killing the bull, c. AD 150; Louvre-Lens

Eleusinian Mysteries

Abduction of Persephone

- Zeus promises his daughter Persephone to Hades as a bride.
- Persephone carried off whilst picking flowers in a field;
 - Flower-gathering festivals with girls (often on the cusp of maturity/marriage) occur throughout Greece.
 - Meadows are liminal spaces associated with transition to sexuality and fertility; but also associated with the underworld – Elysion, the Isle of the Blessed.



Imperial era sarcophagus representing Hades/Pluto's abduction of Persephone/Proserpina, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore

It was a thing of awe whether for deathless gods or mortal men to see [the Narsiccus flower]: from its root grew a hundred blooms and it smelled most sweetly, so that all wide heaven above and the whole earth and the sea's salt swell laughed for joy. **Homeric Hymn to Demeter 9 ff.**

- For nine days Demeter roams the earth in grief not knowing what had happened to her daughter.

- The period of wandering may be paralleled by rites of initiation / transition where the initiate goes through a period of withdrawal from society.



Triptolemus getting ready to depart on his mission to spread knowledge of agriculture; Persephone stands with torches behind him. Early fourth century BC, Archaeological Museum of Eleusis

give her to drink. And Metaneira mixed the draught
the great queen Deo received it to observe the sacred

- Possibly part of the initiation rituals.



Red figure skyphos (two-handled wine cup) showing Triptolemus, c. fifth century BC, British Museum

Instructions to build the cult site

Now Demeter would have made him ageless and immortal if it had not been for the heedlessness of well-girded Metaneira, who went spying one night...“My child! Demophon! The stranger, this woman, is making you disappear in a mass of flames! ... straightaway she spoke to well-girded Metaneira: “Ignorant humans! Heedless, unable to recognize in advance the difference between future good fortune and future bad... [the boy would have become immortal and ageless, but will still receive achieve renown] **But come! Let a great temple, with a great altar at its base, be built by the entire dêmos. Make it at the foot of the acropolis and its steep walls. Make it loom over the well of Kallikhoron, on a prominent hill. And I will myself instruct you in the sacred rites so that, in the future, you may perform the rituals in the proper way and thus be pleasing to my mind.”** – *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* 243 ff.

Famine and the pomegranate seeds

‘She made that year the most terrible one for mortals, all over the Earth... **The Earth did not send up any seed... Many a curved plough was dragged along the fields by many an ox – all in vain...** [the human race could have died out through famine] **thus depriving of their *tîmê* the dwellers of the Olympian abodes – [the *tîmê* of] sacrificial portions of meat for eating or for burning...** [after various gods beseech her] She said that she would never go to fragrant Olympus, that she would never send up the harvest of the earth, until she saw with her own eyes her daughter... [Hermes is sent to retrieve Persephone from Hades] but he [Hades], stealthily, put into my [Persephone] hand the **berry of the pomegranate, that honey-sweet food, and he compelled me by force to eat of it...**’ – *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* 305 ff.

Creation of the seasons

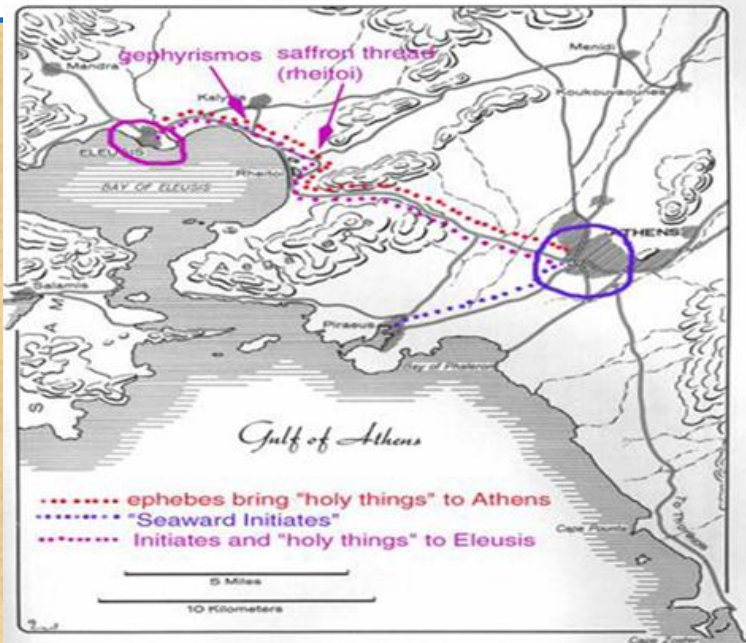
- Now Jupiter, intervening, between his brother and grieving sister, divides the turning year, equally. And now the goddess, Persephone, shared divinity of the two kingdoms, spends so many months with her mother, so many months with her husband. The aspect of her face and mind alters in a moment. Now the goddess's looks are glad that even Dis could see were sad, a moment ago. Just as the sun, hidden, before, by clouds of rain, wins through and leaves the clouds.'
- Ovid *Met.* 5.564-571.



Attic red figure
vessel, c. 440
BC, Met



(13th/14th) the ephebes procession from Athens to Eleusis, escorting holy objects
 (15th) the *mystai* gather at the Stoa Poikile in the Agora (Athens) to hear the declaration about who may participate
 (16th) Marched to the sea in the bay of Phaleron to purify themselves by bathing & also wash a piglet which they sacrificed when they returned to the city
 (17th) possibly a sacrifice to the goddesses
 (18th) the *mystai* stay indoors for the Epidaeria, a festival in honour of Asklepios
 (19th) the *mystai* and their sponsors leave Athens and process along the Sacred Way to Eleusis. Included escorting a statue of Iakchos. Included stops for sacrifice, singing, prayer on a bridge over the Kephisos River at the boundary between Eleusis and Athens, veiled or masked figures shouted insults made obscene gestures at the *mystai*.
 (20th and 21st) activities inside the Telesterion, things done, shown and said.



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Eleusis is about
 14 miles/22.5
 km from Athens

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- 10 day festival. Takes place in the month of Boedromion (September/October) from the 13th-23rd
- On the 19th initiates march in a procession to Eleusis
- Take part in secret rite on the 20th and 21st

- “The initiates are not supposed to learn anything but rather to experience and to be disposed in a certain way [diatethēnai], that is, becoming manifestly fit/deserving” (Aristotle fr. 15 Rose).
- Supposed benefits to the initiate in the afterlife, but also whilst living (wealth).

