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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Mysteries of Demeter and Kore

Kevin Clinton

There were many ancient Greek festivals that were called *Mysteria* (in English, “mysteries”), but the oldest known festival of this type and the most famous was celebrated in Athens, the *Mysteria* of the Two Goddesses (Demeter and Kore). It was held in a sanctuary at Eleusis, about 14 miles west of the center of the city, by the shore opposite the island of Salamis. Today we refer to this festival as the Eleusinian Mysteries, to distinguish it from the other mystery festivals in the Greco-Roman world. One of its legacies, mediated through Plato and Platonism, is the mystery language of Christianity: terms like “mystical,” “mysticism,” “mystagogical,” etc. all go back ultimately to the Eleusinian and other ancient mystery cults.

The Eleusinian *Mysteria* call to mind many things, but they were especially well known for their secrecy. The penalty for divulging these secrets was death. Indeed, these secrets are thought to rank among the best-kept secrets of the ancient world. George Mylonas, the distinguished Greek archaeologist who had been involved with the excavations at Eleusis since the 1930s, had this to say about the *Mysteria* in 1961:

For years, since my early youth, I have tried to find out what the facts were. Hope against hope was spent against the lack of monumental evidence; the belief that inscriptions would be found on which the Hierophants had recorded their ritual and its meaning has faded completely; the discovery of a subterranean room filled with the archives of the cult, which dominated my being in my days of youth, is proved an unattainable dream since neither subterranean rooms nor archives for the cult exist at Eleusis; the last Hierophant carried with him to the grave the secrets which had been transmitted orally for untold generations, from the one high priest to the next. A thick, impenetrable veil indeed still covers securely the rites of Demeter and protects them from the curious eyes of modern students. How many nights and days have been spent over books, inscriptions, and works of art by eminent scholars in their effort to lift the veil! How many wild and ingenious theories have been advanced in superhuman effort to explain the Mysteries! How many nights have I spent standing on the steps of the Telesterion, flooded with the magic silver light of a Mediterranean moon, hoping to catch the mood of the

initiates, hoping that the human soul might get a glimpse of what the rational mind could not investigate! All in vain – the ancient world has kept its secret well and the Mysteries of Eleusis remain unrevealed. (Mylonas 1961:281)

The matter, however, is not quite so desperate, as most scholars now would acknowledge. More, in fact, can be done with books, inscriptions, and works of art, in combination with facts revealed by the excavations at Eleusis, in order to produce at least an outline of what went on in the rite. First, it is important to consider the role of secrecy. A fragment of Aristotle gives us helpful perspective. He wrote: “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” (fr. 15 Rose). If the initiates are not supposed to learn anything, then knowledge of specific secrets is of much less significance than what Aristotle emphasizes here – the experience. The word which he uses to describe this experience, *pathein*, could mean just “to experience” or, more specifically, “to suffer.” Secrecy was a characteristic of quite a few Greek cults, including women’s cults. So, despite what the name *Mysteria* suggests to a person of our time, it was not secrecy that made the *Mysteria* truly special. In fact, originally the word *Mysteria* probably did not mean secrets; this is a meaning that it picked up much later, most likely because this one aspect of the cult, its secrecy, though originally not an essential one, eventually became legendary, in view of the penalty for divulging its details. Originally “*Mysteria*” must have indicated some significant aspect of the ritual; Greek festival names usually incorporated the name or epithet of the god honored in the festival (e.g. *Dionysia*, *Diisoteria*) or a reference to some significant ritual characteristic of the festival (e.g. *Plynteria*, *Oschophoria*, *Panathenaea*). A name meaning simply “secrets” would not differentiate this festival from other secret festivals. The term “*Mysteria*” is most likely related to the word for initiate, *mystēs*, which comes from the verb “to close” (*mucin*) and should mean someone who is “closed,” in this case with respect to his eyes, for the initiate was most likely blindfolded at the beginning of the rite, and had to be guided by a person called a *mystagogue* (Clinton 1992:86, 2003:50–1). The term *mystēs*, then, is just the opposite of the term used for an initiate who could participate in the *Mysteria* a year later, for a second stage of initiation: *epoptēs*, which means “one who sees” (i.e. does not have to wear a blindfold like the *mystēs*). So the very name *mystēs* suggests above all a special experience, which will involve the loss of sight. The festival name “*Mysteria*,” then, points to the community of participants, the *Mystai* (initiates who were blinded), as *Panathenaea* points to “all Athenians.” This is in line with Aristotle’s description of the initiation as an *experience*.

We may then legitimately ask what actually was the point of the secrecy. But first one must consider what is so special about a secret. A secret is a fact or a representation of a human act that cannot be disclosed beyond a certain group. What could be so exciting about a fact or an act that could draw thousands of people from all over the Greek world each year to the *Mysteria*? Some of the Church Fathers thought it was the act of sexual intercourse performed by a priest and priestess. There is no credible evidence that this was the case, and it seems in principle highly unlikely that this act, even if hinted at by initiates to non-initiates, would have produced such widespread attraction. The attraction must rather have been the special religious

experience, a truly extraordinary experience (Burkert 1987a:89–114). The purpose of the secrecy was surely to help ensure that the experience was extraordinary. The nature of the experience, as we shall see, was such that it could easily be trivialized if it became public knowledge (Burkert 1983:252–3). When Dionysus in Euripides' *Bacchae* is asked by Pentheus whether his secret rites are held by night or day, the god replies, "Mainly by night, [for] darkness has solemnity" (486). The Eleusinian Mysteries were famous for their solemnity.

There is abundant evidence that the myth of the abduction of Kore, Demeter's daughter, played some role in the experience, though it is unlikely that the ritual could have presented dramatically the entire myth: the abduction of Kore by Hades and her becoming his wife, named in the underworld Persephone; Demeter's search for her; Demeter's arrival in Eleusis and her nursing the infant son of Queen Metaneira of Eleusis at night by dipping him in the hearth fire; the discovery of her by the queen; her causing the fields to turn barren; the negotiations between the gods and Hades to get Kore back to her mother; and the final return of Kore, though not a definitive return, because she has eaten of a pomegranate in the underworld, and has to return there annually for one-third of the year. The excavation of the sanctuary has shown that a journey to the underworld could not have been put on in the secret rite, and in fact the Telesterion is not a suitable venue for the presentation of a story such as the abduction of Kore (Mylonas 1961:268–9).

What part of the myth, then, did play a role in the cult? That is, how did the myth contribute to the experience? The most famous version of the myth is contained in the so-called *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. However, this version contradicts or is inconsistent with facts about the cult which are attested in historical documentary sources. Among other things it omits at least one important god and one important sacred place at Eleusis. It is striking how unreliable this version was for the Mysteries (Clinton 1986, 1992:13–14, 28–37). A somewhat different version, consistent with what we know from historical documentation about the cult, is provided in large part – strange as it may seem – by artistic representations, and it is to this version we must turn. However, one important piece of information pertaining to the Mysteries is provided at the very end of the *Homeric Hymn*, in the august description of Demeter's founding of the rites: "solemn rites which it is not possible to transgress or to learn about or to utter. For a great reverence for the gods holds back one's voice" (478–9). The Mysteries are referred to here for the first time, only at the very end of the poem. Demeter gives them to the Eleusinians as a great gift in an atmosphere of happiness and generosity occasioned by the return of Kore.

What this final part of the *Hymn* tells us about the Mysteries is important. It says: "Happy is he who has seen these things, but he who is not initiate in the rites, who does not share in them, he does not have a lot of like things when he is dead in the dank gloom" (480–2). And, a few lines later: "Greatly prosperous is he among mortal men whom these goddesses gladly love. Immediately they send to his great house at his hearth Ploutos [Wealth], who gives abundance to mortals" (486–9). Participation in the rites is characterized by *seeing*. But most important is the primary benefit that comes from seeing the Mysteries: the initiate gains a better position in the afterlife than the non-initiate. Highlighted also is the goddesses' other gift, the fruits of the fields, agrarian abundance, Ploutos.

Some of these same themes resurface in an important Athenian testimony written by the orator Isocrates in the fourth century BC. He of course emphasizes the intimate bond between the Mysteries and Athens (Clinton 1994):

First of all, that which mankind first needed was provided by our city. For even if the story is mythical, nevertheless, it is fitting for it to be told even now. When Demeter arrived in our country, having wandered about after Kore was abducted, and was well disposed to our ancestors because of their kindnesses [*euergetiai*] which it is not possible for those who are not initiated to hear, and gave them double gifts, which happen to be the greatest – the fruits of the earth [*tous karpon*] which are responsible for the fact that we do not live like animals, and the festival [*tēn teletēn*], the participants in which have *sweeter hopes concerning the end of life* and all time [*ton sumphantos niōnos*], our city was so reverent and generous [*philanthrōpōs*], that when it possessed such great good things it did not begrudge them to others but let all share in the things which it received. (Isocrates, *Panegyricus* 28)

Here too, in these words of Isocrates, it is implied that the initiates can expect better things for themselves in the afterlife than the uninitiated. And Isocrates emphasizes that these double gifts of Demeter – grain and the Mysteries – she gave first to Athens, and that Athens, in a spirit of civilizing generosity, handed them on to the rest of the Greek world. All this was represented in myth. The gift of the grain was transmitted to the Greeks by the Eleusinian hero Triptolemus, who in the course of his travels, while distributing the grain, invited the Greeks to the Mysteries (Xenophon, *Hellenica* 6.3.2–6). This tradition of announcing the festival continued in historical times, as Athens each year sent sacred ambassadors (*spondophoroi*) to the Greek cities to invite their inhabitants (men and women, slave and free, except for children) to the annual celebration (Clinton 1974:23), and gradually the ranks of the initiates were swelled more and more each year by Greeks who came from abroad. They came in the month of Boedromion, around the time of our September, and the festival took place over a period of nine days, from Boedromion 15th to 23rd. We do not have space here for a full description of all the events on these days, most of them public, many of them spectacular (Clinton 1993:116–19). On the 20th of the month, the initiates marched in a great procession to Eleusis (Clinton 1988); in the evening of the 21st they entered the sanctuary and took part in the secret rite; on the 22nd they celebrated with sacrifices; and on the 23rd they returned to their homes. So it was in the evening of the 21st that the initiates entered and partook of an extraordinary experience in which a myth in dramatic form played a certain role. Isocrates says hardly anything about this myth. But there is another source of information, mentioned above, which has not been tapped as much as it might have been – artistic representations.

Certain Athenian vases, which display symbols of the Mysteries, give us mythical scenes which undoubtedly reflect, at least in a general way, the myth of the Mysteries. It would be difficult for a non-initiate to deduce much about the Mysteries from these scenes, but in combination with other clues, including information from the sanctuary, it is possible to make out the shape of the myth (Clinton 1992:73–84). The scenes appear on vases which were probably sold to initiates and were eventually buried with them in their graves. A sacred Eleusinian landmark appears in some of these scenes: a rock upon which Demeter sits. This feature is missing from the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. But it is essential to both the myth and the cult.

This is the Agelastos Petra, the Mirthless Rock. It appears in some literary versions of the myth as well as on the vases. In order to assess its full significance, we need to know the location of the rock. In addition, in order to understand the relevant scenes on vases, we need to be clear about the iconography of some of the gods who appear in these scenes. We shall consider first the Mirthless Rock and then the iconography of some crucial Eleusinian gods, namely Eubouleus and Iakchos.

The Mirthless Rock, a specifically Eleusinian landmark, is not mentioned in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. A vase at Stanford University clearly shows that Demeter is sitting on a rock (Clinton 1992:14–16 fig. 11; Raubitschek and Raubitschek 1982:115–17). An inscription on the vase confirms that she is Demeter. She is attended by a maiden labeled “Parthenos.” In this Eleusinian context, with Triptolemus hovering in his winged chariot, there can hardly be any doubt that Demeter is sitting on the Mirthless Rock. This rock is part of the Eleusinian landscape, and it must be a sacred spot of great antiquity.

The fullest description of the Mirthless Rock appears in a few lines in the *Bibliotheca* of Pseudo-Apollodorus; it occurs in connection with Demeter’s arrival at Eleusis: “in the form of a woman she arrived at Eleusis. And first of all she sat on the rock that was named after her Mirthless, near [*para*] the so-called Callichoron Well” (1.5.1). Ovid too mentions the Mirthless Rock as an Athenian landmark (*Fasti* 4.502–4). But the location of the Mirthless Rock at Eleusis has remained a puzzle. Pseudo-Apollodorus tells us only that it was “near” the Callichoron Well. We have a report on Eleusis by Pausanias, who is perhaps overly scrupulous about betraying any of the secrets. In any case, he refuses to say anything about the interior of the sanctuary; he tells us only about monuments outside the sanctuary wall. In describing monuments in front of the sanctuary he mentions the Callichoron Well, another very important sacred spot, but does not mention the Mirthless Rock. It is hard to believe that he would have passed over such an important landmark for the myth if it were *outside* the wall of the sanctuary, “near” the Callichoron Well. Nothing outside the sanctuary in the vicinity of the well resembles a monumental rock. The obvious rock in the vicinity of the well is *within* the sanctuary – the cliff and the nearby cave (Clinton 1992:16, 17 fig. 1 n. 6, fig. 2). And in Greek a cave could be called simply a “rock,” *petra*. Theseus supposedly sat on the Mirthless Rock as he was about to descend to Hades (scholiast Aristophanes, *Knights* 785a Koster). The cave below the cliff would suit this story, because it could easily have served as an entrance to the underworld. Dedications found there to underworld deities confirm its underworld character (Clinton 1992:18 n.21). One of the cave’s important physical features tends to confirm that the cave was thought of as an entrance to the underworld. A French excavation revealed a narrow inner cave about 5 meters deep, which proved very difficult to penetrate (Clinton 1992:23 fig. 5; Faure 1958). At the far end of this inner cave they found sacrificial remains. This inner cave obviously had religious significance, presumably as a connection to the underworld.

There should be, though, a specific rock, the exact spot where Demeter sat. Near the apparent entrance to the underworld, the opening to the inner cave, there is a spot where an outcropping of rock forms a natural seat. It is striking that on either side of this natural seat and just below it the walls of the cave have been more or less cut away for various purposes, but the seat itself has been left quite untouched (Clinton 1992:23–7 figs 4, 6–7). An interesting feature of this particular rock,

which is hard not to notice, is that when a group of tourists within the cave is listening to their guide, one or two of them will usually be sitting on that outcropping of rock. It is a nearly perfect seat. Given its permanent nature, the Mirthless Rock ought to be a very old landmark within the cult. It is not difficult to understand how it could have served as a focal point around which part of the cult myth took shape, for it is by a gate to Hades, the entrance to the underworld, the very realm which lies at the heart of the cult.

Before turning to the interpretation of entire artistic representations of the myth, we need to consider, as mentioned above, the iconography of some individual gods.

An Eleusinian god whose importance is often neglected in modern discussions of the Mysteries is Eubouleus. It is sometimes thought that he appears in Eleusinian scenes, but identification of him has proved to be difficult. The documentation for the cult, on the other hand, indicates that he is a major god. His name appears in a fifth-century law, the so-called First Fruits Decree, which calls for sacrifices to Demeter and Kore, Triptolemus, the God, the Goddess, and Eubouleus (*IG* i³ 78 lines 38–40). A hellenistic relief at Eleusis actually illustrates Eubouleus. The relief was found near the Mirthless Rock, and inscribed labels on it identify some of the gods depicted. Called the Lakrateides Relief after the priest who dedicated it (ca. 100 BC), it is the largest relief found in the sanctuary and it turns out to be of the greatest importance for understanding the iconography of the gods of the Mysteries (Clinton 1992:51–3 figs 5–7). According to the main inscription on it (*IG* ii² 4701), Lakrateides was a priest of the God, the Goddess, and Eubouleus. Looking at the relief from left to right (Figure 22.1), with the help of the inscriptions, we see the following figures: a boy at the lower left; behind him, a woman; Demeter; Kore; Plouton; Triptolemus, seated; the Goddess; the God, seated; the priest Lakrateides in low relief, standing in the background; and at the far right a youth with long hair, a torch, and a short tunic (his inscription is missing).

The figures called simply “God” and “Goddess,” to whom sacrifice was ordained in the First Fruits Decree (*IG* i³ 78, lines 38–40) are extremely interesting. A special aspect of the cult of the Mysteries is that the God (Theos) and the Goddess (Thea) are really the gods known elsewhere by the names Hades and Persephone. In the Mysteries the names Hades and Persephone are never used, according to our epigraphical documents. The God and the Goddess are equivalent, in a certain sense, to Plouton and Kore (Clinton 1992:114–15; Nilsson 1952a:545, 555–6). Plouton and Kore appear in the Lakrateides Relief on the left, along with Demeter and Triptolemus. But at Eleusis when these two deities were visualized as king and queen of the underworld (i.e. the gods whom Greeks otherwise called Hades and Persephone), they were called simply God and Goddess. Here in the relief the gods represented on the right are apparently underworld gods – Thea (Goddess), Theos (God), and a third missing a label – while the gods on the left are all upper-world gods: young boy, Demeter, Kore, Plouton (his name reflecting his domain, as producing agrarian wealth), and Triptolemus.

In the Lakrateides Relief, since the God and the Goddess (i.e. Hades and Persephone) appear on the right, it would be logical to conclude that the young god on the far right is also connected with the underworld. But there is also another way of corroborating his identity. The main inscription tells us that the dedicator was a priest of the God and the Goddess and Eubouleus, and to all three (and Demeter and Kore)



Figure 22.1 Lakrateides Relief, Eleusis, Archaeological Museum. Photo by C. Mauzy

he made this dedication. It would not make sense if Lakrateides, as priest of the God and Goddess and Eubouleus, included just a representation of the God and the Goddess and excluded Eubouleus, in a relief in which he had himself and his wife represented in the company of nearly all Eleusinian deities. The young god on the far right must therefore be Eubouleus. Thus the Lakrateides relief gives us the iconography of Eubouleus: he is a young male with longish hair (here in flowing locks), wearing a knee-length tunic and carrying a torch.

The small boy at the far left, in high relief ought to be an upper-world deity, as the ears of grain in his hand indicate. He is surely the god Ploutos, the personification of Wealth. Plouton, on the other hand, is not a personification; his name, though later in non-Eleusinian contexts merged with that of Hades for euphemistic purposes, here reflects his original distinct domain and role, god of the rich, fertile earth (Clinton 1992:61–3).

Another difficult Eleusinian god to identify in classical art has been the god called Iakchos (Herodotus 8.65; Clinton 1992: 64–71; Foucart 1914:110–12; Graf 1974: 40–66). He was the god who led the initiates on their march to Eleusis, on the 20th of Boedromion – a journey of 14 miles from the center of Athens to Eleusis along the Sacred Way. As they marched the initiates sang the Iakchos song. In the *Frogs* Aristophanes gives us our fullest description of Iakchos. In the underworld a chorus of dancing initiates call upon him to join them in wearing the initiates' traditional myrtle wreath (325–35). They call him “light-bearing star of the ritual [*teletē*] in the night” (340–2), a description consistent with his carrying a torch. They also call him

“fellow-traveler” (396); he is to escort them to “the goddess,” Thea, the name given in the Mysteries to the queen of the underworld, Persephone (397–403), just as in the festival he escorted them to Demeter. They shout: “Iakchos, lover of the dance, join in escorting me!” (403, 408, 413).

In works of art, therefore, we should probably expect Iakchos to be a god with a torch in the company of initiates. The figure that most easily fits this description is the youthful male in the lower field of a fourth-century painted tablet, called the Ninnion Tablet (Figure 22.2), after a woman named Ninnion, who dedicated it within the sanctuary. The male figure carries a torch in either hand, and is followed by two initiates. Both he and the initiates wear the initiates' traditional myrtle wreath. The

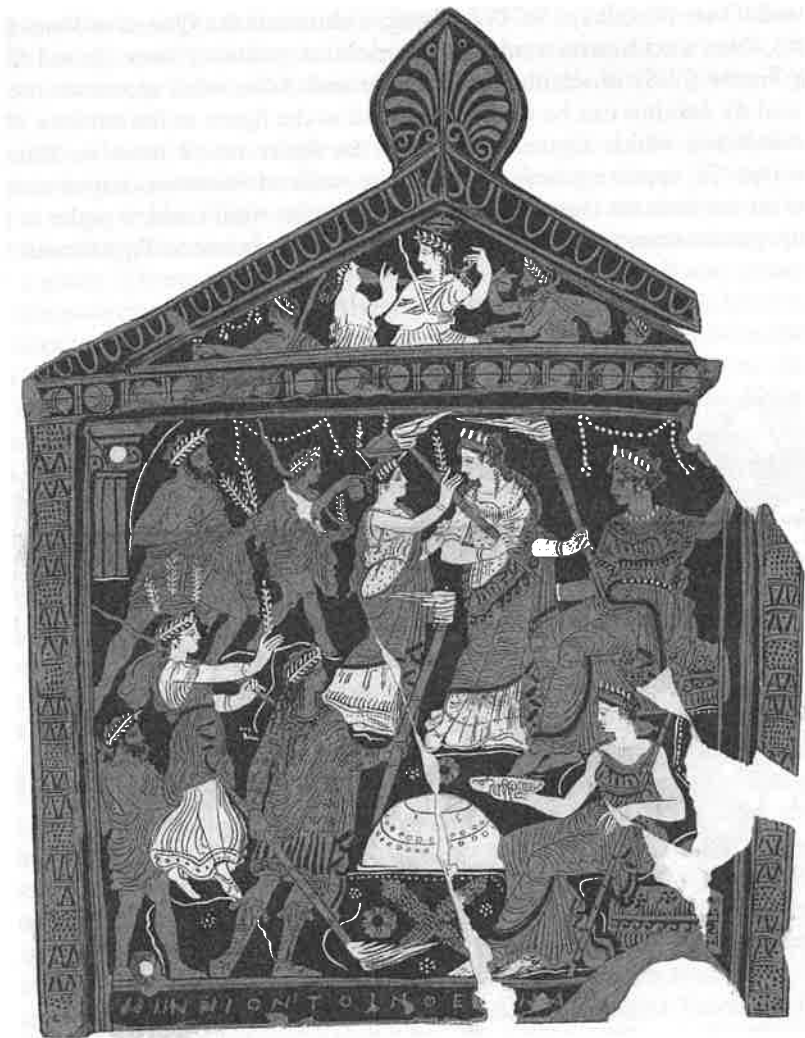


Figure 22.2 Ninnion Tablet from Eleusis, Athens, National Museum 11036. After A.N. Skias *Archaeologike Ephemeris* 1901: pl. 1

initiates' sticks and sacks evoke their journey to Eleusis; but now they are clearly at their destination, and Iakchos is leading them toward a seated goddess, surely Demeter. But Iakchos looks very much like the figure we have identified as Eubouleus: he is relatively young, with long locks, a knee-length garment, and high boots; and he carries a torch. This presents a new puzzle: how are we to tell them apart?

The Ninnion Tablet, fortunately, begins to provide the answer. All of the initiates, male and female, in both upper and lower fields, wear a cloak (*himation*); the men have just a cloak, the women a cloak over a *peplos*. The cloak was the traditional garment of the initiates at the Mysteries. Here Iakchos, the god of the initiates' journey, also wears one, on top of his elaborately decorated tunic. This is the attribute that distinguishes Iakchos when he appears with Eubouleus, for in other scenes in which they appear together Eubouleus lacks a *himation*.

On a relief vase (*hydria*) in St. Petersburg, nicknamed the Queen of Vases (Regina Vasorum), two torchbearers stand in symmetrical positions (nos. 2 and 9 in the drawing Figure 22.3) in relation to Demeter and Kore, who appear in the center (nos. 5 and 6). Iakchos can be readily identified as the figure at the left (no. 2) by his cloak (*himation*), which figure no. 9 lacks. So figure no. 9 must be Eubouleus. Heracles (no. 7), appearing here as an initiate, wears a *himation* draped around his waist; he carries both his club and initiate's staff in his right hand, a piglet in his left. Dionysus appears separately (no. 4), also as an initiate, between Triptolemus (no. 3) and Demeter (no. 5).

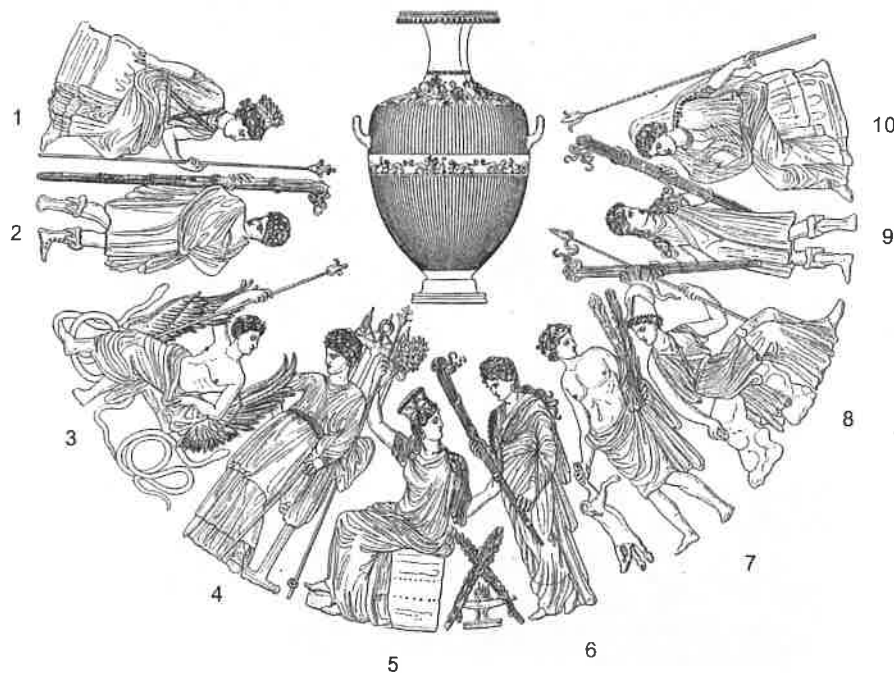


Figure 22.3 Relief *hydria* from Cumae, St. Petersburg, Hermitage 525. Drawing after Baumeister 1885:474, fig. 520

It is striking that Iakchos and Eubouleus have such similar attributes. The important element is the torch (or torches). It is carried by Iakchos to light the way for the initiates; by Eubouleus, as we shall see, also to light the way but not for the initiates.

The Regina Vasorum and other fourth-century images confirm the central importance of Eubouleus in the Eleusinian cult which, as we saw earlier, is reflected in the fifth-century sacrifices listed in the First Fruits Decree, *IG* i³ 78 (Clinton 1992:68, 81–4). It is also possible to identify fifth-century scenes with Eubouleus. For example, on a *stamnos* painted by Polygnotos there are two Eleusinian scenes: the departure of Triptolemus appears on one side; on the other, a male figure, barefoot, in a short tunic, stands between figures who have been identified as Hades and Persephone, i.e. the gods who in Eleusinian terms are called the God and Goddess. He holds torches and looks toward the Goddess. Here and in some similar scenes Eubouleus must be in the underworld (Clinton 1992:71–2 figs 36–42). Inasmuch as Eubouleus is apparently similar to Iakchos in that he seems to be a guide, the most logical conclusion is that in Eleusinian myth it is Eubouleus who guides Kore back from the underworld.

Like other relevant aspects of the myth, the episode of Eubouleus and the Return of Kore does not appear in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. There is, apparently, an echo of it in an *Orphic Hymn*, which related that Demeter went down to Hades in search of her daughter and took with her “Euboulos” (an alternate form of Eubouleus) as a guide (*Hymn* 41.5–8).

Eubouleus carries torches to light the way up from the underworld; Iakchos guides the initiates to Demeter on the Mirthless Rock at Eleusis. Each god is in charge of a transition, towards Demeter at Eleusis: Eubouleus from the lower to the upper world, Iakchos from the world of the uninitiated to the sanctuary, the Mysteries and the promise of “sweeter hopes.”

With Iakchos identified we can better understand the Ninnion Tablet. In the lower field Iakchos and the initiates arrive in Eleusis and walk towards Demeter. She does not hold her scepter; it simply rests between her left arm and shoulder. Her daughter Kore is absent, because now, at the beginning of the Mysteries, Kore as Persephone is still in the underworld. Note that Demeter does not sit on a throne but directly on the hillside – the artist is evidently thinking of her as sitting on the Mirthless Rock. Just above Demeter, in the upper field, a very similar goddess sits on a throne, but wears a more elaborate dress. She too has a scepter, but, unlike the goddess below, holds it upright, vigorously, clasped in her left hand. She extends her right hand behind the back of a woman who holds two torches; the woman might be understood as approaching but she could simply be seen as standing next to the seated goddess. This woman with torches ought to be Kore, for Kore usually carries torches in Eleusinian scenes. She is now rejoined with her mother, who extends her right arm in an embrace. The vessel carried by the woman behind Kore is the *plēmochoē*, a ritual vase used on the last day of the festival (Brommer 1980). The overall interpretation of the scenes is then straightforward: the lower plane represents the first day of the Mysteries at Eleusis, the upper plane the last, well after Kore has returned.

The most stunning vase with Eleusinian scenes is the Regina Vasorum, the relief *hydria* now in St. Petersburg, briefly discussed above (Figure 22.3). Gods are arranged symmetrically around Demeter and Kore in the center. The first symmetrical pair, just to the left and right of Demeter and Kore (nos. 5 and 6), are the two most

famous divine initiates, Dionysus (no. 4) and Heracles (no. 7). The next symmetrical pair are Triptolemus (no. 3) and Athena (no. 8). The two of them are naturally linked: Athens, symbolized by Athena, was responsible for the mission of Triptolemus, who provided the gift of grain and announced the Mysteries to the Greek world. Next, left and right, come Iakchos (no. 2) and Eubouleus (no. 9). Iakchos faces a seated, sceptered woman on the left (no. 1), Eubouleus looks at a similar figure on the right (no. 10). These women (nos. 1 and 10) have proved difficult to identify. The representation of Iakchos here is unusual in that he is not leading initiates to the sanctuary. The goddess whom he faces is seated on something that appears roughly carved and round and lump-like; the scholar who originally published the vase, Stephani, called it a "Felsen," a rocky outcrop (Stephani 1869:271 no. 525). The Mirthless Rock is the obvious identification. Thus the goddess sitting on it (no. 1) should be Demeter, and the identification is further strengthened by the *polos* she is wearing; a similar headdress is worn by Demeter in the center (no. 5).

The pair on the left, Demeter and Iakchos (nos. 1 and 2), appear in the context which they share in the cult; it therefore seems reasonable to expect a similar kind of context for the matching pair on the far right (nos. 9 and 10). The seated woman on the far right (no. 10) gives an impression of sorrow: she seems to support her chin with her right hand (not accurately rendered in the drawing); her face seems to express grief; and her left hand dangles down behind her, just touching her scepter (her loose hold on it is similar to that of the figure of the lower Demeter on the Ninnion Tablet). She sits on a throne, if that is what it is, or perhaps a rock. Since, as we have seen, the goddess most closely associated with Eubouleus in the cult myth is Kore after her return from the underworld or the Goddess (i.e. Persephone) before her return, figure no. 10 ought to be the Goddess (Thea), shown in the underworld, grieving because of her separation from her mother. Her queenly status is corroborated by her scepter, and her identification with Kore by the fact that her head is mostly uncovered (a veil, apparently, can be discerned in back), rather like Kore's uncovered head in the central scene (no. 6). Separation of Mother and Daughter (Thea) is expressed here by placement at the extreme edges of the scene, diametrically opposite each other.

The final symmetry of the composition is now clear. As we have seen, the members of each symmetrical pair relate to each other in some significant way: Dionysus and Heracles (nos. 4 and 7) as fellow initiates; Triptolemus and Athena (nos. 3 and 8) as symbols of the generosity of Athens and its invitation to the Mysteries; the torchbearers Iakchos and Eubouleus (nos. 2 and 9), the one leading initiates to Demeter sitting on her Mirthless Rock, the other leading the Goddess from the underworld to rejoin her mother at Eleusis (no. 5) and to resume her role as the Kore (daughter) (no. 6). We can now recognize a similar relation in the outer pair, grieving mother and sorrowful daughter. There is a further symmetry: the central Demeter (no. 5) is on the same half of the scene as Demeter on the Mirthless Rock (no. 1), and Kore (no. 6) is on the same side as the Goddess (no. 10).

In the center the reunited Mother and Daughter look at each other with feeling. Demeter puts her left arm around Kore's back and lifts her right arm high, vigorously, as she grasps her scepter (unlike her pose on the Mirthless Rock at no. 1). Kore too holds her torch with vigor (in contrast to the way in which she barely clasps her scepter in the underworld at no. 10). The central scene is reminiscent of the upper

register of the Ninnion Tablet, especially in the position of Demeter's hands. We saw that the upper register of the tablet represented the ritual of the *plēmochōai*, held on the final day of the Mysteries. A similar allusion occurs on this vase, in the central scene: on the ground, between Demeter and Kore, stands a *plēmochōō*, below two crossed initiates' staffs. The crossed initiates' staffs appear also in the lower center of the Ninnion Tablet (Figure 22.2), above them the Hieros Lithos (Sacred Stone), indicating here, in the lower register, the opening of the celebration at Eleusis (Clinton 1992:121-5).

The Regina Vasorum highlights the central role played by the myth in the cult.

The Sacred Drama

There are many Eleusinian scenes in art and they present various moments of the myth, but we have concentrated on the Ninnion Tablet and the Regina Vasorum partly because of space but mainly because they give us the progression of the myth from Mirthless Rock to reunion of Mother and Daughter, and, in addition, fairly precise allusions to cult. The scenes not discussed here do not change this picture. The Regina Vasorum presents only gods and goddesses, including divine initiates, but the Ninnion Tablet shows only human initiates, because the tablet is primarily interested in cultic events (opening of the Mysteries at Eleusis with the arrival of the initiates in the lower register; closing of the festival with the *plēmochōai* in the upper register) and only secondarily in the myth (i.e. the status of the goddesses at different moments in the rite). The similarities and differences between the Ninnion Tablet and the Regina Vasorum help us fill out the picture of what mythical events the initiates experience from the moment they enter the sanctuary to the climax of the sacred rite. In these scenes and others we see only the beginning and/or end (Clinton 1992:81-3): as the initiates arrive with Iakchos (in the actual festival he is represented by a statue, carried by the official called *Iakchagōgos*), they approach Demeter on the Mirthless Rock; at the end, i.e. climax, they experience the reunion of the Two Goddesses.

It has long been known that the Mysteries entailed a drama of the wandering of Demeter in search of Kore and, finally, Kore's return (cf., e.g., Burkert 1983:256-64; Foucart 1914:457-85; Mylonas 1961:261-9). These scenes in painting allow us to gain a reasonably good idea of which events the drama encompassed. Clearly, as we have seen, the drama did not begin with the abduction of Kore; its inclusion is not supported by the artistic representations, and the physical features of the Telesterion render it highly unlikely. The abduction itself, therefore, is presupposed; it had occurred before the initiates reached Eleusis; it was a given. The drama began with Mother and Daughter separated and in sorrow: Demeter on the Mirthless Rock, the Goddess (Thea) in the underworld.

The initial image of sorrow and pain was impressed upon the initiates as they proceeded, blindfolded, past the Mirthless Rock. At this point they probably heard lamentations of Demeter and Kore, mentioned by Proclus (*Commentary on the Republic* 1.125.3-22 Kroll). This impression of the goddesses' pain they took with them as they made their way up the path to the Telesterion. Here they apparently wandered about outside the Telesterion (perhaps also inside) in search of Kore,

confused and fearful as they stumbled in the dark, their eyes still blinded, each initiate guided by his mystagogue. All the while the hierophant kept sounding a gong, summoning Kore (Apollodorus, *On the Gods*, FGrH 244, fr. 110b). They participated in the suffering of the goddesses, a suffering that intensified as they wandered in darkness. Finally the scene is transformed from darkness to brilliant light (*mega phōs*), as the Telesterion is opened (Clinton 2004).

The experience that the initiates underwent up to this point is akin to death. It is described for us, in general terms, in a fragment of Plutarch's *On the Soul*:

Then [at the point of death] it [i.e., the soul] suffers something like what those who participate in the great initiations [*telestai*] suffer. Hence even the word "dying" [*teleutan*] is like the word "to be initiated" [*teleisthai*], and the act (of dying) is like the act (of being initiated). First of all there are wanderings and wearisome rushings about and certain journeys unending [*atelestoi*] through the darkness with suspicion, then before the very end [*telos*] all the terrors – fright and trembling and sweating and amazement. But then one encounters an extraordinary light, and pure regions and meadows offer welcome, with voices and dances and majesties of sacred sounds and holy sights; in which now the completely initiated one [*pantelēs... memuēmenos*], becoming free and set loose, enjoys the rite, crowned, and consorts with holy and pure men... (Plutarch fr. 178 Bernadakis)

It is no doubt shortly after this, i.e. when they enter the region of pure light, the Telesterion, that they catch a glimpse of Demeter and Kore reunited. All this is seen and experienced, certainly not narrated; for again and again the words we hear from ancient writers about the Mysteries emphasize the *seeing*; and Aristotle tells us that in the Mysteries one does not learn anything, one *experiences*.

But how did Kore make her return? Where in the sanctuary did she ascend from the underworld? A scene on a recently published vase, a red-figure *hydria* in Bern (Abegg-Stiftung 3.127.73), suggests that she first greeted Demeter while the goddess was sitting on the Mirthless Rock (Clinton 1992:87–8 figs 22–3). In physical terms, it would make sense if Kore arose from somewhere in the vicinity of the rock, greeted her mother, and the two of them went up to the Telesterion together with Eubouleus.

On the north side of the cave precinct in which the Mirthless Rock is located, there is a deep pit, marked "Cisterne" on the plan (Clinton 1992:5 fig. 7); at regular intervals along its sides there are cavities cut for the insertion of beams, which presumably allowed one to climb up or down. Its location seems unlikely for a cistern. Right next to it is a set of steps cut in the cliff which lead up from it to an elliptical opening, partly natural, perhaps partly artificial, in the wall of the cave. Mylonas pointed out:

It seems apparent that no water was ever found in that pit... There can be little doubt that a specific use was made of the opening, of the stairway, and perhaps even of the pit; possibly all these elements served a single purpose. The obvious explanation is that they served for the portrayal of the fortunes of Persephone... Perhaps they were used in the staging of the passage from the lower world, in providing Persephone's ascent to Eleusis. (Mylonas 1961:148)

His suggestion is quite attractive. It seems reasonable to assume that Kore emerged from the underworld here, led by Eubouleus; then they climbed the steps that led to the hole in the wall of the cave, and walked across the cave to her mother who was sitting, sorrowfully, on the Mirthless Rock (Clinton 1992:87–9 figs 10–12). There they embraced.

The Two Goddesses (represented probably by the two priestesses called Hierophantides) and Eubouleus (represented by a priest) then walked up to the Telesterion. I suspect that their passage from Mirthless Rock to Telesterion was not seen by the Mystai (first-time initiands), who were still veiled, but by the *Epoitai* (initiated at least one year earlier), some of them lining the path up to the Telesterion, the rest inside the Telesterion.

After the Mystai perform the search for Kore, they mill about the Telesterion, anxiously waiting in the darkness. Suddenly the doors of the Telesterion are flung open, and a blazing light pours forth. The initiates, as they enter the Telesterion, now presumably without their blindfolds, pass from the outer darkness into an immense interior space lit with extraordinary light, which probably came from hundreds of torches held by the *Epoitai*, standing on the rows of stone steps lining the interior walls (Clinton 2004).

Within the Telesterion the goddesses were visible to the Mystai, but were now displayed, probably as illuminated images, on a structure in the center which may have served as a platform (often mistakenly called an Anaktoron) (Clinton 1992:89–90, 126–32; 2004). The basic scene is presented often enough in painting.

After the Mystai left, a special vision was revealed to the *Epoitai*. A Christian writer speaks of a display of grain and of a child to whom Demeter gave birth (Hippolytus, *Refutation of all Heresies* 5.8.40 Marcovich). The child evidently appeared suddenly and dramatically. This child ought to be Ploutos (Clinton 1992:91–4). In art he frequently appears as an older boy, usually naked, holding a cornucopia and wearing a wreath of grain. As he made his epiphany, presumably from within the structure at the center of the Telesterion, it was perhaps at this moment that the Hierophant displayed the ear of grain mentioned by the Church Father Hippolytus.

The Mysteries revealed simple things, like the return of a lost daughter to her mother, a goddess in suffering (an extraordinary state for a Greek god or goddess), joy that accompanies the appearance of grain, the grain that is Ploutos, the agrarian prosperity that sustains family and clan – all simple things that at the same time had profound significance. The impact lay in part in the dramatic presentation, which was an essential aspect of the experience. The initiates experienced the suffering of Demeter and Kore and, at the end, the goddesses' joy; their relation to the Two Goddesses changed forever; they enjoyed a new status, and that filled them with confidence for the time when they would seek Kore again in a much more perilous transition, as the Thea, queen in the underworld, who held the power to grant them a joyous existence for all time (*tou sumphantos aiōnos*, in the words of Isocrates). Unfortunately, we cannot recapture their experience, their suffering and their joy. One can feel it, though, pervading ancient allusions to the Mysteries, as in Plato's *Symposium* in the words of the prophetess Diotima (209E–212A) or in such descriptions of the Mysteries as this one by Cicero:

It seems to me that [your] Athens has produced many extraordinary and divine things but nothing better than those Mysteria, by which we have been led out of a rude and boorish existence into humanity [*humanitas*] and have become civilized, and as they are called initiations [*initia*], so truly have we learned [in them] the origins [*principia*] of life; and not only have we received a way of living with prosperity [*laetitia*] but also a way of dying with greater hope. (*On Laws* 2.36)

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

This chapter follows closely a main argument in Clinton 1992, which treats many additional problems concerning the cult, its myth, and its iconography (the latter updated now by Clinton and Palagia 2003).

The fullest account of the cult of the Mysteria remains Foucart 1914, and this is still useful, though his theory of an Egyptian origin has not found general favor. Nilsson 1967 has a good discussion, with references to research up to that time. Burkert 1983 presents an important survey of the evidence and discussion of many problems, with a theory that a central secret ritual consisted in sacrifice (on sacrifice at the Mysteria see also Clinton 1988). An illuminating comparative phenomenology of ancient mystery cults, including the Eleusinian, is given in Burkert 1987a.

The archaeological remains received detailed treatment by Noack 1927. An account of the important excavations of the 1930s is given in Mylonas 1961. Travlos 1988:91–169 contains a good bibliography of the excavations and many photographs and plans of the sanctuary. Unfortunately no full treatment of the remains on the scale of Noack 1927 has appeared.

On the priests of the cult see Clinton 1974; on the relation of the Mysteria to Orphic texts, Graf 1974; on the Mysteria as the premier panhellenic festival of Athens, Clinton 1994. The complete edition of the inscriptions of the sanctuary at Eleusis (Clinton 2006) contains documentation and detailed treatment of some of the topics discussed in this chapter.