



The Eleusinian Mysteries

Myth of Persephone

- Hymn to Demeter = reveals cult
- Hymn reproduces numerous features of the Mysteries celebrated
- Hymn thanks Demeter for earth that grows crops;
- She isn't the maker but she is in charge, in control
- In a subsistence economy, she literally has the power over life and death.





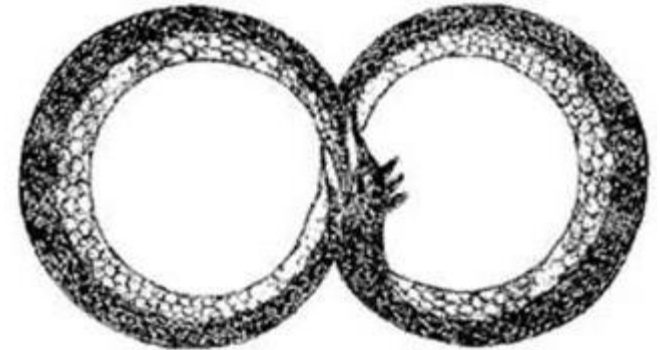
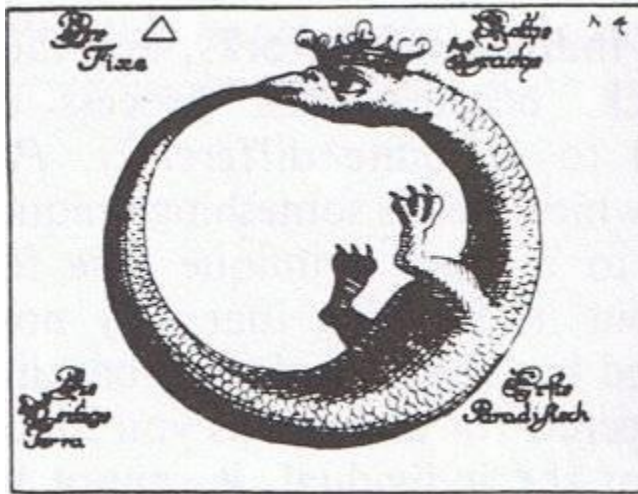


Demeter in Hades (Hell)

- Mother daughter pair thus uniquely divides control over life and death:
- Persephone is mistress of the dead.
- Demeter controls the source of life.
- In most versions, Demeter can't go to Hades but has to have others intervene.
In one version, she goes down but Persephone won't come back



Ouroboros



cyclicity, especially in the sense of something constantly re-creating itself

About Hades

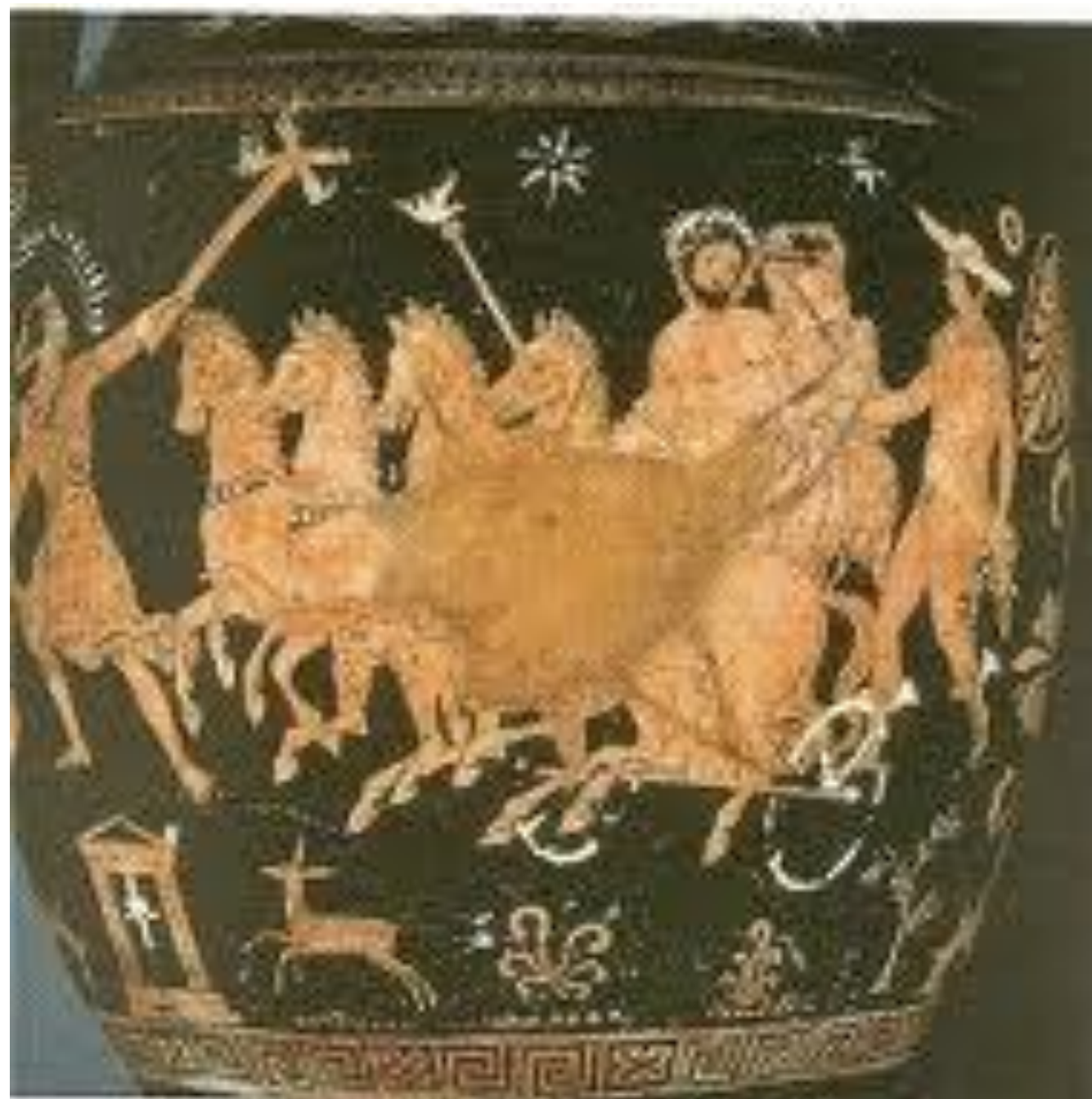
- Initiates of cult are promised happier earth world plus better after life in Underworld
- Paradise = Elysium
- Won't be like Sisyphus or Tantalus
- Myth explains extra detail of world
- Link between mortals and immortals



Earthbound

- Demeter dwells on earth, among mortals
- Gods are hard to detect and are often disastrous to mortals (i.e., Zeus & Hera)
- Earth mother: has power





Women in Greece

- Women were subordinate in home yet respected
- Marriage: Is Demeter mourning the marriage (not just the death)?
- Girls were property, no choices in marriage; hence, violent imagery

Bernini
Sculpture (1621)



Demeter's Pattern

- Withdrawal → devastation → return
- Yet Demeter has power: why doesn't Zeus just handle himself as usual?



THE RAPE OF PERSEPHONE, BY CHRISTOPH SCHWARTZ, MIDDLE TO LATE 1500S



Persephone's Pattern

- Life → Death → Life → Death
- Persephone and adolescent rite of passage:
 - Disruption of cosmos.
 - Maiden
 - Liminal zone
 - Virgin meadow
 - Violent abduction/rape
 - Disappearance associated with death
- Return as adult: wife (and even mother)
- Note: girls who die before marriage called wives of Hades.



Xenia

- On earth = Spring, Summer, Fall
Underworld = Winter, Demeter mourns
- Xenia: eating at someone's table as a guest; it's the guest – host relationship
- She ate the fruit, a symbol of fertility
- Yonic = female
- Phallic = male





Eleusinian Mystery Cult

- Believed to have begun 1500 BC

Demeter Hides Seed

- She withholds the seed for planting / mourning / search
- Wants a temple built to her
- Metaneira / Great Goddess and her priestess



What do they promise?

- For by means of the Mysteries,
we have been transformed
from a rough and savage
way of life
to the state of humanity,
and have been civilized.

Just as they are called Initiations,
so in actual fact
we have learned from them
the fundamentals of life
and have grasped the basis
not only for living with joy
but also dying with a better hope.

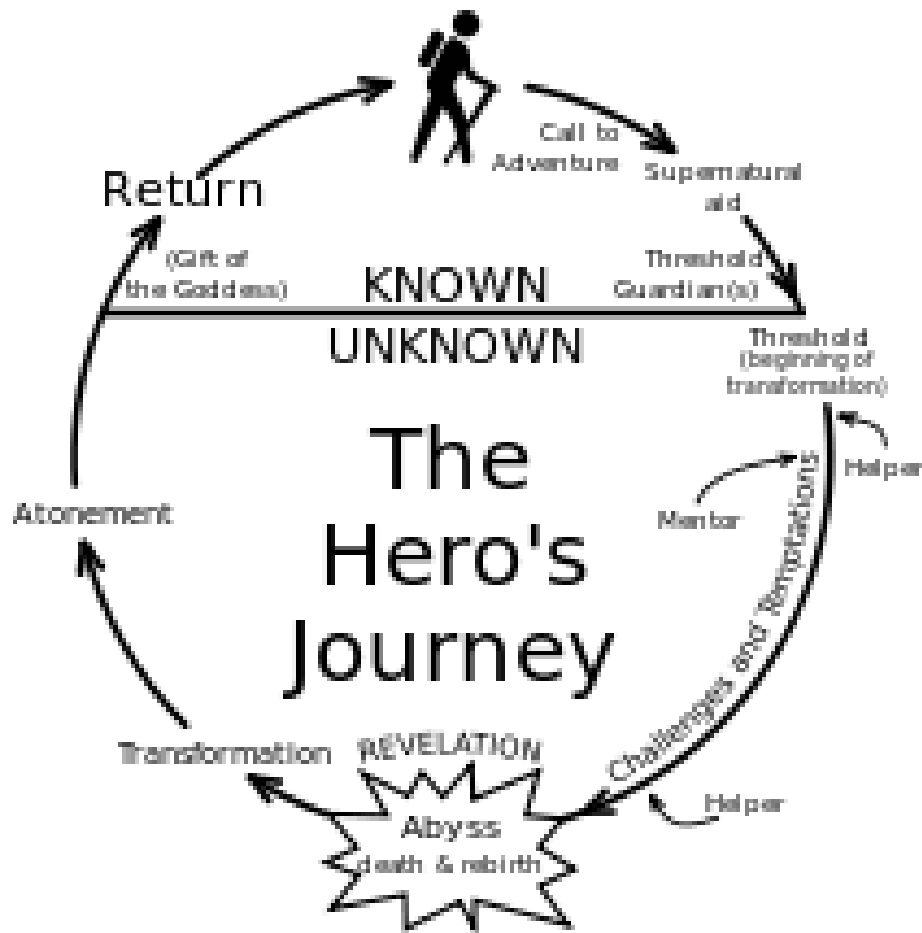
-----Cicero

Eleusis: near Athens

- The Eleusinian Mysteries, held every five years (and in later times every year) in honor of Demeter and Persephone
- Site of Metaneira / watering hole incident
- most sacred and revered of all the ritual celebrations of ancient Greece.
- City of Eleusis =modern Elefsina

- Large crowds of worshippers from all over Greece (and later, from throughout the Roman empire) would gather **to make the holy pilgrimage**
- As Christianity began to spread, the Mysteries were condemned by the early Church fathers; yet the rites continued for hundreds of years more and exercised considerable influence on the formation of early Christian teachings and practices.





The mysteries represented the myth of the abduction of Persephone from her mother Demeter by the king of the underworld Hades, in a cycle with three phases, the "descent" (loss), the "search" and the "ascent", with the main theme the "ascent" of Persephone and the reunion with her mother.

Fertility cults: the pattern

- Mortification (esp. fasting and sexual abstinence)
- purgation (torches)
- invigoration (**aischrologia**)
- jubilation

Participants

- Only those who spoke Greek and had shed no blood (or had subsequently been purified) were eligible
- Each new initiate, known as a "*mystes*"
- A *mystes* who returned a second time to Eleusis for induction into the highest levels of esoteric knowledge was known as an *epoptes*.
- To participate in these mysteries one had to swear a vow of secrecy.
- Priests, priestesses, and hierophants.
- Those who had attained *épopteia* (English: "contemplation"), who had learned the secrets of the greatest mysteries of Demeter.

What Happened?

- Demeter's mysteries:
- 16th of month: initiates went to bay of Phaleron where they washed themselves and a piglet.
- 19th: procession from Athens to **Eleusis**. At bridge over Kephisos River, a traditional boundary between Athens and **Eleusis**, spectators greet procession with **aischrologia**.
- More baths.
- At **Eleusis**, initiates break their fast.
- Women celebrate all night long, more **aischrologia**.

PROCESSION

- The procession to Eleusis began at [Kerameikos](#) (the Athenian cemetery) on the 19th, and from there the people walked to Eleusis, along what was called the "Sacred Way" swinging branches called [bacchoi](#). At a certain spot along the way, they shouted obscenities in commemoration of [Iambe](#)), an old woman who, by cracking dirty jokes, had made Demeter smile as she mourned the loss of her daughter. The procession also shouted "Íakch', O Íakche!" referring to [Iacchus](#), possibly an epithet for Dionysus, or a separate deity, son of Persephone or Demeter.

Arrival

- Upon reaching Eleusis, there was an all-night vigil (*pannychis*) perhaps commemorating Demeter's search for Persephone. At some point, initiates had a special drink of barley and pennyroyal, called kykeon, which has led to speculation about its chemicals perhaps having psychotropic effects.

Aishchrologia

- Aischrologia = “abusive speech” = ritual obscenity in female cults
- Iambe makes Demeter laugh by shaving her genitals and saying obscenities

Psychedelic?

- **The Greatest Mystery and a psychedelic twist**

The most important ritual for those involved in the Eleusinian Mysteries involved a ten day journey to Eleusis and a fast broken by drinking [kykeon](#).

The administration of kykeon, a peasant drink consisting of barley and the common cooking herb pennyroyal, is a subject of controversy for modern historians, as the [kykeon](#) served near the end of the journey likely contained a psychoactive ingredient.

- [Ergot](#), a parasite that grows on barley, emits ergometrine and d-lysergic acid amide, a chemical precursor to LSD that exhibits similar psychedelic effects and a [DEA schedule III drug](#) in the United States. After ingesting the kykeon, the participant enters the final portion of the journey, wherein the most secret aspects of the mystery are revealed, with many experiencing visions pertaining to the possibility of eternal life. The influence of mind altering drugs is believed to bolster the individual's reaction to the final step and help the Eleusinian Mysteries survive for nearly two thousand years against a plethora of other mystery cults and the rise of Christianity in Rome.

Inside the Temple

- Initiates entered a great hall called [Telesterion](#); in the center stood the Anaktoron ("palace"), which only the hierophants could enter, where sacred objects were stored.
- Before mystai could enter the Telesterion, they would recite, "I have fasted, I have drunk the *kykeon*, I have taken from the *kiste* ("box") and after working it have put it back in the *kalathos* ("open basket").
- It is widely supposed that the rites inside the Telesterion comprised three elements: *dromena* ("things done"), a dramatic reenactment of the Demeter/Persephone myth; *deiknumena* ("things shown"), displayed sacred objects, in which the hierophant played an essential role; and finally *legomena* ("things said"), commentaries that accompanied the *deiknumena*.
- Combined these three elements were known as the *aporrheta* ("unrepeatables"); the penalty for divulging them was death.

- Inside the telesterion: initiates apparently 'saw' Kore summoned by gong. Kore has a baby.
- The climax, get this, was the priest cutting wheat/grain from its stalk.
- Initiates also fondle the contents of a basket:
- Likely genitalia made of dough, or the implements for grinding grain into flour, or both.
- As to the climax of the Mysteries, there are two modern theories. Some hold that the priests were the ones to reveal the visions of the holy night, consisting of a fire that represented the possibility of life after death, and various sacred objects.
- Following this section of the Mysteries was the Pannychis, an all-night feast accompanied by dancing and merriment.
- A bull sacrifice also took place late that night or early the next morning.
- That day the initiates honored the dead by pouring [libations](#) from special vessels.

Hymn:

- Zeus, Demeter, Kore/Persephone, nymph daughters of Ocean, Hades, Hekate, Helios, daughters of Celeus, Dos, Metaneira, Iambe, Demophoon.
- Flowery meadow, torches, well, stool, special potion of barley water and mint, fire, temple, drought (n.b. shuts down communication between heaven and earth), pomegranate.
- Angry withdrawal, lying story by Demeter, Kore lies to mom.

Pre-History

- "None of these initiatory cults can be regarded as a creation of the Greek mind. Their roots go deep into prehistory, Cretan, Asiatic, and Thracian traditions were taken over, enriched, and incorporated into a new religious horizon. It was through Athens that Eleusis became a Pan Hellenic religious center; but the mysteries of Demeter and Kore had been celebrated at Eleusis for centuries. The Eleusinian initiation descends directly from an agricultural ritual centered around the death and resurrection of a divinity controlling the fertility of the fields."
- Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*

May Be Really, Really Old Worship

- See Cult of Cybele which may be a descendent of the Anatolian Mother Goddess found at Catalhoyulk (6th Millenium BCE)





Archeological Sites reveal mass quantities of fat, stumpy female statues
Sitting or Squatting; are they pregnant?

Cult of Cybele

Great Mother
Phrygian goddess

Goddess of the Cave

