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“INITIATION INTO THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES: A “THIN”
DESCRIPTION”

INITIATION INTO THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES: A “THIN” DESCRIPTION

by

JAN N. BREMMER

University of Groningen

The philosopher Democritus once said: “A life without festivals is like a road without inns” (B 230), but there can be little doubt that among all the Greek festivals it is the Eleusinian Mysteries that most intrigues the modern public. It is the aim of this contribution to take a fresh look at this festival during the height of the Athenian empire, the later fifth century B.C. Unlike older studies, the most recent detailed analyses, those by Walter Burkert and Robert Parker, have given up on a linear reconstruction of the ritual.¹ Yet there is something unsatisfactory in such an approach, as it prevents us from having a proper view of the course of the ritual and appreciating its logic.² Ideally, we should reconstruct a linear “thick description” (to use the famous term of the late Clifford Geertz [1926-2006]) of the experience of the average initiate, *mystês*,³ but we are prevented from doing so by the fact that our main and rather scanty literary information is from Christian authors, who often wanted to defame the ritual, and, in some cases, lived 600-700 hundred years after Athens’ heyday. For these reasons, our account will be “thin” rather than “thick” and, moreover, tentative rather than assured. In fact, almost all analyses of ancient festivals are no more than probable, ahistorical scripts or templates, as we cannot get to the original performances, and thus have to confine ourselves to static outlines of festivals, however

¹ Walter Burkert, *Homo necans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 248-97 and Robert Parker, *Polytheism and Society at Athens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 334-68. For the older, linear approach see August Mommsen, *Heortologie* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1864), 243-69 and *Feste der Stadt Athen im Altertum* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1898), 204-45 (very little about the actual performance of the Mysteries); Ludwig Deubner, *Attische Feste* (Berlin: H. Keller, 1932), 71-91; George E. Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 237-85. For a different and, in my opinion, unpersuasive, brief reconstruction see Kevin Clinton, “The Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore at Eleusis,” in *Greek Sanctuaries* (ed. Nanno Marinatos and Robin Hägg; London: Routledge, 1993), 110-24 at 118-9.

² We can see the effect of this approach very clearly in the study of Aristophanes’ *Frogs* by Ismene Lada-Richards, *Initiating Dionysus: Ritual and Theatre in Aristophanes’ Frogs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 81-84, who completely confuses the two stages of the Eleusinian Mysteries.

³ For this term note Antoine Hermay, “Dioskouroi,” in *LIMC* 3.1 (1986), 567-53 at 576 no. 111 (black-figure Attic pelike of about 510 BC); Sophocles F 804 Radt; Euripides, *Suppl.* 173, 470; Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 159, 887; Thucydides 6.28.1 and 53.2; the title *Mystai* of one of Phrynichus’ comedies and the title *Mystis* of comedies by Philemon, Antiphanes and Philippides.

unsatisfactory that may be. This is certainly true for the Eleusinian Mysteries, as it is highly improbable that this festival would have stayed completely unchanged during a whole millennium. Yet it is characteristic for our dearth of sources that we cannot point to any changes in the ritual over the course of this period.

The Eleusinian Mysteries profoundly influenced all other Greek mysteries and are therefore an appropriate subject for a book on mysteries and secrecy. It is with pleasure that I dedicate this analysis to Einar Thomassen. I first met Einar during a symposium on “Myth and Symbol” organised by Synnøve des Bouvrie at the University of Tromsø in the midnight sun of 1998. We have since met in all kinds of places – ranging from Oslo, Groningen, Chicago, Malibu and Bergen to London and Volos – and those meetings have always been most stimulating and pleasurable experiences.

Let us start with the question regarding the identity of the average initiates. Unique for Greek festivals, the Mysteries were open to men and women,⁴ free and slaves,⁵ young and old, Greeks and non-Greeks. Yet not everybody could afford the Mysteries. Prospective initiates first had to complete a whole series of ritual acts, as we know from the Church Father Clement of Alexandria (about A.D. 200), who relates the following “password” of the initiates: “I fasted, I drank the *kykeon* (like Demeter in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*), I took from the hamper, after working I deposited in the basket and from the basket in the hamper.”⁶ Clearly, the meaning of these allusive acts is intentionally left obscure, but they could not have been part of the actual Mysteries, given that there was no time in the programme for a couple of thousand initiates to perform these acts or to fast in a meaningful way. Consequently, they will have been performed either at the Lesser Mysteries in the spring,⁷ seven months earlier,⁸ or, perhaps more likely, at some other time, as the receipts of the Lesser Mysteries in 487/6 were much lower than those of the Greater

⁴ For the well known Ninnion Pinax, see most recently Michalis Tiverios, “Women of Athens in the Worship of Demeter: Iconographic Evidence from Archaic and Classical Times,” in *Worshipping Women: Ritual and Reality in Classical Athens* (ed. Nikolaos Kaltsas and Alan Shapiro; New York: Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation, 2008), 125-35 at 130-31. Kalliope Papangeli, *ibid.*, 150-51 wrongly suggests that the name Ninnion suggests a courtesan, cf. Olivier Masson, *Onomastica Graeca Selecta 3* (Geneva: Droz, 2000), 238.

⁵ Initiation of a slave was clearly a favor of a benevolent master: Theophilus F 1 Kassel-Austin (= KA).

⁶ Clement of Alexandria (= Clem. Alex.), *Protr.* 2.21.2; Arnobius 5.26, cf. Pierre Roussel, “L’initiation préalable et le symbole éleusinien,” *BCH* 54 (1930): 52-74; Burkert, *Homo necans*, 269-74; Parker, *Polytheism*, 354.

⁷ This seems suggested by Clem. Alex. *Strom.* 5.11.

⁸ *IG I³ 6 B 36-47 = I. Eleusis* 19 B 36-47; Plutarch, *Demetr.* 26.2, cf. Parker, *Polytheism*, 344f.

ones.⁹ Prospective initiates will have been introduced into the secret teachings of the Mysteries by so-called mystagogues, already initiated friends and acquaintances:¹⁰ Andocides mentions that he initiated guest friends, the orator Lysias promised to initiate Metaneira, the courtesan he was in love with, and Plutarch stresses the fact that the murderer of Plato's friend Dio had also been his mystagogue,¹¹ which clearly made the murder even more heinous.

Initiation into the Mysteries, then, was not a simple act, but potential initiates must have been able to spend time and money, as they also had to pay a fee to the officiants.¹² All these conditions will have limited participation mainly to the less poor strata of the population. In addition, we should never forget that not every Athenian was initiated. The story that Aeschylus escaped condemnation for revealing the mysteries by arguing that he had not been initiated is probably a misunderstanding of Clement of Alexandria, our source,¹³ but Socrates was not initiated, and Andocides mentions that the uninitiated had to withdraw from his trial.¹⁴ These cases are somewhat exceptional, but we must remain conscious of the fact that we simply do not know how many Athenians participated in the Mysteries.

So, on the fifteenth of the month Boedromion (September) well over 3000 prospective initiates and mystagogues assembled in the agora of Athens to hear the proclamation of the festival, a gathering which excluded those who could not speak proper Greek or had blood on their hands;¹⁵ in later antiquity, in line with the growing

⁹ Robert Simms, "Myesis, Telete, and Mysteria," *GRBS* 31 (1990): 183-95 at 183; Parker, *Polytheism*, 345f.

¹⁰ Note the close connection between mystagogues and teaching: Posidonius, fr. 368 Theiler; Plutarch, *Mor.* 795e; Dio Chr. 12.27; Ineke Sluiter, "Commentaries and the Didactic Tradition," in *Commentaries – Kommentare* (ed. Glen W. Most; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 173-205 at 191-5. For assistance by mystagogues see Menander, fr. 500 KA; *LSCGS* 15; Plutarch, *Mor.* 765a; for the instruction, Christoph Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie bei Platon, Philon und Klemens von Alexandrien* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1987), 5-14. Mystagogues are still underresearched, but see Arthur D. Nock, *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World* (ed. Zeph Stewart; 2 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 2:793 note 8; Simms, "Myesis," 191-5 notes the relatively late appearance of the term.

¹¹ Andocides, *Myst.* 29; [Demosthenes] *In Neaeram* 21; Plato, *Epistle* 7, 333e; Plutarch, *Dio* 54, 56.

¹² Parker, *Polytheism*, 342 note 65.

¹³ Clem. Alex. *Strom.* 2.14.60.2, cf. Radt on Aeschylus T 93d.

¹⁴ Lucian, *Dem.* 11 (Socrates); Andocides, *Myst.* 12.

¹⁵ Aristophanes, *Frogs* 369 with scholion *ad loc.*; Isocrates 4.157; Suetonius, *Nero* 34.4; Theon Smyrnaeus, *De utilitate mathematicae* p. 14.23-4 Hiller; Celsus *apud* Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3.59; Pollux 8.90; Libanius, *Decl.* 13.19, 52; *SHA Alex. Sev.* 18.2, *Marc. Aur.* 27.1.

interiorisation of purity,¹⁶ this became extended to those “impure in soul.”¹⁷ Participation *en masse* meant that the initiates had to bring their own sacrificial victims, just as they did for other big festivals, such as the Diasia for Zeus Meilichios and the Thesmophoria.¹⁸ Thus the initiates of the more remote regions must have brought their own piglets, to sacrifice later, and their squealing could hardly have enhanced the solemnity of the occasion (we may compare the inevitable ringing of cell phones at inappropriate moments today). The next day the formula “initiates to the sea” sent them off to the coast in order to purify themselves and their animals.¹⁹ However, some participants must have confused purification with having a nice swim, as in 339 B.C. a prospective initiate was eaten by a shark.²⁰ A sacrifice of the “mystic piglets” probably concluded the day.²¹

On the morning of Boedromion 19, after three days rest (a free period of time that had made it possible to intercalate the Epidauria festival for Asclepius),²² the prospective initiates assembled again in the agora and formed the procession to the sanctuary of Demeter and her daughter Persephone in Eleusis.²³ At the front went the Eleusinian dignitaries,²⁴ dressed in their full glory,²⁵ the priestesses carrying sacred objects on their

¹⁶ Jan N. Bremmer, “How Old is the Ideal of Holiness (of Mind) in the Epidaurian Temple Inscription and the Hippocratic Oath?” *ZPE* 142 (2002): 105-7.

¹⁷ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3.59; Eusebius, *Contra Hieroclem* 30.3 (anecdote about Apollonius of Tyana); Libanius, *Decl.* 13.19, 52; Julian, *Or.* 7.25; Matthew W. Dickie, “Priestly Proclamations and Sacred Laws,” *CQ* 54 (2004): 579-91.

¹⁸ Michael Jameson, “Notes on the Sacrificial Calendar from Erchia,” *BCH* 89 (1965): 154-72 at 159-66 (Diasia); Robert Parker, “Festivals of the Attic Demes,” in *Gifts to the Gods* (ed. Tullia Linders and Gullög Nordquist; Boreas 15; Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1987), 137-47 at 145 (Thesmophoria).

¹⁹ Ephoros *FGrH* 70 F 80, cf. Polyaeus 3.11.2; Hesychius α 2727 Latte; *IG* I³ 84.35-6; *IG* II² 847.20 = *I. Eleusis* 208 with Clinton *ad loc.* (bibliography).

²⁰ Aeschines 3.130 and scholion *ad loc.*; Plutarch, *Phocion* 28.3, cf. Fritz Graf, *Eleusis und die orphische Dichtung Athens in vorhellenistischer Zeit* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1974), 43; Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie*, 47 note 85; Parker, *Polytheism*, 108-9, 347; Kevin Clinton, “Pigs in Greek Rituals,” in *Greek Sacrificial Ritual: Olympian and Chthonian* (ed. Robin Hägg and Britta Alroth; Stockholm: Svenska institutet i Athen, 2005), 167-79; note also, for the values connected with pigs, Rolf Schneider, “Der Satyrknabe im Schweinsfell,” in *Die zweite Haut. Panther-, Wolfs- und Ferkelfell im Bild des Satyrn* (ed. Andrea Mogwitz; Munich: Museum für Abgüsse Klassischer Bildwerke München, 2005), 37-46.

²¹ Philostratus, *VA.* 4.18, cf. Parker, *Polytheism*, 347 note 87.

²² Kevin Clinton, “The Epidauria and the Arrival of Asclepius in Athens,” in *Ancient Greek Cult Practice from the Epigraphical Evidence* (ed. Robin Hägg; Stockholm: Svenska institutet i Athen, 1994), 17-34; Parker, *Polytheism*, 462.

²³ For the debate whether there were two processions, on 19 and 20 Boedromion, see Parker, *Polytheism*, 348, whom I follow here.

²⁴ For the Eleusinian priests see Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, “The Priesthoods of the Eleusinian Cult of Demeter and Kore,” in *ThesCRA* 5 (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2006), 60-65.

²⁵ For their costumes see Lysias 6.51; Plutarch, *Alc.* 22, *Arist.* 5; Arrian, *Epict.* 3.21.16; Athenaeus 21e; Janine Balty, “Hiérophantes attiques d’époque impériale,” in *Rayonnement Grec. Hommages à Ch. Delvoye* (ed. Lydie Hadermann-Misguich and Georges Raepsaet; Brussels: Éditions de l’Université de Bruxelles, 1982),

heads in special baskets closed by red ribbons,²⁶ and, in later times, the ephebes, the Athenian male youth. They were followed by a huge cavalcade of Greeks, holding a kind of pilgrim's staff consisting of a single branch of myrtle or several held together by rings,²⁷ who were accompanied by their donkeys with the provisions and torches for the coming days.²⁸ The procession now left the city, and it would be quite a few hours before they would have completed the roughly 15 mile journey, which was repeatedly interrupted by sacred dances, sacrifices, libations, ritual washings,²⁹ and the singing of hymns, accompanied by pipes.³⁰ It was hot and dusty, but the crowds did not care and rhythmically chanted "Iacch', o Iacche," invoking the god Iacchos at the head of the procession, who was closely related to and sometimes identified with Dionysos.³¹ Later reports told how during the battle of Salamis (480 B.C.) "a great light flamed out from Eleusis, and an echoing cry filled the Thriasian plain down to the sea, as of multitudes of men together conducting the mystic Iacchos in procession."³² At times, the scene must have resembled that of fervent Catholic or Shi'ite processions.

The participants were now in that transitory stage of betwixt and between, which, as the anthropologist Victor Turner (1920-1983) has taught us, is often characterised by reversals and confusions of the social order.³³ And indeed, during the journey the young mocked the old,³⁴ at the bridge over the Athenian river Kephisos a prostitute hurled

263-72; Wolfgang Geominy, "Eleusinische Priester," in *Festschrift für Nikolaus Himmelmann* (ed. Hans-Ulrich Cain *et al.*; Mainz: Von Zabern, 1989), 253-64.

²⁶ Plutarch, *Phoc.* 28; Apuleius, *Met.* 6.2; Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 245.

²⁷ Servius, *Aen.* 6.136; schol. Aristophanes, *Knights* 408; Claude Bérard, "La lumière et le faisceau: images du rituel éleusinien," *Recherches et documents du centre Thomas More* 48 (1985): 17-33; Mary B. Moore, *Attic Red-Figured and White-Ground Pottery* (Agora 30; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 136-7; Hermann Schaubert, "'Bakchos'. Der eleusinische Kultstab," in *ThesCRA* 5, 385-90; Parker, *Polytheism*, 349.

²⁸ Aristophanes, *Frogs* 159 with scholia *ad loc.*, cf. Diogenianus 6.98.

²⁹ Hesychius, s.v. Ἰαττοί .

³⁰ Aristophanes, *Frogs* 313 (pipes, cf. Graf, *Eleusis*, 57; Claude Bérard, *Anodoi* [Rome: Institut suisse de Rome, 1974], 92-3); Plutarch, *Alc.* 34.4; *IG II²* 1078.29-30 = *I. Eleusis* 638.29-30.

³¹ Herodotus 8.65.1; Aristophanes, *Frogs* 316-7; Graf, *Eleusis*, 40-50; Kevin Clinton, *Myth and Cult* (Stockholm: Svenska Institutet i Athen, 1992), 64-71; Erika Simon, "Iakchos," in *LIMC* 5.1 (1990), 612-4.

³² Plutarch, *Themistocles* 15.1, tr. Perrin.

³³ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

³⁴ Aristophanes, *Frogs* 374-5, 389-93; *Wasps* 1362-5, cf. Jeffrey S. Rusten, "Wasps 1360-1369. Philokleon's τωθασμός," *HSCP* 81 (1977): 157-61.

mockery at the passers by,³⁵ and the wealthier women who rode in buggies reviled one another.³⁶ Although some couples must have been initiated together,³⁷ in general the two sexes were now able to take a close look at one another in a way that would have been unthinkable in normal circumstances. Aristophanes even lets one of his male characters peep at a slave girl who had performed a Janet Jackson act with her top.³⁸ That will have been wishful thinking, but Phaedra, a kind of Athenian desperate housewife, saw Hippolytus first when he had come to Athens for, to quote Euripides, “the viewing of and initiation into the most solemn mysteries” (*Hippolytos* 25).

At the end of the day, the procession finally reached the sanctuary “together with Iacchus.”³⁹ The night fell early, and the flickering of the thousands of torches must have produced a near psychedelic effect among the weary travellers.⁴⁰ Recent neurological research has stressed that a good walk can produce euphoric effects.⁴¹ I take it therefore that the “pilgrims” were already in a state of excitement when they reached their goal, which can only have increased that mood. At the entry to the sanctuary was the Kallichoron well, literally “Beautiful dancing,” the location for dancing during the Mysteries cited by Euripides in his *Ion* (1074): apparently, the “pilgrims” danced their way into the sanctuary.⁴² As Demeter is portrayed several times as seated on the well,⁴³ the place clearly had a marked symbolic significance.

After their tiring but inspiring journey, the prospective initiates will hardly have performed other ritual obligations, and the evening and night must have been fairly quiet. The next day will have begun with sacrifices, as was normal. We hear of sacrifices by the

³⁵ Hans Fluck, “Skurrile Riten in griechischen Kulturen” (Ph.D. diss., University of Freiburg, 1931), 52-59; Rusten, “Wasps 1360-1369”; Burkert, *Homo necans*, 278 note 19; Susan Cole, “Achieving Political Maturity: *Stephanosis*, *Philotimia* and *Phallegphoria*,” in *Gab es das griechische Wunder?* (ed. Dietrich Papenfuss and Volker M. Strocka; Mainz: Von Zabern, 2001), 203-14.

³⁶ Buggies: Aristophanes, *Wealth*, 1014; Demosthenes 21.158; Plutarch, *Lives of the Ten Orators*, 842a. Reviling: scholion on Aristophanes, *Plut.* 1014; Suda τ 19.

³⁷ Homer Thompson and Richard Wycheley, *The Agora of Athens: The History, Shape and Uses of an Ancient City Center* (Agora 14; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 153f.

³⁸ Aristophanes, *Frogs* 409-15, see also *Wealth* 1013f.

³⁹ Sophocles, *Ant.* 1146-52 with scholion *ad loc.*; Aristophanes, *Frogs* 342-3; *LSS* 15.42; *IG II²* 847.21 = *I. Eleusis* 208.21.

⁴⁰ The torches are already mentioned in Sophocles, *OC* 1049-51.

⁴¹ See the interesting study of Eveline J. Albers-van Erkelens, *Heilige kracht wordt door beweging los gemaakt. Over pelgrimage, lopen en genezing* (Groningen: Instituut voor Liturgiewetenschap, 2007).

⁴² See also Pausanias 1.38.6 and the allusion to the well in Aristophanes, *Frogs* 450f.

⁴³ Iphigeneia Leventi, “The Mondragone Relief Revisited: Eleusinian Cult Iconography in Campania,” *Hesperia* 76 (2007): 107-41 at 121-4.

epimelêtai, the *archôn basileus* and the epebes.⁴⁴ In order to demonstrate their physical prowess, the latter, “in the way of the Greeks” (Eur. *Helen* 1562), lifted up the sacrificial bull to have its throat cut. This custom is attested in many inscriptions but was doubted by Paul Stengel, the greatest expert on Greek sacrifice at the turn of the twentieth century. He had put the question to the Berlin abattoir, where the possibility was laughed away. Yet the sixth-century athlete Milo of Croton had gained great fame for lifting a four-year old bull on his shoulders and carrying it round the stadium at Olympia. Moreover, a more recently published sixth-century amphora shows us a group of adult males with a bull on the shoulders, clearly on their way to the sacrifice.⁴⁵ Modern spectators of bulls or oxen will probably share Stengel’s doubts, but ancient Greek bovids were considerably smaller than those we see nowadays.⁴⁶ Still, despite the difference – and bovids on the mainland may have been somewhat bigger – the “lifting up of the bulls” remains a feat that undoubtedly was admired by the prospective initiates. Burkert locates these sacrifices after the completion of the whole ritual of the Mysteries,⁴⁷ but this seems less likely, as people would hardly have been very interested in such ritual activities once the highlights of the actual initiation were over.

Some time after the setting of the sun, the prospective initiates would go to the *telestêrion*, where the actual initiation would take place over two consecutive nights.⁴⁸ It was a square or rectangular building of about 27 by 25 metres, seating about 3000 people,⁴⁹

⁴⁴ IG II² 847.13-16 = I. Eleusis 208.13-16, 1028.10-11, cf. Paul Foucart, *Les mystères d’Éleusis* (Paris: Picard, 1914), 371-5; Parker, *Polytheism*, 351 note 102.

⁴⁵ Epebes: Fritz Graf, “Apollon Delphinios,” *Museum Helveticum* 36 (1979): 2-22 at 14-5 (fullest collection); Paul Stengel, *Opferbräuche der Griechen* (Leipzig and Berlin: Teubner, 1910), 115. Milo: Athenaeus 10.412ef. Amphora: Claude Bérard *et al.*, *A City of Images: Iconography and Society in Ancient Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 58f.

⁴⁶ Jürgen Boessneck and Angela von den Driesch, *Knochenabfall von Opfermahlen und Weihgaben aus dem Heraion von Samos* (Munich: Institut für Palaeoanatomie, 1988), 22 (sacrificed cows only between 95 cm and 1,15 m, one bull 1,26 m, an ox 1,35); Manfred Stanzel, “Die Tierreste aus dem Artemis-/Apollon-Heiligtum bei Kalapodi in Bötien/Griechenland” (Ph.D., University of Munich, 1991), 48 (bulls about 135 cm.).

⁴⁷ Burkert, *Homo necans*, 292.

⁴⁸ For night being the usual time of Greek mysteries see Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie*, 47 note 81. *Telestêrion*: Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 78-88, 111-3, 117-24, fig. 26.

⁴⁹ For the various building phases and reconstructions see especially Ferdinand Noack, *Eleusis: Die baugeschichtliche Entwicklung des Heiligtums* (2 vols.; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1927); Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, “Reconstructing Change: Ideology and the Eleusinian Mysteries,” in *Inventing Ancient Culture* (ed. Mark Golden and Peter Toohey; London: Routledge, 1997), 132-64; Andrea Jördens, “IG II² 1682 und die Baugeschichte des eleusinischen Telesterion im 4. Jh. V. Chr.,” *Klio* 81 (1999): 359-91, to be read with the comments by Kevin Clinton, *Eleusis, the inscriptions on stone: documents of the Sanctuary of the Two Goddesses and public documents of the deme* (2 vols.; Athens: Archaeological Society at Athens, 2005-2008), 2.429-30.

and in its middle was a small chapel, the *anaktoron/anaktora*,⁵⁰ about 3 by 12 metres, where the sacred objects, that were displayed at some point in the ritual, were kept. Given that there were 5 rows of 5 pillars each inside the *telestêrion*, it is understandable that, as Plutarch noted, there was shouting and uncomfortable jostling at the entrance of the building, presumably in order to get to the best places.⁵¹ Finally, the initiates, who would have washed themselves to be pure for the occasion,⁵² sat down on the 8 rows of stepped seats around the walls “in awe and silence,”⁵³ the room smelling of extinguished torches,⁵⁴ darkness reigning supreme. The initiation could begin.

But what was the programme? In the second century AD a religious entrepreneur, Alexander of Abonoteichos (a kind of Greek Joseph Smith), founded mysteries, which were closely modelled on those of Eleusis. Its highlights were divided over two nights, with a kind of sacred wedding and the birth of a child on the second night.⁵⁵ Exactly the same division over two nights would have taken place in Eleusis, as there were two grades of initiation,⁵⁶ and two nights available within the programme of the Mysteries.⁵⁷ It thus seems a reasonable guess that both nights were different,⁵⁸ that the freshly initiated could hardly have left the scene after the climax of their initiation in order to clear the field for those aspiring to the highest grade,⁵⁹ and that we therefore should divide the information that has come down to us over the two nights. In fact, this is not impossible, as both Plato in his *Phaedrus* and Christian authors assign certain events explicitly to the highest grade

⁵⁰ For the term, see Catherine Trümpy, “Die Thesmophoria, Brimo, Deo und das Anaktorion: Beobachtungen zur Vorgeschichte des Demeterkults,” *Kernos* 17 (2004): 13-42 at 34-7.

⁵¹ Plutarch, *De prof. virt.* 10, 81de. The jostling is somewhat exaggerated in Plato, *Phaedrus* 248b1 and Plutarch, fr. 178 Sandbach; note also Plutarch, *Mor.* 943c, cf. Graf, *Eleusis*, 133f.

⁵² For the attention to washing at Eleusis see Robert Parker, *Miasma* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 284 notes 12f.

⁵³ Plutarch, *De prof. virt.* 10, 81e. Silence: Plutarch, *De liberis educandis* 14.10f; Hippolytus, *Ref.* 5.8.39-40.

⁵⁴ Aristophanes, *Frogs* 314 mentions “the most mystic whiff of torches.”

⁵⁵ Lucian, *Alex.* 38-9, cf. Angelos Chaniotis, “Old Wine in a New Skin: Tradition and Innovation in the Cult Foundation of Alexander of Abonouteichos,” in *Tradition and Innovation in the Ancient World* (ed. Edward Dabrowa; Cracow: Jagiellonian University Press, 2002), 67-85 at 77-9.

⁵⁶ Ken Dowden, “Grades in the Eleusinian Mysteries,” *RHR* 197 (1980): 409-27; Kevin Clinton, “Stages of Initiation in the Eleusinian and Samothracian Mysteries,” in *Greek Mysteries* (ed. Michael B. Cosmopoulos; London: Routledge, 2003), 50-78.

⁵⁷ Clinton, “The Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore,” 118-9 reduces the events to one night, as he postulates two processions on two days to Eleusis, but this is improbable, cf. Parker, *Polytheism*, 348 note 90.

⁵⁸ This was already argued by Mommsen, *Heortologie*, 261.

⁵⁹ Noack, *Eleusis*, 1.230. In this division over two nights, my analysis returns to the older studies of Mommsen, *Feste der Stadt Athen*, 244-5; Lewis Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), 173 and Foucart, *Mystères*, 357. The great value of Noack’s reconstruction is that he continuously takes the practical possibilities of the *telestêrion* into account.

of the initiation, the *epopteia*, literally “the viewing.” That leaves the events connected with the kidnapping of Persephone to the first night.

The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, the foundation myth of the Mysteries,⁶⁰ relates how Hades kidnapped Persephone, and how her mother Demeter wandered the earth in search of her. When her daughter had been returned to her, Demeter promised fields yellow with corn and a better afterlife. It was this myth that was in some way acted out by the Eleusinian clergy and the prospective initiates on the first night. Only the three highest Eleusinian officials seem to have participated in this “mystic drama,”⁶¹ and their limited number enabled Alcibiades and his friends to parody the Mysteries in private houses.⁶² It was a kind of Passion Play, that contained dances,⁶³ but no discursive accounts. Apparently, the initiates were sent outdoors to look for Persephone with their torches,⁶⁴ like Demeter herself in her *Homeric Hymn* (47),⁶⁵ but eventually the hierophant, the Eleusinian high-priest, sounded a gong to call up Persephone.⁶⁶ This was the sign for the initiates to assemble in order to witness her successful recovery, which guaranteed the fertility of the land. It must have been an extremely joyful moment, and Lactantius, surely correctly, reports that after Persephone was found the ritual came to an end with “rejoicing and brandishing of torches.”⁶⁷ The search for a divinity was a well-known ritual in ancient

⁶⁰ Robert Parker, “The Hymn to Demeter and the Homeric Hymns,” *Greece and Rome* 38 (1991): 1-17.

⁶¹ Graf, *Eleusis*, 129f. Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 3.12 still mentions only four officials, even though their meaning had clearly been adapted to the allegorizing spirit of his times.

⁶² As is well observed by Parker, *Polytheism*, 353. For the process against Alcibiades see most recently Fritz Graf, “Der Mysterienprozess,” in *Grosse Prozesse im antiken Athen* (ed. Leonard Burckhardt and Jürgen Ungern-Sternberg; Munich: Beck, 2000), 114-27, 270-73; Alexander Rubel, *Stadt in Angst. Religion und Politik in Athen während des peloponnesischen Krieges* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2000), 220-29; Stephen Todd, “Revisiting the Herms and the Mysteries,” in *Law, Rhetoric, and Comedy in Classical Athens* (ed. Douglas Cairns and Ronald Knox; Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2004), 87-102 at 89-92.

⁶³ Cleanthes, *SVF* 1. no. 538; Epictetus 3.21.16; Aristides 22.13; Lucian, *Pisc.* 33, *Sal.* 14; Tatian, *Or.* 27; Clem. Alex., *Protr.* 12.1; Sopatros, *Rhet. Gr.* VII.115.11, 30; Burkert, *Homo necans*, 288.

⁶⁴ It may well be that some women also used the cross torches that were typical of the cults of Demeter, Kore and Artemis, cf. Anja Klöckner, “Women’s Affairs? On a Group of Attic Votive Reliefs with Unusual Decoration,” in *Myths, Martyrs, and Modernity: Studies in the History of Religions in Honour of Jan N. Bremmer* (ed. Jitse Dijkstra et al.; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 179-91.

⁶⁵ See also Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 6.2, cf. Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie*, 47.

⁶⁶ Apollodorus *FGrH* 244 F 110b; Bérard, *Anodoi*, 84f.

⁶⁷ Lactantius, *Div. inst. epit.* 18 (23), 7: *et ea (Proserpina) inventa ritus omnis gratulatione ac taedarum iactatione finitur.*

Greece,⁶⁸ and, originally, the Mysteries would perhaps have ended with the return of Demeter's daughter.

This leaves the initiation into the highest degree of the Mysteries, the *epopteia*, for the second night – once again, surely, after washing. Although we do not know the exact order of the programme, several things must have been going on, and it seems reasonable to surmise that the programme gradually worked towards a climax. We will therefore start with the preliminary events. Tertullian mentions that a phallus was shown to the *epoptai*. The validity of this information has been denied, but another Christian author also mentions “acts about which silence is observed, and which truly deserve silence.”⁶⁹ In fact, a phallus was part of several festivals and does not seem to be out of place in a ritual for Demeter.

A more intriguing feature is mentioned by the late antique Christian bishop Asterius of Amaseia in Pontus. He rhetorically asks:

Are not the Mysteries at Eleusis the core of your worship [...]? Are the dark crypt (καταβύσιον) not there and the solemn meeting of the hierophant with the priestess, the two alone together? Are not the torches extinguished while the whole huge crowd believes its salvation (σωτηρίαν: note the Christian interpretation) to lie in the things done by the two in the dark?⁷⁰

The mention of a subterranean crypt should not be taken as a reference to “a gate to the underworld,” as suggested by Burkert, since the word never has this meaning,⁷¹ and archaeology has demonstrated the absence of a subterranean crypt. However, that does not really solve the problem, as was thought by Mylonas, who felt he had to defend the dignity of the Mysteries.⁷² Now a “Hymn to Isis” by the mid-second century A.D. Cretan poet Mesomedes indicates the stages of the mysteries of Isis according to rites of the Eleusinian Mysteries.⁷³ His enumeration mentions the “birth of a child” (13), the “unspeakable fire” (14), the “harvest of Kronos” (16) and, finally, the *anaktora* (18), which betrays its Eleusinian origin. And indeed, his enumeration starts with a *chthonios hymenaios* (10),

⁶⁸ Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, *Hylas, the Nymphs, Dionysos and Others: Myth, Ritual, Ethnicity* (Stockholm: Svenska Institutet i Athen, 2005).

⁶⁹ Tertullian, *Adv. Valent.* 1; Gregory Nazianzenus, *Or.* 39.4, tr. Parker; Theodoretus, *Graecarum affectionum curatio* 7.11, cf. Parker, *Polytheism*, 355 notes 123-4.

⁷⁰ Asterius, *Homilies* 10.9.1 Datema, tr. Parker, *Polytheism*, 356, with an illuminating commentary.

⁷¹ *Contra* Burkert, *Homo necans*, 284 note 47.

⁷² Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 314.

⁷³ Mesomedes, *Hymn.* 5 Heitsch, cf. Burkert, *Homo necans*, 291 note 79 and *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 160 note 116.

which is exactly and irrefutably a “subterranean wedding.” Now, the mysteries of Isis had been developed by the Eleusinian hierophant Timotheus, who had been summoned to Alexandria by Ptolemy Soter to propagate the cult of Serapis (Plut. *Iside* 28). This puts the information about the Eleusinian mysteries back to about 300 B.C., which is pretty early.

Burkert interprets the words as a reference to Persephone, but her wedding was in no way a highlight of the Mysteries. Given that all the other references are to clearly identifiable stages of the epoptic ritual, it seems more likely that we have a reference here to the same act as mentioned by Asterius. In fact, Gregory of Nazianze notes: “nor does Demeter wander and bring in Celeuses and Triptolemus and snakes, and perform some acts and undergo others,” and love between the Eleusinian king Celeus and Demeter is attested elsewhere.⁷⁴ In other words, various sources suggest that sex played a role at least on the mythical level, which could, but need not, have been reflected on the level of ritual. But how do we explain a “subterranean wedding” when there is no such space archeologically attested? Two answers seem possible. The *anaktoron* was sometimes called *megaron* or *magaron*, the term for subterranean cultic buildings of Demeter and Persephone, but also of the pits in which sacrifice was deposited during the Thesmophoria.⁷⁵ In other words, both Asterius and Mesomedes, directly or indirectly, could have misinterpreted their source’s report of the sacred wedding in the *anaktoron* because they were not, or no longer, familiar with the Mysteries. A second possibility could be that the hierophant himself, who was the only one who had access to the *anaktoron*,⁷⁶ made a suggestion of a subterranean descent. We simply do not know.

There also will have been dancing,⁷⁷ and probably other acts that escape us but which almost certainly included speaking or singing, as *euphônia* was required of the hierophant, whose voice could even be depicted as that of his eponymous ancestor Eumolpos.⁷⁸ In fact, there is a close connection between *Mousai* and *mysteria* in a number

⁷⁴ Gregory Naz. *Or.* 39.4; scholion on Aelius Aristides p. 53.15-16 Dindorf.

⁷⁵ Hesychius α 4390 Latte. For the spelling *magaron* see Menander, fr. 553 KA; Aelius Dion. μ 2 Erbse; Photius μ 5 Theod.; Albert Henrichs, “Megaron im Orakel des Apollon Kareios,” *ZPE* 4 (1969): 31-37 at 35-6; Louis Robert, *Opera minora selecta* (7 vols.; Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1969-1990), 2:1005-7 and 5:289-90; Clinton, *Myth and Cult*, 126-32.

⁷⁶ Aelian, fr. 10h, i¹ Domingo-Forasté.

⁷⁷ Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie*, 57-8, who compares Plato, *Phaedrus* 247a7; 250b6; 252c3; Alex Hardie, “Muses and Mysteries,” in *Music and the Muses* (ed. Penelope Murray and Peter Wilson; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 11-37 at 19.

⁷⁸ Plutarch, *Phoc.* 28.2; Arrian, *Epict.* 3.21.16; Philostratus, *Vit. sophist.* 2.20; *IG II².3639.4 = I. Eleusis* 515.4.

of texts.⁷⁹ As the singing of hymns is securely attested in the mysteries of the Lykomids,⁸⁰ we may well expect them to have been performed in Eleusis as well. And indeed, a first-century B.C. inscription mentions *hymnagôgoi* in Eleusis.⁸¹ Unfortunately, we cannot tell whether they instructed choirs or whether we can think of a kind of community singing in the *telestêrion*.

However, before the high point of the ritual occurred, the initiated were first subjected to a terrifying experience. As Plutarch notes: “subsequently, *before the climax* (my italics: *pro tou telous*) [come] all the terrible things, panic and shivering and sweat, and amazement.”⁸² It is the same rhythm that we can see in Plato’s *Phaedrus* (251a), where those who have seen “a godlike face” first experience shuddering, sweating and abnormal heat. We may safely assume that the Eleusinian clergy knew how to build up tension in the performance, and several sources state that prospective initiates were frightened during initiations into all kinds of mysteries.⁸³ It seems a fair assumption that Greek initiations learned from one another, and that such a practice thus will have occurred at Eleusis as well.

The high point of the initiation has been described by a Gnostic author, who rhetorically asked: “what is the great, marvellous, most perfect epoptic mystery there, an ear of wheat harvested in silence,” the showing of which was probably accompanied by a display of a statue of Demeter.⁸⁴ But that was not all. The Gnostic author proceeds with the words “just as the hierophant [...] at Eleusis, when performing the great, unspeakable mysteries amid great fire, calls out at the top of his voice: ‘the reverend goddess has given birth to a sacred boy, Brimo to Brimos, that is the strong one has born a strong child.’”⁸⁵

⁷⁹ Hardie, “Muses and Mysteries.”

⁸⁰ Jan N. Bremmer, “*Manteis*, Magic, Mysteries and Mythography: Messy Margins of Polis Religion?” *Kernos* 23 (2010): 13-35 at 27.

⁸¹ *SEG* 30.93.18.

⁸² Plutarch, fr. 178 Sandbach, tr. Burkert; similarly, Proclus, *Theol. Plat.* 3.18; see also Aeschylus F 387 Radt; Plutarch, *Ages.* 24.7; Aelius Arist. 22.2; Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie*, 64-7; Richard Seaford, “Sophokles and the Mysteries,” *Hermes* 122 (1994): 275-88 at 284f.

⁸³ Idomeneus *FGrH* 338 F 2 (Sabazios); Origen, *Cels.* 4.10 (Bacchic mysteries); schol. Aristophanes, *Wasps* 1361 (Eleusis); Lada-Richards, *Initiating Dionysos*, 90-2.

⁸⁴ Plato, *Phaedr.* 254b, cf. Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie*, 52, 61-2; Clinton, *Myth and Cult*, 89f. For such φῶματα in mysteries see Graf, *Eleusis*, 134 note 34; Burkert, *Homo necans*, 288.

⁸⁵ Hippolytus, *Haer.* 5.8.39-41 Marcovich, cf. Burkert, *Homo necans*, 288-90; Parker, *Polytheism*, 357f. For the last part of this passage, which is a comment of Hippolytus, compare Hesychius β 1166: Βριμῶ· ἰσχυρῶ, where Latte *ad loc.* wrongly compares “Clem. Al. protr. 2,15,1) A (S)n.”

And as we just mentioned (above), Mesomedes had also mentioned the birth of a child, the fire and the “harvest of Kronos.” In other words, these acts surely constituted the climax of the epoptic ritual.⁸⁶

This conclusion is confirmed by other indications. Around A.D. 200 an epigram for a hierophant stresses the moment that the initiates saw him “stepping forward from the *anaktoron* in the shining nights” of the Mysteries.⁸⁷ The fire returns in many allusions to the Mysteries,⁸⁸ and clearly was a well-staged moment in the ritual that made a big impression on the participants. Plutarch even uses this crucial moment in a discussion of the *Werdegang* of a philosopher: “but he who succeeded in getting inside, and has seen a big light, because the *anaktora* was opened ...”⁸⁹ The announcement of the birth also seems to be traditional, as the beginning closely resembles a line from Euripides’ *Suppliants*: “You too, reverend goddess, once gave birth to a boy” (54). The main difference with the Gnostic report is the introduction of the names Brimo and Brimos. The *Suppliants* probably date from about 420 B.C., and it fits with this date that the name Brimo is most likely an import from Orphic poetry, probably at the end of the fifth century B.C.⁹⁰ The most likely interpretation of these somewhat enigmatic words is that the boy is Ploutos, the personified Wealth, who is a recurrent figure in Eleusinian iconography and who is already mentioned in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* as “the god who bestows affluence on men” (489).⁹¹ Apparently, the ritual celebrated both the arrival of wheat and its personification. We may think of the showing of an ear of wheat as a somewhat poor climax, but we must not forget that the fifth century was the heyday of Athens’ claims to the invention of agriculture and

⁸⁶ Burkert, *Homo necans*, 276 note 8: “the high point of the celebration.”

⁸⁷ *IG II/III*² 3811.1-2 = *I. Eleusis* 637.1-2, cf. Clinton, *Sacred Officials*, 40-1; note also *IG II/III*² 3709.10 = *I. Eleusis* 659.10; Philostratus, *Vit. sophist.* 587.

⁸⁸ See the extensive discussion by Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie*, 47-52; Richard Seaford, “Mystic Light in Aeschylus’ *Bassarai*,” *CQ* 55 (2005): 602-06.

⁸⁹ Plutarch, *Mor.* 81e, cf. Burkert, *Homo necans*, 276 note 8; similarly, Maximus Tyrius, *Diss.* 39.3; Himerios, *Or.* 67.9.

⁹⁰ For Brimo as an originally Orphic figure and the date of her introduction into Eleusis see Jan N. Bremmer, “Divinities in the Orphic Gold Leaves: Euklês, Eubouleus, Brimo, Kore, Kybele and Persephone,” in *The Gold Leaves* (ed. Fritz Graf; Leiden: Brill, 2011), forthcoming. For Orphic influence on Eleusis at the end of the fifth century see Graf, *Eleusis*, 182-6.

⁹¹ Clinton, *Myth and Cult*, 91-5, followed by Parker, *Polytheism*, 358.

Triptolemos as the missionary of the new invention,⁹² as well as of Prodicus' re-interpretation of Demeter as the deified wheat.⁹³

Finally, why did the hierophant call out “at the top of his voice”? We touch here upon a difficult and debated topic of the Mysteries. Naturally, one of the answers is: because this was the climax of the ritual. And indeed, Lysias already mentions the loud voice at the conclusion of his enumeration of the profanation of the Mysteries, just as Alexander of Abounoteichos used a loud voice at the climax of his ritual.⁹⁴ Yet there will have been another, more practical reason. Given the architecture of the *telestêrion* with its many pillars, it must have been impossible for everybody to see exactly what was on show during the climax of the ritual. This fact is indeed admitted by our best recent students, but they refuse to accept it because, as they argue,⁹⁵ the importance of “seeing” and “showing” is continuously stressed by our sources as a fundamental part to the highest degree.⁹⁶ Yet in the same passage of Plato's *Phaedrus* (248ab), one that is so replete with the terminology of the Mysteries,⁹⁷ we also read that many horses could not behold the realities or could only just do so. The ancient Greeks were not yet like modern consumers who certainly would have strongly demanded their money back if they had not seen everything. We may better compare church services in medieval cathedrals. Here, too, not everybody could see the performance of the Eucharist and, in fact, a bell had to be rung so that the faithful knew when to kneel during the climax of the mass. In many churches the clergy had even made squints, “an aperture, usually oblique, affording a view of an altar,” in walls or screens to enable the viewing of the climax of the service at the high altar.⁹⁸

⁹² Graf, *Eleusis*, 22-39; Parker, *Athenian Religion*, 99.

⁹³ Albert Henrichs, “Two Doxographical Notes: Democritus and Prodicus on Religion,” *HSCP* 79 (1975): 93-123 and “The Sophists and Hellenistic Religion: Prodicus as the Spiritual Father of the Isis Aretologies,” *HSCP* 88 (1984): 139-58.

⁹⁴ Ps. Lysias 6.51: καὶ εἴ πε τῆ φωνῆ τὰ ἀπόρρητα; Lucian, *Alex.* 39.

⁹⁵ Graf, *Eleusis*, 128-9 (“völlig ausgeschlossen”); Parker, *Polytheism*, 351-2 (“we know that the initiates did see the sacred objects, even if we do not understand how”).

⁹⁶ *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* 480; Pindar, fr. 137.1 Maehler; Sophocles, fr. 753.2 Radt; Euripides, *Her.* 613, *Hipp.* 25; Andocides, *Myst.* 31; Aelius Arist. *Or.* 22.2, 12; Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie*, 22-6, 37-8; Parker, *Polytheism*, 353 (importance of “showing”).

⁹⁷ Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie*, 65f.

⁹⁸ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005²), 97 (bell, squint); Justin Kroesen, “Squints in Nederland: Definitie, typering en inventarisatie,” *Jaarboek voor liturgie-onderzoek* 22 (2006): 195-216; Simon Roffey, “Constructing a Vision of Salvation: Chantries and the Social Dimension of Religious Experience in the Medieval Parish Church,” *Archaeological Journal* 163 (2006): 122-46. For some interesting observations on the problem of blocked vision during ritual action see also Allie

However this may have been, we may assume that whatever awe there was eventually would have turned into relief and joy. With their personal well-being assured the initiates will have left the *telestêrion* tired but content.

The last day of the Mysteries was a day of festivities and sacrifices, and the happy initiates now could wear a myrtle wreath, like the officiating priests.⁹⁹ The day was called Plemochoai, after a type of vessel that was used for the concluding libation, one vessel upturned to the west, the other to the east,¹⁰⁰ to the accompaniment of a “mystic utterance,” perhaps the attested cry “Rain,” while looking up to heaven, and “Conceive” while looking down to the earth.¹⁰¹ During this day, and probably also before, the initiates visited the fair, which was a standard feature of ancient festivals, as it still is often today.¹⁰² In the middle of the fourth century B.C. the Athenian state even issued a number of coins with symbols referring to the Mysteries, such as Triptolemos, the mystic piglet and the staff. These will have helped to pay the vendors of food and drink but also the sellers of presents, souvenirs and, probably, ladies of pleasure.¹⁰³ We must never forget that longer rituals regularly had,

Terry, “The Iconostasis, the Choir Screen, and San Marco: The Veiling of Ritual Action and the Participation of the Viewer in Byzantine and Renaissance Imagery,” *Chicago Art Journal* 11 (2001): 15-32.

⁹⁹ Initiates: Aristophanes, *Frogs* 330 and scholion *ad loc.*; *Agora* 16.239 (late 3rd century B.C.; see also Angelos Chaniotis and John Mylonopoulos, “Epigraphic Bulletin for Greek Religion, 2002,” *Kernos* 18 [2005]: 425-74 at 473); Plutarch, fr. 178; Theo Smyrnaeus, *De utilitate mathematicae* p. 15.1-4 Hiller; schol. Sophocles, *OC* 681; Peter G. Maxwell-Stuart, “Myrtle and the Eleusinian Mysteries,” *Wiener Studien* 85 (1972): 145-61; Hans R. Goette, “Römische Kinderbildnisse mit Jugendlocken,” *Athen. Mitt.* 104 (1989): 203-18 at 207-9; Lee Ann Riccardi, “The Bust-Crown, the Panhellenion, and Eleusis,” *Hesperia* 76 (2007): 365-90 at 386f. Priests: Istros *FGrH* 334 F 29.

¹⁰⁰ For the vessels see Margaret M. Miles, *The City Eleusinion* (*Agora* 31; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 95-103; Ingrid Krauskopf, “Plemochoe,” in *ThesCRA* 5, 252-55; Kevin Clinton, “Donors of Kernoï at the Eleusinian Sanctuary of the Two Goddesses,” in *Le donateur, l’offrande et la déesse* (ed. Clarisse Prêtre; Liège: Centre International d’Étude de la Religion Grecque Antique, 2009), 239-46; Christina Mitsopoulou, “De Nouveaux *Kernoï* pour *Kernos*... Réévaluation et mise à jour de la recherche sur les vases de culte éleusiniens,” *Kernos* 23 (2010): 145-78, with a unique representation of the ritual at 168-72.

¹⁰¹ Critias *TrGF* 43 F 2; Athenaeus 11.496ab; Proclus, *In Tim.* 3.176.28, reflected at Aelius Arist. 22.7. I follow here Burkert, *Homo necans*, 293; see also Parker, *Polytheism*, 350.

¹⁰² Plutarch, *Mor.* 635A, cf. Luuk de Ligt and Pieter W. de Neeve, “Ancient Periodic Markets: Festivals and Fairs,” *Athenaeum* 66 (1988): 391-416; Michael Wörrle, *Stadt und Fest im kaiserzeitlichen Kleinasien* (Munich: Beck, 1988), 209-15; Christophe Chandezon, “Fôires et panégories dans le monde grec classique et hellénistique,” *REG* 113 (2000): 70-100; Rena Basser, “Is the Pagan Fair Fairly Dangerous? Jewish-Pagan Relations in Antiquity,” in *Religious Rivalries in the Early Roman Empire and the Rise of Christianity* (ed. Leif Vaage; Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006), 73-84.

¹⁰³ For the coins see John H. Kroll, *The Greek Coins* (*Agora* 26; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 27-36, who, at 29, also notes an increase of visitors in the fourth century B.C., cf. Kevin Clinton, “A Law in the City Eleusinion Concerning the Mysteries,” *Hesperia* 49 (1980): 258-88 at 273-5, 281; Selene Psoma, “*Panegyris* Coinages,” *American Journal of Numismatics*, Second Series 20 (2008): 227-55 at 229.

so-to-speak, empty moments, which were not rule-bound, formal or differentiated from everyday activities.¹⁰⁴

When leaving, the initiates probably uttered the words “*paks*” or “*konks*,” as we are told that this was the exclamation of those who had been initiated.¹⁰⁵ Somehow the end of the Mysteries had to be ritualised, although we have no idea what these words mean. Having returned home, the initiates used the clothes they had worn during their initiation as lucky blankets for their children or consecrated them in a local sanctuary. That is why many an initiate even wore old clothes.¹⁰⁶ After all, religion and economic interest are not exclusive, as the USA shows us all too clearly.

When we now look back, we first note that the term “Mysteries” is misleading to a certain extent. The rite was secret, but there was nothing mysterious about it. Even if we were to find a full description dating from antiquity, nothing leads us to expect anything unheard of. Why, then, were the mysteries secret in historical times? The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* explains the secrecy from the fact that the rites, like the deities to whom they belong, are *semna*, “awesome”, and “a great reverence of the gods restrains utterance” (478-9).¹⁰⁷ In Augustan times, Strabo gave the following explanation: “the secrecy with which the sacred rites are concealed induces reverence for the divine, since it imitates the nature of the divine, which is to avoid being perceived by our human senses” (10.3.9, tr. H.L. Jones, Loeb). These “emic,” or insider, explanations are fully satisfactory: it is the very holiness of the rites that forbids them to be performed or related outside their proper ritual context.¹⁰⁸ It is also important to note that these “emic” explanations do not suggest a valuable propositional element in the Mysteries. Contrary to what many moderns seem to think, there was no esoteric wisdom to be found in the ancient Mysteries, no Da Vinci Code to be deciphered.

Second, what was the goal of the Mysteries? Was it eschatological, as one of the best students of Greek religion states in his most recent discussion?¹⁰⁹ Such a statement

¹⁰⁴ Parker, *Polytheism*, 370.

¹⁰⁵ Hesychius k 3134 Latte, wrongly quoted by Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 279.

¹⁰⁶ Graf, *Eleusis*, 45; Parker, *Polytheism*, 361.

¹⁰⁷ See also Albert Henrichs, “Namenlosigkeit und Euphemismus: Zur Ambivalenz der chthonischen Mächte im attischen Drama,” in *Fragmenta Dramatica* (ed. Heinz Hofmann and Annette Harder; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 161-201 at 169-79.

¹⁰⁸ See also Jan N. Bremmer, “Religious Secrets and Secrecy in Classical Greece,” in *Secrecy and Concealment* (ed. Hans G. Kippenberg and Guy G. Stroumsa; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 61-78.

¹⁰⁹ Parker, *Polytheism*, 354, 373; differently, Burkert, *Homo necans*, 294.

perhaps overstates one, though important, aspect of the Mysteries and does not seem to take another claim into sufficient account. As we have seen, the first day ended in the return of Persephone, the guarantee for fertility, and the second in the showing of an ear of wheat and the birth of (Agricultural) Wealth. Moreover, Varro, the most learned Roman of the first century B.C., noted: “there are many traditions in her (Persephone’s) mysteries, all related to the discovery of grain.”¹¹⁰ And indeed, as Burkert has noted, “no matter how surprising it may seem to one Platonically influenced, there is no mention of immortality at Eleusis, nor of a soul and the transmigration of souls, nor yet of deification.”¹¹¹ In other words, the actual performance of the Mysteries points only to agricultural fertility.

This interpretation of the Mysteries as a kind of fertility ritual seems to fit the iconographical representations. None of those with Eleusinian themes refers to blessings in the afterlife, but the message of fertility is very clearly expressed in the prominence of the gods Ploutos and Plouton, whose names reflect the aspiration for (agricultural) wealth.¹¹² The connection of Eleusis with agriculture is also manifest in the equally prominent position in Eleusis of Triptolemos, the inventor of agriculture but a judge in the underworld only in the fourth century, and by the presence on a fourth-century Apulian vase of personified Eleusis sitting next to Eniautos, “(The products of the) Year,” holding a horn of plenty with ears of wheat sprouting out.¹¹³

On the other hand, literary texts regularly speak of the eschatological hopes that await the initiates.¹¹⁴ As the afterlife does not seem to have been mentioned during the actual performance, which consisted primarily in “showing” not “teaching,” prospective initiates will have heard about it during their preliminary initiation. Such a “catechism” kept the interpretation of the Mysteries up-to-date and could incorporate contemporary intellectual fashions, just as Christian theology and rabbinic scholarship have kept the texts of the Bible alive for the faithful by their interpretations.

¹¹⁰ Varro *apud* Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 7.20. For other, similar texts see Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, “Festival and Mysteries: Aspects of the Eleusinian Cult,” in *Greek Mysteries* (ed. Michael B. Cosmopoulos; London: Routledge, 2003), 25-49 at 35.

¹¹¹ Burkert, *Homo necans*, 294.

¹¹² Parker, *Polytheism*, 336f.

¹¹³ Triptolemos: see most recently Gerda Schwarz, “Triptolemos,” in *LIMC* 8.1 (1997), 56-68; Jan N. Bremmer, “Triptolemos,” in *Der Neue Pauly* 12/2 (Stuttgart and Weimar: Metzler, 2002), 528-29. Apulian vase: Malibu 86.AE.680, not yet known to David Parrish, “Annus,” in *LIMC* 1.1 (1981), 799f.

¹¹⁴ *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* 480-3; Pindar, fr. 137 Maehler; Sophocles, fr. 837 Radt; Isocrates 4.28; Plato, *Gorgias* 493B; Cicero, *De legibus* 2.36; Crinagoras, *Anth. Pal.* 11.42.

Recent years have seen many discussions of the relation between myth and ritual, which have resulted in the realisation that myth often selects the more striking parts of the ritual as well as dramatizes and simplifies its issues at stake.¹¹⁵ Moreover, we also have recently learned that there is no one-to-one relationship between rituals and their representations.¹¹⁶ Consequently, we must accept that in their representation of the Mysteries vase painters selected fertility for their emphasis, rather than the eschatological promise. There probably was a good reason for that choice, as the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (480-3) mentions only this about the afterlife: “Blessed is he of men on earth who has seen them, whereas he that is uninitiated in the rites [...] has another lot wasting away in the musty dark.” That is all, and the other older texts with this promise (above) are equally vague. As belief in the afterlife was not widely held and always seems to have been limited to a minority,¹¹⁷ vase painters had little to work with and hardly ever represented the afterlife.¹¹⁸ People, then, will have made their own choices about what to bring home from the festival. As nobody seems to have put the fact of their Eleusinian initiation on his or her tombstone before the second century B.C.,¹¹⁹ most Greeks may well have looked forward more to the promise of wealth in this life than to a good afterlife. The times of medieval Christianity were still far away.¹²⁰

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¹¹⁵ For the most recent surveys see Jan N. Bremmer, “Myth and Ritual in Ancient Greece: Observations on a Difficult Relationship,” in *Griechische Mythologie und Frühchristentum* (ed. Raban von Haehling; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2005), 21-43 and “Walter Burkert on Ancient Myth and Ritual: Some Personal Observations,” in *Gewalt und Opfer. Im Dialog mit Walter Burkert* (ed. Anton Bierl and Wolfgang Braungart; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 71-86.

¹¹⁶ Anja Klöckner, “Votive als Gegenstände des Rituals – Votive als Bilder von Ritualen: Das Beispiel der griechischen Weihreliefs,” in *Archäologie und Ritual. Auf der Suche nach der rituellen Handlung in den antiken Kulturen Ägyptens und Griechenlands* (ed. John Mylonopoulos and Hubert Roeder; Vienna: Phoibos, 2006), 139-52.

¹¹⁷ Bremmer, *Rise and Fall*, 7-8; Parker, *Polytheism*, 363-8.

¹¹⁸ Andreas Scholl, “Hades und Elysion – Bilder des Jenseits in der Grabkunst des klassischen Athens,” *JDAI* 122 (2007): 51-79.

¹¹⁹ See now *SEG* 55.723: a grave epigram that mentions both the initiation into the Samothracian and Eleusinian Mysteries.

¹²⁰ For information and comments I am most grateful to audiences in Malibu (Getty Villa: 2006), Winnipeg, Malibu (Pepperdine University), Durham, St. Andrews, Edinburgh, Leeds (2007), Montreal (McGill), Giessen (2008) and Cologne (Internationales Kolleg Morphomata: 2010). Sarah Hitch kindly and skillfully corrected my English.

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