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Mysteries of the Earth Mother Goddess at Eleusis

Essaier LXI by Michael Freedman

**Mankind is a dream of a shadow';
But when the god-given brightness comes
A radiant light rests on men and a noble life.**

— Pindarus 518-438 Bce.

Very little is known of the *Great Mysteries of the Gods* that were performed by the ancient Greeks. Much of what we do know is derived at second-hand from people concerned to condemn them. Nevertheless scholars, supported by archaeological research at the site, have managed to piece together from various, often fragmentary, sources, enough for us to get some idea of what happened at the greatest of them all, the *Mysteries of the Great Earth Mother Demeter at Eleusis*.

The Word 'Mystery' derives from a Greek word meaning 'to close'; it meant either the closing of the lips or the eyes. The Greek word for initiate was *Mustes*, derived from the fact that firstly, the initiates kept their lips closed about the *Mysteries* and what they did and heard there and secondly, before their initiation their eyes were 'closed', so that they could not see the light, but they would be opened as they were initiated.

The Hierophant and the Goddesses

A significant feature of initiation into the *Mysteries* at Eleusis was when a priest took certain sacred objects from a chest and showed them to the new initiate. 'Showing the sacred objects' was such an important part of the *Mysteries* that a special name was given to the priest concerned, 'One who shows sacred things.' Hence the title Hierophant: *HIERO-* (sacred things) and *PHANTIS* (one who shows). Eventually only the chief priest was allowed to show the sacred objects to initiates or to expound their sacred significance. The highest stage of initiation into the *Mysteries* was that of *Epotheia* or *Beholding*, this is summed up in the quotation from the Greek lyric poet Pindarus (see above).

The Mysteries at Eleusis focused upon the goddesses Demeter and Kore. Demeter probably means 'Grain Mother.' Kore is the Maiden because of her sojourn with Hades in the underworld, where she is usually identified with Persephone the queen of the Underworld. Demeter is the personification of the mature grain bearing its seed at the time of the spring harvest. Kore is the newly planted grain of the autumn sowing.

Originally a family agricultural festival

The Mysteries at Eleusis seem to have originated in agricultural festivals commemorating the year sowing of grain around the time of the Greek month of Boedromion (September/October). It was originally conducted by a local family the Eumolpidai. From the beginning, these rites seem to have had a particularly personal significance for those taking part. This led to incorporation of ceremonies of initiation at the annual festival.

Blessed is the one who goes under the earth after seeing these things.

That person knows the end of life

And knows the Zeus-given beginning

— Pindarus 518-438 Bce.

Unlike other mystery cults, the mysteries at Eleusis were not restricted by age or sex. Thus, their significance was potentially universal. At an early stage, the rites were opened up to include people living around Eleusis outside of the members of the Eumolpidai 'Whanau' which is similar to the New Zealand Maori term 'Whanau' which probably captures the sense of the ancient idea better than either of the English word family or tribe.

Around 600 Bce when the mysteries of Demeter and Kore were still being conducted by an independent Eleusis, the Homeric Hymn to Demeter was introduced into the rites. (See Essaiers XXXI)

Eligibility for initiation widened

When Eleusis was incorporated into a unified Attica, of which nearby Athens was a prominent city, eligibility for initiation was made available to Athenian citizens and women. The Hierophant of the Eleusinian mysteries was always drawn from among the Eumolpidai at all stages of its 1000-year history but the control of the sacred site and its ceremonies was extended to include the Kerukai Whanau who had family connections at both Eleusis and Athens. The Torchbearer (Dadouchos) and the Herald (Kerux) who were the other two chief officers of the Mysteries, always came from among the Kerukai.

(**Note:** Those persons with some knowledge of the 20th century Golden Dawn system may recognise the titles of Dadouchos and Kerux.)

Eventually; initiation into the Mysteries at Eleusis was opened to all who could speak Greek, provided that they were free from pollution. The ceremonies and preparations for the annual initiations became more and more elaborate.

Personal preparations began in January, in order to be allowed to be admitted to the Lesser Mysteries. The purpose of the Lesser Mysteries was twofold: Purification and Instruction.

Candidates bathed ritually in the River Issus, which flowed into Athens from a nearby mountain. They took place in the month Anthesterion (our February/March) six months before the Greater Mysteries which lasted throughout most of the month of Boedromion (September/October).

While the initiations themselves were secret the processions and other festivities that preceded and followed them were public - Although there were certain classes of people who were excluded from taking part. Who these were was proclaimed by a herald at a solemn assembly of the citizens of Athens on the 15th Boedromion.

On the following day, there was a procession to the sea, where the candidates for initiation undertook a sacred bath. Each candidate also washed a pig, an animal sacred to Persephone. These pigs were then sacrificed, probably by burning and the roasted meat probably eaten as a communion by the priests and worshippers.

On 17th Boedromion, official sacrifices to Demeter and Persephone took place. The candidates for initiation rested on the 18th. The great Iacchus procession from procession from Athens to Eleusis, a distance of 14 miles, took place on the 19th day of Boedromion. The Iacchus meaning a 'loud cry' was the name given to the resurrected Dionysus, the vegetation god, after he had been torn to pieces by the Titans. Dionysus has been variously described as the child of Zeus and Demeter.

So many thousands took part that it raised clouds of dust like a mighty army. The procession included dancing, and singing, as well as many stops for special rites and sacrifices along the way. Do not think of this as a solemn or dignified procession. The nearest to it in modern days are the *Mardi Gras* processions in New Orleans.

At Eleusis

The Iacchus procession concluded with an all-night festival at Eleusis itself. Less is known about the various ceremonies that took place at Eleusis during the following days, inside the Telestrion the great hall in which the rites took place. Excavations have shown that there was rating for 4000 people in the Telestrion, which had a raised platform in the centre on which stood a small chamber, an Inner Sanctum from which the Hierophant emerged from time to time to display the sacred images of the Mysteries.

These objects included various kinds of cakes, pomegranates, poppies and an image of a woman's genitals. These objects were kept in a Chest that was brought from Athens to Eleusis as part of the Iacchus procession.

Hippolytus of Rome said that an important part of the rites was the cry Hye' Kye' while water was poured upon the earth, symbolising the pouring of rain upon the earth to make it fruitful. There was also the proclamation of the 'Hieros Gamos' or Sacred Marriage. (See: *The Marriage Rite of the Goddess and Gods - Apostolic Guardian Church* or *B'nai Amen Guardian Order*) In the earlier centuries, this was between Hades and Persephone but as Athenian patriarchal ideas took over, the rite increasingly referred to Zeus.

There is a curious tradition that at Eleusis in our later days proclaimed the holy union between Zeus and the partners of the Earth, in the words:

**The Bull is the father of the Dragon;
And the Dragon is the father of the Bull.**

This was explained thus Zeus, in the form of a Bull, copulated with his sister Demeter, who gave birth to the earthly Kore/Persephone and Zeus, in the form of a Dragon then copulated with Kore/Persephone who gave birth to the bull like Dionysus. However, there is some evidence that originally the partners in the 'Hieros Gamos' were unnamed and known simply as 'the Goddess and the God.'

The Deeper Mysteries

The deepest rites of the Mysteries were held in chamber far underground at a place some distance from the Telestrion. Our knowledge of what happened there is minimal. We can say that the initiates were given the experience of moving from Darkness to Light. There is frequent mention of the darkness being overwhelmed by a great burst of brilliant Light.

The final initiation has perhaps been most reliably described by Hippolytus [170 C.E.]. Although he was a Christian, he was Greek by birth. He may himself have been admitted into the Mysteries before his conversion. He says of the central initiatory rite: "The Phrygians say that the God is a 'green ear of corn reaped.'" Following the Phrygians, the Athenians when initiating anyone into the Mysteries at Eleusis also show to those who have been made Epoptes, meaning those who have received the Vision, the mighty and wonderful and most perfect mystery there is for Epoptes a green ear of corn reaped in silence. This of corn is for the Athenians the great and perfect spark of Light from the Unportrayable One.

A green ear of corn reaped in silence

Hippolytus further says "The Hierophant at Eleusis is not castrated like Attis, but is rendered a eunuch by drinking hemlock and so cut off from fleshly generation. He celebrates the ineffable Mysteries by night at Eleusis beside huge fire and cries aloud 'Noble Brimo has brought forth a holy son Bromios'."

This means so Hippolytus says "that the strong has given birth to the strong. For noble is generative act which is spiritual or heavenly or sublime, and strong is that which is thus generated."

Brimo meaning the 'Terrible One' is a name of Hekate and Persephone. Bromios 'Noisy One' is a name of Iachus (Dionysus). Persephone brings forth Dionysus. In modern terms, by coming to terms with the dark side, our anima, we can give voice to the one who can cry aloud at the wonderment of the Brilliant Light that integration between outer and inner light and dark sides can bring.