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## Part One Reconstruction



1. *Excavation and industry in present-day Eleusis*

2. *The excavated area near the Great Propylaea. At the far right, a bust of the Emperor Antoninus Pius*



## I. THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING

### The Sacred Road

MODERN DEVELOPMENTS have dealt kindly with the natural settings of nearly all the most celebrated holy places of the ancient Greek religion. Cleared many years ago from the last vestiges of the medieval and Turkish periods, the Akropolis at Athens stands there as though it had sprung from the rocky soil and from the marble mountains of Attica. A whole village and its predecessor, a Byzantine city, have been removed from the ruins of the temple of Apollo at Delphi, and once more the high mountains hold uncontested sway over the sacred precinct. The resinous scent of Aleppo firs envelops the grove of Zeus at Olympia and the sanctuary of Asklepios at Epidauros in an atmosphere of natural enchantment. Delos and Samothrace give the impression of remote islands of the gods, cut off from the world. Only poor Eleusis, so easily reached from Athens, lies disenchanting beneath the yellow-gray film of dust and smoke that seldom departs from it. Cement factories are gradually eating away its crenelated romantic backdrop [1].

In the late twenties buses were already running on the former Sacred Road, the route of the processions between Athens and the site of the Mysteries [2]. At that time, one would sometimes meet, as early as April, the season of the first harvest, a throng of reapers on the highway. A meaningful encounter on that road, for it suggested the fertility of the Rharian Plain, the farmland between Thria and Eleusis, where in ancient days grain was sown according to the instructions of Demeter. It was here, the Eleusinians believed, that the goddess bestowed grain

on their hero Triptolemos and through him on all mankind. In the late twenties one could still discern some of the river beds and watercourses crossed by Theseus, founder of the Athenian state, as he came from Eleusis and also by the annual procession from Athens to Eleusis. It was here that the procession of the *mystai* passed each year on its way to undergo the highest degree of initiation.

Not only has this road lost all air of sanctity today; it has almost ceased to be a country highway. The city is spreading up the mountain slope over the stony soil whose hardness for the pedestrian of ancient times is still remembered. Already urban enterprise has reached the lofty cypresses and the sparse woods near the cloister church of Daphni, erected on the site of a temple of Apollo. New houses have been built overlooking the Bay of Eleusis. The path leading through the pass between Mount Aigaleos and Mount Poikilon has been widened into an asphalt highway, and the plain that lies before us is no longer as it was. It was formerly one of those where two harvests were gathered each year. If the inroads of industry continue, there will soon be no harvest at all.<sup>1</sup>

In the distance we can see the cloud of dust and smoke that lies over Eleusis, while in the foreground we behold, its contours quite unchanged, the scene of a glorious episode in the history of the world, the battle of Salamis. The Greeks made this battle into an incomparable performance, not only with the movements of their ships but also with their songs, the early morning hymns to the gods and heroes of the country.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, it was not the Greeks who looked upon the battle as a spectacle for the benefit of an audience but Xerxes, king of the Persians. Across from the island of Salamis, on the southern slope of the Aigaleos, Xerxes had a throne of rock erected, in order that he might look on, missing no detail, at the victory of his fleet, which he expected

to be an easy matter: as we look down on the scene from a still higher vantage point, we are led to reflect not only on the past and now dwindling fertility of the plain of Thria which we can already glimpse, or on the bravery of the Greek warriors shut up in the bay, but also on the Mysteries of Eleusis which on this occasion—according to the story handed down to us by Herodotos—revealed their extraordinary importance in so striking a way.

### The Mysteries at the Time of Xerxes (480 B.C.) and of Valentinian (A.D. 364)

ON THE 27th or 28th of September of the year 480 B.C., another event in addition to the battle of Salamis is said to have taken place in the geographical and historical setting I have described—some twelve miles west of ancient Athens. And this other event is fully as illuminating as the victory of the blockaded Greeks. Regardless of whether it was a later invention or a vision actually beheld and believed at the time, it is of the utmost importance for our knowledge of historical Greek existence. This, to be sure, was no empirical happening but an “act of the human spirit,” as were, in the words of Bachofen, the legends that made a place for themselves in the historical tradition, the narratives of events which never took place or which at least cannot be verified but which can, if clarified and faithfully interpreted, throw light on the historical reality.<sup>3</sup>

There were two Greek renegades in the retinue of the Persian king. One was the Athenian Dikaïos, son of Theokydes, who having been banished from Athens had won the esteem of the Persians. It was he who gave an eyewitness report of the event, which is recorded by

Herodotos. The other renegade was Demaratos, banished king of the Spartans. Before the battle of Salamis the two of them, probably with a part of the Persian army, were on the plain of Thria, through which ran the Sacred Road. The whole countryside around Athens had been laid waste. The Athenians had all taken to the ships or else withdrawn with their women and children to the mountains of the mainland. The day of the Mysteries came. Ordinarily the initiates left Athens on the 19th of the month of Boëdromion—according to our time reckoning, the 27th or 28th of September—for Eleusis, there to celebrate the mysterious holy night. On this day of the year 480, Dikaïos and Demaratos, standing on the plain of Thria, witnessed the following scene. I take the story almost literally from Herodotos (VIII 65).

A great cloud of dust rose from Eleusis, as though stirred up by a crowd of some thirty thousand men. The two onlookers were amazed and wondered what men could raise such dust. Immediately afterward they heard voices that seemed to be crying, “Iakchos! Iakchos!” as at the Feast of the Mysteries. Demaratos was unfamiliar with the ceremonies performed at Eleusis and asked what the cries were. Dikaïos, who later told the story, replied: “Demaratos, it can only be that the king’s army will suffer a great defeat. For this is clear: since all Attica has been abandoned by its inhabitants, those sounds must be a divine host that has come from Eleusis to help the Athenians and their allies. If it makes for the Peloponnese, it will endanger the king and his army on the mainland; if it turns toward the fleet at Salamis, the king is in danger of losing his fleet. For this is the feast that the Athenians celebrate each year in honor of the Mother and the Daughter. At this festival all the Athenians, as well as those other Greeks who so desire, are initiated. The voices you hear are the cries of ‘Iakchos!’ that resound at the feast.” Whereupon Demaratos said: “Be silent and mention this to no one

else. If your words came to the king's ears, you would lose your head. Neither I nor anyone else could save you. Just keep your peace. The gods will decide the fate of the host." This was Demaratos' warning. From the dust and voices a cloud arose and drifted toward Salamis, where the Greeks were encamped. Seeing this, the two men knew that Xerxes' fleet was doomed.

This is the story as recorded in Herodotos. In it the cloud of dust and smoke that is always over Eleusis appears in a strangely transfigured light. In any case, one element of the miraculous tale is the nature of the soil at the site of the Mysteries. Another is the knowledge that at the time of the Persian Wars roughly thirty thousand initiates took part in the Mysteries when not prevented from so doing: a round number which Herodotos elsewhere cites for the whole population of Athens (V 97). On this occasion the festive throng was replaced by something divine. In a chorus of his tragedy *Ion* (1079–86),<sup>1</sup> Euripides makes the sea and the sky reply to the dance of the throng arriving at Eleusis along the Sacred Road for the Mystery Night. Then: "the starry ether of Zeus takes up the dance, the moon goddess dances, and with her the fifty daughters of Nereus dance in the sea and in the eddies of the ever flowing streams, so honoring the Daughter with the golden crown and the holy Mother. . . ." The leader of the dance on earth was held to be the youthful torch-bearing god whose statue the procession bore from Athens and to whom it cried "Iakchos! Iakchos!" In *The Frogs* (316) of Aristophanes, the cry resounds in the underworld, in the abode of the blessed who in their lifetime had been initiated at Eleusis and now continue to dance in the Elysian Fields. Thus heaven, earth, and underworld are drawn into the dance.

Here we touch upon a third and perhaps the most important element of the story, which, if we suppose that the renegades each in fact ex-

perienced a hallucination, may well have been its source. This element is the general conviction that the Mysteries with all their rites, including the torchlight procession and dance, *had to be celebrated* when the time came. They were more than a common festival, they encompassed the world. A later version of the miraculous tale, recorded in Plutarch's life of Themistokles (15), adds the characteristic sign of the secret rite, lest anyone suppose that the essential part of the Mysteries was not observed on this occasion. At the very moment when the cries were heard, a light flashed across the bay from Eleusis: the light from the sanctuary, the one feature of the Mysteries that is not kept secret but mentioned in almost all the accounts. The profane could be excluded from the procession, but the fire that issued from the sanctuary could not remain a secret.

If this mysterious rite which encompassed and concerned the whole world could not be performed by men, the gods had to attend to it. A reason need scarcely be given since the Mysteries concerned the whole world, but an answer is provided by the victory at Salamis. Apparently what happened was that a divine host, a procession of spirits which could not be seen but only heard, replaced the festive throng of the Athenians with their cries of "Iakchos," joined the battling Greeks, and helped them to victory. This miracle has no known parallel, no analogy, in the history of Greek religion. When the Dioskouroi or Herakles appear in battle, they help as they are expected to. Their epiphany derives from their well-known helpful nature. The procession of spirits was an expression of perplexity, if you will, springing from the perplexity of the soul and not only of man's conscious mind—it was an expression of a profound awareness that all Greek existence was inseparably bound up with the celebration of the Mysteries at Eleusis. What would have happened if, in those days when the existence of the Greeks

was so threatened, Eleusis had ceased to be the theater of the ceremonies which had never once been neglected since their founding? It was unthinkable. The Greeks as a whole and the people of each city looked upon themselves as “mankind,” as the representatives of the whole human race. Certain philosophers, it is true, taught that the human race was immortal.<sup>5</sup> But we should not underestimate the Greeks’ knowledge to the contrary: they knew that whole cities and tribes had perished, on the mainland and on the islands, and that, as Hesiod says<sup>6</sup> earlier, happier races of men had passed away. But nowhere was it stated that those who had perished had been in possession of the Eleusinian rites. At the time of the battle of Salamis, in the days when the country was occupied and laid waste by the enemy, they were not celebrated—or were they, perhaps, after all? They must have been. They and the victory that brought salvation—the salvation of Greek existence—could be thought of only as one.

A later witness very clearly expresses the knowledge, bordering on certainty, of the Greeks that their own existence was bound up inseparably with the Eleusinian Mysteries. He was not himself a Greek, but he was a devout worshiper of the gods; he was initiated at Eleusis and even held the rank of a hierophant, though not of Eleusis. His name was Vettius Agorius Praetextatus. His religious offices—as well as his high political honors—are recorded in an inscription in Rome.<sup>7</sup> In the year A.D. 364 the Catholic Emperor Valentinian prohibited all nocturnal celebrations with a view to abolishing, among other rites, the Mysteries of Eleusis. He began “at the hearth”—so runs the record of the Greek historian Zosimos, a pagan author of the fifth century, clearly alluding to the Eleusinian custom that a boy who had been initiated “at the hearth” was always sent by the Athenian state to take part in the Mysteries. “But,” Zosimos’ report continues,<sup>8</sup> “after Praetextatus, who

held the office of proconsul in Greece, declared that this law would make the life of the Greeks unlivable, if they were prevented from properly observing the most sacred Mysteries, which hold the whole human race together, he permitted the entire rite to be performed in the manner inherited from the ancestors as if the edict were not valid.”

This late testimony throws a highly significant light on the meaning of the Mysteries of Eleusis. They were thought to “hold the entire human race together,” not only because people continued, no doubt, to come from every corner of the earth to be initiated, as they had in the days of the Emperor Hadrian, but also because the Mysteries touched on something that was common to all men. They were connected not only with Athenian and Greek existence but with human existence in general. And Praetextatus clearly stated just this: *bios*, life, he declared, would become “unlivable” (*abiotos*) for the Greeks if the celebration were to cease. Beyond a doubt the “Greeks” are here contrasted with the Christians. The sharpness of this formulation of the significance of Eleusis, which has no parallel in earlier documents, springs from the conflict between Greek religion and Christianity. Nevertheless, it suffices to give the Mysteries a special significance for us, which goes beyond any concern for the history of religions. If life was unlivable for the Greeks without the annual celebration at Eleusis, it means that this celebration was a part not merely of non-Christian existence but also of Greek life, of the Greek form of existence; and this is another reason why it is of concern to us. Despite the enormous amount of literature devoted to them, the Eleusinian Mysteries have not been studied from the standpoint of Greek existence, nor has Greek existence ever been considered in the light of Eleusis.

## Testimonies to the Beatitude of the Initiates

THE EARLIER statements on the significance of the Eleusinian Mysteries are not distinguished by the same precision as the last, but they do stress something of existential importance. I do not employ the word “existential” in the strict sense employed in existential philosophy. I speak of “Greek existence” in the sense of a historical *fact*—“existential” designates the highest and most universal degree of importance, for it concerns the possibility of precisely this fact: that it *could* endure precisely as it was, and not otherwise. This importance was clearly manifested in the events of 480 B.C. and A.D. 364. The extreme importance of the Mysteries for the survival of personal existence, regardless of death, is already stressed by the Homeric Hymn to Demeter,<sup>9</sup> a poem of the archaic period, perhaps from as early as the eighth century B.C., which tells how the goddess Demeter inaugurated the Mysteries.

The style of this hymn in honor of the two goddesses, Demeter the Mother and Persephone the Daughter, is Homeric, and this in itself called for the omission of certain mythical details which other poets and storytellers do not pass over in silence. After Mother and Daughter are united, it is very briefly related how Demeter restored to mankind the fruit she had withdrawn in her grief, the grain which in antiquity grew so abundantly on the Rharian Plain at Thria, and the other plants and flowers. But—and this should be stressed at the very outset—this blessing with which she expressed her joy over what she herself had gained at Eleusis was not her essential gift to man; the essential gift was the ceremonies which no one may describe or utter. At this point the poet falls silent, not for reasons of Homeric style but because—these are his words (479)—“great awe of the gods makes the voice falter.”

What he is permitted to add is a message whose *form* is still discernible in the Beatitudes of Christ's Sermon on the Mount. Here the word *olbios*, which I render as "blessed," bears no reference, as it often does elsewhere, to material wealth. Intentionally the poet leaves his meaning unclear to the profane (480–82). "Blessed is he among men on earth"—so runs this beatitude—"who has beheld this. Never will he who has not been initiated into these ceremonies, who has had no part in them, share in such things. He will be as a dead man in sultry darkness." The existential emphasis lies on the blessedness. It was achieved through participation in a rite. Thus an inequality was created between the initiate and the profane, a division here and now, by virtue of which *one* group is blessed while the others go to their death in imperfection and uncertainty. The end of existence has taken on two faces. The one shines back on men, lending their existence a special radiance. The other—the end awaiting the vast uncharacterized multitude—is lusterless. The grammatical context of "such things"<sup>10</sup> is clear: other men, in the darkness of death, will not share in "such things" as those of which the initiates have partaken. As the reader will see from Chapter IV, the Homeric hymn refers to the secret of the Mysteries in circumlocutions that must have been perfectly clear to the initiate.

Sophokles put the same beatitude into the mouth of a character probably in his tragedy *Triptolemos*; but here the statement is even more exalted and deals more explicitly with the end of life, whose whole character depends on participation or nonparticipation in the Mysteries: "Thrice blessed are those among men who, after beholding these rites, go down to Hades. Only for them is there life; all the rest will suffer an evil lot."<sup>11</sup> But of the poets who speak of the Mysteries in the form of a beatitude, it is only Pindar who tells us something about their content. He speaks in such a way that the initiate could recognize the

secret in the words that cloaked it: "Blessed is he who, after beholding this, enters upon the way beneath the earth: he knows the end of life and its beginning given by Zeus!"<sup>12</sup> "End" and "beginning" are seemingly colorless words. But they reminded the initiates of a vision in which the two were united.

The initiate possessed a knowledge which conferred blessedness and not only in the hereafter; both knowledge and beatitude became his possession the moment he beheld the vision. Both gifts of Eleusis, a happiness both here and hereafter, are praised by the poet Krinagoras of Lesbos.<sup>13</sup> His older contemporary, the Roman Cicero, in his treatise *On the Laws*,<sup>14</sup> attaches the highest importance to the radiance which Eleusis cast on all life. "We have been given a reason," he writes, "not only to live in joy but also to die with better hope" (*neque solum cum laetitia vivendi rationem accepimus sed etiam cum spe meliore moriendi*). Three centuries earlier, the Attic orator Isokrates was able, thanks to his calculated ambiguity, to do justice not only to the personal hopes conferred by the Mysteries but also to their implications for the whole human race. In his Panegyric on Athens (IV 28), he mentions the two gifts of Demeter: the grain and the Eleusinian rites (see also p. 121). And in speaking of the latter he again distinguishes two blessings: "Those who take part in them," he says, "possess better hopes in regard to the end of life and in regard to the whole *aion*."

The ambiguity lies in the word *aion*. It *can* refer to the life span, the personally characterized life of the individual man, though everywhere else in Isokrates it means the duration of the world.<sup>15</sup> Participation in the Mysteries offered a guarantee of life without fear of death, of confidence in the face of death. That is why the poets looked upon the initiates as so superior to other mortals. All Greeks—actually all Greek-speaking persons, the language was the criterion—could share in this gift. It con-

ferred on Greek existence a characteristic sense of security, and because it was able to do this, it responded to a spiritual need which, it was not unreasonable to suppose, formed a bond uniting the whole human race: this was the need for a bulwark against death. Thus, as the story related by Herodotos shows, though the Greeks never said so explicitly, the Mysteries were of fundamental importance to the community, to existence in common. But the threat of death faced all men and each man personally. Would life have been worth living without the hope inspired by the Mysteries of Eleusis? Both to the community and to the individual, they supplied confidence in the face of all-devouring death.

## The End of the Mysteries

THE ELEUSINIAN Mysteries provided such confidence throughout their existence, which probably extended over a period of two thousand years. Before we attempt to penetrate their sacred precinct, it would be of the utmost interest to consider their historical destinies. But very few historical details have come down to us, and we know nothing at all of the inner history, the transformations in the spiritual content and forms, of the cult. Archaic secret cults are not ordinarily susceptible of inner change. The Eleusinian Mysteries may, it is true, be termed the classical mysteries of Greece. But even so, even if an archaic cult became classical, we cannot without proof speak of transformation; at most we can note certain changes in outward form. It is in connection with the last days of the cult that we possess the most detailed information.

The end of the sanctuary of Eleusis is reported to us in the fifth century after Christ by Eunapios, historian and biographer of the last Greek philosophers and orators, in the form of a prophecy which was

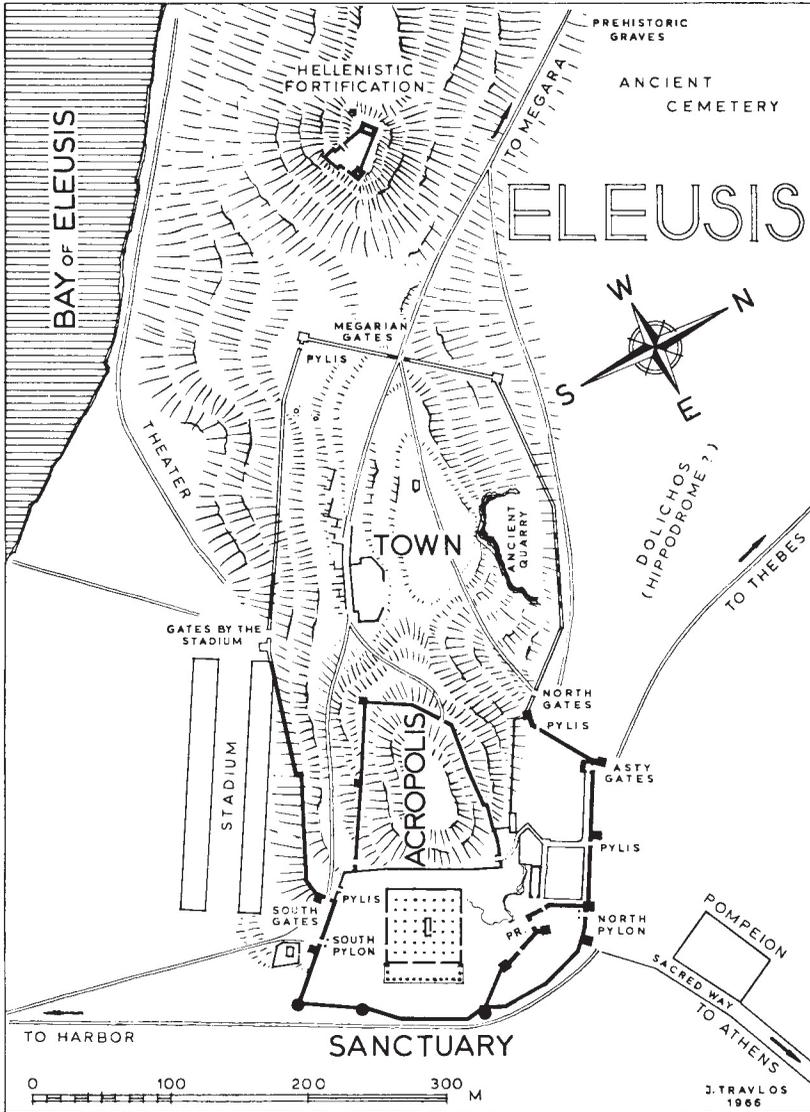
fulfilled when Alaric, king of the Goths, invaded Greece in A.D. 396. Eunapios was initiated into the Mysteries by the last legitimate Hierophant of Eleusis, who had been commissioned by the Emperor Julian to restore the cult, which had already fallen into considerable neglect. He was followed by a last high priest, who usurped the office and title of Hierophant. The prophecy which Eunapios records in his biography of Maximos the Neoplatonist relates to him and to the final destruction of the sanctuary. His story follows:

“I may not mention the name of the Hierophant of the time. Suffice it to say that he was the same who had initiated the writer and who traced his descent back to the Eumolpidai. It was he who foresaw the destruction of the sanctuary and the end of all Greece. He said clearly, in the writer’s presence, that after him there would be a Hierophant who had no right to approach the Hierophant’s throne because he was dedicated to other gods and had sworn unspeakable oaths never to preside over other ceremonies. And yet he would preside, although he was not even a citizen of Athens. The sanctuary—so far-reaching was his prophecy—would be destroyed and laid waste in his own lifetime, and the other would live to look on, despised for his boundless ambition. The worship of the Two Goddesses would come to an end even before his death, and he, shorn of his honor, would neither remain Hierophant nor live long. And so it was: scarcely had the man from Thespiiai who held the rank of Father in the mysteries of Mithras become Hierophant . . . than Alaric with his barbarians poured through the Pass of Thermopylai, as though running down a racecourse, a field stamped by horses: the gates of Greece had been opened to him by the godlessness of those who in their dark garments entered with him unhindered and by the dissolution of the hierophantic rules and of the bond they embodied.”<sup>16</sup>

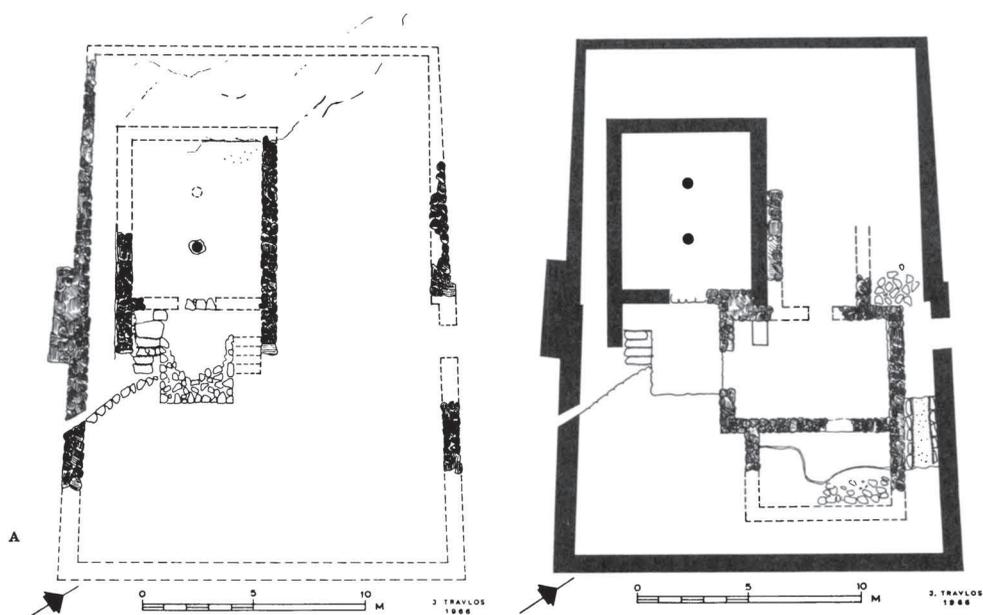
There were Eleusinian rules which defined who might be Hierophant and who might not. These were included in the written laws of the Eumolpidai; hence they were no part of the secret. One such rule, for example, was that the Hierophant's name must not be mentioned.<sup>17</sup> These were probably the ordinances which Cicero wished to receive from Atticus.<sup>18</sup> Eunapios also looked upon them as the bond that holds the world together. He mentions neither the true nor the false Hierophant by name. The two Hierophants whose rivalry shattered the bond witnessed the collapse not only of the Mysteries but of the whole world. The men in dark garments who moved in with Alaric were monks. A new form of existence began for Greece. The identification of Greek existence with the Mysteries is manifested clearly and movingly by their common fate.

### The Question of the Origins

THUS THE end of the Mysteries is clear. Not so their beginning. The question is not merely since when the region of Eleusis shows traces of a human settlement. To this archaeology provides a clear answer.<sup>19</sup> But before we can even suggest a hypothetical date for the inception of the Mysteries, we must answer another question: When did the place [3] become the site of a cult exceeding in scope and importance the small household cults or tribal cults and cults of the dead which may be presumed to have existed everywhere? The earliest settlement to have been excavated in the region of Eleusis and its Mystery sanctuary is older than the era commonly known as "Mycenaean." In the so-called Middle Helladic period—the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries B.C.—the unimpressive stone houses of this settlement covered the whole mountain slope on which the sanctuary



3. Plan of the sanctuary and city of Eleusis



4. Plans of Megaron B and of its extension

was later built. On the strength of fire marks Professor Mylonas conjectures that the village was destroyed at the end of the above-mentioned period. The excavations have yielded no indication that any of the buildings was a temple. Or, as Mylonas puts it (p. 32), we have no evidence of a cult of the grain goddess at that time at Eleusis. Obviously this observation applies equally well to a cult of Rhea, the Great Mother Goddess, or of Persephone, goddess of the underworld, which in that early period would seem far more likely than a cult of Demeter.

This makes it all the more interesting to note that in the settlement which replaced the first village on the mountain slope in the first Late Helladic or Early Mycenaean period, roughly from 1580 to 1500 B.C., the place on the mountain later occupied by the Mystery sanctuary was left

empty. The cult which was to be characteristic of Eleusis must have made its appearance at this time. The empty space on this particular spot offers a negative indication of some significant cult. For it was here that the historical Mystery sanctuary was subsequently built, and as early as the second Late Helladic period, roughly in the fifteenth century B.C., this was the site of the building which the archaeologists call "Megaron B" [4a]. From the transformations undergone by this building we can, I believe, infer that it was specially intended for use in a Mystery cult.

It was originally a single room, its roof supported by two inner columns. In other respects it resembled a Greek temple without columns outside the entrance. It opened out upon a projecting platform, with steps to one side, as though intended for the public appearance of a priest or god. Those privileged to witness this event could gather in front of the platform, in a courtyard surrounded by high walls. In the third Late Helladic period, between 1400 and 1100 B.C., this edifice was extended by three rooms situated between the gate leading to the courtyard and the main building. If there was no other entrance to the court, the addition of the three new rooms made it necessary to pass around or through them to the main building [4b]. Such indications argue in favor of a Mystery cult or a way of initiation. Before the construction of the buildings, the way of initiation may have taken the form of a dance. To judge by all these indications, the Eleusinian Mysteries would seem to have been inaugurated toward the middle of the second millennium B.C. This was a period of mutual influence, religious and otherwise, between Crete and continental Greece, then ruled over by "Mycenaean" kings.

But we do not know whether Eleusis ever existed independently as a small city or whether, as early as the sixteenth century B.C., it owed its

existence predominantly to the cult which was to make it famous. Possibly it was ruled by its priests rather than by “Mycenaean” kings. This would not have been usual for Greece, but something very particular, related perhaps to the tradition that the inhabitants of Eleusis were Thracians, originally hostile to the Greeks. On the Athenian stage Eumolpos,<sup>20</sup> the mythical ancestor and predecessor of the Hierophants, was represented as the enemy of Erechtheus, like him, a warlike king, and in this form assuredly a poetic invention in the style of the ancient Mycenaean heroic legend. But also, according to his mythical genealogy, Eumolpos was a Thracian.<sup>21</sup> This is confirmed by the name of the hero Immarados, whom the genealogists gave him as a son. “Immarados” is related to the Thracian place name Ismaros<sup>22</sup> and reflects a phonetically more advanced Thracian language, perhaps a southern dialect. The tomb of the Thracian hero Tereus in Megara<sup>23</sup> proves that Thracian tribes had pressed beyond Eleusis to the Isthmus. In the second millennium these Thracian tribes, like the Albanians today, lived side by side with the Greeks in wild mountainous regions and were completely Hellenized. They were no less open to Cretan influence than the Greeks.<sup>24</sup>

The Homeric Hymn to Demeter seems to argue directly against the possibility that Eleusis, like the other important cities of the Mycenaean age, once had a dynasty of its own. Aside from Keleos, in whose palace the events leading up to the founding of the Mysteries took place, the poet enumerates many kings of Eleusis in the Homeric style. Keleos himself, to judge by his name, which means “woodpecker,” is a mythological being, a forest king of the same race as the primordial inhabitants of the earth, on whom Demeter had bestowed her gift of grain. He is not a figure in the Homeric style, nor a real ancestor of a race such as might have been called Keleidai. It is characteristic, however, that the noblest families of Eleusis, when it already belonged to the Athenian

state, derived their lineage from ancestors who, instead of real names, bore names connected with sacred offices. A family of this kind were the Eumolpidae. Their ancestor was the just-mentioned Eumolpos, “he who sings beautifully”; in his mythological transfiguration he was a swan among men, son of Poseidon the sea-god and of Chione the snow virgin, while in reality he was the priest whose voice resounded in the rites of the holy nights.<sup>25</sup> As we have seen, the high priests of the Mysteries, the Hierophants, had to be descended from his line. A second family of priests was that of the Kerykes, descended from Keryx, “herald,” a son of Hermes, the divine herald. From this family were appointed the Dadouchos, the second priest of the Mysteries, known as the “torch bearer,” also the Hierokeryx, “herald of the ceremonies,” and finally the priest who officiated at the altar.

The name Eleusis is also no usual Greek place name. We are told that the place had formerly been called Saisaria.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps a poet had referred to Eleusis by this name on the basis of some old story. Saisara was the name of an Eleusinian heroine. Her name, “the grinning one,” assuredly denotes an aspect of the underworld goddess. The name Eleusis is still more transparent. It refers to the underworld in the favorable sense and may be translated as “the place of happy arrival.” Grammatically, it is differentiated by accent and inflection from *eleusis*, “arrival,” but, like it, is related, according to the rules of Greek vowel gradation, to Elysion, the realm of the blessed. No superficial adaptation of a foreign name could have fallen in with this striking grammatical regularity. The name of Eleusis appealed to the throngs of those who strove for a happy arrival and gave itself to be recognized as the goal of human life.

According to the sacred history of Eleusis, the first to “arrive” was Demeter herself. The Homeric hymn tells us that she came from Crete (123), but this does not absolutely mean that the Mysteries themselves

were of Cretan origin. The goddess was the first initiate and also the founder of the Mysteries; her initiation was the finding of her daughter. This did not happen in Crete. Nevertheless, as with so many of the characteristic elements of Greek cultural history, there are indications pointing to an origin in Crete, the great island whose advanced civilization had been shared by Greeks since the fifteenth century B.C.

Ancient literature contains a single explicit mention of Crete in connection with the Eleusinian Mysteries. A learned historian of the first century B.C., Diodorus of Sicily, tells us that the Cretans laid claim to these Mysteries, as well as to the Orphic mysteries and those of Samothrace. Claims of this kind were frequently raised in antiquity without justification. Diodorus does not name his authority. It was probably a historian from Crete. His proof of the Cretan origin of the Mysteries, cited in Diodorus (V 77 3), is of interest: elsewhere—these are the exact words—such rites are communicated in secret, but in Crete, in Knossos, it had been the custom since time immemorial to speak of these ceremonies quite openly to all and, if anyone wished to learn of them, to conceal none of the things which elsewhere were imparted to the initiate under a vow of silence. Whoever wrote this may have generalized and drawn overhasty comparisons: but he may perfectly well have been referring to elements of the cult which in his day still survived in Knossos and which are unknown to us.

Of course, there could be different degrees of secrecy in connection with cults of like content. The Greek language itself draws a distinction between the *arrheton*, the ineffable secret, and the *aporrheton*, that which was kept secret under a law of silence. Those admitted to the Mysteries, even to the true secret, the *arrheton*, may originally have included the whole collectivity, the tribe or the community. The *arrheton*

was by its very nature ineffable. Here we may speak with Goethe of a “holy open secret.”<sup>27</sup> Certain rites in themselves imposed secrecy on those who partook of them. But this direct effect could have its source only in the ineffable center of the rites. Around the center were grouped elements less charged with emotion, concerning which it was necessary to order silence. At Eleusis these included the festive procession and many of the things that were carried in it. The moment the participants in the procession gathered at the Poikile in Athens, the prohibition proclaimed by the Hierophant and the Dadouchos forbidding all barbarians and murderers to take part came into effect:<sup>28</sup> they alone were not permitted to take part in the holy open secret. This was not very different from the situation prevailing in Crete, according to Diodorus’ source: the moment in the ceremonies when strict secrecy came into force seems to have varied.

There is an Orphic hymn which points, not explicitly to Crete, but only in a southern direction, toward the sea which bordered the route of the procession and the place where the initiates danced. I have quoted the words from the chorus of Euripides which says that even the goddesses of the sea, the daughters of Nereus, participated in the dance of the initiates. Presenting a mythological transfiguration of the remote origins, the Orphic Hymn to the Nereids tells us that the sea-goddesses were the first to reveal the holy Mysteries (24 11)—the Mysteries of the “most holy Bakchos and of the pure Persephone.” This was a way of saying that the most important mysteries of the Greeks came from the sea. In the Bay of Eleusis they were received by Thracian priests. Their original language broke through in the song of the Hierophant, in the strange names for the gods, long after the initiations had become Greek and indeed the most sacred mysteries of Greece. Herein lies a possible answer to the question of origins.

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