

## Eleusis, the Seeds of Life: A Philosophical Journey

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### Abstract

The following article is a philosophical, spiritual, historical itinerary to modern Eleusis, Greece, site of the Eleusinian Mysteries of antiquity. Through Ancient Eleusis and its Mysteries, we trace the roots of democracy, poetry and philosophy, where the threads of myth and history, art and ritual, faith and reason start dismantling to new creations of humankind.

**Keywords:** Eleusis; Greek Mysteries; philosophy; tragedy; first democracy

### Introduction

*Ἐλευσις* in Greek means, “The Coming.” The city of Eleusis—Elefsina today—took its name after it. For those outside of Greece, the word “Eleusis” might refer to the famous Ancient Greek Mysteries. For many, it may just be unknown.

“Elefsina” is the main sign you see as you drive on the highway after having left Athens towards the south. It is not a main destination for most drivers who take the national road. If you decide to stop at Elefsina, do not expect Mysteries—unless you are caught by the mystery of the site.

Where there was once spread out a giant veil of wheat on the plain of Thriasion, there now expands an armour of industries, smoking furnaces, abandoned shipyards and oil refineries.

As a child, in the late 70s, sitting in the back seat of our car, I was holding my nose to avoid the urine-smell of the oil refineries of Aspropyrgos, the town right before Elefsina, as we were driving past it. The smell persists, but now not as disturbing, since many of these giant smoking tubes have been shut down. But I was always wondering how people who live or work there handled their breathing.

As you leave the highway eastwards, and drive into the small industrial town of Elefsina, look for the sign pointing to the archaeological site when taking the main local road. After a few blocks of small streets, you will suddenly find yourself in the midst of a little oasis, an absolutely necessary remnant of what used to be the most famous sanctuary of the ancient world.

### **Seeds of Democracy**

I only visited Eleusis again when I was in my forties. Not that I was not interested in it before. In spite of its tremendous importance in the spiritual life of the Ancient Greeks, this was not a place where your parents or teachers would take you as a kid or you would take a foreign visitor. Elefsina has been shaded by the embarrassment of its brutal transformation from a small, working class port, to a sprawling industrialised city.

“It was all destroyed by the Junta,” I remember my father saying, while driving on the national road. He recalled the excursions to Kineta, “Athenian’s most favourite resort,” which exists a bit further. The metallic, smoking landscape was extending as far as your eye could see and I could not even discern where, possibly, Kineta lay. “Now, Elefsina *is nothing*,” my father uttered and I felt the aversion, the fear to face the altered landscapes that he and his generation had cherished so much. Those were the times of first outings in private cars making possible weekend drives to the beach. Then came the Junta. It was just what was needed—a Junta disguised in a toga, in its brainless mimetic of the “Great Ancestors,” to step over Elefsina’s broken marbles, in order to raise their new, modern Greece. They did so with the complicity of a bunch of unscrupulous barons of the country’s shipping elite. It was enough, given that caricature of a regime, to maximise a damage called industrialisation which timidly but steadily started already in the middle of the 20th century.

However, something else also prompted the devastation of the place.

At that time more than half of Elefsina's population comprised Greek refugees, ousted from Asia Minor<sup>1</sup> in the aftermath of the Greek-Turkish war of 1922. It was as if the Pelasgians,<sup>2</sup> the first inhabitants of Eleusis, came back from their land of origin, Asia Minor.<sup>3</sup> Such demography would be easily understood as a "no man's land" for the Junta who gave the finishing blow to the wild industrialisation of the area.

The Junta distinguishes the "pure" from the "others", whether they are refugees, gypsies or communists. However, it was not that type of purity which was a prerequisite for the Mysteries. "Everyone who has clean hands and intelligible speech ... he who is pure from all pollution and whose soul is conscious of no evil and who has lived well and justly ..." <sup>4</sup> is regarded as pure. Everyone meant, as long as they are clean, have not committed homicide, have clear language and are reasonable, speak Greek, the language of the Mysteries. No wonder the Mysteries reached their heyday at the times of democracy. A powerful experience, uniting the Greeks<sup>5</sup> into a spiritual communion, meant sowing the seeds of "the thing in common"—"to koinon." A solid foundation for the Athenian democracy was the embrace of the Mysteries more than that of any other political system.

It was during the Golden Age of the Athenian democracy that Eleusis, with its Mysteries, reached its utmost splendour. It was a huge, collective event. Participants shared a highly spiritual experience. It included different stages of emotional tension, frenzy and relief that would solidly bond their sense of identity as well as their sense of communion. They were followed by non-participants who were there to cheer and accompany them. "The life of the

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1 Asia Minor is called the west coast of Turkey, populated by Greeks as early as the 9th century BC, for as long as the beginning of the 20th century.

2 The Pelasgians are said to be the first dwellers of Greece; "Pelasgian" has come to mean more broadly all the indigenous inhabitants of the Aegean Sea region and their cultures before the advent of the Greek language.

3 At that time, Elefsina was also inhabited by Arvanites, Illyrian populations that descended from the northwest, during the Middle Ages. The Illyrians were a group of Indo-European tribes in antiquity, who inhabited part of the western Balkans and the south-eastern coasts of the Italian peninsula (Messapia). The territory the Illyrians inhabited came to be known as Illyria to Greek and Roman authors, who identified a territory that corresponds to the former Yugoslavia and most of Albania, between the Adriatic Sea in the west, the Drava river in the north, the Morava river in the east and the mouth of the Aaos river in the south.

4 Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries*.

5 Even though the Mysteries were mostly celebrated amongst the Athenians and members of the Athenian confederation, they became a major ceremony for all Greeks. They were the most renowned, archetypical Mysteries but not the only ones in Ancient Greece.

Greeks [would be] unlivable<sup>6</sup> if they were prevented from properly observing the most sacred Mysteries, which hold the whole human race together.”<sup>7</sup>

Holding together a whole society, as if holding together the whole humanity, the Mysteries were there to “make life livable”—words uttered not by a Greek but by Praetextatus, the Proconsul of Rome in Greece at a time where the Mysteries were about to be abolished. Eleusis is clearly not only a place of worship for the Greeks, but for humanity itself, a place where humans perform a ritual in deep connection with nature.

The goal of this form of spirituality and the result are the same: happiness. It is about realising happiness rather than redemption and salvation. “Happy is he who has seen these things before leaving this world: he realizes the beginning and the end of life, as ordained by Zeus,”<sup>8</sup> writes Pindar. Nowadays happiness is measurable with specific indexes and statistics. Sadness is often observable, in people’s faces and acts, their daily intake of antidepressants and measured in terms of suicide rates. One reads often in the media that today’s “Greece of the crisis” ranks at the top of Europe’s “misery index.” A few decades ago, Elefsina was ringing the bells, as its inhabitants had to get over the shock of the town’s complete transformation, starting with the change of the landscape, and not ending with the air they had to breathe. It includes heavy-metals in the waters were they used to swim and the gradual shrinking of accessible coastal area. The Gulf of Salamis, named after the island across the port of Eleusis, gradually became a lake of abandoned shipwrecks stranded in its narrow waters.

Eleusis and Salamis form a harmonious whole, together with the gulf flowing between them. Salamis is known for the famous battle where Persians were sapped by the outnumbered Greeks. The Greeks were led by the Athenian General Themistocles<sup>9</sup> who trapped the Persian navy in the straights of Salamis and thus, thanks to his craftiness, won the battle. There have been many projections about the fate of Greece and consequently, the West, had the Persians won the battle. The cry of Persephone, the daughter of the Goddess, provided the necessary

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6 In Greek: *βίος ἀβίωτος* means “a life impossible to live.”

7 This phrase, according to Historian Zosimus, was said by Praetextatus, Pro-consul of Rome in Greece, to the Roman emperor Valentintinianus when, in 364, he decided to legislate to impede the nocturnal performances of the Mysteries. They were later totally abolished by Roman Emperor Theodosius, in 392BC.

8 Pindar (c. 522–c. 443 BC) was an Ancient Greek lyric poet from Thebes.

9 It was Thucydides’ judgement that Themistocles was “a man who exhibited the most indubitable signs of genius; indeed, in this particular he has a claim on our admiration quite extraordinary and unparalleled.”

omen. She made the hearts of the Greeks beat fast and deep in their land of Mysteries before entering the fight.

The story of Penelope needs to be told:

Plouton [another name for Hades, the God of the Dead] fell in love with Persephone [another name for Penelope], and with Zeus' help secretly kidnapped her. Her mother Demeter roamed over the earth in search of her, by day and by night. When she learned from the people of Hermion<sup>10</sup> that Plouton [Hades] had kidnapped her, enraged at the gods, she left the sky and in the likeness of a woman made her way to Eleusis ... Finally she succeeded, but when Zeus commanded Plouton to send Kore [Persephone] back up, Plouton gave her a pomegranate seed to eat, as assurance that she would not remain long with her mother. With no foreknowledge of the outcome of her act, she consumed it. Askalaphos, the son of Akheron and Gorgyra, bore witness against her; he was punished by Demeter who pinned him down with a heavy rock in Hades' realm. But Persephone was obliged to spend *a third of each year with Plouton, while the remainder of the year among the gods* ...<sup>11</sup> [own italics]

Before the battle of Salamis, Themistocles made a sacrifice to Dionysus Zagreus, son of Persephone and Zeus, the king of Gods.<sup>12</sup> According to the myth, Zagreus was being devoured by the monstrous Titans<sup>13</sup> until, at the last moment, Goddess Athena<sup>14</sup> intervened. She rescued his heart, enclosed it in a gypsum figure, into which she breathed life. Accordingly the Athenians, leading the coalition of the Greek city-states, would save Eleusis, just like their Goddess Athena had saved Zagreus from the Titan.

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10 According to the Homeric "Hymn to Demeter," it is God Helios (the Sun) who informed Demeter about the abduction.

11 This is a brief encounter of the myth of Demeter and the Kore (Persephone) by Greek mythographer Pseudo-Apollodorus (Bibliotheca 1. 29. C), 2nd century A.D.

12 Zeus, in Greek: Dias, king of Gods. Hades, his brother, seems like his inversed, dark side (Dias-Hades), hence Zeus' tolerance to the abduction of the Kore.

13 In Classical Greek mythology, the Titans and Titanesses (or Titanides; Greek: *Τιτανίς Titanis*; plural: *Τιτανίδες Titanides*) were members of the second order of divine beings, descending from the primordial deities and preceding the Olympian deities. Based on Mount Othrys, the Titans most famously included the first twelve children of the primordial Gaia (Mother Earth) and Uranus (Father Sky). They were giant deities of incredible strength, who ruled during the legendary Golden Age, and also composed the first pantheon of Greek deities.

14 Athena is the goddess of wisdom, courage, inspiration, civilisation, law and justice, mathematics, strength, war strategy, the arts, crafts, and skill in Ancient Greek religion and mythology. She is the protector of Athens, the city who took its name after her.

If I could only imagine the procession of the initiates, and the crowds escorting them from Athens to Eleusis along the Holy Road (*Hiera Odos*), on that day of the 19th of Boedriomion in the year 480 BC ... If I could only feel their thrill, their emotions and cries, as they were solemnly carrying in the process the wooden statue<sup>15</sup> of Dionysus<sup>16</sup> to the shrine of Eleusis. Would not that be one of the highest moments of the Athenian democracy? The Greeks could celebrate their Mysteries in freedom. And the Mysteries would facilitate the initiation of the Greeks to their spiritual freedom. That was a freedom wider than citizenship, open to women and even to non-Greeks, as long as they were ready and apt for the experience.

### **Seeds of Greek Tragedy**

As it happens with some things in certain periods of our lives, Eleusis became my passion. I returned to the place and sat down for a long time on a marble stone, to observe the ruins. I did so in an intuitive quest of some message hidden in the landscape—or what was left of it. The cement factories had eaten up large parts of the surrounding hills, rich in limestone. The ancient theatre was buried. Not to mention the lack of vegetation and the total transformation of what used to be Greece's largest granary, the Thriasion.

I experienced my visit to Eleusis as a vagarious return to a primal emotion, the memory of which had been lost in the passage of the centuries. But what kind of return was it really? To a place where I had never been before? What was after all that spot, which was a part of Mother-Earth's body, and while cherished by the Ancient Greeks was abducted by my contemporaries? I was just a fool, looking for lost treasures.

In September 2015, during the Athens International Poetry Festival, I met Abha Acharya, a poetess from India who asked me if I knew someone who could take her to Eleusis. A few days later, we found ourselves together with Abha and another close friend, Giorgos,<sup>17</sup> a geologist, breathing amidst the ruins of Eleusis, unintentionally listening to the remarks of the visitors and the accounts of the tour guides.

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15 In Greek: "*xoanon*."

16 Dionysus is the god of the grape harvest, winemaking and wine, of ritual madness, fertility, theatre and religious ecstasy in Greek mythology.

17 The name, George, also refers to Gaia (Mother Earth) from *ge* "earth" (see *Gaia*) + *ergon* "work."

We first sat by the cave of *Ploutoneion*, an earthly channel from which Plouton—another name for Hades<sup>18</sup>—drew Persephone into the underworld. Wildflowers and pomegranate seeds were lying at the cavity, all nostalgic offerings to a remote legend, and a sign that legends never retire. The Maiden was innocently playing in the Nyssa<sup>19</sup> plain—where Dionysus was raised by the Nymphs<sup>20</sup> and prepared the entheogen<sup>21</sup> wine. She was playing and picking flowers with her friends, the daughters of Okeanos<sup>22</sup> as she became enchanted by the sweet fragrance of a narcissus,<sup>23</sup> a marvellous flower “spreading over the wide skies and the earth below smiled back in all its radiance. So too the churning mass of the salty sea. She [Persephone] was filled with a sense of wonder, and she reached out with both hands to take hold of the pretty plaything. And the earth, full of roads leading every which way, opened up under her ...”<sup>24</sup>

The Earth opens up. The caves are its secret passages. Caves are wombs in Mother Earth’s body, bearing the secrets of genesis and corruption, revealing its miracles through the practice of harvest. Channels who open through the attraction of entheogen, wild plants that need to be discovered and secretly prepared into magic elixirs, like the *Kykeon*—the stirred drink used at the Eleusinian mysteries. The Earth has a soul—a living force making the miracle of life happen. The soul is pure love: The love of *De-meter* [Mother Earth] for *Kore* [the daughter], Persephone. The love of Nature for the soul, the matrix and the core. *Kore* also means the pupil of the eye, the core of vision.<sup>25</sup>

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18 *Plouton* means wealth. Hades only gets wealthier and wealthier from the bodies of the dead. Only Aesculapius, hero and god of medicine and alchemy, delays some of the bodies to be drawn to death.

19 Mount Nyssa is associated with many, different locations, according to ancient authors (Ethiopia, Libya, Tribalia, India or Arabia). Yet, it is worth mentioning that Nysa was a city reached by Alexander the Great in his expedition in India, a city near the Indus River. The locals said that their city was founded by Dionysus in the distant past and was dedicated to the god Dionysus.

20 A nymph in Greek mythology and in Latin mythology is a minor female nature deity typically associated with a particular location or landform.

21 An *entheogen* (“generating the divine within”) is a substance used in a religious, shamanic, or spiritual context [5] that often induces psychological or physiological changes. See: Wasson (R. Gordon), Hofmann (A.), Ruck (C.A.P.), *The Road to Eleusis. Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries*; and Robert Graves *Greek Myths* Introduction in Revised Edition of 1960.

22 Okeanides, daughters of Okeanos (ocean), the older generation of sea goddesses

23 *Narcissus*: type of bulbous flowering plant, from Latin *narcissus*, from Greek *narkissos*, a plant name, not the modern narcissus, possibly a type of iris or lily, perhaps from a pre-Greek Aegean word, but associated with Greek *narke* “numbness” because of the sedative effect of the alkaloids in the plant.

24 *Hymn to Demeter*, Homer verses 13–16.

25 On the Greek idea of vision see (“*In the Eye of the Mirror*”) “*A l’oeil du miroir*,” Jean-Pierre Vernant, Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux, 1997.

This was a vision experienced by those who attended the Mysteries and it was kept secret throughout the passage of centuries. The participants were called *epoptai*: those who oversee—those who see from above. They would pass through their own trial—alone and with the others—by fasting, marching in procession on the sacred road, and searching in agony before reaching the light of Eleusis.

Across from the cave of the *Ploutoneion* we could see the *Propylaia*, the entrance to the shrine, where the initiates would come for the final and capital-phase of the Mysteries. They had been receiving the teaching of the Hierophants.<sup>26</sup> They had been baptised at the waters of Phaliron Bay. They had been fasting. They had been processing from the *Eleusinion*, the small temple in the basis of the Acropolis of Athens, all through the Sacred Way<sup>27</sup> carrying the figurehead of Iacchus—another name for Dionysus.<sup>28</sup> Iacchus, “the light-bringing star of our nocturnal rite,”<sup>29</sup> is Dionysus reborn out of Zagreus’ ashes. He is the torch-bearer, the one bringing light in the darkness of the mysteries.

There exist three faces of the same god: Zagreus, Iacchus (or Bacchus), and Dionysus. Each figure represents a face of humanity and a phase of the human pursuit to find a balance between the underworld, and the other world or the world above. Many masks thereof are incarnated by the heroes of the Greek tragedy: Oedipus Rex, Prometheus, Ajax ...

In reality, however, that hero is the suffering Dionysus of the Mysteries, that god who experiences the suffering of the individual in himself, the god about whom the amazing myths tell how he, as a child, was dismembered by the Titans and now in this condition is venerated as Zagreus. Through this is revealed the idea that this dismemberment, the essentially Dionysian suffering, is like a transformation into air, water, earth, and fire, that we also have to look upon the condition of individuation as the source and basis for all suffering, as something in itself reprehensible. From the smile of this Dionysus arose the Olympian gods, from his tears arose mankind. In that

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26 *Hierophant*: the chief priest at the Eleusinian Mysteries, interpreter of sacred mysteries and arcane principles. “The one who shows the holy objects”: *ta hiera*, “the holy,” and *phainein*, “to show.”

27 22 km long, in today’s terms.

28 Iacchus an epithet of Dionysus, [1] particularly associated with the Mysteries at Eleusis, where he was considered to be the son of Zeus and Demeter. *Iacchos* is also the ritual cry (“*Iachi!*”) from the cries of the initiates at the procession in the Sacred Way.

29 Aristophanes, *Frogs* 342.



existence as dismembered god Dionysus has the dual nature of a cruelly savage daemon and a lenient, gentle master.<sup>30</sup>

As Nietzsche unrolls the fabric of tragedy down to its very roots, he sees Dionysus, guiding the inspiration of the great tragedians, including Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Aeschylus, the “father of Greek tragedy” and author of the *Prometheus* trilogy, was an Eleusinian who also took part in the battle of Salamis. The legend says that Aeschylus was visited in his sleep by Dionysus who commanded him to turn his attention to the nascent art of tragedy.<sup>31</sup> A modern statue of Aeschylus stands at the little “square of heroes” in Elefsina, adjacent to the modern “Sacred Way” (*Hiera Odos*). The main cultural festival of modern Elefsina, taking place in an old oil-mill, which is also named after him: “*Aeschylia*.”

The initiates are carrying Iacchus’ wooden statue—the “*xoanon*” all through the Sacred Way, like a torch, bringing light to the darkness of the underworld. The Sacred Way connects Athens to Eleusis like an umbilical cord; it leads to the matrix of the Great Divine Mother—what the Hindus would call *Shakti*. At the end of the road, Hades awaits, hidden deep in Mother Earth’s womb. If I could only hear the ritual cry to the god by the enthusiastic voices of the initiates; if I had only a glimpse of that face of Dionysus, the god who stood closer to humans than any other of the Greek gods. I caught myself thinking of the Orthodox Christian Easter procession of the *Epitaph*<sup>32</sup>; it is headed as well by Christ’s wooden statue on the cross. That was the only procession I had known till then.

There is not much left of the old Sacred Way. The modern road that bears the same name, coincides in some parts with the ancient one. Often it is overburdened by trucks and heavy carriers. *Hiera Odos* (Sacred Way) is today famous for its few king-sized, live music nightclubs to be found at the beginning after having left Athens; as for the rest, it is a tedious road leading in solitariness to the outskirts of Elefsina. While driving along it, in one of my trips to Eleusis, it made me think of the phrase of *Democritus*.<sup>33</sup> “A life without festivals is like a road without inns.”

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30 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, chapter 10.

31 Pausanias, Greek geographer of 2nd century AD, narrates the incident.

32 *Epitaph* (in Greek): Funeral oration.

33 Democritus was an influential Ancient Greek pre-Socratic philosopher, primarily remembered today for his formulation of an atomic theory of the universe.

Acts are acted, words are spoken, things are shown.<sup>34</sup>

We slowly walked through the *Telesterion*, the Ceremonial Hall, where acts were performed, words were spoken and things were shown during the last two-day part of the Mysteries.

Entering now into the secret dome, he is filled with horror and astonishment. He is seized with loneliness and total perplexity; he is unable to move a step forward, and at a loss to find the entrance to the way that leads to where he aspires to, till the prophet or conductor lays open the anteroom of the Temple ...<sup>35</sup>

Fear and agony are part of the experience. The agony of the search of Demeter for the Kore, let her walk on Earth in distress. The goddess disguised her godly nature, and became a nurse for the son of the king of Eleusis, who had offered her his hospitality. The goddess remained in absolute loneliness. She felt betrayed by the gods who let the abduction of the Kore happen,<sup>36</sup> but also she was betrayed by humans, who did not understand her godly nature.<sup>37</sup> The initiate's wandering in agony as reminder is an essential part of the ritual. To this is added the role of the *mystagogue*,<sup>38</sup> guiding to the doors of perception, just like Hecate,<sup>39</sup> the *psychopomps* (from the Greek *ψυχοπομπός* meaning "guide of the soul"), who assisted Demeter in her search of Persephone following the abduction of Hades. The myth stands like

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34 There were three degrees of initiation: the Lesser Mysteries, which were a preliminary requirement; the Greater Mysteries or *telete*, which means "to make perfect,; and the additional and highest degree, the *epopteia*. The initiation ritual (*telete*) can be divided into the *dromena*: things acted, the *legomena*: things said, and the *deiknymena*: things shown (revelation of the holy objects).

35 Themistius *Orat in Patrem*. 50 (Themistius: 317, Paphlagonia, c. 390 AD, Constantinople), named "eloquent" was a statesman, rhetorician, and philosopher. He flourished in the reigns of Constantius II, Julian, Jovian, Valens, Gratian, and Theodosius I; and he enjoyed the favour of all those emperors, notwithstanding their many differences, and the fact that he himself was not a Christian.

36 Zeus, Demeter's brother and king of Olympian Gods, was aware of the abduction of the Kore by Hades but did not interfere.

37 In her search for Persephone, Demeter arrived in Eleusis. "And first she sat down on the rock which has been named *Laughless* after her, beside what is called the *Well of the Fair Dances* (*Καλλίχορον Φρεαρ*). Thereupon she made her way to *Celeus*, who at that time reigned over the Eleusinians. Some women were in the house, and when they bade her sit down beside them, a certain old crone, *Iambe*, joked the goddess and made her smile. But Metaneira, wife of *Celeus*, had a child and Demeter received it to nurse, and wishing to make it immortal she set the baby of nights on the fire and stripped off its mortal flesh. But as *Demophon*—for that was the child's name—grew marvelously by day, Metaneira watched, and discovering him buried in the fire she cried out; wherefore the baby was consumed by the fire and the goddess revealed herself. But for Triptolemus, the elder of Metanira's children, she made a chariot of winged dragons, and gave him wheat, with which, wafted through the sky, he sowed the whole inhabited earth." (*Pseudo-Apollodorus, Bibliotheca* 1. 29).

38 *Mystagogos*, from Greek: *μυσταγωγός* "person who initiates into mysteries."

39 Hecate is the moon goddess, most often shown holding two torches or a key and in later periods depicted in triple form, symbolising the maiden, the mother, the crone.

a pattern of initiation processes that one could also find in shamanic initiation rites. Learning the essentials meant cleansing in water, fasting, consuming potions made from wild plants, wandering in solitude before or after the guidance of the shaman, and so forth.

I turned my gaze to my friend who seemed completely absorbed by the landscape. There were ancient stones, objects and caves, all part of a mutilated landscape and silent accomplices to the mystery. Was there anything else that remained to be observed?

“Language remains”—the phrase just came to me<sup>40</sup> recalling my extensive research in the ancient texts. And so it was, I found a striking comment made by Plutarch<sup>41</sup> about the very experience of the Mysteries:

The soul, at the time of death, experiences the same impression as those who are initiated to the Great Mysteries. The word and the action resemble each other. They say *τελευτάν* [*teleutan*: to end] and *τελείσθαι* [*telesthai*: to perform].<sup>42</sup>

There was the Hall, where *telos* (“end”, in Greek) was performed: the *Telesterion*. *Telos* is situated in the common linguistic root of the word (*teleutan*) and the action (*telesthai*). *Telos*, in its double meaning: as both an *end* and as a *goal*. Plutarch is not saying that the soul of the Great Mysteries evokes such experiences which have the same impression as one has at the time of death. He states that at the time of death, the soul goes through the same impression as the one experienced during the Great Mysteries. The Mysteries seem to stand as a preparation to death, and give a first taste of the end, or the very end of the soul; that is when the coming back cannot be traced but only be represented by “acts” and “words” as well as by “things” which are shown at the Mysteries.

If all is a representation of death, what would that possibly mean? Or maybe, it is only a ritual that precedes death, and therefore encompasses the biggest fear of their human being, unable

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40 “Language Remains: A Conversation with Günter Gaus,” 1–23. In *Essays in Understanding*, Hannah Arendt, German-born, American-Jewish philosopher, 1906–1975.

41 Plutarch, (c. AD 46–AD 120) was a Greek historian, biographer, essayist, ambassador and priest in Delphi (the last 30 years of his life); he is known primarily for his *Parallel Lives* and *Moralia*.

42 *Τελευτάν* (*teleutan*) means to end, *τελείσθαι* (*teleisthai*) to perform (the rites). Plutarch may be not taken literally, yet, this phrase is quite revealing of what the feeling of the mysteries might be.

to explain their disappearance from the sight of the earth. The mysteries might suggest a step beyond fear, and therefore in what might have been a certain immortality of the soul.

It is said that the Hierophant will soon open your eyes to show you the holy objects. You will see the light of the golden dawn on the pure Rharian<sup>43</sup> fields, covered up to their ears.

## Seeds of Philosophy

Through the *Telesterion* we climbed up the hill, where there stands a small museum. A couple of headless Kore<sup>44</sup> were standing right there, in the courtyard, with their backs turned to the industrial background (figure 1). Giorgos was taking a photo. “Andreas Embirikos<sup>45</sup> has taken a similar one” he says, as if the poet’s gaze had just crossed his mind. He likes contradictions. Between the headless, straight bodies of the two ladies, there is as contrast the blast furnace of “Titan,” the cement factory. It is like a click of the eye according to the myth of Zagreus.

The purpose of our lives is not servility ... There exist infinitely better things than even that statuesque presence of the bygone epic. The purpose of our life is love ...<sup>46</sup>

The beautiful bust of Kore dominates the main hall of the small museum. She is carrying a basket, the *calyx*, which contains secret objects to be revealed by the Hierophant at the highest moment of the Mysteries. The *calyx* seems to be almost a continuation of her head. She seems calm, yet she must be performing a demanding exercise. She needs to stand, or walk, while having to balance the basket on her head. She has to stay constant until the utmost moment of revelation of the holy objects. She recalls with her stance the fragile balance of human existence. I now see this Kore coming from far, going far; she is an African woman, carrying a basket on top of her curly hair; it is almost as if she is carrying her whole household. And the household is a temple, the temple of our everyday lives.

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43 The Rharian Field (*Ράριον πεδίον*), parth of Thriasion, was supposedly where the first plot of grain was grown after Demeter, taught humanity agriculture, through Triptolemus son of king Keleos of Eleusis. It was associated with the Eleusinian Mysteries. Demeter was surnamed *Rharias* after the field, or after its mythical eponym Rarus.

44 Kore: Maiden but also, Ancient Greek statue of a clothed young woman standing with feet together.

45 Andreas Embirikos (Greek: *Ανδρέας Εμπειρίκος*; 1901–1975) was a Greek surrealist poet, photographer and the first Greek psychoanalyst.

46 Andreas Embirikos, *Blast Furnace*.

More of these maidens are seen in the glass narthexes of the museum. They are statuettes or figurines depicted on ceramic vases. They are preparing devotedly for the coming of the first maiden, Persephone. They were escorting her while she was abducted by Hades. Ovid wrote that they were Sirens.<sup>47</sup> Did they distract Persephone with their earthly seduction? On the other hand, did they not become lonely and desperate as well; that is once she was gone? Demeter gives them wings to search for her daughter. As escorts in the passage to death, and back, these maidens are present to caress the soul and to drag it to the limits of existence. These Kore also accompany the initiate who, like a Homeric hero, has to stay balanced and constant. The relevant Greek word is *empedon* (ἐμπεδον: literally: “having one’s feet on the ground”). It is eloquently used in the *Odyssey*, in the scene when Ulysses is strapped in ropes to the mast, so that he can listen to the song of the Sirens but not follow their seduction.<sup>48</sup> Being in alignment with the axis of the earth, bound to a mast, or carrying a *calyx*, always it is important to be constant, since a kind of immanence with the “being.”

The steeds that bear me carried me as far as ever my heart  
 Desired, since they brought me and set me on the renowned  
 Way of the goddess, who with her own hands conducts the man  
 who knows through all things. On what way was I borne  
 5. along; for on it did the wise steeds carry me, drawing my car,  
 and maidens showed the way. And the axle, glowing in the socket—  
 7. for it was urged round by the whirling wheels at each  
 end—gave forth a sound as of a pipe, when the daughters of the  
 Sun, hasting to convey me into the light, threw back their veils  
 10. from off their faces and left the abode of Night.<sup>49</sup>

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47 Sirens were considered the daughters of the river god Achelous, fathered upon Chthon (the Earth). In Euripides’ play, *Helen* (167), Helen in her anguish calls upon “Winged maidens, daughters of the Earth.”

48 The same word is used in the *Odyssey*, again, when Ulysses, having come back to Ithaca, inspects his marital bed, originally carved out on a tree trunk, rooted. He has to make sure the bed stands in its place, steady, constant. Thus must stand Penelope’s love, keeping the bed on its axis, keeping love constant.

49 Parmenides of Elea, (late sixth or early fifth century BCE) was a pre-Socratic Greek philosopher from Elea in Magna Graecia (Greater Greece, included Southern Italy). He was the founder of the Eleatic school of philosophy. The single known work of Parmenides is a poem, *On Nature*, which has survived only in fragmentary form.

With these words begins one of the most emblematic works of the first philosophy, *On Nature*, where poetry, mythology and mystery blend together, in order to sow the seeds of metaphysical thinking. The poet, who is Parmenides, is delivered by wise mares. He is carried by them as far as his heart desires, and it leads him to the “Way of the Goddess.” Maidens show him the way. The axis is “glowing in the socket, urged round by the whirling wheels at each end” (I.5–7), like a time machine, voyaging to the limits of the night. It includes sounds and lights winding him in a cosmic ride to the borders of existence. Then maidens, “daughters of the Sun,” hasten along to convey the light. They throw back their veils in an almost apocalyptic gesture. And there he stands, the poet, at the “gates of the ways of Night and Day fitted above with a lintel and below with a threshold of stone” (l. 10–12). Thanks to the maiden’s gentle words and skilful persuasion by Justice (*Dike*), the doors open up and after another impressive wave of flashes and sounds, there appears the “Goddess.”<sup>50</sup>

The Goddess comes when the poet philosopher, in a sort of an ecstatic condition, is ready to welcome and to hear her. The first philosophy—as narrated by Parmenides. It seems to emerge through a sort of initiation which resonates to a ritual carried out by female priestesses. The source of knowledge about “what it is,” the Goddess, is a deity referring almost to the archetype of the female deity, and which is like the idea behind many forms.<sup>51</sup> Such forms are *Thetis* or *Dike* (Justice) and *Pistis* (Faith) who are present as well in Parmenides’ poem. Archetype forms of the female deity are also Rhea, daughter of Gaia (Earth) and Uranus (sky), and Rhea’s daughter, Demeter.<sup>52</sup>

During this moment of “ecstasy”<sup>53</sup> the poet has to remain in contact with “what is”:

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50 “Just as persons who are being initiated into the Mysteries throng together at the outset amid tumult and shouting, and jostle against one another but when the holy sites are being performed and disclosed the people are immediately attentive in awe and silence, so too at the beginning of philosophy: about its portals also you will see great tumult and talking and boldness, as some boorishly and violently try to jostle their way towards the repute it bestows; but he who has succeeded in getting inside, and has seen a great light, as though a shrine were opened, adopts another bearing of silence and amazement, and ‘humble and orderly attends upon’ reason as upon a god.” Plutarch, *Progress in Virtue* 81e.

51 Plato presents in his dialogue *Parmenides*, his theory of ideas.

52 Demeter’s character as mother-goddess is identified in the second element of her name *meter* (*μήτηρ*) derived from Proto-Indo-European *\*méh<sub>2</sub>tēr* (mother). In antiquity, different explanations were already proffered for the first element of her name. It is possible that *Da* (*Δᾶ*), [12] a word which became *Ge* (*Γῆ*) in Attic, is the Doric form of *De* (*Δῆ*), “earth,” the old name of the chthonic earth-goddess, and that Demeter is “Mother-Earth.”

53 From the Ancient Greek *ekstasis* (*ἐκστασις*): “to be or stand outside oneself, a removal to elsewhere” from *ek-* “out,” and *stasis* “a stand, or a stand-off of forces.”

Wherefore all holds together; for what is; is in contact with what is.  
Moreover, it is immovable in the bonds of mighty chains, without  
beginning and without end; since coming into being  
and passing away have been driven afar, and true belief has cast them away.  
It is the same, and it rests in the self-same place, abiding in itself.  
30 And thus it remaineth constant in its place<sup>54</sup> ... for hard necessity keeps it in the  
bonds of the limit that holds it fast on every side.

The image could be a powerful reminder, as said already, of the scene of Ulysses and the Sirens. Ropes hold the hero onto the axis; that is the mast. It is like an initiate, who has to stay constant in spite of the turmoil he has to undergo before being lead to the light of the knowledge. Around their right fist and their left ankle, initiates to the Great Mysteries are wearing the *crocae*, a saffron thread. According to the legend, it is put on them by the *Krokonidae*, descendants of Krokon, the first settler of Eleusis. These are symbolic chains of their alignment to the roots of Eleusis. Likewise the poet, the hero, or the “being” in an ecstatic communion, has to remain also “constant in its place” (the Greek word in Parmenides’ poem is the same, as the Homeric one: *empedon*<sup>55</sup>). Parallel to that the initiate of the Great Mysteries has to keep his tongue tied and stay constant in keeping the secret.

I have gone far; maybe not outside of myself, like an Eleusinian initiate, but far from the casual archaeological site where the three of us were supposed to be sitting. Thoughts and images had been coming into my mind, asking to know more. Most thoughts came while we were sitting in silence under the olive trees in the courtyard of the tiny Christian church located at the western part of the rock, that is opposite to the museum: *Panagia Mesosporitissa* (in Greek: the “All Holy Middle-Sewer”).<sup>56</sup> Every year, on 21 November, women gather here in a ritual consisting of breaking loaves (*artoclassia*), an Orthodox Christian celebration for wheat. It echoes the offering of *pelanos*, the sacred bread offered to the Gods before entering the *Telesterion*.

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54 Parmenides’ *On Nature* VIII 25–30. *Ἐμπεδον* is here translated by “constant.”

55 I thank Barbara Cassin for her remarks about *Ἐμπεδον* in her book *La Nostalgie, Quand donc est-on chez soi? Ulysse, Enee, Arendt*.

56 *Panagia*: “The All Holly” is the most common name for Virgin Mary in orthodox Christianity.

Demeter is the great sower.<sup>57</sup> She sows her grains of wheat—grains that are seeds, an image of the eternal return of the same, the clear reproduction of the seed to the grain and of the grain to the seed. It is she who gives through the one, or many, through the perpetual dance of the *Kore*, from the intestines of the Earth to its surface. The Earth as an organism, who through the perennial reproduction of the same, produces life and wealth for the humans. I remembered reading about the movement of Indian women defending the diversity of seeds and resisting that they become a monopoly of the so-called aggro-alimentary industry. The image of Demeter, holding a branch of wheat, occurred to me like an unfulfilled prophecy which entails a key to our survival.

From where we stood, in the church yard, we could also see the Laughless Rock where Demeter was found by the Maidens of Eleusis. Right next to it exists the Well of Beautiful Dances (*Kallichoron Frear*), around which young women dance with torches on the sixth day of the Mysteries. We were the only visitors left on the site. The sunset was close and so was the closure. Before the twilight falls, floodlights throw their harsh light onto the sacred rock. No time for the shrine to be caressed by the night's veil. No time for Demeter to soothe her petrified gaze and bend over her tired eyelashes. The Laughless Rock was laying towards the end on our way out, an empty seat left by a Goddess. Would we dare to sit down? Would we dare to see the gaze of Hades absorbing the remote silhouette of the *Kore*?

At the bottom of the hill, crowned by the “All Holy.”

Alexandra Theodoropoulou, Athens, June 2016



**Figure 1:** Two headless Kore, at the front yard of the Archaeological Museum of Eleusis, Photo: Yorgos Moussouris

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<sup>57</sup> See also Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, 1948.



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