

An archaeological journey to the ancient cultural heritage of the City of Eleusis

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Abstract

This paper presents an outline of the ancient cultural heritage of the city of Eleusis from the classical antiquity. Eleusis is located in an area continuously inhabited since the Neolithic times, 19 km west of Athens, the capital city of Greece. The road connecting the two cities was called “Sacred”. Eleusis had been one of the most important sacred cities of antiquity for more than a thousand years, famous to the Greco-Roman world for the Eleusinian Mysteries and their connection with the religious myth of goddess Demeter and her daughter Persephone. The Sacred Road, leading from Athens to Eleusis, and the Eleusinian Mysteries, as described herein, are the cultural remnants of the ancient glory.

Keywords: Eleusis, cultural heritage, Sacred Road, Demeter, Persephone, Eleusinian Mysteries

Introduction

The city of Eleusis (or Elefsina nowadays) is located 19 km west of Athens, the capital city of Greece. It is inhabited continuously since the prehistoric times, even sparsely occasionally, being inextricably linked to the myth of the goddess Demeter. The goddess Demeter belonged to the choir of the Olympian deities; she was the daughter of Cronus and Rhea and the mother of Persephone, whom she had from her brother, Zeus. In this myth, we read, therefore, that when Demeter was informed of the unpleasant news of the abduction of Persephone by Hades, she immediately left Olympus and came to earth in search of her daughter. The goddess, taking human form, wandered the earth mourning, until the road brought her to Eleusis. There she met the daughters of Celeus, who invited her to stay in their palace and raise the youngest child of the royal family. The goddess accepted the girls’ invitation and went to the palace of Celeus, where she became the foster mother of Demophon, a mortal child who, raised under her care, had been blessed with the gift of immortality. Demeter remained in Eleusis to mourn for her beloved daughter, patiently waiting for her to return to her, as she did. Persephone, accompanied by Hermes, arrived in Eleusis, where she was reunited with her mother. Then, after restoring the fertility of the earth, Demeter revealed to the rulers of the city her sacred rites, the Eleusinian Mysteries ^[1].

The Eleusinian Mysteries

The Eleusinian Mysteries were ceremonies held to honour the goddess Demeter and her daughter, Persephone (Fig. 1). Those who were not initiated did not have access to the ceremonies, and those who were initiated did not reveal what they experienced. Before their catechism began, prospective believers were bound by oath to keep secret what they would see and hear during the rituals. All people participated in the Eleusinian Mysteries regardless of gender, social status, economic status, or age. Those who had committed homicide or did not understand the Greek language were excluded. However, they had to pay a respectable cost for the salary of the priests and the maintenance of the temple. In the case of slaves, someone who had the financial means undertook the expense.



(Source: Collection of X. Foulidi)

Fig 1: Votive relief, dated from 440-430 BCE. Found in Eleusis in 1859 and exhibited in the Archaeological Museum of Eleusis. On the left, goddess Demeter holds wheat for sowing. On the right, Persephone symbolizes vegetation, since the seed remains buried for months in the ground and then sprouts. In the middle, Triptolemus, son of the king of Eleusis, Celsus, is an Eleusinian deity, who spread the cultivation of wheat

In Classical times, the Great Mysteries were celebrated every autumn. In addition to these, there were also the Minor or En Agrais Mysteries, which took place annually in early spring, that is, during the month of Anthestirion of the Attic calendar. The Minor Mysteries constituted the first stage of initiation and were held on the eastern bank of the Ilissus river, at a location known as Agra or Agrai. During the Minor Mysteries, the priests prepared the prospective initiates with ritual purifications in the waters of the Ilissus, in order to receive initiation into the Great Mysteries. The latter lasted nine days. They began on the 14th of the month of Boedromion (between September and October), with sacrifices performed on the eschar and the altars of Demeter

and Kore (“Daughter”, i.e., Persephone) at Eleusis (“prothymata”). Then, a procession was formed, headed by the Eleusinian priesthood, flanked by an honour guard, which transported the sacred objects of Demeter to Athens, via the Sacred Road (“Iera Odos”) in a special box. On the eastern curbs of the Panathenaic Street, north of the rock of the Acropolis, they were placed in the Eleusinian in Aste, a sanctuary on the northern slope of the Acropolis. These objects, which were kept in Eleusis all year round, we do not know what they contained exactly. During this procession, the Sacred Road was strewn with fruits and flowers.

The first day (on the 15th of the Boedromion) of the Eleusinian Mysteries was called “Agrymos”, when the herald officially proclaimed in the Poikili Stoa the beginning of the celebrations in Athens (“proressis”). The Kerykes (“Heralds”) were the first and largest priestly family of Eleusis, after that of the Eumolpides. The office of the dadouchos (“torch holder”) is proven through the inscriptions to be the most important after that of the hierophant. The dadouchos, during the celebration of the mysteries with the help of a dadouchos priestess, was responsible for creating a symbolic atmosphere with the torches as his main means. At that time, all those who wished were invited to participate, except those who had committed murder, were sacrilegious or did not speak Greek. On the second day, called Elasis, the initiates took a cleansing bath in the sea of Phaleron or Piraeus, and washed the pigs intended for sacrifice and offering. On the third day, the candidate initiates set off for Eleusis, which they reached via the Sacred Road, while the old initiates of the goddess remained in Athens and continued the ritual celebrations. The third day was called “Iereia deuro”, which meant that the Athenians, as well as representatives of other cities, brought the animals for the sacrifice. In addition to the sacrifices, they prayed to the goddess Demeter for the city, and the initiates fasted, and only in the evening did they have a simple dinner. The fourth day was called “Epidauria” or “Asclepius”, in honour of Asclepius, so that the god of Health, who according to tradition arrived late, could be initiated. On this day, under the supervision of the eponymous Archon, the statues of Demeter and Kore were transported to the Asclepius. Late initiates could undergo the procedures. The remaining initiates remained locked in their homes to prepare for the greatest spiritual experience. On the fifth day of the Great Mysteries, which was considered the brightest, the sacred objects of Demeter returned to Eleusis, accompanied by a large procession of believers, who had already been initiated into the worship of the goddess. The procession started from the Eleusinian Temple in Aste, followed the Panathenaic Street, crossed the Agora and the Kerameikos and reached the area of the Dipylos, the monumental gate in the western part of the Athenian walls. There was probably also the Iachion, that is, the sanctuary of the god Iachos, the husband of Demeter and Kore. From the Iachion, the initiates received the crowned image of Iachos, placed it on a chariot at the head of the procession and entered the Sacred Road towards Eleusis. They offered sacrifices at the sanctuaries they encountered, such as the temple of Apollo, at the site where the Dafni monastery is today, the sanctuary of Aphrodite at Skaramangas and the lakes of the Rheiti (presently Lake Koumoundourou). Then, they arrived at the bridge of Eleusinian Cephissus river, where the procession was welcomed by the Eleusinians with coarse jokes, mocking comments against the prominent figures of the procession,

which were called “Bridgings”. Then, the procession by the light of the torches reached the courtyard of the Sanctuary. All-night dances in honour of Demeter took place in the Callichorum well. There, the kernos, vessels for the worship of Demeter, were used [2, 3].

The kernos is a clay vessel with many cups, filled with various offerings (sage, white poppy, wheat, barley, broad beans, lentils, honey, wine, milk and sheep’s wool) that those who hold it receive from the priest. The one who carried the kernos tasted from the goods, found in the cups, like a “cradle bearer”, as a kerchnos (“rough”), a word that probably refers to its uneven surface due to the presence of the cups. They were used in the worship of several chthonic deities (Rhea, Cybele), but were particularly associated with the worship of Demeter at Eleusis. There are several different types of kernos, as well as materials of construction (clay, stone, copper), but the basic shape remains the same. A conical base supports the body of the vase, which consists of two parts. The lower part opens outwards and has a flat surface with sockets or depressions and two noticeably protruding “handles”. The upper part of the kernos narrows upwards and ends in a mouth with a wide rim. The vases usually had written decoration, while the more luxurious ones could have been covered with thin gold leaves [4].

On the sixth day of the ceremonies, sacrifices were performed in the Sanctuary by the Lord King; this was followed by rest, fasting, purification and sacrifices, which were performed in memory of Demeter’s fasting, after the abduction of her daughter Persephone by Pluto. Like Demeter in the palace of Celeus, they drank the drink “kykeon”, which had divine origin. Sacrifices and prayers followed, and Athenian teenagers sacrificed an ox. During this period, the pelanos, a large bread kneaded from wheat from the surrounding Rharion Field, was offered (Fig. 2). This was followed by the tying of ribbons on the heads of the Initiates by the Priests. Thus, the Initiates were ready to receive the great revelation in the Telesterion. There, the goddess revealed to the Initiates the secrets of the beyond and equipped them with the means by which they would ensure their salvation during this terrible ordeal.



(Source: Collection of X. Foulidi)

Fig 2: Ears of wheat, the symbol of Demeter, on the left relief within the archaeological site of Eleusis

The rituals that were performed (a, b) were:

a) The Events, namely the abduction of Persephone and the sorrow of Demeter, the searches by torchlight and the return of Persephone, under the cheers of the Initiates, accompanied by music, dance and song, and with words that evoked fear, sadness, despair, and finally joy, as in the tragedy that functioned as a catharsis. The words spoken during the ceremony were explanatory phrases, spoken by the Hierophant. The phrases “hieron eteke pontia vrimo vrimon”, that is, “the strong gave birth to the strong”, have been preserved. Scholars associate this phrase with the Hierogamy of Zeus and Demeter. For the spectators, the Hierophant and the Priestess were gods themselves. The story unfolded, as they believed, that the union of the two gods had taken place in mythological times. Zeus violently dragged Demeter and descended into a dark space. Then the torches were extinguished and the union took place in the darkness and in the agonized expectation of those present. When the Hierophant appeared, he exclaimed “The divine strong gave birth to the strong, the sacred child”, which was Ploutos (“Wealth”). Finally, the Hierophant showed the sacred objects, when he left the “palace” in broad daylight. From this demonstration of the “Priests”, he took the name Hierophant.

b) The Supervision was the last degree of initiation. According to it, certain sacred objects were revealed to the Initiates, one year after the previous degree of initiation, which they viewed silently and in meditation. We do not know what these were. Probably the “sacred ear of corn”. According to some scholars, the supervision took place on the second night of the Initiates’ stay in Eleusis, after all those who had not been prepared had left.

On the seventh day in the evening, the Events ended. The “supervision” took place, i.e., the third and final stage of initiation into the Eleusinian worship. Only believers who had been initiated at least a year before could take part in this. The eighth day was dedicated to libations and honors for the dead. Each Initiate filled two special vessels, known as “plemochoai”, with liquid, and placed them so that one faced east and the other west. Then he would turn them over and pour the liquid into a gap in the earth. From these vessels, this day was called “plemochoai” libations, in honor of the dead. The rest of the day was covered by dances and songs. On the ninth day, the Athenian and other Greek Initiates returned to Athens in peace, having secured a happy afterlife. This was done again via the Sacred Road, but this time there was no organized procession, but smaller groups. The Initiates returned to the normal rhythm of life, with experiences that would help them become more pious, more just and better persons.

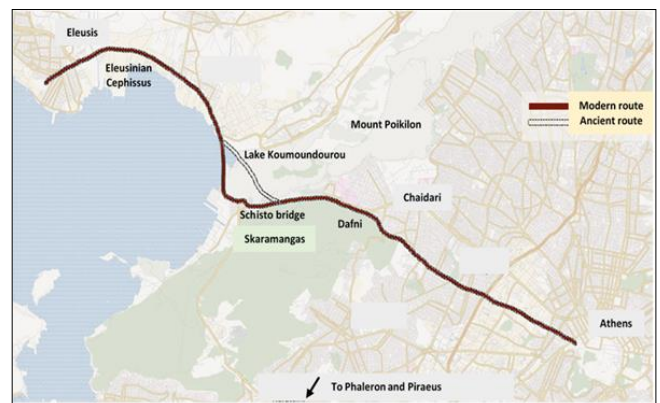
The Sacred Road

The Sacred Road was the important road that connected Eleusis with Athens (Fig. 3). It started from the Sacred Gate of the Athenian wall in the Kerameikos area. It ended at the sanctuary of Demeter and her daughter Persephone in Eleusis. It is made of small, unhewn stones “set” into the hard soil. Its length was 19 kilometers and its width does not exceed 5 meters. At the entrance to the Sanctuary of Demeter it is approximately 5.5 meters wide. Its width is defined by “relief” walls, that is, walls of low height built with one side of the roadway wider than the other.



Fig 3: A preserved section of the ancient Sacred Road near the Schisto bridge [5]

The excavator Ioannis Travlos [6] describes the constructional features of the Sacred Road: “Its width (...) is limited on both sides by stones deliberately placed, which protrude half above the ground. Where the ground was soft, it was replaced by a filling of small stones and soil, and on the surface of this filling it appears that slab-like stones of medium size were placed, which constituted the ground of the road”. On rocky slopes, such as the hill of Echo (presently Kapsalona Hill, to the northeastern foothills of Mount Poikilon, west of the Upper Forest of Chaidari and north of the district of Dafni, see Fig. 4), there were carvings or rockfalls in order to mark the course of the road, while on the slopes the road was supported by built retaining walls. In sandy areas, such as around Lake Koumoundourou, the substrate consisted of small stones and soil. Nowadays, only a small part of its ancient route is visible (see Fig. 4, white line), since the rest coincides with its modern route (see Fig. 4, red line), covered so beneath.



(Source: Google map processed by the authors)

Fig 4: The Sacred Road on the map

The Sacred Road was named after the cult procession. During the Eleusinian Mysteries, the procession of the initiates passed through this ancient road to Eleusis. In antiquity, every sacred road connected a city with a large regional sanctuary. Along the ancient road there were stone landmarks at regular intervals, indicating the distance from the city of Athens, outdoor sanctuaries, altars, gardens, fruit trees, funerary monuments, numerous cemeteries and tombs with important finds (statues, figurines, vases, etc.). The Athenians used to bury their dead outside the walls, since there was an old law that prohibited the establishment of cemeteries in inhabited areas and that was re-enacted

immediately after the construction of the Themistocleian Wall (478 BCE). For cemeteries, therefore, nearby areas around the city were chosen, so that the relatives of the deceased could easily travel there, for the necessary rituals and offerings. Furthermore, the Athenians wanted their tombs, especially the most monumental ones, to be in plain sight, in areas with increased traffic and along busy roads. In this way, everyone could perceive how much the deceased was honored by his/her family, but also the financial status of the latter. In this light, it goes without saying that the areas along the busy Sacred Road were particularly popular burial places, tangible proof of this being the numerous funerary monuments ^[5, 7].

About one kilometer east of the entrance to the Sanctuary of Demeter in Eleusis, at the point where the Sacred Road met the bed of the Eleusinian Cephissus, an ancient bridge survives, a four-arch one with a length of 50.00 m and a width of 5.30 m (Fig. 5).



Fig 5: The ancient bridge of the Eleusinian Cephissus ^[8]

The bed below the bridge is paved with large rectangular slabs of Eleusinian stone, so that the foundations of the bridge are more durable. Most likely, these slabs came from older buildings of the Eleusinian sanctuary. The points where the bridge rests on the banks of the river were reinforced with strong sloping retaining walls, in order to prevent their collapse due to a possible flash flood. Before this bridge, there would have been some other wooden or stone structure. It consists of a central section, the main bridge (30.00 m long) and two inclined approaches on either side of 10.00 m long each. The main bridge consists of four arches. The two extreme ones are narrower than the two central ones, which are supported by three strong pillars, founded on the stream bed. The river bed at the point of construction of the bridge was paved with large rectangular blocks. The bridge was built of well-hewn Piraeus limestone. It is an excellent example of Roman bridge construction. It was dated, based on written sources to the time of the Roman Emperor Hadrian and was more precisely associated with the year of his initiation into the Mysteries (125 CE). Before this, it is assumed that there was some other wooden or stone structure. The bridge is known for the “bridgings” teasing between the people of the procession of the Mysteries ^[5, 7].

The Sacred Road was also an important trade route that connected Athens with the Peloponnese and central Greece. As mentioned earlier, it ended at the Sanctuary of Demeter in Eleusis.

Conclusion

Eleusis had been known to the Greco-Roman world for the Eleusinian Mysteries and their connection with the religious myth of goddess Demeter and her daughter Persephone. It was one of the most important sacred cities of antiquity for more than a thousand years, leaving nowadays an internationally well-known cultural heritage.

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