

# THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES AND THE BEE

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**T**he fifth century BCE Greek historian Herodotus relates the importance of bees in ancient Greece, pointing out that the honey of neighboring countries was made using fruit, while the honey of the Greeks was produced by bees.<sup>1</sup> The significance of this difference lies in that, to the Greeks of that time period, bees were considered to be divine insects, and were revered in their myths and rituals.<sup>2</sup> Among the most celebrated of these myths was the story of the fertility goddess Demeter and her daughter Persephone. Demeter restores her gift of fruit and grain to the earth, but she also gives a greater gift to humans—the Mysteries.<sup>3</sup>

The Eleusinian Mysteries were an initiatory tradition that played an important role in the lives of those who experienced it.<sup>4</sup> In these rites, the initiates, known as *mystai*, were led on a procession toward Eleusis by the priests and priestesses of Demeter.<sup>5</sup> This was a symbolic initiatic journey in which they purified themselves in preparation to ceremonially return Persephone from the underworld and take part in other sacred acts.<sup>6</sup> As in the wider Greek culture, the bee symbolized divine concepts of life and death, so in the Mysteries and other traditions it took on the connotation of initiatic death and rebirth: that is, of personal regeneration and transformation.<sup>7</sup>

## Myth of Demeter

As a fertility goddess, Demeter brought life to plants and crops, just as bees do. Her mother was Rhea, the daughter of Gaia, goddess of earth.<sup>8</sup> In the myth, the underworld god Hades desires to marry Persephone. He seeks and is granted permission for the union from her father

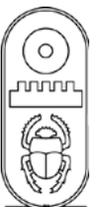
Zeus. Then, while Persephone wandered with her friends the nymphs in earthly fields gathering flowers, Hades arrives on a golden chariot, snatches her up, and rides back down with her into the underworld.

When Demeter cannot find her daughter, she discovers what has occurred—all without her permission—and becomes furious with the gods and goddesses for allowing it. After all, the ultimate implication of the marriage to Hades was that Persephone would dwell forever in the underworld. So Demeter disassociates herself from the divine world, and in her wrath and grief even stops nurturing the plants of the earth, with devastating effects for humanity.

In hopes of restoring the natural order of life, Zeus convinces Hades to release Persephone from the underworld. However, before Hades lets Persephone go, he feeds her a honeyed pomegranate seed, magically binding her to the underworld. Thus she would ever after return to the underworld



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Rape of Persephone*, ca. 1632, Berlin.



for one-third of the year—considered to be the winter and barren months.<sup>9</sup>

### A Hittite Parallel

The myth of Demeter is similar to an older Indo-European myth about a mother goddess named Hannahanna and her bee. The myth is preserved in fragments of ancient Hittite texts and concerns a vegetation god, named Telepinu, who has disappeared and taken all of life with him. While he is missing fires are extinguished, grain is fallow, springs run dry, and humanity and the gods alike are doomed to perish. So the gods try to find Telepinu in hopes of restoring life.

The sun god sends out an eagle, but it cannot find Telepinu. Then the storm god fails in another attempt. Finally, the mother goddess Hannahanna sends out a bee. The bee finds Telepinu lying asleep in a meadow and stings him. Upon being awakened in this manner, Telepinu is furious, and in his rage he floods rivers and causes earthquakes. By doing so the bee caused Telepinu's presence to be felt on earth—again restoring life to a natural state.<sup>10</sup>

The agricultural aspect of the Eleusinian Mysteries can be found in the rebirth of newly sprouting seeds from the old grain that has been cast upon the earth for seeds.<sup>11</sup>



Golden Anatolian Bee.



Persephone is a symbol of the seed that must go into the earth, and with a seeming death give birth to new generation.



Eleusis is a site where it was said the first grain was planted, and the rites took place every year during the harvest months of September and early October.<sup>12</sup> In the Greek myth it is Rhea, the mother goddess, who convinces Demeter to cause seed to grow beneath the earth again, and restore life to earth.<sup>13</sup> “Persephone is a symbol of the seed that must go into the earth, and with a seeming death give birth to new generation.”<sup>14</sup>

### The Temple of Artemis and the Priestesses of Eleusis

Guarding the outer entrance of the sacred precinct of Eleusis stood the temple of the goddess Artemis. When the mystai arrived, they rested outside the temple walls and paid their reverence to the goddess.<sup>15</sup> Artemis is an Indo-European goddess of life and fertility, who survived in ancient Greek culture as a moon goddess. Artemis was highly associated with bees, as beekeeping and agriculture were very ancient and vital crafts in Western Asia and Crete. Many artifacts depicting small metal bees have been found in places where Artemis was worshiped.<sup>16</sup>

Phoenician historian Porphyry (234–305 CE) states that the ancient Greeks referred to Artemis by the name *Bee*, and that the soul was conceived as coming down from her in the form of bees.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the connection between Artemis and the bee resulted in the adoption of bees as symbolic creatures of the underworld. Consistent with this, classicist A.B. Cook held that the metal bees were votive sacrifices symbolizing the divine soul.<sup>18</sup>

Persephone's nickname among the ancient Greeks was *Melitodes* or "the honeyed one," and the priestesses of Persephone and Demeter were known as *Melissai* or "bees."<sup>19</sup> There is evidence that an exalted priestess of Demeter lived at Eleusis in a dwelling known as "the sacred house." She served for life, and the years at Eleusis were dated by her name. In the sacred plays at Eleusis, the priestess of Demeter played the roles of Demeter and Persephone.<sup>20</sup>

There is an ancient myth from Corinth that tells of an elderly priestess of Demeter, named *Melissa*, or Bee, who was initiated into the mysteries by the goddess herself. Other women pressed her for secrets, but she steadfastly refused. These women became so infuriated by her secrecy that they murdered her. This enraged Demeter, who punished the women with plagues and caused bees to fly out of Melissa's body, symbolizing the soul.<sup>21</sup>

Beside the temple of Artemis there was found a sacrificial hearth, where initiates would leave presents for the *chthonian* deities, "the gods and goddess of the underworld."<sup>22</sup> There were other priestesses at Eleusis, whose duties are not completely known. However, a document has survived from one of them, and describes her duty as a torchbearer who stood guard near the doors of Demeter and Persephone. There were also priestesses known as *Panageis*, or "all holy ones," who were allowed to touch the sacred temple objects, known as the *hiera*, and likely traveled with them during the procession.<sup>23</sup>

### The Temple of Hades and the Underworld

The next action of the initiates was to cross through the pylon and enter the temple complex. The *mystai* would explore the grounds where they would discover a temple to Hades erected inside a cave.<sup>24</sup> To the ancient Greeks, a cave was seen as a gateway into the divine world.<sup>25</sup> They dedicated their caves to the gods and goddesses long

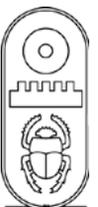
before temples were erected to them.<sup>26</sup> Caves were also commonly dedicated to nymphs, especially to the water nymphs, such as the nymphs Persephone was with when she was abducted into the underworld. It was thought that the home of these water nymphs was in the primordial waters of the cave, and that they watched over the death and regeneration of souls.<sup>27</sup>



Minoan golden bee. Photo © 2001 by Andree Stephan.

The water nymphs are sometimes called *bees*, since bees were seen as fresh incarnations of the soul.<sup>28</sup> Wild bees live mostly under stones, in the clefts of rocks and caves, and within hollowed-out trees.<sup>29</sup> Porphyry states:

*All souls, however, proceeding into generation, are not simply called bees, but those who will live justly, and who, after having preformed such things as are acceptable to the gods, will again return [to their kindred stars]. For this insect loves to return to the place from whence it first came, and is eminently just and sober...therefore we must admit that honeycombs and bees are appropriate and common symbols of the aquatic nymphs, and of souls that are married [as it were] to [the humid and fluctuating nature of] generation.*<sup>30</sup>





Bees of Malia, two bees heraldically arranged around a honeycomb (or a honeycake). Minoan artwork, 1700–1550 BCE. Gold pendant with appliqué decoration and granulation. Excavated by the French from the Chrysolakkos necropolis in Mallia, Crete, now in the Archaeological Museum of Herakleion. Photo © 2009 by Wolfgang Sauber.

The fact that the ancient Greeks used honey in their rituals most likely is a survival from primitive society when wine was unknown. Honey was a constant ingredient in libations and rituals to the dead.<sup>31</sup> Porphyry states that honey was a symbol of death, and for that reason it was usual to offer libations of honey to the divinities of the underworld.<sup>32</sup> In ancient Greek ritual a tradition of using honey can be found that dates back to prehistoric times when the only intoxicating drink was mead (fermented honey). The Greek historian Plutarch (46–120 CE) writes, “Mead was used as a libation before the cultivation of the vine, and even now those...who do not drink wine have a honey drink.”<sup>33</sup>

Porphyry also states that “Ancient sacrifices were for the most part performed with sobriety...in which libations were made with water. Afterwards, however, libations were made with honey, for we first received this liquid prepared for us by the bees.” Sober offerings were called *nephalia*. These *nephalia* continued to be performed after prehistoric times and even after wine was cultivated.<sup>34</sup>

Pausanias (ca. 2 CE) writes, “Once a month [people] offered to the gods; they sacrifice after an ancient fashion, for they

burn on the altar frankincense together with the wheat which has been kneaded with honey...only to the nymphs and the mistresses do they not pour wine.”<sup>35</sup> It is noted that the pitchers that were carried in the procession to Eleusis did not hold wine.<sup>36</sup> In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Demeter also refuses to take wine, and creates her own drink called *kykeon*, which means “the concoction” or “mixture.” After drinking the *kykeon*, the *mystai* soon felt the profound effects of the Eleusinian Mysteries as they made their way into the main temple, which was called the *Telesterion*, or “place of initiation.”<sup>37</sup>

### The Greater Mysteries in the Telesterion

At the *Telesterion* the *mystai* would become true initiates into the secret ceremony of the Greater Mysteries.<sup>38</sup> In the center of the temple there was a rectangular-shaped stone construction known as the *anaktoron*, which represented a symbolic door to the underworld. Although there is no direct evidence of what these rites entailed, scholars suggest that during the initiation rite, the temple would be shrouded in darkness except for a fire burning on the *anaktoron* and some torches carried by the priests and priestesses. In a blinding flash of light the door on the *anaktoron* would open, revealing the high priest of Eleusis, known as the hierophant, literally “the one who displays divine things.”<sup>39</sup> To the sound of a gong, he would begin summoning Persephone from the underworld. Demeter and Persephone are ritually reunited, and then the hierophant announces the birth of Persephone’s son, Brimos (considered by most scholars to be Dionysus).<sup>40</sup>

At the conclusion of the ceremony, the *mystai* would perform a libation to the dead. It is said that each initiate filled two vessels known as *plemochoai*; facing one to the east and one to the west, they would turn them upside down, pouring the libations into the earth.<sup>41</sup> During this libation it is probable

that the initiate gained a different outlook or perspective concerning the underworld. During the Eleusinian Mysteries the mystai learned about the mysteries of rebirth.<sup>42</sup> The Eleusinian Mysteries removed the feeling of terror concerning death and promised a happier fate in the underworld.<sup>43</sup> It is said in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* that the initiates were blessed to have seen what they have seen, and that anyone who dies without being initiated into the mysteries will have no blessings in the afterlife.<sup>44</sup>

The mysteries never promised the mystai immortality. However, after being initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries, death would be reborn and would no longer be a dark thing.<sup>45</sup> In the Eleusinian mysteries, as Porphyry taught, “[Wrath] is considered as a symbol of life, that the life of the soul dies through pleasure, but through bitterness the soul resumes its life, whence also, [bitterness] is sacrificed to the gods, or whether it is, because death liberates from molestation, but the present life is laborious and bitter.” That is, after the initiation there was an understanding that all the suffering and trials we go through in life can be transformed into something good, something greater.<sup>46</sup>

The fifth century CE Greek writer Zosimos called the Eleusinian Mysteries “sacred mysteries, which hold the whole human race together.”<sup>47</sup> Cicero wrote about

the important lessons that come from the Eleusinian Mysteries. In his treatise, *On the Laws*, he wrote: “We have been given a reason, not only to live in joy, but also to die with better hope.”

## Conclusion

Whether we consider the gathering of pollen by bees and the subsequent production of honey within a hive, or the communal gathering of initiatic wisdom by the ancients at Eleusis, we observe a powerful symbol for the distillation of spiritual energy. Partaking of this energy is transformative, leading to psychological and spiritual regeneration. The goddess, the priestess, and their sister the bee unite as emblems for this vital human activity—one that leaves us pure, ever-new, and reborn.

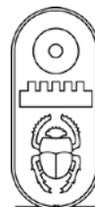
The Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem each year wears Eleusinian robes to light candles in the Holy Sepulchre at Easter, with no normal source of fire. This is the Divine Service of Fire in Jerusalem.



Robert Fludd, *Rose and Cross* from *Summum Bonum*, 1629. “The Rose gives Honey to the Bees.”

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1.193, 4.194, 7.31.
- <sup>2</sup> A.B. Cook, “The Bee in Greek Mythology,” *The Journal for Hellenistic Studies* 15 (1985), 23.
- <sup>3</sup> Carl Kerényi, *Eleusis, Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 13; cf. the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 4, 16.
- <sup>5</sup> George Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 245.



- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., 247–258.
- <sup>7</sup> For an extensive critical treatment detailing these Greek traditions, see Cook, “Bee in Greek Mythology”. For a worldwide treatment see Hilda M. Ransome, *The Sacred Bee in Ancient Times and Folklore* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004).
- <sup>8</sup> Kerényi, *Eleusis*, 29; Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 287.
- <sup>9</sup> Kerényi, *Eleusis*, 13; *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*.
- <sup>10</sup> Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 123, 124, 126.
- <sup>11</sup> M.P. Nilsson, *A History of Greek Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), 211.
- <sup>12</sup> Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 243; R. Gordon Wasson, Albert Hofmann, and Carl A.P. Ruck, *The Road to Eleusis: Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries* (Los Angeles: Hermes Book Press, 1998), 85.
- <sup>13</sup> Kerényi, *Eleusis*, 44.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 160.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., 70; Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 167-169.
- <sup>16</sup> Cook, “Bee in Greek Mythology,” 11-13.
- <sup>17</sup> Porphyry, *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, trans. Thomas Taylor (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1991), 41.
- <sup>18</sup> Cook, “Bee in Greek Mythology,” 13, 19.
- <sup>19</sup> Porphyry, *Cave of Nymphs*, 41; Melissae are Priestesses of Persephone and Demeter; see Cook, “Bee in Greek Mythology,” 15.
- <sup>20</sup> Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 171, 231-232, 310; Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 285, 286.
- <sup>21</sup> Servius in commenting on Virgil (Pausanias *Serv. Verg., Aeneid* 1.43); Cook, “Bee in Greek Mythology,” 14, 10, 19.
- <sup>22</sup> Kerényi, *Eleusis*, 70.
- <sup>23</sup> Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 231-232.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., 99, 146.
- <sup>25</sup> Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 24; Porphyry, *Cave of Nymphs*, 27, 31.
- <sup>26</sup> Porphyry, *Cave of Nymphs*, 42.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., 32.
- <sup>28</sup> Cook, “Bee in Greek Mythology,” 11.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., 17-18.
- <sup>30</sup> Porphyry, *Cave of Nymphs*, 42.
- <sup>31</sup> Cook, “Bee in Greek Mythology,” 21-22.
- <sup>32</sup> Porphyry, *Cave of Nymphs*, 42.
- <sup>33</sup> Plutarch, *Banquet of the Seven Wise Men*, 106.
- <sup>34</sup> Porphyry, *De Abstinencia*, 2.20.
- <sup>35</sup> Pausanias 5.15, 10.
- <sup>36</sup> Kerényi, *Eleusis*, 65.
- <sup>37</sup> H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 1770.
- <sup>38</sup> Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 225-226.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., 228.
- <sup>40</sup> Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 287-288.
- <sup>41</sup> Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 279.
- <sup>42</sup> Wasson, Hofmann, and Ruck; *Road to Eleusis*; 85.
- <sup>43</sup> Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 289.
- <sup>44</sup> *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 480–84.
- <sup>45</sup> Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 289.
- <sup>46</sup> Porphyry, *Cave of Nymphs*, 42.
- <sup>47</sup> Kerényi, *Eleusis*, 12.

Marcus Aurelius was initiated in 176 CE and received unprecedented honors. He was made a “Stone Bearer” and although he was not a Hierophant or even a member of the Eumopid family, he was allowed to enter the Anaktoron, the only lay person ever admitted in that sanctum in the long history of Eleusis.

– George Mylonas