

# THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES AND OTHER MYSTERY RELIGIONS

*Jeremy Naydler, Ph.D.*

From *Shamanic Wisdom in the Pyramid Texts*, by Jeremy Naydler, Inner Traditions, Rochester, Vermont, ©2005, Inner Traditions/Bear & Co., [www.InnerTraditions.com](http://www.InnerTraditions.com)

**T**he Eleusinian mysteries were celebrated from at least the eighth century B.C. at Eleusis, near Athens, and continued into the Hellenistic period. While there is some reason to believe that they were established at a much earlier date—in the second half of the fifteenth century B.C.—and that their origin was Egyptian, neither an earlier dating nor an Egyptian origin is accepted by the majority of scholars today, for lack of firm evidence. Nevertheless, the possibility of an earlier Egyptian origin of the Eleusinian mysteries should not be dismissed out of hand, and there are some who have no difficulty with this view.<sup>1</sup> But whether or not they had an Egyptian origin is a side issue to the present argument. Eleusis was just one of many mystery centers that flourished throughout the Greek and Greco-Roman world.

Like the other mystery religions that were constellated around the cult of a certain god or goddess, the Eleusinian mysteries were based upon the myth and cult of Demeter and her daughter Persephone. The key event of this myth is Persephone's abduction by Hades, the god of the Underworld, and her eventual release from the clutches of Hades and restoration to her mother and the Upperworld. The birth of a divine child seems also to have been a crucial event. In other words, the central themes of the myth are of Persephone's death and resurrection, and the birth of a new "principle" in the form of a divine child.<sup>2</sup>

The rites celebrated at Eleusis fell into three parts.<sup>3</sup> The "lesser mysteries" were



Bronze Osiris Images, 525-332 BCE. The God Osiris was dismembered by Set and then raised from the dead by his wife Isis, and together with their son Horus are the focus of the very early Osirian Mysteries of Egypt. From the Collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum.

celebrated in spring and their purpose was mainly instructional and purificatory. The "greater mysteries" occurred the following autumn and lasted nine days, during which time candidates experienced a reenactment of the myth of Persephone's descent into, and release from, the Underworld, and the birth of the divine child, announced by the hierophant. From the accounts that have come down to us, it is clear that the mysteries were intensively participated in, and the candidates (*mystai*) felt inwardly

identified with Persephone. Finally, a full year later, came the highest level of initiation, the *epopteia* or “vision,” which led to the second grade of initiate that Plato mentions, the *epoptai*.

While the broad course of events that took place at Eleusis is fairly well known, much less is known of the details of what actually occurred in the mysteries, because the initiates were sworn to secrecy. We do know, however, from Aristotle, that what happened to the initiates was not that they gained some kind of intellectual understanding, but rather that they had a transformative experience that had a strong emotive charge. Aristotle writes that initiates were “not expected to learn something but to experience emotions and a change in the state of mind (*diatethenai*).”<sup>4</sup> From other ancient writers we have cryptic statements indicating that participation in the mysteries conferred on the initiates a blessing that set them apart from the uninitiated, particularly in a changed



Iron Isis Finial, 525-332 BCE. Finials were the tops of staves used in Temple Processions to mark the location of important officials. The Isis Mysteries spread throughout the Mediterranean and became the most widespread mystery tradition of the Egyptian-Greco-Roman world. From the Collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum.

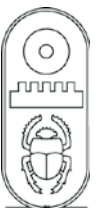
~~~~~  
The central themes  
of the myth are of  
Persephone’s death  
and resurrection, and  
the birth of a new  
*principle* in the form  
of a divine child.  
~~~~~

attitude toward death. For example, Pindar, Sophocles, Isocrates, and the anonymous *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* all confirm that people initiated into the mysteries felt that they had a quite different relationship to death from the uninitiated. They no longer feared death, but looked forward to it as the beginning of a new life.<sup>5</sup>

We have already seen that Plato implies that the initiate experienced in initiation something similar to what would otherwise be experienced after death: a sublime mystic vision. To this we may add a corroboratory statement of Plutarch: “The soul at the point of death has the same experience as those who are being initiated in great mysteries.”<sup>6</sup> Plutarch was referring to either the Eleusinian mysteries or the Hellenistic mysteries of Isis, probably both.

### A Beatific Vision

While some scholars have been very cautious in making any pronouncement as to what actually occurred in the initiations at Eleusis, others have been more willing to follow through the implications of the various testimonies that have come down to us. According to Carl Kerényi, the climax of the Eleusinian mystery rites was a “beatific vision” comparable to the medieval Christian mystical *visio beatifica*.<sup>7</sup> It was, that is to say, a “mystical seeing” that conferred upon the initiate a certain beatitude. Walter Burkert has suggested that of the “things





environment or by bodily incarnation. For both Plato and the mystery religions that we have been considering, it is clear that it was regarded as possible for people, *while still alive*, to enter a state of consciousness in which the soul becomes separated from the body for a short period. During this period of separation, people could have profound experiences that they would not otherwise have until they died, the most important of which was an intense realization that there is an element in their nature that is immortal.

This understanding of the relationship between a certain type of visionary mystical experience and what is experienced at death is well attested to in the shamanic tradition too.<sup>11</sup> And we have already seen that it was central to the Hermetic tradition. There is compelling evidence that various Greco-Roman and Hellenistic mystery cults all shared the same perspective.<sup>12</sup>

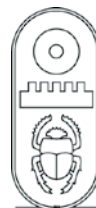
It is highly probable that more than a thousand years earlier in ancient Mesopotamia a similar initiatory encounter with death was central to the Akitu, or New Year festival. During this festival, the death and resurrection of the god Marduk were reenacted. He descended into the Underworld and was mourned for three days before he rose again triumphantly. The role of Marduk was taken by the king, who was ritually disrobed and “confined in the mountain”—the ziggurat—for the prescribed length of time, and then liberated to the jubilation of the gathered crowds.<sup>13</sup>

Here, then, we seem to have a mystery rite that in essential respects, both mythological and experiential, parallels the Greek and Hellenistic mystery rites. Where it differs from the Greek and Hellenistic models is that apparently only one person, the king, went through the experience of death and resurrection on behalf of the whole community. Given the over-all context of the Akitu, which means literally “power making the world live again,” it is likely that what the king underwent, and later on in the festival enacted in the Sacred Marriage Rite, was felt to affect the whole country and its populace.<sup>14</sup> In this respect, the affects of the Akitu bear comparison with certain passages in the Pyramid Texts that indicate that through the king’s transformation and rebirth, the land of Egypt was renewed, the grass was made green, and the fields became fertile.<sup>15</sup>

These considerations should cause us to approach the ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts with an awareness that, although they appear concerned with the fate of the soul after death, they may belong to a similar mystical tradition to the Mesopotamian Akitu, and that the experiences the pharaoh underwent were regarded as benefiting the whole country. According to this mystical tradition, in crossing the threshold that separates the world of the living from the realm of the dead, a connection was made with the vitalizing energies that are mediated by the dead into the world of the living.



The Great Ziggurat was built as a place of worship, dedicated to the moon god Nanna in the Sumerian city of Ur in ancient Mesopotamia. Today, after more than 4000 years, the ziggurat is still well preserved in large parts as the only major remainder of Ur in present-day southern Iraq. Photo by Cherie A. Thurlby.







Ruins of the Osireion at Abydos, site of the ancient Mysteries of Osiris. Photo © 2004 by AntiguogEgipto.

The fact that the mystical “near-death” experience appears to have been central not only in the mystery rites of Greek and Hellenistic times but also in ancient Mesopotamia clearly weakens the argument of Morenz, Hornung, Assmann, and others discussed at the beginning of this chapter that implies that such rites were a post-pharaonic development, for the Mesopotamian Akitu goes back to the third millennium B.C., was already well established at the time of the Egyptian Middle Kingdom, and probably dates back to before that period.<sup>16</sup>

If we find these rites in Mesopotamia, then the likelihood that something similar also existed in ancient Egypt is considerably increased. There is, however, a good deal of evidence to suggest that this same understanding and ritual practice flourished in many other ancient cultures contemporaneous with pharaonic Egypt, such as the Minoan, Ugaritic, Hittite, and so on.<sup>17</sup>

Against such a background, it would seem odd if in Egypt similar mystery rites and initiations did not take place, especially given the enormous significance that the religious life had for the Egyptians and the reputation of Egypt throughout the ancient world for being a fount of esoteric wisdom. We therefore need to look further into whether the reasoning of Egyptologists who refuse to accept that a comparable mystical tradition existed in ancient Egypt is as compelling as at first sight it may seem.

## ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> For a thoroughly researched case for the Egyptian origin of the Eleusinian mysteries, see P. Foucart, *Les Mystères d'Éleusis* (Paris: A. Picard, 1914), part I and especially chap. 1. See also Bernal, *Black Athena* 1:69, who comments:

*The late 15th century was a period of great Egyptian power after the conquests of Tuthmosis III, and one in which the mystery cults of Isis and Osiris seem to have been well established in Egypt and the Levant. Since Egyptian faience plaques of the type placed under the corners of temples have been found at Mycenae dated to the reign of Amenophis III (1405-1367), I have no difficulty in accepting the possibility that the Eleusinian cult of Archaic Greece was the descendant of an Egyptian foundation made there 700 years earlier.*

Against the derivation of the Eleusinian cult from Egypt is the lack of any object or artifact of Egyptian origin in either the sanctuary or a nearby cemetery dating from the second millennium. See C. Picard, “Sur la patrie et les pérégrinations de Déméter,” in *Revue des Études Grecques* 40 (1927): 320-69, and G. Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961). However, see also Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 20f., for Egyptian influence on the Eleusinian cult.

<sup>2</sup> C. Kerényi, *Eleusis*, trans. R. Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 93; Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, 111. For the divine child, see W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 288.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account of the Eleusinian rites, see Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries*, chap. 9. See also Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 285ff.; Eliade, *History of Religious Ideas*, 1:294ff.; and Kerényi, *Eleusis*, chaps. 3 and 4.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle fr. 15 (Rose), trans. in Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 89.

<sup>5</sup> For the statements of Pindar, Sophocles, and Isocrates and the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, see Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 289. For further ancient testimonies on the effects of the Eleusinian mysteries on those participating, see Kerényi, *Eleusis*, 13-16.

<sup>6</sup> Plutarch fr. 168 (Sanbach). The same statement is wrongly attributed by Stobaeus to Themistios. See Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 162, n. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Kerényi, *Eleusis*, 95-102.

<sup>8</sup> Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 21.

<sup>9</sup> Cicero, *De Legibus*, 2.36, quoted in Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 21.

<sup>10</sup> Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, trans. Robert Graves (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1950), 285-86.

<sup>11</sup> Eliade, *Shamanism*, chap. 2. For the shamanic underpinnings of Plato's philosophy, see Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, 210. For shamanic themes in the Eleusinian and Hellenistic mysteries, see Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, 109-15.

<sup>12</sup> Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, 112-13. A particularly telling example is the inscribed gold plate found at Hipponium in 1969, similar to many gold plates placed in graves in Crete, Thessaly, and southern Italy dating from around 400 B.C. These gold plates give detailed descriptions of what the dead person should expect to experience in the journey into the Underworld. The 1969 discovery, however, presents exactly the same information in an explicit context of initiation into the Bacchic mysteries. See P. Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Myth and Magic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 259. According to Kingsley, it is possible that the gold-plate tradition has Egyptian origins (264). For further sources, see also chapter 3, n. 11.

<sup>13</sup> S. A. Pallis, *The Babylonian Akitu Festival* (Kobenhavn: Hovedkommissionær: A. F. Host, 1926), 249. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, 315 and 321 ff., contrary to Pallis, does not accept that the death of the god was enacted by the king, because no proof of the enactment exists. Yet the evidence of the major role of the king in the rites immediately before and immediately after the god's "confinement in the mountain" is incontrovertible. As Eliade points out, insofar as the Mesopotamian kings incarnated the god in the Sacred Marriage Rite that took place after the god's "confinement in the mountain," it is only reasonable to suppose that they also went through the "confinement." See Eliade, *History of Religious Ideas*, 1:64-66.

<sup>14</sup> Eliade, *History of Religious Ideas*, 1:74.

<sup>15</sup> Pyramid Texts, utt. 317. In certain utterances, the king lives in the trees and fruits and scents of the earth. See Utts. 403 and 409. See also Jacq, *La tradition primordiale*, 24.

<sup>16</sup> The Babylonian New Year festival was modeled on much earlier Sumerian rites. There is good reason to believe that an early version of the Akitu was already well established by the twenty-first century B.C. (Third Dynasty of Ur). See T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 124; also N. K. Sandars, *Poems of Heaven and Hell from Ancient Mesopotamia* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 44ff.

<sup>17</sup> For ancient Minoan mystery rites (second millennium B.C.) and their relationship to the Eleusinian mysteries, see J. Harrison, *Prolegomena to*

*the Study of Greek Religion* (London: Merlin Press, 1962), 564-67. Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, trans. C. H. Oldfather et al., Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, 1933-67), 5.64 and 5.77, states that whereas the Greeks performed their rites of initiation secretly, the Cretans did so openly. For the Ugaritic myth of Baal and Mot, closely paralleling the initiatory Mesopotamian descent myths, see S. H. Hooke, *Middle Eastern Mythology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), 84ff. For the Hittite version, see 100ff. in the same book.

*Jung suggested that  
the Eleusinian Mysteries  
were an individuation  
machine, which created  
individuals, who like  
shamans, journey to  
another plane.*

