The philosopher Democritus once said: "A life without festivals is like a road without inns" (B 230), but there can be little doubt that among all the Greek festivals it is the Eleusinian Mysteries that most intrigues the modern public. It is the aim of this contribution to take a fresh look at this festival during the height of the Athenian empire, the later fifth century B.C. Unlike older studies, the most recent detailed analyses, those by Walter Burkert and Robert Parker, have given up on a linear reconstruction of the ritual. Yet there is something unsatisfactory in such an approach, as it prevents us from having a proper view of the course of the ritual and appreciating its logic. Ideally, we should reconstruct a linear “thick description” (to use the famous term of the late Clifford Geertz [1926–2006]) of the experience of the average initiate, mystês, but we are prevented from doing so by the fact that our main and rather scanty literary information is from Christian authors, who often wanted to defame the ritual, and, in some cases, lived 600–700 hundred years after Athens’ heyday. For these
reasons, our account will be “thin” rather than “thick” and, moreover, tentative rather than assured. In fact, almost all analyses of ancient festivals are no more than probable, ahistorical scripts or templates, as we cannot get to the original performances, and thus have to confine ourselves to static outlines of festivals, however unsatisfactory that may be. This is certainly true for the Eleusinian Mysteries, as it is highly improbable that this festival would have stayed completely unchanged during a whole millennium. Yet it is characteristic for our dearth of sources that we cannot point to any changes in the ritual over the course of this period.

The Eleusinian Mysteries profoundly influenced all other Greek mysteries and are therefore an appropriate subject for a book on mysteries and secrecy. It is with pleasure that I dedicate this analysis to Einar Thomassen. I first met Einar during a symposium on “Myth and Symbol” organised by Synnøve des Bouvrie at the University of Tromsø in the midnight sun of 1998. We have since met in all kinds of places—ranging from Oslo, Groningen, Chicago, Malibu and Bergen to London and Volos—and those meetings have always been most stimulating and pleasurable experiences.

Let us start with the question regarding the identity of the average initiates. Unique for Greek festivals, the Mysteries were open to men and women, free and slaves, young and old, Greeks and non-Greeks. Yet not everybody could afford the Mysteries. Prospective initiates first had to complete a whole series of ritual acts, as we know from the Church Father Clement of Alexandria (about A.D. 200), who relates the following “password” of the initiates: “I fasted, I drank the kykeon (like Demeter in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter), I took from the hamper, after working I deposited in the basket and from the basket in the hamper.” Clearly, the meaning of these allusive acts is intentionally left obscure, but they could not have been part of the actual Mysteries, given that there was no time in the programme for a couple of thousand initiates to perform these acts

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5 Initiation of a slave was clearly a favor of a benevolent master: Theophilos F 1 Kassel-Austin (= KA).