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THE RELIGIOUS PREHISTORY OF DEMETER'S ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES

It has often been said that the Greek Mystery cults were unique and that their innermost secrets were well kept and buried with the long succession of initiates over a millennium and more. This was certainly true of the myth and ritual and of points of detail in ceremony and belief, but in general Greek Mystery cults shared some basic features with other religions and therefore belonged to an exceedingly old tradition which antedated the development of new religious concepts in the archaic Greek world. Behind the sophisticated Mysteries of the classical age there lay ideas which had been fundamental to religious thought from prehistoric times concerning the fertility of vegetation and nature in general under the protective guidance of a Nature or Mother goddess.

Within that framework great variety could exist from region to region, because, although the most successful cults like those of Samothrace and the Eleusinian Demeter spread their influence to other centres, in essence Mystery cults tended to be localised. In other words, despite common features between all these cults, each major centre had, as it were, something special to offer to ensure the loyalty of generations of worshippers. Also it is easy to overlook the important point that, shared origins apart, the sense of promise and otherworldliness which came to be incorporated in the fully developed Greek Mysteries could only flourish in an age that was receptive to their particular religious message. This meant the archaic age and especially the sixth century, for it provided the most fertile ground on which the Mystery cults could grow to their full potential and which laid the foundation of their tremendous influence in Hellenistic and Roman times. Success attracts other beliefs, cults and gods not all of whom need be too closely connected in function. In the case of the Greek Mysteries the most significant "contaminating" agent, so to speak, was the Orphic movement which is almost as difficult to define convincingly as the essential nature of the Mystery cults themselves. But it is generally believed that the Mysteries, those at Eleusis particularly, owed their moral and teleological dogmas to Orphism. But Orphic influence did not become significant before the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., that is from about
the same time that the Mystery cults began to claim their own large following. Hence the question arises whether the latter owed their prominence to their fusion with Orphic, that is moral and emotional, ideas, or themselves provided the Orphic movement with a firm basis for success. In the intensely religious climate of the age this is a difficult question to answer. However, it is as well to remember that Orphic religion drew from older ideas like that of a continued existence after death and of the divine nature of man.

Before attempting to separate old from new, inherited from acquired characteristics, one ought to establish whether there are any basic principles at all underlying Mystery rites and whether they might be explained in terms of what is known of prehistoric Aegean religious belief and practice. Again was there any common bond which united the gods central to the Mystery cults like Demeter, Persephone, Dionysus and other figures? It is useful to recall Plutarch’s distinctions for example between unchangeable (Olympian) gods and daemons, like Demeter and Dionysus, whose myths declare their sufferings. The thought and form of argument are classical and particularly Platonic of course but nevertheless revealing for our purposes since the myths of these daemons were at the heart of the Mysteries. Demeter and Dionysus remained unacceptable to the Homeric Olympian family precisely because their worship had continued on the basis of communion between the human and divine. And this feature, which was a distinguishing mark of Minoan/Mycenaean religion in the Bronze Age, is a noticeable characteristic of other gods connected in various aspects with the Mysteries, including Zeus himself. As far as our evidence goes, it does suggest that prehistoric Greek and Cretan worship inculcated the belief in man’s direct experience of the divine.

The Mysteries at Eleusis became the most influential in the Greek world. The site and surviving features of the cult speak for religious continuity from prehistoric times so that Eleusis constitutes a fine basis for discussion. The archaeological picture seems strong enough in the circumstances. There is in fact a gap in the material finds after L.H. IIIC and few traces survive of the oval or apsidal temple of the Geometric period directly above the Mycenaean sanctuary. But these breaks are accidental and insignificant in the face of the overall impression of continuity in the sacred area beginning with the so-called Mycenaean ‘‘Megaron B’’ which remained the centre of each successive temple throughout history. As one might expect, no artifacts survived from the Dark Age, but far more important is Herodotus’ report that