The Schedule of the Eleusinia

The place of the Eleusinia in the Athenian festival calendar has been a long-standing question. A century ago Stengel observed that we have no direct evidence. But in order to locate the celebration by indirect means, scholars have made the most of our epigraphical sources. By the end of the nineteenth century the possible date had been narrowed to the months Metageitnion or early Boedromion (August-September). For IG II² 1496.130 (IV BC) places the Eleusinia between the Panathenaia and the sacrifice to Demokratia, that is, between 28 Hekatombaion and 12 Boedromion. This season is consistent with schol. Pi. O. 9.150: the Eleusinia commemorated the grain harvest, hence in late summer. In the twentieth century, on the principle that the assembly did not meet on state festival days, Mikalson was able to eliminate early Boedromion, which shows too many assembly meetings to allow time for a major festival, and suggested that the longest time available was during 13-20 Metageitnion; Simms added that 5-8 Metageitnion also is possible.

Other testimonies are weaker but suggestive. The Tetrapolis sacrificial schedule IG II² 1358.ii.43 (Μεταγειτνιῶνος· Ἐλευσινίαι βὸς) has been taken as hinting that the Eleusinia occurred in Metageitnion, though a deme’s sacrifice to the ‘Eleusinian (goddess)’ need not have coincided with the state’s Eleusinia. The deme Erchia made a sacrifice to Demeter at the city Eleusinion on 12 Metageitnion, and Simms (1975, 270), observing that this was an assembly day, urged that this gesture makes the range 13-20 Metageitnion the more “apt” of the two possible periods in Metageitnion. Mikalson (1975, 40) noted too a private sacrifice to Demeter on 15 Metageitnion (IG II² 1367.1-3), which “may be a reflection” of the Eleusinia.

These arguments pointing to Metageitnion are thorough and compelling in themselves. But they are confirmed by a more direct testimony, and of an early

1) Stengel 1905, 2332; so also Healey 1965, 48.
2) Pfuhl 1900, 102; the question is surveyed by Klee 1918, 61-2; Kirchner ad IG II² 1496 (p. 101); Healey 1965, 28-51; Follet 1976, 329-31; Parker 2005, 468-9. Metageitnion or early Boedromion: e.g. Deubner 1932, 91; recently Parker 2005, 468; Petzl & Schwertheim 2006, 74.
3) I 301-2 Drachmann, ἀγεται δὲ ἐν Ἀθήναις μετὰ <τῆν> τῶν Δημητριακῶν καρπῶν συλλογὴν τῇ Δήμητρι εὐχαριστήρια; cf. Diod. 5.4.
4) Mikalson 1975, 40, 46; Simms 1975, 270 (“almost certainly” Metageitnion).
5) Pfuhl 1900, 102; Kirchner, IG II² p. 101; Simms 1975, 270.
6) SEG XXI 541.B.1-5.
date, that has been overlooked by students of the Eleusinia. Pindar, in an ode for the runner Xenophon of Corinth in 464 BC, praises as well Xenophon’s father Thessalos, also a runner, who in the course of a single month had won twice in one day at Delphi and three times in one day at Athens (O. 13.37-9):

Πυθοῖ τ’ ἔχει σταδίου τιμὰν διαύλου θ’ ἀλίῳ ἀμφ’ ἕνι, μηνὸς τε οἱ
τωῦτοι κραναιαὶ ἐν Λάνκαισι τρία ἔργα ποδαρκῆς
ἀμέρα θήκε κάλλιστ’ ἀμφὶ κόμαις.

‘At Pytho he has the honor of the stadion and the diaulos on a single day, and in the same month in rocky Athens a day of races placed around his hair three glorious achievements.’

‘In the same month’: this was recognized as a synchronism already by Joseph Scaliger, but Boeckh was still unable to name the months. By the late nineteenth century the calendars of Delphi and Athens had become known with sufficient precision. The Pythia occurred in the month Boukatios, and Boukatios at Delphi was Metageitnion at Athens.

The modern consensus about Pindar’s referent is that Thessalus competed in Athens at the Panathenaia. The Great Panathenaia in fact did fall in the Pythian year. This interpretation goes back to A. Mommsen, who held that the only possibility for Thessalos was the Panathenaia in Hekatombaion, so the Pythia on this occasion must have taken place a month earlier than normal, in Delphian Apelplaios. This exception has been variously justified, the most credible explanation being that an intercalary month in Athens pushed Hekatombaion and the Panathenaia one position later, so as to occur in the same lunar month as Boukatios and the Pythia.

I would urge that we do not need to assume an exceptional circumstance to account for Pindar’s statement. The consensus for the Panathenaia derives from a time before the date of the Eleusinia was known even approximately, and indeed before this festival with contests was recognized to be distinct from the Mysteries (14-21 Boedromion). If we maintain the equation Boukatios/Metageitnion that

7) An Olympic victor in 504/3, which gives an approximate date for these other victories: schol. Pl. O. 13.1a; Moretti 1959, 79.
8) Mommsen 1878, 157-8; cf. e.g. Christ 1896, 100-1 (perhaps the contests of the Panathenaia continued over into the next month, or Pindar’s ‘same month’ means simply a span of thirty days); Gaspar & Pottier 1906, 790 (the episode was exceptional, and schedules change); Beloch 1926, 143 (perhaps the Attic year was shifted); Moretti 1959, 79; Nicholson 2005, 207.
9) Barrett 1978, 16 n. 2; supported by John Morgan (per litt.).