Bronze Age Eleusis and the Origins of the Eleusinian Mysteries

Michael B. Cosmopoulos
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THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES

For more than one thousand years, people from every corner of the Greco-Roman world sought the hope for a blessed afterlife through initiation into the Mysteries of Demeter and Kore at Eleusis. In antiquity itself and in our memory of antiquity, the Eleusinian Mysteries stand out as the oldest and most venerable mystery cult.

Despite the tremendous popularity of the Eleusinian Mysteries, their origins are unknown. Because they are lost in an era without written records, they can only be reconstructed with the help of archaeology. This book provides a much-needed synthesis of the archaeology of Eleusis during the Bronze Age and reconstructs the formation and early development of the Eleusinian Mysteries. The discussion of the origins of the Eleusinian Mysteries is complemented with discussions of the theology of Demeter and an update on the state of research in the archaeology of Eleusis from the Bronze Age to the end of antiquity.

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For Debbie
So [Rhea] spoke and beautifully crowned Demeter did not disobey;
Quickly she sprouted fruit from the fertile fields,
And filled the whole wide earth with foliage and flowers;
After she went, to the kings who administer justice,
Triptolemos and Diokles, the driver of horses,
and to mighty Eumolpos and Keleos, leader of the people,
she showed the performance of her holy rites and taught to them
all her secret rituals,
to Triptolemos and Polyxeinos and Diokles also –
awful rituals, which are impossible to breach or to learn
or to talk about: for deep awe of the gods checks the voice.
Happy is he among mortal men who has seen these rituals;
but he who has not been initiated and who has no part in them,
will never share such things
after he disappears under the murky darkness

(Homeric Hymn to Demeter, 470–482)
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Exactly twenty-five years have passed since the day I set foot in the storeroom of the Eleusis museum and started this project. During these two and a half decades a lot has changed, both in my personal and in my professional life. Projects have begun and finished, new friends have been gained and old friends have been lost, family members have died and new ones have been born. Through all these ups and downs, one of the constants in my life has remained Eleusis.

My fascination with this site comes from its last excavator and my own mentor, George Mylonas. Soon after his death, the Athens Archaeological Society asked me to undertake the study and publication of the Bronze Age finds from the old excavations at the Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore. That project led to a two-volume publication of the architecture, stratigraphy, and finds from the site, which was recently published by the Athens Archaeological Society. In the course of that work I became increasingly aware of the need for a synthesis of the history of Eleusis in the Bronze Age, above and beyond what the technical publication of the material record would allow. The purpose of the present book is twofold: to provide that synthesis and also to address the wider issue of the origins of the Eleusinian Mysteries, a problem that is tied to the Bronze Age origins of the site. The core of the book is a synthesis of the social, economic, and cultural history of Eleusis during the Bronze Age, especially the second millennium BC. Given, however, that more than seventy years have passed since the publication of Mylonas’s *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (1961), I considered this an opportunity to place the Bronze Age within the wider historical framework of the archaeology of Eleusis by providing updates on the most important archaeological developments since Mylonas’s book. In this respect, it is hoped that this book can prove useful also to scholars working on the later periods of the site.

It is a pleasure for me to acknowledge the support provided by the Ἑν Ἅθηναις Ἀρχαιολογική Ἐταιρεία, the institution that launched, more than a century ago, the first systematic excavation at Eleusis. To the Board of the Society, especially the Secretary General Dr. Vassileios Petrakos, I am grateful for the many years of moral and financial support that allowed me to complete the project successfully. My work in the museum and at the site was made
possible thanks to the kindness and patience of the Epimelitria of Eleusis, Mrs. Kalliope Papangeli, whose own spade has patiently and meticulously unearthed a tremendous wealth of new information about ancient Eleusis. To Professor George S. Korres I am grateful for encouraging me to undertake work at this important site.

The Eleusis project has been made possible thanks to funding provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities (grant FB-54201-09), the Hellenic Government–Karakas Foundation Professorship in Greek Studies of the University of Missouri–St. Louis, the Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation, the University of Manitoba Department of Classics, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Institute for Aegean Prehistory, the Shelby White–Leon Levy Program for Archaeological Publications, the Mellon Foundation, the Michael Ventris Memorial Award, and the Mediterranean Trust. A special note of thanks is due to my colleagues, Rory Egan at the University of Manitoba, and Joel Glassman and Susan Brownell at the University of Missouri–St. Louis, who facilitated my long stays in Greece so that I could work in the Eleusis museum.

A tremendous debt is owed to the following friends and colleagues, who took time out of their own busy schedules to read and comment on parts of the book or to provide feedback, information, and counsel: Carla Antonaccio, Jan Bremmer, Susan Brownell, Kevin Clinton, Jennifer Glaubius, Joann Gulizio, Pigi Kalogerakou, Iro Mathioudaki, Nikolaos Papadimitriou, John Papadopoulos, Robert Parker, Vassilis Petrakis, Rebecca Worsham, and James Wright. Needless to say, I remain solely responsible for any errors or omissions the reader may find in the book. I should also be held responsible for the translations of the ancient Greek passages, in which I sought to render the meaning of the original text rather than a word-for-word translation. The map of Attica in Figure 1 was generously prepared by Dr. Sylvian Fachard, whereas the drawings of the potter’s marks in Figure 29 and 30 are reproduced respectively with the kind permissions of Dr. Michael Lindblom and Prof. J. Crowel. At Cambridge University Press, I am indebted to Asya Graf and Isabella Vitti for their enthusiastic support of this book. For their effective production work and careful copyediting I am thankful, respectively, to Minaketan Dash of Aptara and Fred Goykhman of PETT Fox Inc.

My deepest gratitude goes to my family. For a quarter of a century my late father Vassilis and my mother Effie have provided endless support and practical help with many aspects of this project; it is a pity that my father did not live long enough to see this project completed. My children, Vassilis, Marilena, and Petros Alexandros, have been forgiving during the long hours that I disappeared behind the computer screen. Last but not least, Deborah, my supportive and motivating partner in life and in archaeology, has shared and sustained my love of Eleusis with humor, encouragement, and patience. The book is lovingly dedicated to her.
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