

About 14 miles from Athens, on the northwestern frontier of Attica, lies the town of Eleusis, today a modern industrial centre with 30,000 inhabitants. Far back in history, however, Eleusis' fame was not based on its industries, but on its association with Demeter, the revered goddess of the crops. According to the ancient myth, Demeter was devastated by the loss of her daughter Persephone (also known as Kore) to the god of the underworld, and chose Eleusis as a place of refuge in her grief. Thus it was here that the great Eleusinian Mysteries in honour of Demeter and her daughter took root and flourished until the triumph of Christianity and the closing of the sanctuary by the emperor Theodosius II.

The Eleusinian Mysteries are thought by modern scholars to date back, in one form or another, to the Bronze Age, perhaps to the 14th century B.C. Some argue that these mysteries came to Greece from the eastern Mediterranean, but, as is the case with our knowledge of the rites in general, obscurity surrounds the question. It does seem logical, however, that Eleusis, the site of one of the most fertile plains in Greece, would come to be connected with the great Greek goddess of agriculture and fertility. The imposing sanctuary built there, which even in its ruined state today attracts busloads of tourists, must have been famous all over the Greek world, attracting to its sacred halls all those who sought two things traditional Greek religion did not offer - a meaningful life after death and a close personal union with a divinity.

What actually went on within the sanctuary remains unclear, since mystery cults require their initiates to keep all rites secret lest they be

profaned by outsiders. Ancient visitors to the site, such as Pausanias and Strabo, even hesitated to describe the sanctuary itself, fearful perhaps of the terrible consequences of profanation. Yet, despite all such secrecy, modern scholars have been able to reconstruct some of the activities associated with the mysteries. For example, it is believed that the so-called "Lesser Mysteries" were celebrated in Athens every February, and it was then that the first stage of initiation took place. Then, in the Athenian month of Boedromion (our September), came the celebration of the "Greater Mysteries" over the course of nine days (commemorating the nine days during which Demeter wandered the earth in search of her abducted daughter). The 14th day of Boedromion witnessed a procession from Eleusis to Athens, with the priestesses of Demeter leading the way along a route strewn with flowers and fruit (even today this road is known as the "Sacred Way", and the bus between Athens and Eleusis follows its path quite closely). By the end of the day the parade arrived in the centre of Athens, and so the stage was set for the official "first day" of the celebration on the 15th.

On the 15th, the Athenian magistrate known as the Archon Basileus stood in the agora (the Athenian market-place) and formally declared that the celebration was to begin. At this time it is thought that cult initiates would receive a formal benediction. The following day saw the initiates march to the sea coast of Attica (at Phaleron) to sacrifice pigs and to undergo ritual purification. More sacrifices seem to have occupied the next day, the 17th, and it is possible that the 18th was a day set aside

for late arrivals who wanted to join in the rites.

On the 19th, a procession of priests and initiates returned to Eleusis, chanting hymns and wearing wreaths of myrtle on their heads. They would have arrived at the sanctuary around dusk, and all were now ready to participate in the holiest rites of all, which apparently took place on the night of the 20th. There would probably have been sacrifices made, and we think that the initiates received a special "communion" cup into which went a drink (the Kykeion) made of barley-meal, water (or perhaps wine), and mint. Next came the sacred ceremony in the Great Hall, or Telesterion (a structure rebuilt by Pericles after its destruction by the Persians in 480 B.C.) But it is precisely at this point that darkness falls upon us - for what went on inside the Telesterion has remained a true mystery, despite years of speculation among modern scholars.

On the 21st, the final stage in the ritual seems to have been reached, when certain "sacred objects" were displayed, and the initiates allegedly experienced a close personal union with divinity. On the next day came a special remembrance ceremony for the dead, and on the final day the initiates dispersed, each to his/her own home, restored and refreshed by contact with the divine. And it should be noted here that such "res-

toration" was open to all people - not only men, but even women and slaves were allowed to become initiates, making this cult one of the more "democratic" of the ancient world.

A visit to Eleusis today still elicits a feeling of awe. Despite the ruinous state of the sanctuary, enough remains to give one at least a hint of the magnificent place it once was. Excavation of the site has been far from easy: initial exploration began in the 19th century, but was abandoned when it proved difficult to remove the people living their lives on top of the ancient site. In 1860 some French archaeologists attempted to renew excavation, but soon the Greek Archaeological Service stepped in and took control. From 1882 to 1907 systematic excavation was carried on, and even today some excavations are periodically made, especially in the hope of clarifying the early history of the site. A modest, but well appointed museum has been built, in which some of the finest artefacts found on the site are displayed. Leaving the museum and gazing over the ancient sanctuary to have one's eyes come to rest upon numerous smoke-stacks belching industrial pollutants over modern Eleusis makes one feel somewhat like being in a time-warp - and also makes one wonder how much "progress" has indeed been made over the centuries and at what price.