

The initiation ceremonies held every year for the cult of Demeter and Persephone were called the Eleusinian Mysteries. These mysteries and myths were a major festival during the era of Hellenistic and later spread to Italy – in particular Rome.

Complexities in Fall



The Eleusinian Mysteries were open to all persons who spoke Greek and had not committed murder. The goddesses welcomed men and women, slave or free. The one requirement that may have prohibited participation was the fee of 15 drachmas, equivalent to about ten days' workman's wages by the fourth century B.C.E. The Greater Eleusinian Rites began in the last half of September and lasted about ten days.

- **Day 1:** Young men selected for their physical dexterity and athleticism left Athens for the town of Eleusis to escort the sacred objects back to Athens on the following day.
- **Day 3:** Thousands of men and women gathered in the grand Agora of Athens to declare themselves participants and hear the high priest state the rules.
- **Day 4:** The initiates marched to the sea to purify themselves in the briny water.

Each initiate also washed a piglet that he or she would sacrifice later that day.

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The specific worships, beliefs and rites were kept a secret since the initiation was believed to unite the gods and the worshipper and included power and rewards in the "afterlife". Some scholars believed this power came from psychedelic agents.

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- **Day 5:** A sacrifice was offered to the two goddesses.
- **Day 7:** The initiates walked along the Sacred Way to Heusis, following behind the sacred objects. As they walked, they swung branches of myrtle tied with wool in rhythm to a beat and shouted the sacred name "lakchos." They carried torches, as the goddess Ceres did in her search. A ritual bath in the river ended the day's journey.

The initiates were welcomed into Eleusis and, at the sight of the first star, broke their two-day fast just as the goddess had done. Special round pottery dishes and tiny cups of grain, peas, and beans were displayed for all to see. That night, the women apparently danced suggestively and sang obscene songs, although celibacy was mandatory.

- **Day 8:** The final phase of initiation occurred in a building built solely for this purpose. The Telesterion was a large flat-roofed, windowless square hall capable of holding thousands of people on rows of seats lining the sides. In the center was the Anaktoron, a sacred stone construction, closed to view, containing the throne of the high priest. This must have been a very dark and mysterious place. The initiates drank the sacred drink, kykeon, and attended the mystery rites.

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- **Day 9:** There was dancing, feasting, and singing after the rites were completed. As a closure ceremony, a libation was made with all participants facing the east, looking to the sky, and shouting "Rain," then turning to the west, facing down at the earth, and shouting "Conceive" (or "Hye." then "Kye" in Greek). The clothes the initiates wore were later used as swaddling clothes for newborn infants.

How can a story from thousands of years ago, a myth involving the gods and goddesses probably originating in the Neolithic times, hold any meaning for us today? We all experience loss of some degree, yet coming to terms with a separation or ending takes time and can be a very slow, painful, and personal process. At some point in our lives, a ritual for loss may be appropriate and bring comfort and healing.

