



THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES AND RITES

DUDLEY WRIGHT

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**BY
DUDLEY WRIGHT**

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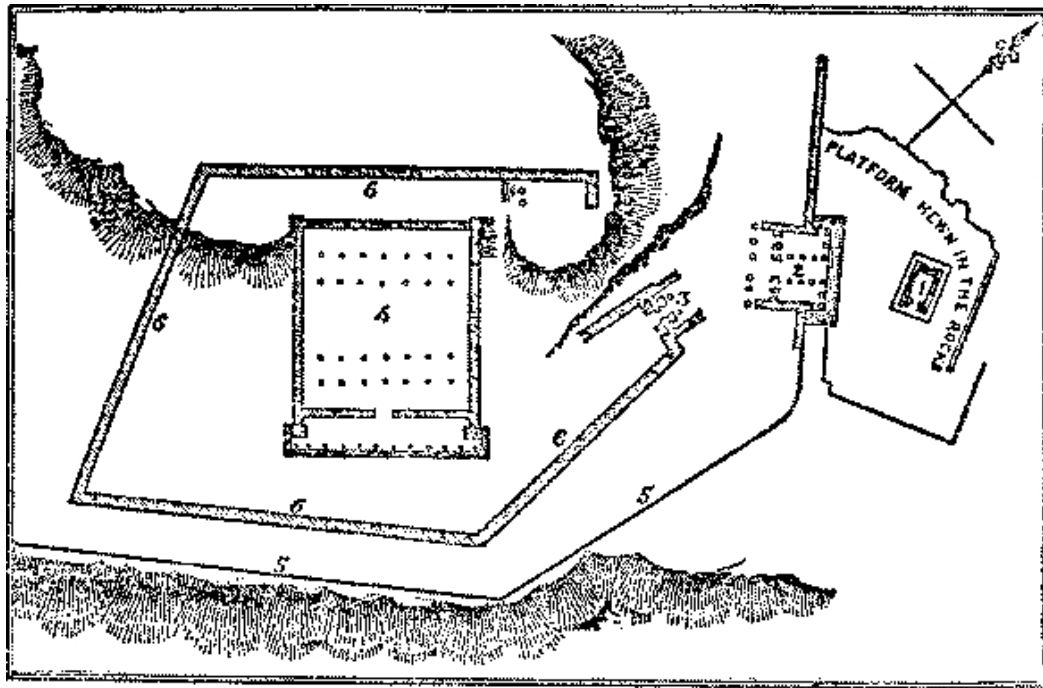
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PLAN OF THE SACRED BUILDINGS OF ELEUSIS.

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here and hereafter, when purified from the defilements of a material nature and consequently elevated to the realities of intellectual vision.

The Mysteries were supposed to represent in a kind of moral drama the rise and establishment of civil society, the doctrine of a state of future rewards and punishments, the errors of polytheism, and the Unity of the Godhead, which last article was afterwards demonstrated to be their famous secret. The ritual was produced from the sanctuary. It was enveloped in symbolical figures of animals which suggested a correspondence which was utterly inexplicable to the uninitiated.

K.O. Müller, in his *History of the Literature of Ancient Greece*, says:—

"All the Greek religious poetry treating of death and the world beyond the grave refers to the deities whose influence was supposed to be exercised in this dark region at the centre of the earth, and were thought to have little connection with the political and social relations of human life. These deities formed a class apart from the gods of Olympus and were comprehended under the name of the Chthonian gods (gods of the underworld). The mysteries of the Greeks were connected with the worship of those gods alone. That a love of immortality first found a support in a belief in these deities appears from the fable of Persephone, the daughter of Demeter. Every year at the time of harvest, Persephone was supposed to be carried from the world above to the dark dominions of the invisible King of Shadows, and to return every spring in youthful beauty to the arms of her mother. It was thus that the ancient Greeks described the disappearance and return of vegetable life in the alternations of the seasons. The changes of Nature, however, must have been considerable in typifying the changes in the lot of man; otherwise Persephone would have been merely a symbol of the seed committed to the ground and would not have become queen of the dead. But when the goddess of inanimate nature had become queen of the dead, it was a natural analogy, which must have early suggested itself, that the return of Persephone to the world of light also denoted a renovation of life and a new birth in man. Hence the Mysteries of Demeter, and especially those celebrated at Eleusis, inspired the most elevated and animating hopes with regard to the condition of the soul after death."

No one was permitted to attend the Mysteries who had incurred the sentence of capital punishment for treason or conspiracy, but all other exiles were permitted to be present and were not molested in any way during the whole period of the Festival. No one could be arrested for debt during the holding of the Festival.

Scarcely anything is known of the programme observed during the course of the Lesser Mysteries. They were celebrated on the 19th to 21st of the month Anthesterion, and, like the Greater Mysteries, were preceded and followed by a truce on the part of all engaged in warfare. The same officials presided at both celebrations. The Lesser Mysteries opened with a sacrifice to Demeter and Persephone, a portion of the victims offered being reserved for the members of the sacred families of Eumolpus and Keryce. The main object of the Lesser Mysteries was to put the candidates for initiation in a condition of ritual purification, and, according to Clement of Alexandria, they included certain instructions and preparations for the Greater Mysteries. Like the Eleusinian Mysteries, properly so called, they included dramatic representations of the rape of Persephone and the wanderings of Demeter; in addition, according to Stephen Byzantium, to certain Dionysian representations.

Two months before the full moon of the month of Boedromion, sphondophoroi or heralds, selected from the priestly families of the Eumolpides and Keryces, went forth to announce the forthcoming celebration of the Greater Mysteries, and to claim an armistice on the part of all who might be waging war. The truce commenced on the 15th of the month preceding the celebration of the Mysteries and lasted until the 10th day of the month following the celebration. In order to be valid the truce had to be proclaimed in and accepted by each Hellenic city.

All arrangements for the proper celebration of the Mysteries, both Lesser and Greater, were in the hands of the families of Eumolpides and Keryces. These were ancient Eleusinian families, whose origin was traced back to the time when Eleusis was independent of Athens, and the former family survived as a priestly caste down to the latest period of Athenian history. Its member possessed the hereditary and the sole right to the secrets of the Mysteries. Hence the recognition by the State of the exclusive right and

privilege of these families to direct the initiations and to provide each a half of the religious staff of the temple. The Eumolpides held so eminent a place in the Mysteries that Cicero mentions them alone, to the exclusion of the Keryces.

Pausanias relates that, following a war between the Eleusinians and the Athenians, when Erectheus, King of Athens, conquered Immaradus, son of Eumolpus, the subdued Eleusinians, in making their submission, stipulated that they should remain custodians of the Mysteries, but in all other respects were to be subject to the Athenians. This tradition is disputed by more modern writers, but it was accepted by the Athenians and acted upon generally, and the right of the two families solely to prepare candidates for initiation was recognized by a decree of the fifth century B.C., the privilege being confirmed afterwards at a convention between the representatives of Eleusis and Athens. The Eumolpides were the descendants of a mythical ancestor, Eumolpus, son of Neptune, who is first mentioned in the time of Pisistrus. On the death of Eumolpus according to one legend, Ceryx, the younger of the sons, was left. But the Keryces claimed that Ceryx was a son of Hermes by Aglamus, daughter of Cecrops, and that he was not a son of Eumolpus.

The members of the family of Eumolpides had the first claim upon the flesh of the sacrificed animals, but they were permitted to give a portion to any one else as a reward or recompense for services rendered. But when a sacrifice was offered to any of the infernal divinities, the whole of it had to be consumed by the fire. Nothing must be left. All religious problems relating to the Mysteries which could not be solved by the known laws were addressed to the Eumolpides, whose decision was final.

The meaning of the name "Eumolpus" is "a good singer," and great importance was attached to the quality of the voice in the selection of the hierophant, the chief officiant at the celebration of the Mysteries and at the ceremony of initiation, and who was selected from the family of the Eumolpides. It was essential that the formulæ disclosed to the initiates at Eleusis should be pronounced with the proper intonation, for otherwise the words would have no efficacy. Correct intonation was of far greater importance than syllabic pronunciation.

well knew that, from the time of their sanctification, they were nameless, and no more to be named but by hallowed names."

In the Imperial Inscriptions we find the titles substituted for the proper names.¹ The hierophant was compelled to avoid contact with the dead in the same manner as the Cohanim of the Jewish faith, and with certain animals reputed to be unclean. Contact with any person from whom blood was issuing also caused impurity. He was assisted by a female hierophant, or hierophantide—an attendant upon the goddess Demeter and her daughter Persephone. She also was selected from the family of the Eumolpides and was chosen for life. She was permitted to marry, and several inscriptions mention the names of children of hierophantides. On her initiation into this high degree she was brought forward naked to the side of a sacred font, in which her right hand was placed, the priest declaring her to be true and holy and dedicated to the service of the temple. The special duty of the female hierophant was to superintend the initiation of female aspirants, but she was present throughout the ceremony and played some part in the initiation of the male candidates. An inscription on the tomb of one hierophantide mentions to her glory that she had set the myrtle crown, the seal of mystic communion, on the heads of the illustrious initiates, Marcus Aurelius and his son, Commodus. Another gloried in the fact that she had initiated the Emperor Hadrian.

Next in rank to the hierophant and hierophantide came the male and female dadouchos, who were taken from the family of the Keryces. They were the torch-bearers, and their duty consisted mainly in carrying the torches at the Sacred Festival. They also wore purple robes, myrtle crowns, and diadems. They were appointed for life, and were permitted to marry. The male dadouchos particularly was associated with the hierophant in certain solemn and public functions, such as the opening address to the candidates for initiation and in the public prayers for the welfare of the State. The office was frequently handed down from father to son. Until the first century B.C.

¹ From two inscriptions found at Eleusis it would appear that it was customary to make the name public after the death of the hierophant. It seems also to have been the practice to make the name known to the initiate under the pledge of secrecy. Sir James Frazer thinks that the names were, in all probability, engraved on tablets of bronze or lead and then thrown into deep water in the Gulf of Salamis.

