

# Psychedelic Effects and the Eleusinian Mysteries

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ELEUSIS was a small bay city approximately fifteen miles northwest of Athens. Beginning as early as the fifteenth century BCE, an agricultural cult of the goddess Demeter is associated with the location. It is this provincial fertility cult which grew in Hellenistic times to become the most important of the *mysteria megale*, the great mystery religions. Noted historian Walter Burkert explains that these mysteries were not religious bodies apart from the wider context of ancient paganism, but rather were tangential and supplemental for those who desired them. "Mysteries," he says, "were initiation rituals of a voluntary, personal, and secret character that aimed at a change of mind through experience of the sacred." [1] Scholars have long held considerable interest in these mysteries: of Dionysos, Orpheus, Mithras, Cybele, and Isis; but none quite so much as those of the goddess Demeter and her daughter Persephone, celebrated before thousands of

initiates every fall in ancient Greece. Although we know that the Eleusinian Mysteries profoundly impressed those who experienced them, modern scholarship has struggled for well over a century to explain why the secret rites within the sanctuary were so compelling and convincing to so many people of varied background and sophistication. The curiosity with which classical scholars approach this problem has not diminished to the present day.

The Eleusinian rites were just as compelling in the pagan world and were highly respected and revered. Pausanias tells us they were held in superiority to all other religious functions "as gods are higher than heroes." [2] It was, of course, forbidden to disclose the secrets of the initiations--those who did faced exile or death [3] -- and so our sources for reconstructing the events are sometimes sparse or questionable. Accepting this limitation, we may proceed to examine what facts remain available. We have as our sources not only literary testimonies, but the architectural and artistic remains from the site and elsewhere. George Mylonas, who performed a complete archaeological survey of the site four decades ago, confronted the whole of this data and was both confident and frustrated: "We cannot know, at least we still do not know, what was the full content and meaning of the Mysteries of Demeter held at Eleusis. We know the details of the ritual but not its meaning." [4] We can describe with some degree of confidence both the order of events and even--in certain limited cases--the acts performed.

The oldest and most fundamental source related to the Eleusinia is the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, [5] probably composed in the seventh century BCE, which records the sacred story or *hieros logos* of the cult. The Hymn contains the mythic kernel of the Eleusinian religion and provides important clues about the rites. In it we read of the familiar tale of Persephone, who while gathering flowers far from her mother Demeter, was captured by the nether-god Plouton and secreted away into the depths of the earth to be his queen. Demeter exiles herself from Olympus and goes wandering on the earth in search of the maiden, arriving eventually at none other than Eleusis:

No man, no woman who saw her recognized her, until she arrived at the home of clever Keleos, who was the king of fragrant Eleusis at the time. The daughters of Keleos of Eleusis saw her as they came to draw water. ... They did not recognize her, for gods are hard for mortals to see (95-97, 105, 110).

Demeter, disguised as an old woman named Doso, goes with the girls to Keleos' household, on pretext of becoming a wet nurse for the newly-born son of Queen Metaneira. However, once they arrive at the palace, the goddess is obviously forlorn.

She sat down, holding her veil in front with her hands. For a long time she sat there on the stool sorrowfully, without speaking; and made no contact with anyone in word or gesture. Without smiling, without touching food or drink she sat, consumed with yearning for her daughter, until Iambe understood and made plenty of jokes and jests and made the holy Lady smile with kindly heart, and ever afterward she continues to delight her spirit. Then Metaneira filled a cup of sweet wine and offered it to her, but she refused it, for she said it was not right for her to drink red wine. Instead she asked her to give her barley groats and water mixed with crusted pennyroyal to drink. She made the compound, the kykeon, as she commanded, and offered it to the goddess. Deo the greatly revered accepted it for the sake of the ceremony (196-211).

All goes well, and Doso is given charge of young Demophon. One evening, though, the Queen discovers the old woman passing her son through fire in a magical operation designed to render him immortal. Demeter, offended, then reveals herself. Sick with grief, she causes the earth to become barren. The gods are threatened with the end of mankind's honor for them, so Zeus sends one after another to coax Demeter back to Olympus. She refuses to leave until Persephone is returned, so Zeus sends Hermes into the netherworld to bring the maiden back. The mother and daughter are joyfully reunited, and in celebration Demeter lifts her curse on the earth and bestows the Mysteries upon

the people of Eleusis:

Promptly [Demeter] sent up fruit on the rich-soiled fields, and the whole broad land was loaded with leaves and flowers. She went to the royal stewards of the right and to Triptolemos, Diokles the driver of horses, mighty Eumolpos, and Keleos the leader of the people. She showed the tendance of the holy things and explicated the rites to them all, to Triptolemos, to Polyxeinos, and to Diokles--sacred rites, which it is forbidden to transgress, to inquire into, or to speak about, for great reverence of the gods constrains their voice. Blessed of earthbound men is he who has seen these things, but he who dies without fulfilling the holy things, and he who is without a share of them, has no claim ever on such blessings, even when departed down to the moldy darkness (471-483).

The rites of the Greater Mysteries, to which the *Homeric Hymn* refers, were held in the autumn every year. The day before the celebration began, the *hiera* -- "holy relics" -- were taken from the inner Sanctuary of Demeter in Eleusis and transported to the acropolis of Athens in sealed chests (*kistai*). There were four days of elaborate preparation during which aspirants offered piglets for sacrifice, bathed in the sea, fasted, and rested.

On the fifth day, the procession, bearing the chests containing the *Hiera*, started out from Athens along the fourteen-mile Sacred Way to the Telesterion in Eleusis, a gigantic hall of initiation large enough to hold well over a thousand initiates at a time. The enthusiasm and spirit of the crowd was personified in a boy-god named Iacchos, and they sang and celebrated all along the road.[6] At night the parade would arrive at the outer court in Eleusis, where it would spend the night in song and dance.[7] These conspicuous events above took place in public for any to see. What happened at Eleusis in the privacy of the Sanctuary is another matter entirely.

The *Telete* ("Perfection") began the evening of Boedromion 20. By every indication, the initiates continued to fast

until nightfall on the 20th, when they ended the abstention with the sacred *kykeon*: the traditional brew of barley groats, water and pennyroyal which the goddess Demeter accepts "for the sake of the ceremony" in the *Homeric Hymn*. Then, within the walls of the complex, the initiates were taken through an initiation process involving, as we have it from ancient authors, three elements: the Dromena ("Drama"), the Legomena ("Sayings"), and the Deiknymena ("Displaying").

The Dromena was certainly some enactment of the *hieros logos*. This dramatization, performed "with very few explanatory words and no dialogue" [8], followed the wanderings of the Goddess as she mourned the Kore, going to different locations within the walls of the Sanctuary which were, according to legend, the actual landmarks in the *Homeric Hymn*. At the disappearance of the Maiden, her name was called out and the initiates were startled by the crashing of a great cymbal.[9] It is contestable that the wanderings included a terrifying sojourn into the underworld. Carl Kerényi insists the Drama must have been not a stage-play, but a mystic dance.[10] Certainly the interior of the Telesterion was ill-suited to a play in any realistic sense, there being no stage and altogether too many columns for everyone to have a clear view of things.[11] Whatever the details, we know the subject and the culmination. Lactantius (d. 310 AD) says that Persephone "is sought with lighted torches through the night, and when she has been found the whole rite ends with expressions of joy and brandishing of torches." [12]

Less accessible are the Legomena. "Scholars agree that the legomena were not sermons, or long religious discourses, but short liturgical statements and explanations, and perhaps invocations. They were brief comments accompanying the dromena." [13] Any who repeated the words later faced execution. Only one such saying has survived and its context in the mysteries remains unclear. [14] Although Mylonas feels it had no place at all in the Eleusinia, but belonged to the cult of Cybele and Attis[15], most scholars have attempted to include it in their attempts at reconstruction.

The Deiknymena was the completion, and most profound part, of the rite. A special priest called the Hierophant

("Displayer of the Hiera") would emerge from the Anaktoron (a small "holy of holies" within the Telesterion which only he could enter) and, bathed in dazzling torchlight, display the Hiera. Clement of Alexandria claimed the Hiera included the following: sesame cakes shaped as pyramids, balls, and navels; salt-balls; a snake; pomegranates; fig branches; fennel stalks; ivy leaves; poppies; "unutterable symbols" of the earth goddess Themis, marjoram, a lamp, a sword, and a model of the female genitals.[16] Clement's witness has been undermined by more recent scholarship, and there is little confidence in our ability to know what the *kistai* contained. It is reasonable to assume that the Hiera were objects large enough for those present to see.

One year or more after experiencing the Telete, the initiate was entitled to attain the final degree in the mysteries of Eleusis, called Epopteia, "the Beholding." It is commonly believed that the rite was held in the Telesterion after the Telete, once the general initiates had been evacuated. We have a few ancient sources--nearly all Christian--which would purport to betray this ultimate mystery. Of these, the one most likely to have historical value [17] is the quotation Hippolytus gives us from the writings of a now-unknown Naassene teacher:

The Athenians, when they conduct the Eleusinian mysteries, reveal in silence to the epoptai the great, wonderful, most perfect initiation mystery, the epoptikon, an ear of grain. This ear of grain is for the Athenians the great initiatory light-bringer from that which is unformed, as when the hierophant himself ... at night in Eleusis beneath a huge fire, celebrating the great and unspeakable mysteries, cries aloud, "The Lady Brimo has brought forth a holy son, Brimos." [18]

After a day of libations and offerings, the initiates departed the Sanctuary, utterly convinced that they had truly witnessed unspeakable, divine mysteries. Herein lies the historian's problem. Exactly how are we to account for the superlative impact these rites had upon most, if not all, of its participants? Mylonas clearly defines this enigma:

Whatever the substance and meaning of the Mysteries was, the fact remains that the cult of Eleusis satisfied the most sincere yearnings and the deepest longings of the human heart. The initiates returned from their pilgrimages to Eleusis full of joy and happiness, with the fear of death diminished and the strengthened hope of a better life in the world of shadows: "Thrice happy are those of mortals, who having seen those rites depart for Hades; for to them alone is it granted to have true life there; to the rest all there is evil," Sophokles cries out exultantly. And to this Pindar with equal exultation answers: "Happy is he who, having seen these rites goes below the hollow earth; for he knows the end of life and he knows its god-sent beginning." When we read these and other similar statements written by the great or nearly great of the ancient world, by the dramatists and the thinkers, when we picture the magnificent buildings and monuments constructed at Eleusis by great political figures like Peisistratos, Kimon, Perikles, Hadrian, Marcus Aurelius and others, we cannot help but believe that the Mysteries of Eleusis were not an empty, childish affair devised by shrewd priests to fool the peasant and the ignorant, but a philosophy of life that possessed substance and meaning and imparted a modicum of truth to the yearning human soul. That belief is strengthened when we read in Cicero that Athens has given nothing to the world more excellent than or divine than the Eleusinian Mysteries).[19]

We are at a loss to explain how any mere dance, any mere torchlight, any mere manipulation of objects pulled from a basket could produce such life-renewing effects. No matter what sort of grain the perfected initiates of the Epopteia degree saw in the silent spotlight, we cannot imagine how it was perceived as so spectacular, divine, and fulfilling. And yet it was. All scholars agree that something extraordinary, bordering on the otherworldly, happened in the Telesterion.

In the earlier part of the century, it was fashionable among scholars to assert that the spectacular content of the mysteries was derived from the performance of a *hieros gamos*, or sacred marriage. Accepting the lewd insinuations of the early Christian bishops, Jane Ellen Harrison, Paul Foucart, Mircea Eliade, E.O. James and many others concluded that a cultic *orgia* took place between the Hierophant and the priestess of Demeter in the indirect presence of the initiates.[20] In Asterios we read the accusation that at the height of the Telete, the Hierophant and a priestess of Demeter descend into a basement chamber (*katabasion*) in the Telesterion. "Are not the torches then extinguished," he asks, "and the vast crowd believes that its salvation depends on what those two act in the darkness?" [21] Clement of Alexandria does not mention any particular sexual act, but certainly implies something of the sort when he laments that "Formerly night, which drew a veil over the pleasures of temperate men, was a time for silence. But now, when night is for those who are being initiated a temptation to licentiousness, talk abounds, and the torch-fires convict unbridled passions." [22]

Apparently accepting the insinuations of Clement and Asterios as veracious, Foucart paints a seamy picture of the Telete. The Hierophant and priestess descend together. The initiates begin the Eleusinian chant *hie kye* ("Rain! Conceive!") as the two officiants consummate their sexual union. Suddenly they emerge victoriously with the child Brimos... and all present are saved.[23] Certainly such an experience would be memorable for all concerned. However, if this was indeed the explosive secret of the mysteries, we are unable--even considering the different sexual attitudes of pagan Greece--to realistically explain the historical impact of these rites. Furthermore, we are probably making a mistake if we take the testimony of the uninitiated Asterios and Clement over the loftier witnesses of the archaeological data itself [24] as well as such prominent (and initiated) ancients as Aristotle, Cicero, Horace, and Plutarch. One cannot imagine such men standing in supreme awe at what would have resembled but a diluted and ornamentalized Bacchanalia.

Pointing out the ancient attestation that the Hierophant was



celibate[25], even Jung concludes that only a spiritual or ceremonial, not physical, marriage could have occurred at Eleusis.[26] The sexual relationship of Persephone and Plouton was not acted out or celebrated in itself. In the Homeric Hymn, the mysteries are not instituted at the rape of Persephone, but at her return. The birth of Brimos that was reportedly stressed refers more likely to Demeter's "fiery adoption" of the queen's son Demophon than to an otherwise unknown child of Plouton and Persephone.[27]

Another theory to explain the regenerative powers of the mysteries in sexual terms has been put forth in various versions by such scholars as Albrecht Dieterich, Alfred Körte and Otto Kern. These solutions are inspired by Clement of Alexandria's so-called "password":

I fasted;  
I drank the kykeon;  
I took from the chest;  
I did the work, [or "I tasted"]  
I placed in the basket,  
and from the basket into the chest. [28]

Dieterich took this as a suggestion that the mystic chest contained a phallus with which the initiate touched himself.[29] But not even Clement claims a phallus to be part of the inventory of the Hiera. Nevertheless, the idea that some bizarre sexual rite took place in the handling of the sacred relics became a favorite explanation for the impact the mysteries possessed. Any number of variations of this theme have made themselves known:

...Körte maintained that not a phallus but the female pudenda, the *kteis*... was contained in the *kiste* [chest]. According to Körte by sliding the *kteis* over his body, the initiate believed that he was reborn, that he had become a child of Demeter. Kern... going a step further, maintained that the initiate actually came into a symbolic union with the Goddess by manipulating his own genital organ in the *kteis*. Picard projected a mystic union of the initiate with Demeter and Dionysos effected by the manipulation of a phallus and a *kteis*...

Wilamowitz suggested that by merely seeing or touching the *kteis* the initiate was bound to the Goddess with a bond that blessed and sanctified him.[30]

All this conjecture is drawn from Clement's password and the vague suspicions of Christian writers like Tertullian and Asterios. Quite apart from the unlikelihood that such rites could honestly leave thousands awestruck year after year *is their impracticality*. Unless we postulate the awkward image of multiple sets of Hieras and multiple hierophants working at the same time in different corners of the Telesterion, there would not have been enough time in the Telesterion to allow each initiate his turn in handling the sacred objects. Even initiating around the clock for forty-eight hours running, only 576 five-minute initiations would be possible. Furthermore, outside of the scholarly elucidations of *ergasamenos*, [31] we have no claim at all that the mysteries at Eleusis were culminated in something the initiate did or acted with his own hands. "If there is any point upon which all witnesses agree, it is that the climax of the Eleusinian Mysteries was not a ritual, or anything which the mystes did or physically experienced, but a *vision*." [32] All of the evidence points to the simultaneous revelation of the Hieras to all the initiates by the Hierophant.[33] Certainly Clement's "password" is not on this basis alone to be forbidden a role in the mysteries, but it cannot represent the Telesterion proper.

It is unlikely that eroticism was completely absent from the Eleusinian mysteries, but it is impossible to conclude from evidence that literal or symbolic sex acts constituted the sacred revelation of the *epopteia*. Such explanations, and others just as unlikely [34], were put forward by learned scholars who were well aware of the inconsistencies involved. Perhaps such uses of the evidence were justified by the knowledge that the greatest inconsistency of all would be that *nothing* spectacular happened at Eleusis to leave such deep marks in the psychic life of Mediterranean antiquity.

The notion that consciousness-altering drugs might have been employed in the mystery rites was not new when R. Gordon

Wasson, Carl A.P. Ruck, and Albert Hofmann proposed in a 1978 study that the sacred *kykeon* with which the initiates ended their week-long fast contained a hallucinogenic compound. As early as 1964 Huston Smith had reached that very conclusion, and Robert Graves in the same year published an essay suggesting the priests of the Eleusinia had discovered a variety of hallucinogenic mushroom that could be baked into offering cakes and yet retain psychedelic potency. [35] Carl Kerényi, in conjunction with Hofmann, was considering the possible narcotic effects of pennyroyal in connection with the mysteries.[36] But of the three ingredients of *kykeon* mentioned in the *Homeric Hymn*--water, barley and pennyroyal leaves--it is barley which is the most likely source of an hallucinogenic drug.

Barley, wheat, rye and other cereals may be visited by the parasitic fungus ergot (*Claviceps purpurea*). Ergot contains a number of alkaloids, several of which are psychoactive, including ergine (*d*-lysergic acid amide) and ergonovine. Ergine is the botanical source of one of the most powerful psychedelic compounds known, the modern synthetic LSD, and produces similar effects.[37] The theory of Wasson and his colleagues (the Wasson-Hofmann-Ruck model) is that the inhabitants of Eleusis had discovered the psychedelic properties of ergot and that the mystery rites enacted there were an outgrowth of powerful hallucinogenic experiences.

What is particularly striking about this purport as opposed to others is that it explicates the surviving evidence without contradicting it in any way. It explains the importance of the *kykeon*. It explains the enhanced feelings of empathy which gripped the initiates as they sought the lost Kore. It explains the amazement of the initiates as the holy relics were displayed in the brilliant firelight. Most of all, it is the best solution yet to the question of how the Epopeteia, in which the Hierophant in silence held out an ear of grain, could have been the profound culmination of the mysteries which it was perceived to be. Indeed, some of our witnesses seem to demand recourse to some form of altered state of consciousness. Although the *mystai* understood from the mysteries that "death is for mortals no longer an evil, but a blessing" [38] we have the important testimony of Aristotle:

Initiates do not need to understand anything; rather, they undergo an experience and a disposition -- become, that is, deserving. [39]

This interesting assertion should be compared with Plutarch's description of the psychological condition of the initiate, whom he compares to one who would like to become a philosopher:

Just as persons who are being initiated into the mysteries throng together at the outset amid tumult and shouting, and jostle against one another, but when the holy rites are being performed and disclosed the people are immediately attentive in awe and silence, so too at the beginning of philosophy. [...H]e who has succeeded in getting inside, and has seen a great light, as though a shrine had been opened, adopts another bearing of silence and amazement, and "humble and orderly attends upon" reason as upon a god. [40]

In a similar and even more descriptive passage, Plutarch compares initiation to the experience of death and the liberation from the body:

(At the moment of death) the soul suffers an experience similar to those who celebrate great initiations... Wanderings astray in the beginning, tiresome walkings in circles, some frightening paths in darkness that lead nowhere; then immediately before the end all the terrible things, panic and shivering and sweat, and amazement. And then some wonderful light comes to meet you, pure regions and meadows are there to greet you, with sounds and dances and solemn, sacred words and holy views; and there the initiate, perfect by now, set free and loose from all bondage, walks about, crowned with a wreath, celebrating the festival together with the other sacred and pure people, and he looks down on the uninitiated, unpurified crowd in this world in mud and fog beneath his feet. [41]

As if to elucidate this idea, the philosopher Proclus describes that the officiants of the Eleusinia "cause" alterations in the psychological states of the *mystai*...

They cause the sympathy of the souls with the ritual [*dromena*] in a way that is incomprehensible to us, and divine, so that some of the initiands are stricken with panic, being filled with divine awe; others assimilate themselves to the holy symbols, leave their own identity, become at home with the gods, and experience divine possession.

[42]

This passage is cited by Burkert who holds it "should be taken seriously as containing authentic tradition," since Proclus knew the daughter of a Hierophant on a personal basis.[43] If we do take it seriously, it becomes clear that initiates did (in fact were "caused" to) experience extreme and subjective states of consciousness the specific details of which correspond quite directly with the reported effects of lysergic acid hallucinogens. Most notable are Plutarch's descriptions of the initial agitated confusion, sensation of cold or trembling, and increase in perspiration. The physiological effects of LSD, "especially conspicuous in the first hour, before the psychological effects become obvious [are]: dilatation of the pupils; increase in deep tendon reflexes; increased heart rate, blood pressure, and body temperature; mild dizziness or nausea, chills, tingling, trembling; slow deep breathing; loss of appetite; and insomnia." [44] Along with these effects, an increase in both perspiration and blood glucose levels are noted by Julien, who reports that the physiological effects of LSD, "although noticable, seldom interfere with the psychedelic experience and are seldom serious." [45] The effects in question for this study, those mentioned in Plutarch, have been observed with the use of the natural substance ergonovine. [46]

It is explicit from Aristotle, Proclus and Plutarch that the mysteries were experienced, not explained. In fact, they were considered arrheta, unspeakable, not just because it was illegal to disclose what transpired in the sanctuary, but because the transcendent nature of the experience defied

attempts to communicate it in language. By some method, the initiates must have been conditioned to "receive" this message with some degree of accuracy and personal satisfaction. What the initiates "learned" during the mysteries was accomplished by sight and without explicit verbal teaching. The Legomena were not theological discourses but short, cryptic statements. W.K.C. Guthrie correctly noted that we "can scarcely speak of anything so definite as doctrine in connexion with Eleusis." [47] It is natural to infer the use of altered states of consciousness from the fact that nevertheless the mysteries did communicate a rather complicated message with more or less precision. "The initiate was shown things," says Guthrie, "and convinced of his salvation by the evidence of his own eyes." [48] That some form of altered state was responsible was the suggestion of Walter Otto even before the drug hypothesis became an issue:

...the truth, disclosed to the mystai by images, signs, or words, must have been something absolutely new, astonishing, inaccessible to rational recognition. This is almost self-evident. And yet it has often been forgotten. ... During the sacrosanct action the mystes is passive; he receives no teachings, but is *put into a state which is not subject to natural explanation* (emphasis added). [49]

One natural explanation, however, for an altered state of consciousness which would enhance human visual perceptions and add seemingly spiritual significance to them is the hallucinogenic properties of ergot. It is specifically the perception of visual stimuli that is most affected by these psychedelic compounds. [50] The subject's perceptions are magnified in contrast and intensity. Cross-sensory perceptions are also reported: the "texture" of a color, for instance, or the "sight" of a sound. Even this cross-modality perception is suggested by one of the ancient witnesses, Aristides the Rhetor, who writes, "Eleusis is a shrine common to the whole earth... it is both the most awesome and the most luminous. At what place in the world have more miraculous tidings been sung, and where have the dromena called forth greater emotion, where has there been

greater rivalry between seeing and hearing?" [51]

Taken on their own merits, surely these psychological testimonies from ancient times sound fantastic. Yet either Aristotle, Plutarch, Proclus and Aristides were conspiring to deceive their contemporaries, or the fantastic did happen. According to Kerényi, we must accept this as self-evident if we are to imagine the mysteries "worked" and fulfilled their purpose:

It was essentially a wordless initiation that led to a knowledge which it was neither necessary nor possible to clothe in words. We have to assume, in the history of the Eleusinian mysteries, a certain period during which the ear of grain, under whatever circumstances it was shown, was transparently clear in meaning to the celebrants. We must take it as axiomatic that such a transparent meaning was there in the very fact of the mystery-festival being celebrated and experienced at all. [52]

A mystes whose perceptions had been reconditioned with ergine or ergonovine actually would feel such deep meanings had suddenly and inexplicably become transparent. Like the mysteries, most of what has been reported about the psychological effects of hallucinogenic drugs is difficult, and perhaps impossible, to imagine without benefit of experience. In both cases it is stated that the effects are so great that they preclude description. We have no choice but to work with the attempted accounts given us in scientific literature, such as the following:

The psychic changes and the attendant abnormal states of consciousness induced by hallucinogens differ so utterly from ordinary experiences of the outer and inner world that they cannot be described in the usual language of the daily pattern of the outer and inner universe. The profound changes in conception of the universe towards either the diabolical sphere or celestial transfiguration may be explained by alterations in space and time perception--the two basic elements of human existence. The experience of corporeity and the spiritual being may likewise be deeply affected. The partaker of an hallucinogen forsakes the familiar world and, yet in full consciousness, embraces a

kind of quasi-dream world operating under different standards, strange dimensions and in a different time. [53]

As shown above, all of the traits of the telete given by Plutarch and by Proclus are closely paralleled by the known common physiological and psychological effects of lysergic acid-based drugs. For these reasons the Wasson-Hofmann-Ruck model is remarkably strong, explaining as it does the subjective psychological state of the initiates and doing so with elements which can be traced directly to the origin of the cult. Furthermore, it is in thorough accord with the ancient testimonies regarding the sacred activities at Eleusis. [54] The drug hypothesis fits.

How future scholarship will deal with this interpretation of the facts has not yet become clear. Few new major studies of the mystery religions have appeared since 1978, when *The Road to Eleusis* was published. In *Ancient Mystery Cults* (1987), Walter Burkert does mention both Kerényi's and the Wasson group's drug theories, the latter of which he calls a "more sophisticated guess." [55] Burkert raises three very brief objections [56] to the Wasson-Hofmann-Ruck model, all of which we will examine:

*Did ergot really infect the grains of the Rharian field?*

*Would Eleusis have been able to get enough of the drug for all the initiates?*

*Is not ergot poisoning very unpleasant? If so, how could it produce euphoria?*

The question of whether ergot was extant in that place in Greece during the times in question is one which cannot be answered definitely. However, given the widespread persistence of the various types of ergot, it is unlikely that the grains and grasses of ancient Greece somehow escaped playing its host. Hofmann insists that we are not "pulling a long bow" in assuming that some of the Eleusinian barley was prey to the *Claviceps purpurea* with its hallucinogenic alkaloids. [57] Indeed, theories far more improbable than this one are regularly given serious consideration by historians, and rightly so. The complete absence of ergot, and not its presence, would be difficult



to justify.

Burkert's skepticism that the Eleusinians could have consistently obtained "the quantities needed" for all of the initiates is similarly unjustified. It is true that ergine and ergonovine both are only 5-10% as potent as LSD. However, LSD is extremely potent, producing its most notable effects in doses as miniscule as 100 millionths of a gram ( $\mu\text{g}$ ). Ergine and ergonovine produce the same effects in doses of 1 to 2 thousandths of a gram (mg). Several grams of the drug would be perfectly enough for one year's initiations.

Although to ensure the successful collection of the drug on an annual basis would require a not insignificant amount of grain, it is extremely unlikely that a religious center as famous and powerful as Eleusis would not be able to procure in a year's time the small amount of ergot alkaloids needed for the initiations. From the fifth century BCE, a decree was in effect that all of Greece should send a portion of its barley and wheat crops to Eleusis. These offerings were kept in a special silo at Eleusis wherein any ergot contamination would be able to spread rather quickly.[58] If anything, the problem was the same then as it was in later European history: not how to get *enough* ergot, but how to keep the pure grain from becoming infected.

The question of ergot poisoning (ergotism) is a more valid one. However, it is not the Wasson-Hofmann-Ruck theory that the initiates suffered this illness. Ergotism was a serious, often deadly, problem during the Middle Ages, when infected grains were used in bread-making. [59] Known as "St. Anthony's Fire," its symptoms included delirium, muscle spasms, hallucination, even gangrene. Today we know that ergotism is caused by specific ergot alkaloids such as ergotoxine and ergotamine. Dr. Hofmann's chapter in *The Road to Eleusis* is devoted specifically to the question of whether the Greeks could have isolated the valuable properties of ergot. Because the poisonous alkaloids are not water-soluble, Hofmann concludes that it would have been elementary to eliminate this problem:

The separation of the hallucinogenic agents by simple water solution from the non-soluble ergotamine and ergotoxine alkaloids was well within the range of possibilities open to Early Man in Greece. [60]

This portion of Burkert's critique is thus not a problem. It was possible to receive the pharmacological benefits of ergot without its painful and destructive poisons, [61] as our medical industry in fact does today in commercial preparations of ergonovine.

Burkert's concerns have some validity, but they were some of the same concerns Wasson and his associates felt when they were developing their model. All of them are treated, I feel satisfactorily, in the original thesis.

There is, however, a final objection which is not scientific but philosophical: namely, whether drugs of this sort can in fact produce desirable religious states or if they instead are inherently destructive. After raising the questions just treated, Burkert continues: "What is perhaps more important is that the use of drugs, as our time has been doomed to see, does not create a true sense of community but rather leads to isolation." [62]

Whatever truth there is in this statement may stem more from our cultural biases than any actual reality.[63] It is, rather, a value judgement unbecoming one trained in either anthropology or psychology. It resembles the caveat once raised by the great orientalist R.C. Zaehner. Reacting strongly against the sentiments of Aldous Huxley, specifically that mescaline could induce a mystical state, Zaehner made the derisive comment that:

It must therefore follow, if we accept the fatal 'platitude', that not only can 'mystical' experience be obtained artificially by the taking of drugs, it is also naturally present in the manic. It must then follow that the vision of God of the mystical saint is 'one and the same' as the hallucination of the lunatic.[64]

This is a drastic overgeneralization. Even before the consideration of hallucinogenic drugs, the mystical state had already long been compared with that of the psychotic, and rightly so. The comparison is neither unreasonable nor irrelevant. Extreme religious experiences, like other types of experience, may be had by the psychotic and non-psychotic alike. "It follows," answers Huston Smith, "that religion is more than religious experiences." [65]

At the same time, professor Burkert acknowledges that the initiates must have been put into an altered state of consciousness verging on if not identical to the psychedelic:

In psychological terms, there must have been an experience of the "other" in a change of consciousness, moving far beyond what could be found in everyday life. "I came out of the mystery hall feeling like a stranger to myself"--this is a rhetor's description of the experience at Eleusis. [66]

It is, then, a question of whether it is allowable for a drug to be the generative factor of the expanded state. While surely there is no drug which is by itself "religious vision encapsulated," it would be too reckless anthropologically speaking to say that drugs serve no important function in mankind's religious life. Drug researchers Grinspoon and Bakalar found that the religious experiences common to psychedelic sessions are produced ultimately not by the drug, but by the individual:

The fact that a simple compound like nitrous oxide as well as the complex organic molecule of ... LSD can produce a kind of psychedelic mystical experience suggests that the human organism has a rather general capacity to attain the state and can reach it by many different biological pathways. [67]

This same conclusion has been reached by Stanislav Grof, who has conducted decades of research on LSD and similar

psychedelics, and may be the world's authority in the field:

Most researchers studying the effects of psychedelics have come to the conclusion that these drugs can best be viewed as amplifiers or catalysts of mental processes. Instead of inducing drug-specific states, they seem to activate pre-existing matrices or potentials of the human mind. [68]

It is, then, by no means a sacrilege to think that the mysteries of Demeter and Kore might have utilized the naturally-occurring compounds which sporadically appeared on the heads of grain which were sacred to the goddesses. The question is not whether extreme altered states of consciousness are accessible without the use of drugs, but whether there was any realistic means to be certain hundreds and thousands of initiates could be inducted into such states reliably and regularly through the use of fasting, music and dance alone. Perhaps the ancient authors all exaggerated the fantasticity or the universality of the rite, omitting to mention that a large proportion failed each year to see the "great light," or become "possessed" by the gods, or know the "rivalry between seeing and hearing." While I am prepared to go so far as to accept that it was possible for some (even many) of the initiates to achieve an expanded consciousness as a side-effect of the physical rigors of the week combined with autosuggestion based upon deeply-felt expectations, it does not seem plausible that a majority of Greek-speaking people of random classes and levels of education could like clockwork attain a natural, advanced trance state in which perceptions are changed after the order of psychedelic drugs.

The secret of what really happened at Eleusis remains one of the premier problems for historians of religion. That a trance state played an important role in the initiation is being suggested by more and more scholars. While there are various possible means of entering a mind-altering state of consciousness resembling that described in ancient sources, the use of a botanical stimulus is by far the most reliable. The model expressed by R. Gordon Wasson, Albert Hofmann and Carl Ruck, must therefore be taken seriously. Their theory is perhaps the first truly realistic explanation for the

most-documented aspect of the sacred mysteries: their profound, beneficial and lasting effects upon the millions of initiates who, at one time or another, stood enraptured on the steps of the torch-lit Telesterion.

## Footnotes to the Text

1. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 11.
2. Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 10.31.11).
3. Willoughby, *Pagan Regeneration*, 46-47; Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 224-226.
4. Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 316.
5. Otto, "The Meaning of the Eleusinian Mysteries," 14.
6. Aristophanes preserves an interesting example of such a procession song in his play *The Frogs* (324-459). Although he has adapted it to a comic setting, it probably retains something of the typical mood of the celebrants.
7. Euripides, *Ion* 1074.
8. Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 261.
9. Apollodoros, fr. 36.
10. Jung and Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology: The Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis*, 141.
11. Otto, "Meaning of the Eleusinian Mysteries," 26.
12. *Epitome of the Divine Institutes*, 23.7.
13. Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 272.
14. Cf. Meyer, *Ancient Mysteries*, 19; Jung and Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology*, 143.

15. Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 305-309.

16. Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Greeks* 2.22.

17. There has, however, been some controversy regarding the veracity of the tradition recorded in Hippolytus. George Mylonas in particular insists that nothing in Hippolytus' account can be attributed to the mysteries of Demeter (275-276, 305-310). "How can we maintain," asks Mylonas, "that the showing of 'cut wheat' was considered 'the great and marvelous mystery of perfect revelation' when we find that even the candidates of the telete had to bring with them cut wheat, and when cut wheat is freely exhibited on buildings and works of art?" (275-276) But Mylonas' reasoning is circular in this regard, for elsewhere he argues that Tertullian's statement (*Against Valentinians* 1) that the epoptai beheld silently a phallos cannot be true because such items are not found depicted in the Eleusinian edifices and are not symbols of the goddesses in question (Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 276). If the Epoptheia cannot center around something symbolic of the goddesses, and the Epoptheia cannot center around something not symbolic of the goddesses, we are in a tight spot. Furthermore, the mere depiction of grain around the sanctuary of Demeter, the "Grain Mother," is no surprise and would not at all suggest the Epoptheia ritual Hippolytus describes--if anything, it would tend to throw one off the track. Surely it was not the spectacular nature of the Hieria, but the context of their revelation which caused such a deep effect on the *mystai*. Mylonas and others overlook that Hippolytus is not writing on his own, but is quoting a Gnostic who was in turn trying to argue that the divine mysteries were ultimately confluent with the gnosis of his own sect. Walter Burkert believes we are dealing with the account of a legitimate insider:

"Presumably such a Gnostic, like other homines religiosi of late antiquity, had himself initiated in as many mysteries as possible; at the same time, conscious of the 'freedom of God's children,' the Gnostic felt himself above all traditional commandments and prohibitions," (Burkert, *Homo Necans*, 251).

18. Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 5.8.39.

19. Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 284-285. And this is the same Cicero who ridiculed even the Delphic Oracle (*On Divination* 2.115-117).

20. E.O. James goes so far as to suggest in his *Sacrifice and Sacrament* that "From the general character of the ritual it is clear that the Mystery was connected with the seasonal drama in which a sacred marriage was a *prominent feature*," (242, emphasis mine). Harrison calls the sacred marriage "as integral a part of the mysteries of Eleusis as of the rites of Sabazios and Dionysos," (*Prolegomena*, 548). Eliade makes the *hieros gamos* the culminating act of the Epopeteia: "We know that the torches were put out, a curtain raised, and the hierophant appeared with a box. He opened it and took out a ripe ear of grain. . . . Soon afterward the sacred marriage between the hierophant and the priestess of Demeter took place," (111). Many of Eliade's details are unsupported by the texts.

21. Asterios, *Enkomion to the Saintly Martyrs* 113B.

22. Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation* 2.22.

23. Foucart, *Les Mystères d'Éleusis*, 496.

24. Excavations at Eleusis have proven conclusively that there was at no time in the history of the Telesterion a katabasion into which anyone could descend (Mylonas, 314). The only other option for performance of the act--if we discount it being done in the open, which we may--would be within the anaktoron, into which only the Hierophant was permitted.

25. Hippolytus, in that very passage so often cited as a witness for the sacred marriage hypothesis, in fact relates that the hierophant was chaste and used an anti-aphrodisiac drug, a hemlock potion, to keep himself sexually impotent (*Refutation* 5.8.39). We also have it from Lucian of Samosata that the priestesses of Demeter were "good girls" as opposed to courtesans (*Dialogues of the Courtesans*, 7).

26. Jung and Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology*, 96.

27. Referring to the Naassene witness preserved by Hippolytus, Burkert proposes a very interesting parallel from the Isis mysteries, which we know were often compared in ancient times to the Eleusinia:

These testimonies are not totally isolated: an earlier pagan witness--Mesomedes, a poet of the Hadrianic epoch--brings confirmation. In his "Hymn to Isis," he refers with cryptic allusions to the "marriage underground" and the "birth of plants"--which clearly recalls Persephone--and to "the desires of Aphrodite, the birth of the little child, the perfect, unspeakable fire, the Kuretes of Rhea, the reaping of Kronos, cities for the charioteer--all this is danced through the *anaktora* for Isis." Here we see the birth of the child and the great fire, the reaping of grain... and finally a reference to Triptolemus, the charioteer: clearly an Eleusinian scenario, which even provides a definite sequence rather than unconnected glimpses (Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 94).

28. Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation* 2.21.

29. Dieterich, *Eine Mithrasliturgie*, 123.

30. Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 296.

31. A popular emendation suggests that the word might originally have been *engeusamenos*, "I tasted." This would accord with certain evidence. In particular we have a large number of unique artifacts at Eleusis called *kernoi*. In Athenaios there is a reference to their use in the distribution of some edible substances: "...he who has carried them, that is he who has borne the *kernos* aloft, tastes these articles," (11.56). Elsewhere Athenaios relates the cups of the *kernoi* contained poppy-heads, barley and wheat, peas, okra-seeds and lentils (11.476f).

32. Otto, "The Meaning of the Eleusinian Mysteries," 23.



33. Guthrie, *The Greeks and Their Gods*, 289.

34. For example, Loisy and Wehrli suggested the presence at Eleusis of something like a pagan Mass, wherein the initiate would partake of the substance or blessing of the goddess in the form of *kykeon* (Mylonas, 260n). Scholars have reacted strongly against a quasi-eucharistic interpretation of the Eleusis cult (E.O. James, 242; Mylonas, 259-260). Nilsson offered a rather unspectacular interpretation, that the resurrection of Persephone was revealed to be nothing more than the opening of grain stores in springtime (51-52). This view is "extremely artificial" (Otto, 17) and would have made the mysteries insufferably anticlimactic.

35. Smith, "Do Drugs Have Religious Import?," 518; Graves, *Difficult Questions, Easy Answers*, 107.

36. Kerényi suggested that the mint pennyroyal (*glekhon*) might have been used as a catalyst--in conjunction with the week of fasting and the walk to Eleusis--for altered states of consciousness (177-180). However, pennyroyal acts primarily as a stimulant, with marked toxicological effects in large doses. Pennyroyal itself lacks psychedelic potency (Wasson et al, 46).

37. Grinspoon and Bakalar, *Psychedelic Drugs Reconsidered*, 10-11.

38. Inscription at Eleusis, quoted in Angus, *The Mystery-Religions*, 140.

39. Aristotle, frag. 15.

40. Plutarch, *Progress in Virtue* 10.

41. Plutarch, frag. 168 (Stobaeus 4.52.49).

42. Proclus, *In Remp.* 2.108.17-30.

43. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 114.

44. Grinspoon and Bakalar, *Psychedelic Drugs Reconsidered*, 11-12.
45. Julien, *A Primer of Drug Action*, 181-182.
46. Wasson, et al., *The Road to Eleusis: Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries*, 31.
47. Guthrie, *The Greeks and their Gods*, 289.
48. Guthrie, *The Greeks and their Gods*, 289.
49. Otto, "The Meaning of the Eleusinian Mysteries," 14.
50. Julien, *A Primer of Drug Action*, 182-183.
51. Aristides the Rhetor, *Orationes* 22.
52. Jung & Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology*, 152.
53. Schultes and Hofmann, *The Botany and Chemistry of Hallucinogens*, 20.
54. Wasson, et al., *The Road to Eleusis*, 50.
55. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 108.
56. "...even if the Rharian plain at Eleusis might have been infected with this pest, as Wasson and his adherents surmise, one may wonder about the quantities needed for thousands of participants in order to provide happy visions for all; in addition, ergot poisoning is normally described as quite an unpleasant and not at all a euphoric state." (Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 108)
57. Wasson, et al., *The Road to Eleusis*, 32.
58. The text of the decree is in *Inscriptiones Graecae* I<sup>2</sup>.76.1-46. The actual site of the silos has been discovered at Eleusis and is described by Mylonas (125-127).

59. Schultes and Hofmann, *The Botany and Chemistry of Hallucinogens*, 15-16.

60. Wasson, et al., *The Road to Eleusis*, 33.

61. Regretfully, Burkert's brief comments reflect some mistaken impressions about the model described by Wasson, Hofmann and Ruck. He is also incorrect in saying that ergot contains "traces of LSD," (*Mystery Cults*, 108). This is impossible, as LSD does not occur in nature. LSD is a synthetic molecule which must be prepared in a laboratory.

62. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 109.

63. It is interesting that while there is an objection to the attribution of the Eleusinian mysteries to drug effects, no similar statement is brought against the Dionysos mysteries, famous for using every form of intoxication and excess it could discover.

64. Zaehner, *Mysticism: Sacred and Profane*, xii-xiii.

65. Smith, "Do Drugs Have Religious Import?," 529.

66. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 90, quoting Sopatros, *Rhet. Gr.* 8.114.

67. Grinspoon and Bakalar, *Psychedelic Drugs Reconsidered*, 36.

68. Grof, *Beyond the Brain: Birth, Death and Transcendence in Psychotherapy*, 29.

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