

The Mysteries of Eleusis & the Zodiacal Light

The Mysteries of Eleusis that promised initiates a better lot in the afterlife also extracted a vow of silence, and little has survived that might explain crucial elements of the mystic rites.

Women, men, even slaves, participated in the rites of Demeter and Kore that would be celebrated for over a thousand years. Octavian headed to Eleusis right after the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra at Actium (32 BC), and he returned a decade later as Augustus – and as a higher-grade initiate. Subsequent emperors and empresses followed Augustus' footsteps to Eleusis, and the pre-eminent religious pilgrimage of the Hellenistic world provided legitimacy for centuries to the iron-fisted rule of Rome.

How did the Mysteries cast such a long spell over the ancient world? Cicero, who had been initiated at Eleusis, claimed that the rites that had brought civilization to mankind (*De Legibus*, Liber II, XIV: 36) could be explained as natural phenomena (*De Natura Deorum*, Liber I, XLII: 119).

The Greater Mysteries hosted by Athens over the course of ten days included purifications, sacrifices, fasting, and at its climax, a torch-lit procession to Eleusis, 20 kilometers outside Athens. The all-night celebration (*pannychis*) that followed suggests an astronomical aspect to the Eleusinian rites (Boutsikas, Ruggles, 2011: 56).

The Lesser Mysteries were held in spring and the Greater Mysteries in fall, which suggests an astronomically-determined religious cycle. The heavenly phenomenon that best aligns with this ritual cycle is the zodiacal light that is best seen, in temperate climes, at the equinoxes – shortly after sundown in spring and shortly before dawn in autumn (Kelley, Milone, 2005: 138).

Having fasted and having imbibed the barley-infused *kykeon*, the neophytes danced and sang all night, ready to witness the evanescent appearance of the zodiacal light just before sunrise. The mildly hallucinogenic barley rust (ergot) in the *kykeon* (*Road To Eleusis: Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries*, Wasson, Hofmann, Ruck, 1998) would likely excite the visual acuity of the attendees, and the zodiacal light that enveloped planets along the ecliptic revealed a visible stairway up to the Moon and to heaven beyond (Latura, *SEAC 2013 Proceedings*).



**Stairway to heaven:
zodiacal light rises from
the horizon and envelops
planets and the crescent
moon at Skinakas
Observatory, Crete,
October 7, 2007 (Photo:
Dr. Stefan Binnewies).**