

Greek Sanctuaries: Introduction

Carl Seaquist

(Slide 1) Welcome to Carl Seaquist's lecture on Greek sanctuaries. The first part of the lecture provides general background on Greek ritual with a focus on the sanctuaries; the second half focuses on one example, the sanctuary at Eleusis.

(Slide 2) Religions in the ancient world tended to differ from those in the modern period in a number of ways. They were defined less, or not at all, by doctrine or by the use of closed, sacred scriptures. They tended to be more defined by their ritual practice (or orthopraxic) rather than by systems of belief (orthodoxic), and they tended to be local: if you lived in an area and were part of the community, there were expectations that you would engage in certain practices. Few religions were elective, in the sense that people could choose to join or opt out of membership entirely. That would require opting out of the entire social order.

(Slide 3) The Greek gods could be worshipped in a variety of ways, but one common method was for the worshipper to go to the god where the god "lived," as it were, and offer sacrifice there. Sometimes gods resided in natural locals, such as streams or in caves, but often mortals built houses for them – that's what temples were, primarily, houses for the gods more than locations for worshippers, and often when a worshipper came to a temple he wouldn't worship the god in the temple itself but rather at an altar nearby. The sacred precinct, or consecrated area that could include an altar and a temple, or *temenos* in Greek, is what we call a "sanctuary."

In fact the only essential elements of a sanctuary were an altar for worship and a boundary, generally marked in some way even if only by natural features such as rocks or trees that were understood to mark the extent of the sanctuary but generally they were marked with walls. Simple sanctuaries dotted the landscape, and some would be hard to identify if you didn't know where they were. Others were large and boasted some of the finest architecture in the ancient world, with multiple temples, treasuries, theaters, dining halls, residences, and other buildings. At one extreme, the entire island of Delos in the Cyclades was made into a sanctuary in 426 B.C.: all graves were removed from the island and pregnant women and the dying were removed to the island of Rhenea in order to purify Delos.

(Slide 4) Some of the panhellenic sanctuaries drew large numbers of worshippers, and it was a major undertaking to make sure that there was sufficient food for them, and animals available for sacrifice; that waste was properly disposed of and proper hygiene maintained. The larger sanctuaries could be quite wealthy; they were essentially charitable organizations, and technically gifts were made to the god of the place, but this does not change the fact that they could become wealthy, comparable to the large city-states of the period when both moveable and real assets are considered. Thus even the panhellenic sanctuaries tended to come under the control of political entities: Athens in the case of Eleusis, an amphictyony, or league of city-states, in the case of Delphi.

(Slide 5) A basic distinction may be drawn between local and panhellenic sanctuaries, though the boundary between these could be somewhat porous. Local sanctuaries were within *poleis*, or cities, and typically it was people from that city or perhaps the surrounding countryside that worshipped there. Panhellenic sanctuaries, as the name implies, drew worshippers from across the Greek world, and were outside of the larger cities, often on the borders between territories. There were sanctuaries outside the Greek world that drew Greeks, such as the oracle at Siwe in the Libyan desert, and Greek sanctuaries

could draw worshippers from outside of Greece: for example, Lydian kings from west-central Anatolia were major donors to Apollo of Delphi in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.

(Slide 6) The panhellenic sanctuaries evolved in the same period as the panhellenic literature associated with Homer and Hesiod, and the argument can, and has, been made that this period witnessed the rise of the notion of a shared Greek identity. The Persian wars are identified as another major period in which Greek identity coalesced; no doubt it did not happen at any one time, but was a gradual process. In any case, the Hymn to Demeter is one example of how panhellenic literature presented local versions of myths outside of their local context, as though attempting to claim a more universal acceptance for them.

(Slide 7) But multiple states could also lay some claim to these sanctuaries; individual cities built buildings called treasuries at some of them. These were storehouses for the gifts given to a god by the inhabitants of the city. It may not seem obvious from the contemporary ruins, because over time most of the metal gifts were melted down and other objects broken, but the larger sanctuaries would have been jammed with gifts, and cities had a good reason to make sure that precious objects given by their citizens to the gods remained in the hands of the gods. These gifts were also the site of competition between states. For example, at Delphi the Spartans dedicated 39 statues to commemorate their victory over Athens in 405; next to it was a monument commemorating the victory of the Argives over the Spartans in 414.

Panhellenic Sanctuaries: Eleusis

(Slide 8) Eleusis is a small town about 15 miles west of Athens, roughly north of the eastern end of the island of Salamis. Originally independent, it came within the orbit of Athens by the archaic period because it controlled an important route along the sea to the Peloponnese. The plain of Eleusis lies north of the Eleusinian Gulf, which is the northern end of the Saronic Gulf, between Salamis and the mainland. A row of hills lies towards the southern end of the plain, and on this is the settlement of Eleusis. The town of Eleusis lies between two peaks of the hill. The earliest evidence of settlement on the western peak comes from the Hellenistic period, but the eastern peak was settled at least from the Early Bronze Age – this is the acropolis of Eleusis. The acropolis itself was protected by a fortification wall by the Late Bronze Age and no doubt served as a military stronghold, and along the lower slopes a cult of Demeter developed.

(Slide 9) A telesterion (or a building where the rites of Demeter were conducted) was built around 750, with a larger telesterion being constructed around 600; this one was destroyed during the Persian wars. A third structure was built in the latter half of the fifth century, large enough to hold 3,000 worshippers, and the settlement reached its greatest extent in the fourth century. During the Roman period significant additional work was done on the site, and new buildings added. The sacred area was divided into two sections: first, the sanctuary proper, which included the Telesterion; and second, an area with administrative and residential buildings to support the sanctuary. A wall separated the two.

(Slide 10) The second component of the name Demeter is clearly *meter*, the Greek word for “mother,” so it is probably fairest to describe her as a mother goddess; in myth she is typically associated with her daughter, often called Persephone but frequently just going by the title Kore, or “girl.” Most people think the first element of the name is the Indo-European word for “sky,” the same root found in the name of the god Zeus, but there may be phonological problems with this derivation. In any case, in the Archaic period a Panhellenic cult of Demeter arose at Eleusis, and the myth associated with this cult

became well known, through the cult and also through a poem of about 500 lines that became widely distributed, the so-called *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, where the term Homeric means simply “archaic” and not that the poem was written by the authors of the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*. In the Eleusinian and other cults of Demeter, the goddess is often associated with the harvest, so she has frequently been thought of as a fertility goddess.

(Slide 11) The story of the *Hymn to Demeter* can be mapped onto the sanctuary at Eleusis, and no doubt also had a clear relationship to the annual ritual that was practiced there. In the early fall, initiates into the cult of Demeter (a “cult” in this sense is just a tradition of worship; in the study of religion the word does not have the derogatory sense that it does in common speech) made a march from Athens to Eleusis, sacrificed small pigs, and engaged in secret rituals, most of which we know little about – because they were secret. Anyone could be initiated into the cult, including women and slaves, and there were at any one time several thousand initiates, so the secrets of the cult were widely known. However, the prohibition against speaking of the cult was enforced with sufficient rigor that written sources from antiquity do not divulge any of the secrets. What details we know come from Christian authors who were highly critical of the cult. Since details of cultic ritual were secret, the term “mystery” is often used to describe the secret details, and also for the class of cult into which one had to be initiated, as opposed to cults that were open for all to observe. In the classical period there were very few of these mystery cults, though they increased greatly in number in the Hellenistic period, when many changes in Greek religion took place alongside sweeping changes in politics and social life.

(Slide 12) According to the sacred myth, Kore is tricked by Pluto, the god of the underworld, to become his mate, and she disappears from the upper world. Her mother goes looking for her, establishing the cult at Eleusis during the process, and eventually reaches a deal with Pluto according to which her daughter will spend part of the year with him and part with her. Thus near the Telesterion, or temple to Demeter, is a smaller Plutonion, or temple to Pluto. The rites were overseen by two local families, the Eumolpidae, from whose ranks the head priest was chosen, and the Kerykes, or “Heralds,” from whom an office called the “torch bearer” (Greek *dadouchos*) was chosen. The Dolichos is the sanctuary of a local god of the same name; he is mentioned in passing in the *Hymn to Demeter*, but no myths survived about him so he is generally not listed in handbooks on Greek myth.

(Copyright Slide) This presentation is protected by a Creative Commons’ Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives license. That means you’re free to share it with others in this form, but only if you give credit to the copyright holder (Carl Seaquist). You can’t modify it and you can’t use it for commercial purposes without Carl’s permission. For details, see the Creative Commons website:

<http://creativecommons.org/>.