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Paul Robertson

*University of New Hampshire*, paulusdoulus@gmail.com

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## Teaching the Eleusinian Mysteries in an Outdoor Simulation

Paul Robertson

The University of New Hampshire

### Abstract/Introduction

I detail an active learning simulation around the Eleusinian Mysteries. I provide a concrete teaching activity with the dual goals of (1) providing experiential learning around ancient Mediterranean religion to engage those with minimal interest in the subject matter, and (2) providing ideas for outdoor instruction which may be advantageous due to health reasons, preference, and/or campus engagement. It is my hope that other instructors are able to freely adapt this lesson in their own classrooms.

### Background

The fields of classics, ancient studies, and the humanities more broadly too often fail to reach students who are not interested in historical and text-based work. I have failed to reach such students innumerable times. At play is the core of what we teach: texts, often primary sources and therefore far removed in language, culture, and background from students' modern lives. Explaining the importance of a text requires explaining its cultural context which requires explaining its history, and by the time one has properly set the table the period has ended and students are bored.

Such a situation is all too common for students who take these classes as requirements. Many have no interest in ancient religion, much less religion in general, and they see our readings and assignments as drudgery, not divine. And readers of this journal doubtless well know the lack of many students' willingness to read large blocks of text: they are simply untrained in this type of reading, most rarely do it in their own lives, and the mediums of information today and tomorrow—toward fast, shallow reading and in particular video—will only exacerbate this trend. We need to change some, not all, of what we do. Our classrooms are precisely where students learn to read, analyze, and write about larger blocks of text. But we also need to do more to meet students in other ways.

I teach in a Classics department at a relatively large, secular university in North America. Once a year, as part of a course on “Greek and Roman Religion,” or something similar, I teach an active learning simulation on the Eleusinian Mysteries. This activity is

integrated with readings and written assignments, spread over a couple weeks, involves two classes taking place almost entirely outside, and involves students stashing fruit in the campus woods. While a minority of students find the activity outlandishly silly or a stupid waste of their time, most students describe this as the most memorable and interesting thing we do all semester. The latter, majority group never forgets the Eleusinian Mysteries.

### Eleusinian Mysteries

In my course, I devote a unit (2-4 weeks) which I describe on the syllabus as, “Initiation & Epiphany – What was it like to become a member of an ancient ‘mystery cult?’” I also include a syllabus disclaimer under the heading, “A Note: ‘Experiencing’ Ancient Greek and Roman Religion”, where I state that (1) these are not attempts at conversion or serious religious activity, and students can beg off for personal reasons, (2) students must actively engage and not just watch, and (3) students should always come dressed for class in inclement weather.

An abbreviated unit in my syllabus looks like this, by “week.day”:

#### 1.1 – Introduction to the Eleusinian Mysteries

Readings: Warrior (2009), pp. 187-203; Mikalson (2011), pp. 82-90

#### 1.2 – The Myth behind the Mysteries

Reading: “Homeric Hymn to Demeter”, trans Nagy

#### 2.1 – Initiation into Eleusis

Reading: Bremmer, “Initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries”

Come dressed to spend the entirety of the period outside

**In-class activity: Lesser Initiation**

#### 2.2 – Initiation as Epiphany

Reading: Keller, “The Ritual Path of Initiation”

#### 3.1 – An Alternative Theory: Mysteries as Psychedelic Experience

Hofman, “The Message of the Eleusinian Mysteries”

#### 3.2 – Vernal/Autumnal (Spring/Fall) Initiation into Eleusis

Come dressed to spend the entirety of the period outside

**In-class activity: Greater Initiation**

The active learning simulations are the bolded activities on 2.1 and 3.2, the “Lesser” and “Greater Eleusinian Mysteries.” These derive respectively from the Lesser & Greater Mysteries that we know to have occurred at separate points in the Attic calendar, Spring and Fall. Both of these are outdoor, active-learning simulations that draw loosely but intentionally from the Eleusinian Mysteries.

### Lesser Initiation

In the lesser initiation, we began class indoors, summarizing Bremmer’s reading around initiation: what it meant in the ancient world, what it denoted in this context, and so forth. I highlight a few key pieces from ancient religion:

- Communal procession, in the sense of parade
- Reciprocity (*do ut des*), giving offerings to the gods
- Purification, cleansing oneself before the gods

I then bring students out to a wooded area on campus, where I pair them up and have them find an offering from nature that would be suitable to Demeter and Persephone. Their task with their partner is to find something they can offer, and to think of what it symbolizes. A pine branch can symbolize resiliency in winter; a blade of grass the flexibility to bend with the wind; a rock the constancy of nature’s strength; a mushroom the fast growth of new life. This can also be their homework previous to coming to class, which requires each partnered group to bring an object from nature with symbolic value.

I then bring students away from campus, and leave them at a spot to wait. I proceed alone down the path/trail/road just to a point that is visually obscured from the group. Preferably this occurs at some notable point in nature: a tree stump, a large rock, a pool, anything. Then, at a pre-ordained signal (whistle, shout, bird call), the first two students proceed together down the path, carrying their offering. When you come into sight and the students approach, you will be surprised how many are visibly nervous and apprehensively smiling.

I bid the students approach, and welcome them to the “Sacred Grove” (or pool, or stump, or whatever). I instruct them to approach from one direction, to add a sense of ritual propriety around directionality (cf. taking the auspices), then stand before me, place their offering on the stump/rock/sand, state their names, and explain what their offering symbolizes. Again, the nervousness will be palpable. They state their names, put their offering down, and give a sentence or two explanation. I then ask them to close their eyes and extend their hands. From a concealed water bottle I lightly splash their hands, and tell them, “You have been purified by Demeter by the sacred water. Go forth as Lesser Initiates. Open your eyes.” When they do, I tell them to exit away from the rest of the group and circle back toward campus in a different

direction, to maintain the secrecy of the ritual. I then signal the next pair to arrive, and do this one by one, moving swiftly to accommodate the whole group. Other activities can be added beyond just the water: giving them a symbolic token, offering a ritual name to remember for the Greater Initiation, etc.

If there is time, we meet as a group back in the class to debrief; if there is not, they are excused from class after they complete ritual purification. In the latter case, I debrief at the beginning of the next class, asking simply how they felt. Overwhelmingly I have lots of participation, with students talking about how inexplicably nervous they were, how weird it was, how they were even a little afraid. This, of course, can be compared with a large procession, and an even more mysterious rite such as the Eleusinian Mysteries. The goal is for students to realize how this sort of physical activity elicits emotion, bonds them to their partner, primes the mind to over-think, and culminates in a psychological release of tension.

### Greater Initiation

In the Greater Initiation, the students will have now spent significant time with the primary and secondary literature, submitted written work, and undergone the Lesser Initiation. For the Greater Initiation, I give constant hints as to the profundity of what is about to come. On the last day of the unit (before the exam), we meet outside and take a lengthy walk—as far as the course period will let us—into nature.

The students' homework is to bring something that has some symbolic relevance to the Eleusinian Mysteries, and it cannot duplicate what they gave for the Lesser Mysteries. Common choices are pomegranate juice, fruit, grains, and other sorts of plants.

Once we arrive as a group at our destination, I bring sticks of incense, light them, and pass them around. After everyone has held them, they are affixed in the ground in a ritual circle. Other such theatrical flourishes can be added: pouring small cups of pomegranate juice, ritual cleansing of the hands and/or face, donning a ritual garment such as a hat, and so forth.

The goal is to find a location in nature with a special place to stand upon such as a large rock, a stump, or a little clearing. Now comes the large ask for whomever is interested in the Greater Initiation. Any volunteer who steps forward declares their name, declares their intent to be initiated, states that they have been purified in the Lesser Mysteries, then places their offering on the “altar”, and gives a ritual declaration about their offering: “I offer this [plant] to you, Demeter, to symbolize your fertility and growth.” Then, the high priest (you) says, “Your offering has been granted. Join the ranks of the initiated!” The student then climbs/goes on to this special place to stand, puts their arms into the sky, and screams “I AM REBORN!”

You will probably have to do this first to break the ice. I've never had my entire class do it; usually only a sizable minority volunteers. You will feel ridiculous and it will be great. The same will be true for them.

After the last student to volunteer presents their offering, dismiss the other students to walk away as a group, and gather the Greater Initiates. You go around and each must first take an explicit vow of silence regarding what they are to see. Then you offer the epiphany: this can be anything—a token, a hint about a test, a password or phrase that you will use in a later semi-coded email communication. My favorite is a hand signal denoting the “G.M.” with your fingers. Students covertly flashed this at me for weeks and months, some even through the following years until their graduation, and often with a huge grin.

I kept a list of the students, and asked some of them to help as high priests the next year in subsequent Initiations. I even toyed with having an Initiates-only pizza party at the end of the semester. The possibilities are endless, but it needs only to be some type of prestige marker – nothing valuable where you're getting into impropriety – but merely something where students see the value of in-group initiation. You will be surprised how much some of these students love the token/signal/password you give them.

Optionally, as with the Lesser Mysteries, you can follow this up with a debrief in class. Students can share why they did or didn't opt for Initiation. Those who didn't are actually the more interesting group: can't you see how easy you could be a member, but also how easily you see stratification based on an elective mystery cult? Those who are initiated will immediately find “groupness” with one another, and will also understand how social, in-group behavior is a major factor in ancient religious practice, even where authentic beliefs are entirely absent!

### Conclusion

Active learning simulations are widely available, but are mostly found in other fields such as political science (Mock UN) and history (Framing the US Constitution). I've been inspired and trained by enterprising professors of ancient religion who performed some such simulations in the classroom, such as around municipal Roman judges trying stubborn Christian martyrs.<sup>1</sup> The pedagogical literature on the efficacy of such techniques – students doing something instead of reading about it or, even worse, being told about it by us – is vast and unequivocal.

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<sup>1</sup> Special thanks to Nicola Denzey Lewis, who taught me a great deal about teaching – active learning and otherwise – when I was her TA in graduate school.

As scholars and teachers of the ancient world, we need to do more of this. We need to reach more students, and to reach them more effectively. But as scholars who spend the vast majority of our time with ideas and the written word, we also need to remember that ancient religion was dynamic, exciting, mysterious, fun, and most of all *engaging*. Ancient sacrificial rites, for example, occurred in the context of festivals populated with drinking, grilling, music, dancing, and flirting. They were parties! We need to remember that, and try to capture at least some of these same feelings that an ancient Greek or Roman would have felt by participating in ancient religion.

Furthermore, by engaging with ancient religion in such a simulation, our students will also learn more. They will better remember the Eleusinian Mysteries, understand how these rituals create in- and out-groups, see the role of symbolism in belief and practice, and most of all appreciate that ancient religion was not about reading long texts but rather about experiencing, interacting, and exploring something new.

### Reading List

Jan N. Bremmer, "Initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries: A 'Thin' Description," in *Mystery and Secrecy in the Nag Hammadi Collection and Other Ancient Literature: Ideas and Practices*, ed. Christian H. Bull, Liv Lied, and John D. Turner (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 375–397.

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