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Exploring the Mysteries: Personal Religion in Ancient Greece

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I. Abstract

Religion in Ancient Greece has been understood in varying ways. In the past, the main model for religion has been the lens of the polis: the embedded nature of religious ritual in Ancient Greek society and politics. The idea of "practice not belief" (Price 1993, cited by Kindt 2015, 35) was stressed under the polis model, leading focus towards praxis and its purpose rather than the feelings behind it. However, more recent study has shifted focus onto the role of religion in the lives of individual Ancient Greeks. This examination of personal religion places a higher focus on the spiritual appeal of worship, delving into how Ancient Greek people may have interacted with religion on an individual level.

This study aims to better understand personal religion in Ancient Greece, with a focus on the religious lives of average citizens. As my case study, I used Eleusis, a popular mystery cult near Athens. Because the appeal of a mystery cult is the supernatural experience it provides to its initiates, who must make the individual choice to join, this setting is ideal to understand personal religious feeling. After establishing key foundational knowledge, I took a material culture approach to my research, analyzing photos of votive objects left at Eleusis between the eighth and first centuries BCE. I focused on the trends in how these offerings changed over time and what different aspects of the votives could indicate about the worshippers who left them there. I struggled to find adequate images published in the United States; luckily, my project involved an off-campus component, in which I traveled to Athens, Greece to analyze these objects and sites in person. The experiential aspect of this travel was also invaluable in order to understand the life of an Ancient Greek initiate. Although I was satisfied with the conclusions I drew from the photos I was able to take and find in the United States, I feel that further research could be

conducted with a wider sample size and by delving into other mystery cults and sanctuaries for a broader perspective.

II. Understanding personal religion

i. Ancient religion vs. modern religion

Many modern religions revolve around a central holy text and have clear guidelines for worshippers. In contrast to this, religion in Ancient Greece "largely lacked written guidelines, and most Greek religious practices were handed down from generation to generation" (Dillon and Garland 2010, 73). Because of this, the idea of "Ancient Greek religion" is a looser concept, with more variation in convictions and practices. Due to the fact there is no one central document which holds the practitioners of this tradition together, religion is primarily defined through traditional rituals which were passed down from previous eras. These rituals could include public festivals, engagement with oracles, traditional sacrifices, or many other common practices. However, because these rituals were spread over a wide area, the gods took on different meanings in different areas, leading to the multifaceted and complex nature of Greek religious beliefs. Multiple understandings of divinities commonly existed in the ancient world, and beliefs grew and changed greatly over time.

Despite these differences resulting from structure, religion for the Ancient Greeks functioned as "a significant determinant of Greek identity and an important part of the common heritage" (Dillon and Garland 2010, 75) which allowed Greeks to distinguish their culture from others. In addition to the shared Greek language, shared worship of the Greek gods was a key factor in identifying yourself as a Greek and as a citizen. Even if you personally chose to question or reinterpret the beliefs you had inherited from your forefathers, your familiarity with

these beliefs and your participation in religious traditions marked you as a Greek and enabled you to participate in Greek public life. This intertwinedness between Greek religion, Greek identity, and Greek society leads us to search for models through which to understand how religion functioned in the ancient world, leading to the two contrasting models which are popularly examined in scholarship today: polis religion and personal religion.

ii. What is polis religion?

So if ancient religions worked through different rules than modern religions, how can we best understand them? A popular theory among scholars since the mid-20th century has been the idea of "polis religion" (Sourvinou-Inwood 1990, 295), a model which stresses religion's interconnectedness with the fabric of the public world. The driving concept behind the polis model was the idea of "practice not belief" (Price 1993, cited by Kindt 2015, 35). Through this model, scholars analyzed religious activity in the Ancient Greek world through the socio-political structures of the polis, the essential unit of Greek life. In this view, religion in Ancient Greece was focused on ritual and civic festivals which allowed Greek individuals to participate in social and political life. The Great Dionysia, for example, was dedicated to Dionysus, and involved many sacrifices and offerings made in his name. However, the Dionysia also functioned as a theatrical festival which was aimed towards social enjoyment, fostered a sense of community for the city of Athens, and displayed Athenian wealth and power. Although it was a religious festival, the polis religion model views it through its relation to the city and contextualizes the activities it facilitates through that idea of the city at its core. Furthermore, through this model, polis religious engagement was key to the life of the Ancient Greek citizen, which "revolved around innumerable festivals, of the city, phratry (brotherhood) and deme

(village)" (Dillon and Garland 2010, 75). Pan-Hellenic festivals in particular allowed you to assert your identity as a Greek citizen through religious participation.

The polis model is undoubtedly one necessary aspect of understanding the function and importance of religion in the ancient world, especially in studying how it impacted key societal structures. However, it's just that—*one* necessary aspect. Attempting to understand ancient religion using the polis model alone leaves important gaps in our understanding of how religion functioned for the Ancient Greeks, including the question of personal devotion. If engaging in the socio-political sphere was the main reason that most Greeks followed religious practices at all, then what would be the motivation for an individual to be pious? Are we so sure that their primary motivation to—for example—take their sick relatives to the Temple of Asclepius for healing, or walk miles in the hot sun to special religious initiation sites like Eleusis, was to conform to social practices that they didn't believe in? These more individual and humanistic views of religious practices are not as widely covered under the polis model, and it is these flaws that have led scholars to search for additional ways to understand the Ancient Greek religious world.

iii. Personal religion: an alternate understanding

This gap has led to the rise of another model for ancient religion: "personal religion" (Kindt 2015, 37). Emerging in the last few decades, personal religion places itself in contrast to the polis model, arguing that religion in the ancient world can also be understood through the lens of personal belief. According to Kindt, it argues that religious engagement in Ancient Greece carried a depth of individual variation which is not adequately summed up by the idea of polis religion. Instead of rigidly applying their religious practices solely to the established ritual practices and beliefs of the culture as a whole, personal religion encapsulates the idea that

individual beliefs also played a strong role in the religious practices of the individual, that religion outside of the polis exists, and that this fact was an important aspect of Greek religion as a whole. Aspects of religious experience such as private oracle consultations—or, for my purposes, mystery cult—cannot be adequately categorized within the socio-political structures of the polis, as these private religious expressions cannot constitute the public engagement which the polis model relies upon (Kindt 2012, 13–19). Notably, the personal religion model does not have to stand in absence of the polis model; in fact, the personal aspects of Greek religion coexisted with the more organized polis aspects (Kindt 2015, 46–47). This view of the Ancient Greek religious world as multifaceted, individual, and at least in part driven by personal devotion and belief is newer to the field of Classical Studies, but it offers exciting possibilities, especially in the area of esoteric religious practices which cannot be considered public.

III. Eleusis and the Great Mysteries: a personal experience

i. What is mystery cult?

Particularly relevant to the idea of personal religion is the concept of the ancient mystery cult, a type of religious participation which differs from the civic festivals or public rituals which are intertwined with public polis religion. A mystery cult is a group into which a prospective worshipper must be initiated through rituals which are kept secret to the outside world (Burkert 1985, 276–278). These rituals were often passed down from person to person, ensuring that they would be safeguarded for generations to come. The esoteric nature of mystery cults, no matter how popular cults like Eleusis may have become, means that they are kept somewhat separate from the public polis religion sphere—only some can participate, meaning that these are not city rituals by nature. In this way, although membership in the cult may have a social draw (Patera

2019, 684), mystery cult is an excellent field to examine personal religious conviction, as each initiate must choose for themselves to join the group and have their own beliefs which drive them to do so.

ii. Understanding the cult of Eleusis

Previous scholars have done much work on the secret rituals of the mystery cult of Eleusis (Mylonas 1969, Clinton 2007, Bremmer 2014), as well as the rituals' possible oldest origins (Cosmopoulos 2015). These rituals, handed down through lines of priests and priestesses, have been lost to time, and the allure of these mysteries is certainly tempting. However, my focus will move from reconstructing the rituals themselves to reconstructing the motivations and beliefs of those who engaged in them and will attempt to understand their experiences through this alternate lens.

The sanctuary of Eleusis was located near Athens in Attica and was one of antiquity's most popular initiatory cults. Eleusis stood out among mystery cults due to the fact that its membership was open to all Greeks who had not committed murder and could afford the materials necessary for the ceremony, meaning that gender, age, ethnicity, and status played a much less prohibitive role. These aspects mean that Eleusis attracted a wide range of people from all over the Greek-speaking world (Evans 2002, 250–251). Consequently, Eleusis is the perfect mystery cult to focus on in order to understand the widest range of individual experiences. Evidence suggests that the cult of Eleusis evolved in purpose over time. It had its roots in agricultural concerns and was principally concerned with "*olbos*, the wealth combined with fertility that is taken to be one of the early aims of the Mysteries" (Patera 2019, 672). Many gods of Eleusis have direct relations to the world of agriculture. Demeter, of course, is a goddess of grain and the harvest. In her earthly guise as Kore, Persephone relates to springtime plant

growth; in the colder months as the Goddess, she relates to seeds slumbering under the earth. Similarly, her husband Plouton relates to the depths of the earth itself, which is necessary for the growth of plant life. Even Eleusinian gods with less obvious ties to agriculture, such as Ploutos, god of wealth, can be tied to agrarian wealth and the agricultural riches which the cult was established to cultivate. In addition to this, there is also longstanding evidence for concerns with overall happiness (Patera 2019, 672) and specifically happiness in the afterlife (Patera 2019, 686) present in the Eleusinian Mysteries. As time passed, the focus of the cult likely became more soteriological, including the idea that initiation into Eleusis saved the initiate from a more unpleasant fate after death. As the central ideology and belief system of the cult evolved, Eleusis became more and more mystery- and initiation-based (Sourvinou-Inwood 1997, 152). In this way, initiates could enter the sanctuary of Eleusis seeking numerous benefits from its secret rituals based on the era and their personal goals: agrarian fertility, the proliferation of happiness in their lives, or a better afterlife. The development of the cult into an increasingly mystery- and initiation-based model is also highly relevant to the idea of personal religion. As Patera writes, their individuality as worshippers comes from "personal choice" (Patera 2019, 677): the individual decision to become initiated and the reasons a specific person may have had for doing so. Although other societal factors such as the prestige of the Mysteries undoubtedly had an impact on the choice to be initiated, these personal decisions still cannot be minimized as a fundamental driving force for individual worshippers to seek religious experiences at Eleusis.

So, without reconstructing the rituals themselves, how can we best understand the experiences that would motivate an individual to be initiated at Eleusis and keep coming back? While Eleusis's rituals may have faded to time, the worshippers who attended the Mysteries left clues behind: votive offerings. As K. A. Rask writes, analyzing personal devotion "directs our

attention to artifacts in shrines. These items speak to us of individuals and personal devotion, topics deserving of greater discussion and theorization" (Rask 2016, 1). By focusing on offerings sacrificed, displayed, and given as gifts to the gods of Eleusis, we can better understand their motivations for worship, their individual experiences at Eleusis, and their personal feelings towards the mysteries themselves.

IV. Offerings at Eleusis: votives and devotees

The offerings I examined at the Sanctuary of Eleusis can be grouped into two main categories. First, many are of the type described as "handmade offerings" (Kokkou-Vyride 1999, 262) dating from the 8th century BCE through the 6th century BCE. The second major grouping are the more elaborate marble votives left at the sanctuary, common to the 6th century BCE and later. These changes in offerings indicate changes in purpose and intent at the sanctuary over time, as well as providing us a window into the thoughts and motivations of everyday Ancient Greek initiates.

i. Exceptional examples: the Ninnion Tablet and other extraordinary votives

Before examining these two groups, however, we can first analyze some of the most famous votive reliefs in the study of Eleusis. These reliefs are exceptional in their design: due to their detail, they would have been expensive to commission and are therefore not a good example of the religious actions of everyday people in the ancient world. However, they *are* a useful foundational example of Eleusinian imagery which can be compared to the lesser known votives on which this study focuses.

Above: the Ninnion tablet, 4th century BCE. (National Archaeological Museum of Athens)

The Ninnion tablet is perhaps the best known Eleusinian votive. Studied extensively for its detailed imagery, it depicts the journey of initiates toward Eleusis, along with representations of many Eleusinian gods. The tablet is named after Ninnion, a woman who dedicated the tablet in the Eleusinian sanctuary (Clinton 2007, 349–350). The Ninnion tablet provides several important pieces of imagery. Strikingly, it provides archetypes for the imagery associated with many Eleusinian gods, aiding scholars in identifying their representations elsewhere. However, the Ninnion tablet also gives us a glimpse into initiates representations of themselves: here, they personally approach the goddesses Demeter and Persphone, crowned with distinctive headdresses (Clinton 2007, 351). This closeness with one of the cult's key gods emphasizes a personal aspect to Eleusinian imagery, as the worshippers are depicted as interacting directly with the deities they worship.

Other widely studied Eleusinian objects include the Triptolemos Relief (also called the Great Eleusinian Relief) and the Regina Vasorum from Cumae. These objects also serve as valuable sources of iconography for understanding Eleusinian figures, as well as making a strong statement on the importance of worship in Eleusis to those who commissioned them. These fine marble reliefs and delicately painted pieces of pottery demonstrate the value of a finely made offering to those in the upper class who came to Eleusis. Whether this tied to their religious piety, the social benefits of giving a fine votive, or both, these objects make it clear that worship at Eleusis was highly valued by those who came and made offerings, even if all those found at the site were not as intricate as these.

ii. Sacrificial offerings, circa 8th–6th c. BCE

Moving to the larger bodies of Eleusinian objects, the earliest offerings at the site of Eleusis which can be positively identified as Eleusinian in origin date to the Archaic period. During this period, a majority of notable votives recovered are “handmade” votives sculpted from clay, which were burned in several pyres at the sacred site of Eleusis (Kokkou-Vyride 1999, 262). These offerings are distinguished as “sacrificial” in particular due to the fact that they were created to be burned, rather than to be displayed in a sacred site.

Before examining individual examples of clay offerings, we can first examine the implications of these “handmade” clay sacrifices. On a whole, if these offerings were purchased, they would have been cheaper than the marble votives and painted tablets of later periods, which would be commissioned far in advance of one’s journey to join the cult and be naturally more expensive due to material and labor costs. Furthermore, these offerings were made to be burnt and destroyed and were therefore intended to be temporary. As a whole, this could point to a more casual and transient nature of offering at Eleusis in this time period: these clay figurines

cost little and wouldn't have been intended to last long. If this is the case, these mass-produced objects could indicate a lack of individual experience in worship at this period in the cult, tied to its original general agrarian purpose.

However, Kokkou-Vyride's previous identification of these objects as "handmade" suggests a possibility that the devotees who offered these figurines may have sculpted some of them by themselves. If this is the case, then the construction of the figurines could gain a level of personal experience far different from the commission of a marble votive. If initiates created these figurines, they could have sculpted them into whatever forms they wished, developing a close individual relationship with the deities they were offering to.

As a whole, the body of clay votives displays much variation in design and subject matter. Some are clay vessels or tablets, while others are figurines which depict humans or animals. The wide variation in subject suggests another aspect of individual experience: Many of the notable examples of figurines, however, depict women, a large number of whom can be identified as goddesses or priestesses based on their attire and representation in the votive figurines. Reminiscent of Mycenean goddess figurines, these clay images may depict either Demeter, Persephone, or those who tended to their worship. If one of these identifications is correct, further specificity is difficult because of the shared iconography between mother and daughter, as well as the shared iconography between priestess and goddess.

Left: an enthroned goddess figurine, late 8th century BCE. (Archaeological Museum of Eleusis)
Right: an enthroned goddess in a distinctive headdress, late 7th–6th century BCE. (Archaeological Museum of Eleusis)

As shown above, one common motif was the seated goddess figure, which can be found across centuries' worth of sacrificial material. The goddess at right was created one to two centuries later than the goddess at left, but they still share clear iconography. Notably, each goddess sits on a throne, and each has elements of embellishment and decoration to her clothing: the goddess at left is painted with clear designs, while the goddess at right (although her decorations may have faded with time) wears a dramatic headdress. The slightly later goddess figurines show more definition in the face and features than the older goddess, which places more emphasis on the strangely shaped throne on which she sits. The evolution in style may indicate developments in art style between the figures, or a shift in priority in depicting figures: was the imagery more important to worshippers, or the realism of the offering?

Above: “Boeotian female figurines,” possibly representing deities or priestesses, 6th century BCE. (Archaeological Museum of Eleusis)

Similar to the enthroned goddesses are the Boeotian female figurines on display in the Eleusis museum, depicting figures with doglike faces and painted embellishments. These figurines are less facially human than the enthroned goddesses, but like the enthroned goddess at left, they share animalistic aspects of their design and thick hand-painted details. However, the greatest resemblance these figurines bear to the enthroned goddesses is that the Boeotian figurines also feature prominent headdresses. All of these headdresses harken back to the classic imagery of Demeter and Persephone visible on the Ninnion tablet: the goddesses wear headdresses which recall the symbolism of Demeter and Persephone. These goddess figurines hail all the way from Boeotia, and their doglike features make them stand out, suggesting that these worshippers may have had differing religious images of the goddesses they came to worship. However, the unified imagery between these varying figurines suggests a set of shared beliefs among this disparate set of worshippers, pointing to the unity in personal religious

experience that led them to Eleusis in the first place.

Left: a handmade figurine of a charioteer and horses, 7th century BCE. (Archaeological Museum of Eleusis)
Right: a handmade figurine of a horse and rider, 7th century BCE. (Archaeological Museum of Eleusis)

However, women were not the only subjects of these clay sacrificial offerings. Another common form for these offerings is horses, as shown above. Horses may seem like an odd topic for depiction in Eleusinian sacrifices; however, horses played an important role in the lives and culture of Ancient Greeks. Horses were a luxury only the rich could afford, having a high cost to purchase and care for, and therefore served as symbols of status (Trentin and Sneed 2018). Therefore, these clay depictions of horses represent costly gifts given to the deities of Eleusis: miniature copies of luxury goods tossed into the fire by worshippers. In fact, returning to our original seated goddess figurine, the arms of her throne—with their painted eyes, manes, and seemingly saddled bodies—can also be interpreted as horses. The association of a status symbol

like horses with these offerings designed to be burned demonstrates a motivation to honor the goddesses the worshippers created these figurines for—and maybe even a human desire to bring the best gift for someone you admire. The use of these horse figurines conjures a sense of respect from worshippers that was undoubtedly intertwined with their religious experiences at Eleusis.

iii. Marble votives, 6th century BCE and later

As time moved into the 6th century BCE and onward, the types of offerings left at Eleusis began to shift. Correlating to the change in mentality from more agrarian to more eschatological focuses at Eleusis, the clay sacrificial offerings at the site begin to disappear in favor of more permanent votives left by worshippers. Particularly notable are the marble votive offerings, many of which are on display in the Archaeological Museum of Eleusis. Walter Burkert defines votive offerings as "the gift made to the god in consequence of a vow" (Burkert 1985, 68). If votives are a gift given to the gods, then these marble votives are firm, permanent gifts, designed to last the test of time and remain on display in the religious spaces they inhabited. The change in mentality between the clay sacrificial offerings and these more solid votives is clear: while the sacrificial offerings were burnt, much like animal sacrifice, these votives were meant to stand as a "unique strand of gift-giving" which "evoked a sense of permanence in line with that of architecture" (Barnard 2011, 18). The desire for the worshipper's gift to the divinity to be seen by others is doubtlessly a factor, but also present in these more permanent votives are personal promises (Burkert's "vow") from each individual worshipper to the gods and goddesses of Eleusis.

Above: “Demeter sitting Kore on her knees,” 4th century BCE. (Archaeological Museum of Eleusis)

Much like the earlier sacrificial offerings, these votives often depict the two goddesses at the center of the Mysteries. In this marble votive, the goddess Demeter is shown holding her daughter on her knees in an archetypal mother-daughter image. This portrayal of the goddesses is remarkably humanistic and hints to a major draw of the Mysteries: witnessing the deep relationship between mother and daughter while sharing in their joy and sorrow. The stories and images which surround Eleusis focus heavily on Demeter’s grief and Persephone’s pain, as well as their joy at their reunion, which is enhanced further by the sadness which precedes it. As K. A. Rask writes, “The on-going relationship people and sacred figures formed with one another was emotionally charged and personal, aided by the ability of men and women to identify with the inhabitants of heaven based on shared appearance and life-experience” (Rask 2016, 6). This imagery of Demeter and Persephone forms the emotional core of Eleusis, as well as the emotional core of the worshippers’ relationship with the two goddesses. These figures—a

daughter on her mother's lap—create a way for Eleusis's worshippers to personally identify with and relate to the divinities of the Mysteries.

"Persephone as a priestess purifying a young initiate with water," late 5th century BCE. (Archaeological Museum of Eleusis)

This votive depicts Persephone "purifying a young initiate," meaning that an initiate to the cult of Eleusis themself is represented in this relief. The initiate, seemingly a young man, is shown as he is physically given rites by Persephone, demonstrating a close relationship between goddess and worshipper. Persephone is depicted as much larger than the initiate in this image, using hierarchical proportions to embody the goddess's power. Despite this, here Persephone is cast in the role of a priestess: she has been put into a more humanized role in order to connect her personally to the human initiate she interacts with. Based on the shape and proportions of this relief, it seems likely that more initiates might have been depicted to the left of the figure which remains. Because of this, it is difficult to say whether this relief depicts the devotee himself. However, the use of the general idealized *kouros* form for the young man may indicate that he is a general representation of an initiate, both reflecting the person who dedicated the votive and

those who would have looked upon it at the Eleusinian sanctuary. In this way, the personal experience of connection with one of Eleusis's patron goddesses is encapsulated in this votive, which would have provided that feeling for both its creator and its onlookers at the site.

"Supplicants approaching Demeter, seated on the 'mirthless rock,'" 4th century BCE. (Archaeological Museum of Eleusis.)

Similarly, the above votive is identified by the Eleusis Museum as depicting "supplicants" approaching Demeter as she sits on the Mirthless Rock, an important Eleusinian location. The supplicants in question refer back to the myth around which Eleusis revolves, in which Demeter starves the earth of plant growth, creating a famine for humanity, due to the loss of her daughter (Foley 1994, 18, Rayor 1998, 77). The Mirthless Rock, which Demeter sits on, does not appear in the Homeric Hymn, but is a common image in Eleusinian myth. Sometimes, she is waiting there, grieving, when Persephone returns to her (Clinton 2007, 354); here, she sits on the rock while starving humans approach her to supplicate her mercy. These supplicant humans are not initiates themselves; however, they continue the trend of individual human beings approaching their deities which we saw in both the Ninnion Tablet and the relief of

Persephone as priestess. The supplicant humans who approach Demeter to ask for physical salvation, after all, can easily be mapped onto the Mysteries at their most eschatological: initiates come personally motivated to seek a better afterlife and happiness on earth from Demeter, essentially entering into her sacred space as supplicants themselves.

Above: "Votive of priest Lakrateides," 1st century BCE. (Archaeological Museum of Eleusis)

A far later yet still notable example is the Votive Relief of Lakrateides, an extremely detailed and ornate relief which depicts numerous notable Eleusinian figures, including the God and Goddess (the Underworld aspects of Hades and Persephone), who Lakrateides specifically served. Notably, Lakrateides himself is depicted in this relief, in low relief and in the background (Clinton 2007, 347–348). The Votive Relief of Lakrateides is another example of humans being depicted in close proximity to their gods, but Lakrateides's example stands out as showing a man who has purposely had himself portrayed in the same relief as the gods he is honoring. Rather than including unspecific images to represent initiates, Lakrateides (not an initiate, but an

important figure at Eleusis) has himself depicted directly. This emphasizes the personal relationship which Lakrateides wants to portray with the Eleusinian deities, continuing and advancing the trend of humanity's closeness with the gods they worship in mystery cult. Additionally, at a time when Eleusis would have already shifted towards a more soteriological center, this emphasized personal relationship with the divine connects strongly to the more recent Eleusinian idea that participation in the cult can bring about personal salvation.

V. Conclusion

As a whole, the numerous votive objects of Eleusis depict the changing trends in how individuals engaged with the personal religious aspects of the Mysteries throughout time. Mystery cult was a highly experiential institution: initiates' experiences revolved around ritual manipulation of senses and sensations, particularly sight. Scholars have speculated about the different ways in which this manipulation may have taken place (Clinton 2007, 353–356), but a clear piece of evidence for this sensory input already exists in the votive and sacrificial objects left behind by the initiates of the Eleusinian Mysteries. The imagery present in these objects provides a window into the personal experiences of each initiate: what parts of their religion they felt were most important, what aspects of the gods of Eleusis they felt most compelled by, and how they individually chose to engage with the wide, multifaceted practice that is Ancient Greek religion. The commonality of these small votive objects at Eleusis has been analyzed by some as a "more egalitarian experience of the gods" than traditional animal sacrifices (Evans 2002, 227), creating a broad picture of the religious lives of average people, including women, enslaved people, and foreigners—in short, people who may have been excluded from other, more polis-engrained forms of worship. Far from being set in stone, through the lens of personal

religion, rituals are “historic and experienced individually,” forming individual interactions which give the divine a concrete and almost tangible presence in our world (Perissato 2023, 43–44). The varying votives of the Eleusinian Mysteries allow us to view ancient religion through this prismatic lens of personal practice, allowing for a broader and deeper understanding of what it means to believe.

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