

Eleusis and the cult of Demeter

Left: An Archaic Age sculpture of Demeter, whose worship was based on the mysteries of the natural cycles.

Eleusis was founded in about 2000. In the Mycenaean era it developed into a large fortified settlement. It was probably during this period that the cult of Demeter—the goddess associated with growth in nature and often symbolized by ears of cereal grain—was introduced. However, we know little about the Mycenaean Demeter. Because of the widespread adherence to the cult of Demeter, and because Eleusis was the cult's prime sanctuary, in the eighth century the settlement became a panhellenic center.

This form of "neutrality" offered great opportunities for commerce between the often warring Greek city-states, and this went hand-in-hand with banking facilities. During the major festivals, the Sacred Way linking the sanctuary with nearby Athens was lined with temporary stores servicing the needs of pilgrims from all over Greece. Embassies were also set up for inter-state negotiations under the peace of Demeter. Eleusis remained an important center right up to the mid-fourth century AD, with several celebrated Romans contributing to its continual building program.

- Archaic, 800–500
- Classical, 500–350
- Hellenistic/Roman 350 BC–AD 300

