

Eleusis, One of the Most Important Sanctuaries of Antiquity, Must be Saved from New Threats

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Fig. 1: The Great Eleusinian Relief is one of the most celebrated art works of antiquity. Demeter, the goddess of agricultural abundance, stands at the left. At the right is Persephone, her daughter and the wife of Hades, the god of the underworld. The boy is thought to be Triptolemos, who was sent by Demeter to teach men how to cultivate grain.

Photo: Meisterdrucke.com

The archaeological site of Eleusis — just west of modern Athens — was one of the most sacred places in the ancient world. Its significance comes primarily from the Eleusinian Mysteries, a set of secret initiation rituals dedicated to the goddess Demeter and her daughter Persephone. These rites were practiced for nearly 2,000 years, from around 1,500 BCE until the late 4th century CE — longer than most religious traditions in Europe. Eleusis was directly connected to the Acropolis of Athens through the Holy Way (hierá odos) on which every year the most important sacred procession of ancient Greece took place.

Life, Death, and Rebirth were the core meaning of the Mysteries, since at the heart of Eleusis lies a powerful myth while Persephone is abducted into the underworld, Demeter mourns, causing famine on Earth and Persephone returns, restoring life and fertility.

This cycle became a symbolic framework for agricultural renewal (seasons), human mortality and hope after death, spiritual transformation. The Mysteries offered initiates something radical for the ancient world, a personal, emotional assurance of life beyond death — not just myth, but experience.

The Eleusinian Mysteries were Europe's first "Inner Religion", since unlike public Greek religion, the Mysteries were secret and experiential, open to men, women, slaves, and foreigners, focused on initiation and transformation. Participants underwent rituals in the great hall called the Telesterion, culminating in a profound, unspoken experience. Ancient writers like Cicero claimed that "Athens has given nothing more excellent... than these Mysteries."

The Mysteries introduced ideas that later shaped European spirituality, personal salvation, initiation as transformation, sacred drama and symbolic revelation. These ideas echo later in Early Christianity, Medieval mysticism, Renaissance esoteric traditions. The Mysteries formed a bridge between Myth and Philosophy influencing not just religion—but philosophy and culture. Great philosophers were likely influenced by the Mysteries' emphasis on hidden knowledge (gnosis), transformation of the soul and reality beyond appearances.

Eleusis helped shift Greek thought from Myth as story to Myth as symbolic truth. This transition is foundational to Western philosophy. But beyond Europe there is a Universal touch. The Archetypal Pattern (The Demeter–Persephone myth reflects a pattern found globally: Death → descent → return → renewal). Comparable themes appear in Egyptian Osiris myth, Mesopotamian Inanna, Christian resurrection narratives. This suggests Eleusis expresses a deep human psychological and cosmic pattern.

Apart from the influence on human consciousness, Eleusis gave humanity a proto-ecological vision since it implicitly taught that humans are dependent on natural cycles and disrupting nature

leads to collapse. This resonates strongly with modern ecological thinking.

Eleusis is not just an ancient ruin — it's a foundation layer of European identity. Its influence on the cultural history of Europe cannot be overstated. For Europe one of the earliest expressions of shared spiritual culture, a precursor to universal religious participation, a root of philosophical and mystical traditions for humanity offers a symbolic language for death and meaning, renewal and resilience, connection to nature.

Melina Mercouri, Greece's first Minister for Culture and the founder of the European Capital of Culture program - wanted Eleusis to become the first Greek World Heritage site, and she worked for that. Also, Friedrich Schiller's libretto to the final chorus of Beethoven's celebrated 9th Symphony, which became the European Hymn, refers to joy as "the daughter of Elysium". After thousands of years, Europe still celebrates Eleusis, and it should be Greece's most noble task to have it recognized as a heritage of all humanity.

Joy, thou beauteous godly lightning,
Daughter of Elysium,
Fire drunken we are ent'ring
Heavenly, thy holy home!
Thy enchantments bind together,
What did custom stern divide,
Every man becomes a brother,
Where thy gentle wings abide.

Translation by William F. Wertz

In the last decades of the 19th century, however, industries began to be established in the present-day city of Elefsina — along the coastline and very close to the Sanctuary of the Eleusinian Mysteries. Today, the officially designated Archaeological Site has essentially been restricted to the area of Telesterion. The hill where the Ancient City once stood (west of the Acropolis) and the areas where the Stadium and the Theatre were likely located (south of the Acropolis) were never excavated, due to the establishment of industries, especially the TITAN cement factory.

The present Archaeological Site of the Telesterion was effectively strangled by the TITAN factory and suffered serious damage from cement dust emitted by its chimneys. ICOMOS has recognized the Archaeological Site of Eleusis as one of the most important Panhellenic sanctuaries of antiquity, crucial for understanding the Eleusinian Mysteries, with unique architecture (the Telesterion) and historical continuity. It has supported the site's inclusion on UNESCO's World Heritage List.

However, this nomination has not yet taken place. The reason is the "suffocation" caused by TITAN, and ICOMOS has protested about the damage inflicted on the Site by the factory. The wider area has also suffered greatly — especially the coastal

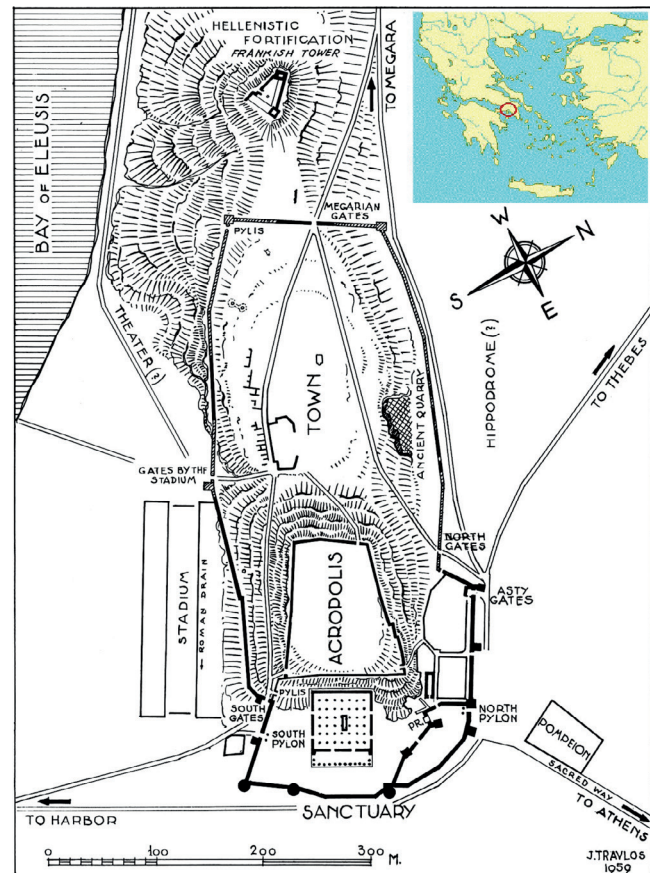


Fig. 2: The ancient town of Eleusis.

Plan: John Travlos, 1959

zone. Today, following the economic crisis that led to the closure of many industries in the broader region, the shores of our enclosed Eleusis Bay host:

- 2 oil refineries (out of the 3 operating in the country, the third is located a few kilometers away within the Saronic Gulf),
- 2 shipyards,
- the TITAN cement factory,
- the commercial bulk cargo port (the only one of its kind in Attica),
- and several other businesses contributing to pollution in the Bay.



Fig. 3: The visual integrity of the archaeological site is heavily impaired by the imposing presence of the neighbouring TITAN factory.

Photo: Stephan Doempke



Fig. 4: Aerial view of the present archaeological site, with the industrial zone blocking the connection with the sea in the background.

Photo: Elefsina Arts and Culture

Within the boundaries of the Municipality of Eleusis and the wider Thriassio Plain area, many logistics facilities are operating, creating major problems — especially in road traffic. Instead of protecting the Bay — which is currently in a period of environmental recovery — and the wider area, and in line with the directions proposed by the planners of the Municipality's Local Urban Plan (still under preparation), the Government and the legal entities it controls (e.g. Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund (HRADF), ETVA VI.PE) are preparing new burdens for the city:

1. HRADF, according to the master plan it has prepared, is planning the relocation of the port to the Vlycha area, next to the TITAN cement factory, very close to the residential area and to a wetland that forms the outflow of the active Soures stream. Such a new port installation would require the landfilling of hundreds of hectares and possibly dredging works in the marine area. This would stir up the seabed, releasing substances currently trapped in the sediment and significantly worsening water quality in the bay. Yes, the current commercial port must be relocated to free the coastline in front of the main residential area — but it must not be moved to Vlycha. The best relocation site would be the inactive lands of HALYVOURGIKI. This location lies within municipal boundaries but away from residential areas and offers road and rail connections that would not burden the urban fabric. Vlycha must instead be protected and regenerated for the benefit of residents.
2. Three months ago, the Government passed a legislative amendment enabling the Eleusis Shipyards to expand their

activities, in line with the declared goals of the company currently operating them:

- Massive expansion of shipbuilding activities, focusing on repairs of large and other vessels (commercial, passenger, and military) and construction of new ships, aiming to establish Elefsina as a leading shipbuilding center!;
- A railway industry, through the establishment of a new company for the production and repair of railway wagons;
- Logistics and port infrastructure, including a modern freight hub with road and rail connections to the Thriassio Freight Center and the Eleusis Military Airbase;
- An energy hub, aligned with the Greek American strategy for natural gas transport, “geopolitically upgrading” the area. Bay;
- All of this implies a dramatic burden on Eleusis Bay and a serious degradation of residents' quality of life.

All this comes while Eleusis and the Thriassio area already constitute a saturated industrial hub, squeezed between two oil refineries, two shipyards, and 22 SEVESO II upper- and lower-tier facilities.

These new burdens — based on very recent plans — are emerging at a time when the Municipality's Local Urban Plan is being prepared. In the first phase of the urban planning process, after examining three future scenarios, the planners selected the one that envisions restoring the Municipality's vital role through structural interventions aimed at reclaiming essential natural space, including:



Fig. 5: General view of the Gulf of Eleusis. Its entire coastline is occupied by industrial development. While the Vlycha area is very near to the archaeological site, Chalivourgiki is in reasonable distance.

Image: Ilias Monacholias

- Protection of available natural areas such as buffer zones between residential areas and industrial/logistics concentrations, and partial municipal management of the coastal front.
- Targeted planning policies, aligned with the Athens Regulatory Plan, to promote Eleusis as an Intermunicipal Center of Wide Influence focused on culture and history — symbolizing the regeneration of land and people (timeless symbols of Demeter).
- Structural interventions in the local economy centered on innovation in energy, decontamination techniques, industrial symbiosis / circular economy, and cultural and creative industries.
- Promotion of sustainable mobility within residential areas and acceptable conditions for supra-local transport needs.
- Urban planning tools for functional and aesthetic upgrading of residential zones and coexistence with industrial activity.
- Restoration of the relationship with Mother Earth and the cycle of life; regeneration of nature and people through protection, promotion, and sustainable use of natural resources (sea, agricultural land, water resources, limited forest formations), and highlighting the spiritual and cultural dynamism of the place.
- Environmental and quality-of-life upgrading.
- Restoration of continuity and cohesion between natural and cultural space, strengthening connectivity between Eleusis and Magoula.
- Promotion of the timeless value of the Eleusinian Mysteries through the advancement of Sciences, Arts, and Healing Practices, and redefinition of the participatory process of the Great Mysteries.
- Utilization of modern industrial heritage and building stock for the development of cutting-edge technologies.
- Leveraging Eleusis' central location and recognition to develop cultural tourism and connections with destinations beyond Athens (Daphni Monastery, Corinth, Mycenae, Epidaurus, etc.).

All this is being proposed just two years after 2023, the year Eleusis was European Capital of Culture. What connection do the Government's plans have with the above vision?

We call upon the municipality of Elefsina and the Greek government to stop and indeed remove the industrial development that is blocking a future inscription of Eleusis on the World Heritage List, and start working on the World Heritage nomination. We have already requested ICOMOS Hellenic to support us and we had their positive reaction with a press release on 16th of last March.