

To Sit in Solemn Silence? *Thronosis* in Ritual, Myth, and Iconography

Recent scholars such as Bowie 1993 and Lada-Richards 1999, following the lead of Burkert 1983, have referred to a *thronosis* ritual at the Eleusinian mysteries to describe the process wherein the initiate sits with head covered on a stool. Such an idea is the result of a terminological confusion over different types of "enthronement". The term *thronosis* properly belongs to Korybantic initiation ritual, not to the Eleusinian Mysteries. Not only are the terms employed to describe the rituals different, but the iconographic representations of the ritual and the mythic paradigms are different as well. The purificatory silent sitting of the Eleusinian initiate should not be confused with the bewildering and terrifying treatment of the enthroned initiate in a Korybantic initiation. Keeping the two types of ritual separate is particularly important when analyzing texts, such as Aristophanes' *Clouds* or *Frogs*, for allusions to Eleusinian rituals.

Plato, in the *Euthydemus* 277de, uses the term *thronosis* to describe an initiation ritual in which the initiate is seated in a throne while the initiators dance wildly and confusingly around him. Burkert and others have used Plato's term (and cited Plato's description) to describe the ritual at Eleusis that involves the initiate sitting down. A search of the TLG corpus, however, reveals that *thronosis* is actually a very rare word. Apart from Plato's use of the term, which explicitly refers to Korybantic ritual, the only other uses are in Hesychius, which is a gloss on the Plato passage, and in the Sibylline oracles (8.43-9), where the ritual of *thronosis* is located on Crete, presumably in reference to a Kouretic ritual similar to the Korybantic one described by Plato. Even the related word *thronismos* appears seldom and never in a specifically Eleusinian context. Dio Chrysostom (II.33-34) uses the term to describe an initiation ritual full of wild dancing around a wondering initiate, who gazes in amazement at the figures whirling around him. In every case, the ritual of enthronement described by *thronosis* or *thronismos* entails a vigorous dancing around the initiate, who is bewildered by the treatment. Sometimes the dancers are Kouretes or even Kabeiroi instead of Korybantēs, but type of ritual remains the same.

This kind of Korybantic ritual appears in a number of representations, which show men, usually armed with spear and shield, dancing around a seated figure. Often this figure can be identified as the child Dionysos, as in the ivory pyxis (LIMC Dionysos 267) decorated with a sequence of scenes from the life of Dionysos. The mythic parallel for this *thronosis* ritual seems to be the story of the infant Dionysos, either as he is being guarded by the Korybantēs from hostile forces or as he is being distracted and attacked by the Titans. This ambiguity between the guardian Korybantēs and the hostile Titans recurs in the variety of stories of the infancy of Dionysos and of Zeus, and it is certainly appropriate for the beginning ordeal of an initiation, where the initiate is not certain what his initiators will be doing to him.

The probable mythic precedent for the ritual connected with Eleusis, on the contrary, has an entirely different affect. In the Homeric Hymn to Demeter 197-201, Demeter sits on a fleece-covered stool in solemn silence, mourning the loss of Persephone. She fasts and refuses drink until she takes the sacred *kykeon*. Such a period of silent mourning might be

appropriate as an initial purificatory step in the Eleusinian festival. The iconography indeed suggests that such a ritual was part of an Eleusinian festival. A number of representations show an initiate, often Herakles, seated on a stool with a covered head. This initiate is at times being purified with by a figure holding a liknon or torch (LIMC Demeter 145, 146). None of these representations show dancing figures, nor could the initiate with covered head be bewildered by unseen gyrations. The "enthronement" at Eleusis is a calm and solemn ritual of purification, perhaps commemorating the mourning fast of Demeter, in contrast to the whirling dance around the initiate in the Korybantic *thronosis*.