



**NATIONAL INVENTORY
OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL
HERITAGE
OF GREECE**

**INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE ELEMENT
BULLETIN**

***PANAGIA MESOSPORITISSA*
FEAST OF THE VIRGIN MARY AT THE ANCIENT
RUINS OF ELEUSIS**

1. Brief presentation of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Element

a. The name under which the element is recognized by its bearers:

Panagia Mesosporitissa [*Παναγία Μεσοσπορίτισσα* – Virgin of the mid-sowing season], *Eortitis Panagitsas sta “Archaia”* [*Εορτή της Παναγίτσας στα «Αρχαία»* - Feast of the Little Virgin at the “Ancient Ruins”]

b. Other name(s): *Eisodia tis Theotikou* [*Εισόδια της Θεοτόκου* - Presentation of the Mother of God at the Temple]

c. Brief Description:

On the Eve of the Feast of the Presentation of the Virgin Mary at the Temple, November 20, Evensong is held in the chapel of *Panagitsa* [*Παναγίτσα* - Little Virgin], on the hilltop, within the archaeological site of Eleusis. This ritual takes place at the exact location where the Eleusinian Mysteries were held. The setting is evocative. Following the service, the churchgoers distribute the semi-sweet bread and taste the *polyspori* [*πολυσπόρι* – multi-seed], the offering of *panspermia* [*πανσπερμία*] to the Virgin.

d. ICH Domain:

- oral traditions and expressions
- performing arts
- social practices – rituals – festive events
- knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe
- traditional craftsmanship
- other

e. Region where the element is to be found:

Eleusis in Attica (archaeological site)

f. Key words:

Panagitsa [Παναγίτσα - Little Virgin], *Panagia Mesosporitissa* [Παναγία Μεσοσπορίτισσα - Mesosporitissa Virgin], *Agia Dimitra* [Αγία Δημήτρα], *Artoklasia* [Αρτοκλασία - the breaking of the loaves], *Panspermia* [Πανσπερμία], *Polyspori* [Πολυσπόρι]

2. Identity of the bearer of the ICH element

a. Who is/are the bearer(s) of the ICH element?

- Citizens of the Municipality of Eleusis, neighbouring Municipalities, but also from other regions of Greece, who come to Eleusis for the event
- “*To Adrachti*” [«*To Adράχτι*» - “The Spindle”], the Folklore Society of Eleusis
- The Municipality of Eleusis
-

b. Headquarters/location

Archaeological site of Eleusis

“*To Adrachti*” Folklore Society

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c. Further information regarding the element:

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3. Detailed description of the ICH element, as found today

The location of the chapel of the Virgin Mary, the preceding centuries’ old worship of the goddess Demeter, the mid-sowing season [*mesospora – μεσοσπορά*] and the ageless invocation of the deities for their grace during the period of cultivation, constitute a background combining a multitude of elements and conferring uniqueness to the custom.

On the Eve of the feast of the Presentation of the Virgin Mary at the Temple, Evensong is held in the chapel of *Panagitsa*, within the archaeological site of Eleusis. Early in the afternoon, around 3 p.m., the worshippers, mainly women, carrying baskets with loaves of bread, slowly

climb the hill above the archaeological site, either from the East side of the rock, or from the plateau on the southern side, above the ancient *Telesterion* [Τελεστήριο]. They proceed cautiously, either in groups, deep in conversation with friends and neighbours, or singly. The women of Eleusis have started preparations from the previous day. Some prepare the semi-sweet bread, using traditional methods. They iron the white, embroidered tablecloths which will be laid in the baskets where the loaves are placed. They have to be carefully ironed, particular attention being paid to the embroideries and lace borders.

Soon, crowds of worshippers start gathering, following the same route. They cross the *Megala Propylaea* [Μεγάλα Προπύλαια], the *Callichoron Frear* [Καλλίχορον Φρέαρ – the well] on the left, the *Mikra Propylaea* [Μικρά Προπύλαια], the *Ploutoneion* [Πλουτώνειον] on the right and the *Agelastos Petra* [Αγέλαστος Πέτρα - the Mourning Rock]. The last section of the *Iera Odos* [Ιερά Οδός - Sacred Way] rises steeply. However, the sea of Salamis, straight ahead, offers a fresh breath of air. The horizon is open on all sides, except for the West which still remains hidden by the hill. To the eyes of the worshipper, with every few steps, a different aspect of the contoured terrain is revealed. The marble elements of the Eleusinian Sanctuary prevail, and the ancient inscriptions, which everyone attempts to read. They definitely manage to read the small inscriptions placed here and there by the Archaeological Department or bring back to memory older ones. They turn their gaze to the walls, alternately towards the sea and the *Telesterion* [Τελεστήριον], then towards the hill. New visitors do not cease taking photographs.

Having reached the last, steep, marble steps, the pretty belfry becomes visible first, and then the simple, gray-white church of *Panagitsa*. Gathered in the church grounds, are neighbours, acquaintances, friends and relatives who now live in Athens and its environs, but who, nevertheless invariably gather to worship *Panagitsa*. The elderly are clearly exhausted by the steep climb and the weight of the baskets. However, they are content. “Will we be blessed to return next year?” they wonder.

The baskets are placed directly on the ground, outside the chapel. At the entrance to the chapel, there is a candelabrum where the churchgoers may place their lit candles. Those making offerings, place their candles on the loaves. They will be lit later, around 16.30, when the priest comes out of the chapel to bless the offerings and chant “*Let us pray to the Lord for fertility of the land and peaceful times*”.

The sun is now setting, filling the sky with glowing colours. The Eleusinian sanctuary was, indeed, built in a unique location. The burning candles on the loaves of bread and the candlelight reflected on all the faces looking down at the ground transform the small churchyard of *Panagitsa* into a monastic place of worship. One could say that the worshippers show the religious respect, emotions and reactions one may come across in a rejoicing monastic space, where ancient and new co-exist amicably. After all, it is not so long ago – in the 70s – when a friend’s grandmother said she lit “one candle for the Virgin and another for Saint Demeter”.

Once the sun has finally set and the service has ended, the baskets with the loaves are placed on the ancient marble ruins and are then joyfully cut and shared amongst the congregation, while wishes are exchanged. Every year, new visitors are astounded by how evocative the place is. For centuries, this spot has served as a place of worship and invocation towards the Goddess Demeter and the Virgin Mary, in whose identity all the mothers of antiquity were reincarnated. In Eleusis, in particular, according to written records, all invocations to the Virgin were made without ever forgetting Demeter, through identification.

The service having ended, the congregation now descends the hill treading more

lightly, the baskets almost empty. Quietly, joyfully. Every single member of the congregation has kept “some bread for home”, folded neatly in a white napkin. All those making an offering have saved a few pieces for some family member, a neighbour, a friend, who were unable to attend. A blessed piece of bread, to spread the Holy Grace.

Outside the main entrance to the archaeological site, “*To Adrachi*” [«*To Adράχτι*» - “The Spindle”], having prepared the “*polyspori*” [πολυσπόρι], are offering it to all those descending from the hilltop. It is a mixture of grains, legumes and spices. Up until the early 20th century, in Eleusis, it was regularly prepared, while the Eleusinian society was still predominantly rural. The custom of the *polyspori* faded away and was revived in 2014 as an expression of contemporary local cultural heritage. Participants ask for it and find pleasure in tasting it.

Having partaken of this final “offer”, people long for conversation and contact. The congregation talk about the service, the priest, the *psaltes* (cantors), the weather, the baskets of loaves, the latest town news. Several people prolong the amicable gatherings at one of the charming establishments on the main square or the large pedestrian area of Eleusis.

It is just after 5 in the afternoon. Yet, within barely two hours, the participants, as well as the place, have experienced a deeply significant event.

4. Location/facilities and equipment connected to the performance/practice of the ICH element.

On the hilltop above the antiquities, overlooking the *telesterion* [τελεστήριον] of the Eleusinian Mysteries and the *Ploutoneion* [Πλουτώνειον] – namely, the entrance to the cave through which, as the myth has it, Persephone was led to the underworld by Pluto – stands the chapel of the Presentation of the Virgin Mary at the Temple, known locally as *Panagitsa* [Παναγίτσα - Little Virgin]. Kalliope Papaggeli, in her book *Eleusis, the archaeological site and the Museum*, states: “Following the Sacred Way, the visitor sees to his right, straight after the Ploutoneion, a tiered platform, carved in the steep rock. The post-byzantine chapel of the Virgin Mary, another landmark of the site, stands at the hilltop. Indeed, the hill of the archaeological site and this little chapel dominate the city centre and are visible from most spots.”

The chapel dates from the Ottoman era. It is a simple, stone-built, stuccoed small oblong structure. Its only “ornament” is the small curved section which protrudes towards the East, marking the area of the *Ieron* [Ἱερόν - Sanctuary] externally, with roof tiles placed in a semi-circle. One of two small perpendicular openings is to be found on the Sanctuary. The other one is directly opposite, above the entrance. There are no windows. It has a simple, pitched roof in a gray/off-white colour. The date of construction can only be determined indirectly.

Despite its particularly austere exterior, the interior has exceptional frescoes which, regretfully, have been severely damaged. Besides the scratches and the erasing of the saints’ eyes, unfortunately a large number of names have been carved on the walls and the lower part of the walls has been whitewashed as an unfortunate form of embellishment, which was attempted at some moment in the past. All the frescoes and the dome are covered in soot.

The baskets with loaves are placed on the ground, in the churchyard. They take up considerable space on this small plateau, and are lined up next to each other, carefully, so that no space is wasted. The worshippers stand around the baskets, forming a natural barrier to the breeze which usually blows, so the little candles placed on the loaves, which have been lit at the right moment during the service, are not extinguished.

As already mentioned, following Evensong, as the worshippers exit the archaeological site, they come across the long table laid by “*To Adrachi*”, the Folklore Society, where they find the *Polyspori*. On 20 November, the weather is usually quite chilly, while the climb and descent to and from the archaeological site, combined with prolonged standing during the service, bring on a pleasant exhaustion. This means, that the offer of the *polyspori* is more than welcome as a pick-me-up at the end of the celebration.

Since 2014, when the long table was first set up with the pots of the women-members of “*To Adrachi*”, to distribute the broth with the grains, there have been gradual changes, aiming primarily to maintain the necessary conditions of hygiene, thus reflecting the tendencies of our times. Since 2018, the *polyspori* is less of a slurry, herbs are added, and it is served immediately after its preparation in heat-insulating cups with lids. These new practices make it easier to carry the *polyspori* home to those family members who were unable to attend.

The *polyspori* is prepared within the premises of the Folklore Society Museum, in the morning of 20 November. Lentils, beans, wheat, chickpeas, are cooked separately, enough so as to retain some firmness. They are then all boiled together, with sugar. Once the mixture has cooled sufficiently, cooked maize is added, together with raisins, grape molasses (*petimezi* – *πετιμέζι*), cinnamon, and pomegranate seeds. Added grated orange peel lends its aroma to the *polyspori*.

Preparations have a festive air. Those members of the Society who, in the previous days, have taken on duties for the preparation, but also relatives, neighbours with pre-school age children, will drop by the Society’s premises, even briefly, to inspect, greet the members, ask questions, and help themselves to some of the food that the members have brought with them, and have a short drink. There is genuine excitement at participating in the local feast preparations.

5. Products or material goods in general, which are the outcome of the ICH element’s performance/practice

No products or material goods are derived.

6. Historical facts relating to the ICH element

The leading mystic rite of the ancient world, the Eleusinian mysteries, took place between the 15th and 23rd day of the month of *Voedromion* [*Βοηδρομιών*] at the exact location where the present-day ceremony is held.

Mythology specifies the Thriassian Plain, together with its neighbouring Rario Plain to the west, irrigated by the Eleusinian Kifissos, as the place where the Goddess Demeter taught Triptolemos, the Prince of Eleusis, how to cultivate the land, offering him a grain of wheat as a gift. On an ancient Eleusinian coin, Triptolemos is depicted on a winged chariot, holding sheaves of wheat, ready to fly around the Universe to spread the sacred grain. This is narrated in the famous Homeric Hymn to the Goddess Demeter.

The offering of bread (*artoklasia* - *αρτοκλασία*) and the *polyspori*, are a joint worship ritual in Christian acts of worship, as experienced by Christians today. However, there is an ancient equivalent to the bread offered in Eleusis. As noted by Ms K. Papaggeli: “it seems possible that on the 20th of the month of Voedromion, sacrifices took place in the Sanctuary; ... it is surmised, that is when the offer was made of the “*pelanos*” [*πέλανος*], a large bread prepared with wheat from the Rarian Plain in Eleusis”. (Papaggeli, K., 2002, *Eleusina: O arxhaeologikos choros kai to Mouseio* [*Ελευσίνα: Ο αρχαιολογικός Χώρος και το Μουσείο / Eleusis: the Archaeological Site and the Museum*])

In the month of *Boedromion*, before the Great Eleusinian Mysteries commenced, the organizers, through an invitation issued to all Panhellenes, encouraged all known cities of the world to bring their offers of fruits to Eleusis, in honour of the goddess.

Mentions of *panspermia* are connected to the existence of an oversized (three times the size of a human) Caryatid [*kistoforos karyatis* - κιστοφόρος καρυάτις – a caryatid carrying a *kystis*, a cylindrical box] the greater part of which was found buried in the archaeological site, known – until 1801 when she was stolen – as Saint Demeter. This statue, which held a prominent place in the lives of inhabitants, is frequently mentioned by local and foreign researchers and travellers; they noted that farmers from Eleusis and the broader region would offer fruits and would invite the village priest to pray “for fertility of the fruits of the earth” lighting candles and frankincense.

The blessed grain was mixed with the remaining seeds, to ensure having a bountiful crop, a common practice in the external worshipping rites of the Eleusinian Mysteries. There, too, the blessed seeds of the Sanctuary’s large storerooms, were sold to the initiated, to enhance their own crops.

From the moment that Christianity was established as the official religion, the old religious centres declined. Numerous ancient temples were converted to Christian churches. However, collective memory and oral tradition of the inhabitants of such religious centres and broader regions, clearly, did not adapt in the same manner, especially in eras when humans were still inextricably bound to nature, since their existence was experientially connected to it. Oral tradition was transmitted in a more poignant fashion, as an element of social communication.

The city of Eleusis was destroyed in 396, by Alaric (Alaricus) and the Visigoths. During the 4th and 5th century A.D., the city retained, almost intact, the form it had over the last years of the Roman era. From that point, and up until the 13th century, there are no historical references, or none have been discovered/researched yet.

Towards the end of the 14th century, there was an increase in the population of the region, as a result of the settlement of *Arvanites* [*Αρβανίτες*]. The first collective settlement of *Arvanites* took place by invitation of the Emperor Ioannes Kantakouzenos (1341-1355). The first settlement of Attica took place in 1382 during the Frankish occupation, once again, upon invitation.

It is wonderful to come across sources, which provide evidence by foreign or Greek travellers, regarding celebrations, events, beliefs and practices of daily life, or legends connecting to such an extent the long-suffering society of *Kountouriotēs Arvanites* [*Κουντουριώτες Αρβανίτες* - from Kountoura in Northwestern Attica), following the liberation from Ottoman rule, to the Sanctuary of Demeter. Anyway, the *Kountouriotēs* built their huts right on the archaeological site. Later, probably around the 18th century, they built the chapel of the Presentation of the Virgin Mary, *Panagitsa*.

“In many parts of the Greek world, the feast of the Presentation of the Virgin at the Temple, still marks the end or the middle of the sowing season, which is why she is also called *Aposporitissa* [*Αποσπορίτισσα* - at the end of the sowing season] or *Mesosporitissa* [*Μεσοσπορίτισσα* - in the middle of the sowing season], and “*Aposodeia*” [*Αποσοδεία*], considering her to be the protectress of crops. Christians thus symbolically introduce “*polysporia*” to the church of the Presentation of the Virgin, following ancient customs. In the past, Eleusinians, having prepared the *polysporia* at home, would bring them to church, with a loaf of bread and, following centuries-old traditions, would distribute them to the congregation, keeping part of them for home, animals and field.... M. Nilssen characterizes this worshipping rite of *polysporia-panspermia*, which falls within the context of folk religion, as one of the most typical examples of continuation through the centuries, and Dim. Loukatos

aptly notes that it is “*panspermia* of thanks” that is offered to the Virgin/Demeter, “for the good that has been and the good that must continue” (Kamilaki-Polymerou, A. “*Apo tin panspermia ton archaeon sta fihinoporina polysporia ton neoellinon*” [“*Από την πανσπερμία των αρχαίων στα φθινοπωρινά πολυσπόρια των νεοελλήνων*” - From the panspermia of antiquity to the autumn polysporia of modern Greeks).

As E. Liapis points out, women frequently confused the Virgin with the Goddess Demeter. In fact, it was common for her to be referred to as Saint Demeter. “They believed more in Saint Demeter.” The same author, who has done extensive research on Eleusis, its history and its unique cultural characteristics, mentions the particular impression made on him: “inhabitants lived simultaneously in two eras, their own contemporary one and antiquity”.

How powerful the presence of the ancient goddess was in farmers’ daily life can be noted in narratives and living myths and legends, which were omnipresent in their social life and worship, until after World War I. Evangellos Liapis refers to an excerpt from an Eleusinian folk tale: “On the holy day, when the girl who has travelled to foreign lands is set free by bandits, Saint Demeter will come to life and as in the past, with her daughter Persephone, she will embrace and kiss her, because she was not offered pomegranate seeds to eat. Priests will come out, wearing their sacred vestments and church bells will ring out on their own...”.

Within the same framework, falls an old dance at *Kallichoro Frear* [*Καλλίχορον Φρέαρ* - Well of the beautiful dance], which was danced up until the early 20th century only by married women, clearly demonstrating the guilt-free invocation to the goddess Demeter, despite the omnipresent Christian religiosity.

Gradually, the first industrial plants appeared in the area. From the 30s onwards, the value of agricultural production gradually declined as a result of the steady growth of the industrial sector, which drastically altered both economic and social structures, as well as the natural landscape. The last straw was the construction of the airport on the Thriasian Plain in 1936. With great sorrow, farmers had to accept the fact: “The Thriasian plain was our whole life. We lived with it, we ate the bread it generously offered us, and we praised God and Saint Demeter” (Liapis, 1993: 64).

Following the enclosure of the archaeological site, which meant it was no longer freely accessible, and the conversion of the Thriasian Plain into an industrial zone, everything became a silent memory, expressed through the lighting of a candle on the eve of the Virgin’s feast on 20 November, during Evensong, within the archaeological site.

7. The significance of the element nowadays

a. What is the significance of the element to the community/its bearers?

As members of the community of Eleusis, we felt the need to decipher the deep love and pure joy that the city’s inhabitants, and visitors also, have felt and shared since childhood for the ritual of *Panagitsa*. It goes back to our tender age, when our mothers or grandmothers thought it inconceivable not to attend the Evensong of 20 November.

It had already been many years since our community had ceased being a rural one. Its connection to land had been lost. We had lost our understanding of labour, the agony and the fear of crops being destroyed, as well as the joy of fecundity. We became estranged from the earth and the need to invoke divine powers for its flowering and sprouting. Furthermore, World War II and its aftermath interceded, followed by industrialization, the construction boom, consumerism. All that remained was our love for this festive event and the wish to light a candle on 20 November.

b. What is the significance of the element for contemporary Greek society?

In Eleusis, we have the privilege, on a daily basis, of gazing upon, walking amongst or visiting a place of exceptional importance. We could wish for nothing better than to increase the number of our fellow citizens and the broader community that are able to deeply comprehend the centuries-old origins of these fragments that have reached us through time, so we may preserve the celebration of our beloved *Panagitsa* in the most profound manner.

We do not believe that the preservation of customs is an obligation. The option to participate in the continuation of customs is a critical process. All we need to do is to offer everyone, our children in particular, the opportunity to learn. We can help them discover the depth of our traditions, our history and mythology, so they may broaden their horizons. This process only holds good things in store for the future.

We ought to point out that “*Agelastos Petra*” [«*Αγέλαστος Πέτρα*» - the “Mourning Rock”], the documentary by Filippos Koutsaftis (2000) was the inspiration behind our initiative. Highlighting scenes from current daily life and the possible link to the historical framework of the place, in an imposing, expressive manner, he sensitized, reminded, taught and eventually inspired the community, at a local and broader scale.

c. Did the community participate in the preparation for the element’s inscription in the National Registry of Intangible Cultural Heritage, and how?

The Society members are Eleusinians, born and raised in Eleusis. They all have personal memories from the festive Evensong. As they grew up, with the passing of time, and looking at the custom in greater depth, they highlighted it and revived the preparation of the *polyspori*. Folklore experts became involved, highlighting the connection between old and new ritual.

With the encouragement of the Ministry of Culture and Sports, members of “*Adrachti*” Society undertook the documentation of the custom, guided by their own experiences and a large number of books and texts. The Society also collected older members’ oral testimonies concerning the celebrations and the pervasive atmosphere of reverence, as experienced by themselves or their parents.

8. Safeguarding/Promotion of the element

a. How is the element passed down to younger generations today?

- From one generation to the next, through participation in the event.
- Through related actions of “*Adrachti*”, such as:
 - Organization of School Competitions on a related topic, with the participation of regional schools.
 - Distribution of an information leaflet regarding the custom.
 - Gradual highlighting of “*Adrachti*” Folklore Society Museum of Eleusis as a meeting point on 20 November, for the preparation of the *polyspori*.

b. Measures taken in the past or being implemented at present for the

safeguarding/ promotion of the element (at a local, regional or broader level).

- The custom is safeguarded by the inhabitants themselves, with renewed ardour each year. Since the establishment of “*Adrachti*” Folklore Society, in 2002, actions have been taken to comprehend and apply a scientific approach to the custom’s rituals.
- The collaboration of Dr. A. Polymerou-Kamilaki was requested and “*Adrachti*”, with support from the Municipality of Eleusis, published an information leaflet on the Mesosporitissa Virgin.
- Through the preparation of the *polyspori*, “*Adrachti*” has highlighted an aspect of the custom which had become obsolete. In the morning of 20 November, at the Society’s Museum, in Iakchou Street, the mix of cereals and pulses is prepared for distribution after Evensong.
- In 2019, urged by the competent Directorate of the Ministry of Culture, it was decided by “*Adrachti*” to proceed with the written documentation of the custom, in the format of the present Bulletin of Intangible Cultural Heritage Element”.

c. Proposed Measures for Safeguarding/Promotion for Future Implementation (at a local, regional or broader scale)

The inscription of the custom in the National Registry for Intangible Cultural Heritage of Greece and, in turn, in UNESCO’s Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, will contribute towards the safeguarding, analysis, comprehension and promotion of the element.

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10. Additional Documentation

- a. Texts (sources, archival evidence, etc.)
- b. Maps
- c. Audiovisual evidence (plans, potographs, sound archives, videos, etc.) (*See Appendix 10*)
- c. Online resources (hyperlinks)

<https://www.kairatos.com.gr/Elefsis.pdf> - *Eleusis, the archaeological site and the Museum*, by Kalliope Paraggeli

[Αγέλαστος Πέτρα, Φίλιππος Κουτσαφτής](#)

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11. Particulars of the Bulletin's authors

- a. Authors' names: "Adrachti" Eleusis Folklore Society, through its members Evdokia Karavasili, Pantelitsa Tsalimopoulou
- b Capacity of Author(s): Evdokia Karavasili – Secretary of "Adrachti" Cultural Society of Eleusis, Pantelitsa Tsalimopoulou, Chairperson of "Adrachti" Folklore Society of Eleusis.
- c. Place and date of the Bulletin's compilation: Eleusis, May 2018 – June 2020

12. Last additions / updating of the Bulletin

