Between Tradition and Innovation:
The Late Archaic Telesterion at Eleusis Reconsidered

The five successive Telesteria in the Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore at Eleusis had to fulfil the needs of a very special mystic cult and therefore differ essentially from the standard Greek temple plan. Consequently the handbooks of architecture do not examine them within their chronological and architectural context, but separately, usually at the end, as a special building type. This seems to be the main reason why the significance of the late archaic Telesterion has escaped so far scholarly attention; since the first thorough examination of the building by Ferdinand Noack, that was published in 1927, it has not been again at the focus of any research. However the late archaic Telesterion is not only the first building at Eleusis, that incorporates the characteristics of the building type of the Telesterion, but also the first Greek hypostyle hall and the first roofed theatre of the ancient world.

This essay is an attempt to comprehend the architecture of this building, whose construction seems to have been completed during the last decade of the 6th century B.C. Examined within the framework of its contemporary monumental architecture the Telesterion exhibits a series of peculiarities and innovative features; it is not only its large size in combination with the square proportions of its interior space, the roof of which is supported by multiple rows of columns, but also the prostyle and multiple-columned arrangement of its front, the Ionic order that is applied for the first time in the interior of a Doric building and the multiple rows of seats, that appear also for the first time in a building's interior.

The analysis of these characteristics, as well of the whole, indicates on the one hand a strong connection with the Cycladic architecture, which has been also left unnoticed, since Noack's study dates long before the latter was made known to research. The spacious interior, the lack of peristasis, the multiple-columned front, the Ionic order, the use of marble, the two-stepped krepis and the axial row of columns are nowadays recognized as typical for the Cycladic architecture of the 6th century. On the other hand other features of the Telesterion do not occur previously and should be considered as plain Attic novelties. This conclusion can be reached under the consideration of another building type, that was also invented in late 6th century Attica: the one of the open theatre. The large size, the square proportions, the multiple seats and the general pericentral spatial organisation are the features that give to the Telesterion its theatrical character and are common to both building types.

The topic is of crucial importance not only because it advances the understanding of the Attic
architecture that followed in the 5th century, but mostly, because it gives a valuable insight into the still poorly understood Attic architecture of the late 6th century, revealing its highly experimental character and its freedom in architectural planning.

Ioulia Kaoura, M.A.
PhD Candidate at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
Institut für Archäologie - Winckelmann Institut
Unter den Linden 6
10099 Berlin
kaouraio@hu-berlin.de