

Explore the Importance of the Thesmophoria in our Understanding of the Role of Women in Athenian Religion

I have chosen to do women and religion as a subject for my essay as it is something I have not investigated as much in my module. I was given the title of Thesmophoria, which I know is a celebration for Greek women in a religious practice or ceremony. To learn more, research needs to be done on who exactly took part, where did it happen, what kind of rituals took place during the festival and why was it celebrated. Research will be conducted through the university library, Brill's New Pauly and the Loeb Classical Library. Thesmophoria takes away with one hand, what it gives with the other.¹

Thesmophoria probably first appeared for women around the festival of Dionysia which took place in late March, early April. The festival of Thesmophoria was celebrated by women about womanhood and their sexual identities.² In the late fifth century Athens, women had to prove that they were legally valid and had contracted a legitimate union with an Athenian who had full citizenship and could exercise their full political rights, in order to participate in Thesmophoria.³

The festive for Thesmophoria begin on the eleventh day of Pyanopsion and ends on the thirteenth day. The festival lasted for three days and each had their own purpose. The first day was called "Road Up" which represented the procession and assembling of all the women to celebrate. The second day was called "Fast" due to the women abstaining from eating any food and sat on the floor throughout the process. The third and final day was called "The Day of Fair Offspring" which referred to the bearing of children.⁴ This shows even when women were celebrating themselves and their sexual identities, they still celebrated themselves as child bearers and nothing particularly or dominantly more than that. This is not necessarily a negative way of thinking about themselves in the ancient world as that was their role, however it is not a feminist view that we would consider celebrating today on its own. In today's society we would celebrate a lot more than women being useful for only childbearing.

Although Thesmophoria was celebrated over Greece and many different polities, it was mainly recorded to be celebrated in Athens. The festival was held on the Pnyx Hill which was where the Assembly of Citizens would gather and was the central institution of Athenian democracy and culture. The women would make their own huts and tents on the hill to sleep and live in during the three days celebration.⁵

It can be assumed those who could celebrate or do any rituals were held in reserve for married women and especially for the upper-class women. Rituals were directed by two female officials called *Archousai*.⁶ Ritual representations of women's sexual and procreative identity was very common when it came to the festival of Thesmophoria. There were two parts to the rituals that included both unmarried girls, known as *parthenoi*, and adult women called *gynaikes*. The young girls were represented in rituals to have possession of

¹ Goff, Citizen Bacchae, page 227.

² Aristophanes and Halliwell, Clouds, Women at Thesmophoria and Frogs, page 87-89.

³ Detienne, The Gardens of Adonis, page 78.

⁴ Versnel, Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion, page 235.

⁵ Blundell, Women in Ancient Greece, page 163.

⁶ Versnel, Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion, page 235.

Explore the Importance of the Thesmophoria in our Understanding of the Role of Women in Athenian Religion

being a desirable object and of erotic and sexual display. Adult women that were married were given a series of positions on a spectrum of chastity. Some were also given a license to perform rituals that they could occupy over the ritual year.⁷ The sexual taboo was not a particularly common one in ancient Greek religion and cults. This was mainly due to the fact, since sexuality was free and fluid, however, men could only marry women and vis versa. This in turn helped create the comedy play *Thesmophoriazuae* or “Women Celebrating the Thesmophoria” written by Aristophanes.⁸

Thesmophoria is one of the most widespread Greek festivals, not only celebrated in Athens but the rest of Greece. The festival is held in autumn before the sowing of seeds and to celebrate harvest as well. The purpose for the festival is not only to celebrate the women and their identities but the principle cult form for Demeter.⁹ Demeter is the goddess of agriculture, mother of Persephone (married to Hades) and both the sister and consort of Zeus.¹⁰

In conclusion, from my research I have found and learnt much more about Thesmophoria. It is now known that only upper class and married women who had proven they were connected to a man with citizenship could take part in the celebration. It has also been found that although it was a widespread festival and celebratory three days across ancient Greece, it was more common and popular to be celebrated in Athens. Thesmophoria was also connected to the agricultural goddess Demeter and that women were child bearers as well as focused on motherhood whereas girls were sexual, desirable objects for affection. It can be argued that Thesmophoria is not about the celebration of women before the sowing of seeds or harvest, but a way of men suppressing women and making them think it is such an honor to have these days to rejoice in only the things they were told they could do in their society. It is also the same of younger girls as they are objectified to men looking at them as objects of sexual desire rather than seeing them as people and young women. It is a festival celebrated by women, controlled by men and male ideas of what women should be, not what women could or wanted to be or do.

⁷ Goff, *Citizen Bacchae*, page 84-85.

⁸ Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, page 163.

⁹ Versnel, *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion*, page 235.

¹⁰ Parrott-Sheffer, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, page 1.

Explore the Importance of the Thesmophoria in our Understanding of the Role of Women in Athenian Religion

Bibliography

- Barbara Goff, *Citizen Bacchae: Women's Ritual Practice in Ancient Greece*. 2004. University of California Press, page 227 and 84-85.
- Aristophanes and Stephan Halliwell, *Clouds, Women at the Thesmophoria and frogs: A Verse Translation Volume*. 2015. Oxford University Press, pages 87-89.
- Marcel Detienne, *The Gardens of Adonis: Spices in Greek Mythology*. Translated by Janet Lloyd. 1994. Princeton University Press, New Jersey, page 78.
- H.S. Versnel, *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion: Transition and Reversal in Myth and Ritual*, Second Edition. 1990. E.J. Brill, Liden, The Netherlands, page 235.
- Sue Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*. 1995. Harvard University Press, Massachusetts, page 163.
- Chelsey Parrott-Sheffer, *Demeter the Goddess*, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 1998. Article Online, updated in 2019 by Aakanksha Gaur.