

Studies

ANCIENT HISTORY

THESMOPHORIA¹

Abstract: Ancient Age women were in a social order in which they do not have any legal rights nor a social status. On the contrary, these women are also at the forefront in the religious activities. Even some cults were exclusively open for only women. The best example for this is the rituals, which were done in the name of Demeter.

The name of Goddess of Earth and fertility –Demeter- originates from the “Gemeter” that means the Mother Earth. She is from the second generation of gods and goddesses and daughter of Kronos and Rhea. The offspring of her relationship with Zeus who is also her brother is called Kore or Persephone. In the structural context, Demeter is a derivation of Earth and fertility goddesses of Neolithic times.

The Daughter of Demeter Kore-Persephone was kidnapped by Hades and became the Goddess of underworld. The original name of the goddess was Kore, which means the “daughter”. Hades named her “Persephone” after she became the goddess of the underworld.

The mysteries’ of the Demeter were taped to the myth of Demeter and her daughter Persephone. The time Demeter remains separated from Persephone was perceived as winter while the time when she meets Persephone was perceived as spring.

Thesmophoria is one of the religious rituals, which were organized for Demeter. Swine sacrificing, fast and purifications were the main rituals of Thesmophoria.

Keywords: Demeter, Kore, Persephone, Thesmophoria, Eleusis Mysteria’s, Woman in ancient time

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14795/j.v1i4.89>
ISSN 2360 – 266X
ISSN–L 2360 – 266X

Thesmophoria is the most famous one in within the festivals that are organized for Goddess Demeter in the Greek world. The festival takes his name from one of the attributions of Demeter “Thesmophoros”. This festival was celebrated 3 days in grain planting period and according to Athens calendar, these 3 days are 11th, 12th and 13th days of Pynapsion (which fits with October and/or November).² Thesmophoros is the “carriage of Thesmoi” and Thesmos means the ‘positioned’; in general it is an “act” or a “rule” and more specifically it means “act setter, act carrier, order provider”. This attribution to Demeter has been ascribed due to its role as the Goddess of marriage.³ Also, it has been thought that the word thesmophoria comes from the “thesmo-“ that means to deposit and “phor-“ brought forth.⁴

Thesmophoria rituals have features related with rural and the underworld. Eleusis mysteries emerged as a practice of the cult legend of Kore’s abduction that is aroused from the first literary source of Demeter’s

¹ This article is part of my MA thesis: Religious Rituals of Women in the Ancient Times – *Thesmophoria – Case Study*, defended at the University of Bursa in 2011.

² HARRISON 1955, 121; MIKALSON 2005, 144; THOMSON 1983, 246.

³ SINA 2004, 44; THOMSON 1983, 247.

⁴ MIKALSON 2005, 144-145.

specific mythic structure Homer's "Tribute to Demeter". This mythic structure is also presented as the cause of the Thesmophoria.

Thesmophoria lasts three days, first days are called Anados, second is Nesteia and the last day is called Kaligeneia.⁵ In some other places the month Pyanopsiaon in which this feast is celebrated might be called Demetrios. In these months, Thesmophoria was celebrated in different times in different cities. For instance in Syracuse, Thesmophoria was celebrated for 10 days and they were starting their celebrations one month before than Athens. Besides the differences in between the celebration times, it is known that the feast was happening when the crops are given to earth.⁶

It is thought that Thesmophoria is a festival of which the central aim is to increase the agricultural fertility. Its main features are swine sacrificing and the rituals to increase the agricultural fertility. Likewise, most of fertility rituals and festivals related with agriculture in Ancient Greek, also in Thesmophoria the main role belongs to women.⁷ In such a ritual related with earth and fertility there is no role for men. It is definitely forbidden to attend to this festival and even to dare it were having serious punishments. In this festival, privacy is crucial and there are legends telling that men who attended to these festivals without any permission were been castrated. For instance, there is a legend says that the King of Cyrene - Battos tried to attend these feasts through wearing women dresses and therefore he was emasculated.⁸ It is also forbidden for men to listen any story about these festivals too.

It is not well known how the women who were allowed to attend to the feast were gathering. It is suggested that these women were having high status and on the other hand, the prostitutes were not able to attend to the feast. Three ancient authors – Aristophanes, Isaios and Lukianos – enlightens this topic more detailed. Aristophanes names the attender women as "eugeneis". This word is used for plants and animals as well as for humans. It means "the one who owns decent features through heredity". Isaios writes that only the women who live a clean life were permitted enter the temple and watch the religious ceremonies. Lukianos claims that the feast was not only open to married women but also young girls, even mothers and daughters were attending together.⁹ However, overall, there is no certain definition about the attenders.

In Athens, this festival was celebrated in the temples in the city as well as outside the city. It was one of the rare occasions, when women of the house go out for camping near the Temple of Demeter. Likewise in Eleusis mysteries, these feasts are also been thought as the celebration of the new beginning of the agricultural cycle and especially for showing thankfulness for the grains.¹⁰

The festival is also elaborated with sexuality; phallus symbols and obscene jokes take place in this festival. This

situation makes us think that these rituals are related with both agricultural production and human fertility.¹¹ Because Demeter was accepted as the Thesmophoros -who makes law for the women-, this feast is also perceived as a kind of a celebration of preparation to marriage and motherhood. Modern researchers are impressed by the autonomy of the women in this camp that is also called as „provisional own city-states”, their standing opposed to men, and the obscene jokes and behavior.¹²

Just like in Demeter Cult, swine sacrificing is very important in Thesmophoria Feast. The belief that swine shepherd Euboleus was there and taken to underworld with the Persephone in the abduction of hers by Hades, has been shown as a reason to that. In Eleusis, Eubolous or Zeus Boleus and Zeus Euboleus as in local language, is respected in the first day of Thesmophoria with Demeter and Kore.¹³ One other reason of swine sacrificing is that swine is the symbol of fertility. As an example, this connection Thomson writes that the word *-khiros-* that is used to define the swine is also used for *pudenda muliebria* (vagina) colloquially.¹⁴ In addition to that, blood of swine also compensates with the menstrual blood *-katharmata-* or the blood comes within the childbirth. Previously, there was a primitive practice of secret distribution of 'katharmata' in order to increase the productivity of the seeds, when this *katharmata* had replaced with the swine blood, women's *katharmata* and sexuality becomes to be seen as pollution.¹⁵ Additionally, researches made in the Eleusis earth shows that sacrificed swine gives productivity to the earth, and this land still keeps it productivity after 1500 years from the last sacrificing activity.

Among the ancient Greek women, two of them are chosen to lead the group, providing the happenings of the rituals and to support the Demeter Priest. Additionally, these selected women have to bring 4 liters of barley, ear, barley meal, ear meal, dried fruits, and 3 liters wine, half liter olive oil and honey; and 1 liter white sesame and hash; cheese which should be more than 450 gr, 900 gr onion; one torch and lastly cash money. In addition, all of these should be prodded by their husbands.¹⁶

During the celebrations women do not put on their hairs flowers because of the myth of Persephone's kidnapping while collecting flowers. Additionally, pomegranate, which is definitely forbidden to eat in Eleusis Mysteries, have a different meaning in Thesmophoria. Women are allowed to eat only pomegranate in their fasting times during the feast. Only touch the pomegranates that felt down to earth was forbidden because of the myth of the pomegranate tree emerged from the blood drops of Dionysus.¹⁷

There are other rituals only done by the women, however the exact dates for those rituals are unknown. For instance, one of them is thrashing softly each other with a whip made of Morton wool and it is thought that this ritual was for increase the fertility of both earth and the women.

⁵ HARRISON 1955, 121; MIKALSON 2005, 144; THOMSON 1983, 246; THOMAS 1998, 282.

⁶ DILLON 2002, 111.

⁷ MIKALSON 2005, 144-145.

⁸ THOMAS 1998, 282.

⁹ SINA 2004, 45.

¹⁰ MIKALSON 2005, 144-145.

¹¹ MIKALSON 2005, 144-145.

¹² MIKALSON 2005, 144-145.

¹³ THOMAS 1998, 281.

¹⁴ THOMSON 1983, 247.

¹⁵ THOMSON 1983, 247.

¹⁶ MIKALSON 2005, 144.

¹⁷ For details, see KERÉNYI 1967, 140.

The other was sacrificing the redemption sacrificial animal and lastly the dogma and Khalkis chase rituals depends on women chasing each other without knowing who chase whom.¹⁸

The first day of the camp was lasting with settling (Kathados & Anodos). The second day was the feasting day (Nesteia), and in the third and last day "Kalligeneia" was celebrated. Rituals in this camp are extremely secret likewise in Eleusis and the known facts about this topic are quite few. However, it has been thought that the main ceremony was happening during the re-opening the megarons -the deep pits in earth in which the swine were buried in the last ceremony- and taking out the bones of these pigs that had been sacrificed in the previous feast. These bones were putted onto Demeter's altar and mixed with various cereal seeds.¹⁹ Second day was lasting with fasting as a requiem to separation, and third day was lasting with celebrations for reunion of the mother and the daughter reminds the phrase in the Eleusis Mysteries and the core of the rituals that is separation and reunion of Demeter and Kore-Persephone.²⁰

1. Kathados & Anodos

The celebrations on the 11th of the month were called Kathados or Anados. It was celebrated in Athens. There is an information about why this day was called like that; because the women were starting to walk to Phnyks month this movement is called *anados* (moving up) and *kathados* (moving down).²¹

2. Nesteia

Second day of the festival and the camp was the mourning and fasting day. This fasting is like a requiem to the separation of Demeter and her daughter Kore-Persephone.²² The twelfth day of Pyanopsion is called Nesteia (Fasting day) or middle day. Women were sitting all the daylong and the lead to researchers to think they were imitating the sadness of Goddess Demeter sitting on the 'unsmiling rock'.²³

3. Kalligeneia

The last day of the Thesmophoria is called Kalligeneia (beautiful birth).²⁴ As can be understood from the name, it is related with the hope of healthy childbirths and the expectation of good harvest of the seeds. Additionally, this day symbolizes the reunion of Demeter and Korea-Persephone.

PLACES OF THESMOPHORIA AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA

Thesmophoria feasts were celebrated from Sicily to Anatolia, North Africa and the entire Greek world to the Black Sea with local adaptations. The written sources document it in Gambreion (Anatolia), Ephesus, Smyrna and Miletus.²⁵

In Hellenistic period, the cult of Demeter cult in the Pergamon is thought to be focused on Thesmophoria.²⁶ In Apollonis period, Thesmophoria celebration has become much more prominent and the temple was rebuilt in this period and dedicated to Demeter and Korea as *Thesmophoroi*. In the votive inscription on Propylons of this temple it is written that "Queen Apollonis, dedicated this stoa and the rooms to Demeter and Kore". The reason of attribution to Thesmophoria is that the usage of the name Korea as Demeter's daughter just like in Thesmophoria. Other Archaeological data are little pots called hydriskoi found in Demeter Sanctuary. It has been thought that these pots were used in the second day of Thesmophoria for water to symbolize the purity that is necessary for that day. In addition to that, two votives that found in the sanctuary are focused on Thesmophoria; the first dedicated to Menophon 's wife because of her kindness and well-being and the second dedicated to mother Philotera by her sons. This situation is associated with Thesmophoria in which women are forefront as wives and mothers. Also in one of the Demeter statues that is dated to Hellenistic period, Demeter was depicted with Kore whom is linked to Demeter in Thesmophoria rather than Persephone.²⁷

The Temple that is situated in Pirene, which is another important cult area, dedicated to Demeter and Kore likewise in Pergamon. Additionally, sacrifice pit, which was structured at the same time with establishment of the city, shows that Thesmophoria has an importance since the establishment of the city.²⁸ Again, similar to that, the foundings which were found in the sanctuary at Knidos indicate that Thesmophoria festival had celebrated for a long time in that place.²⁹

In the Demeter Sanctuary in Kaunos ancient city which is one of the Caria cities in which Egyptian religious iconography was been used since 6th century and Isis-Osiris couple was identified with Demeter-Dionysus, many bonds belongs to swines that were sacrificed have been found. Also terra-cotta figures depicting women bringing swines are found again in this sanctuary.³⁰

Many bothroi (sacrifice pits) that are identified with Thesmophoria Feasts, and fountains that are used in the time of fasting are found in different Demeter Sanctuaries throughout Anatolia and this shows that Thesmophoria was celebrated commonly on Anatolia.³¹

CONCLUSION

Ancient Greek Civilization had been placed differently as the roots of their civilization by the western societies due to their contributions to arts and philosophy. However, when it is studied in a social context they seem a society, which is quite patriarchal, and additionally women were not able to participate into social life except being "subjects" to philosophy, politics and arts. In terms of religion, myth-originated Greek religion has structure that is composed of a central dominant "sky god-Zeus-father god" and many god and goddesses. While in social terms women

¹⁸ SINA 2004, 44.

¹⁹ MIKALSON 2005, 144-145.

²⁰ MIKALSON 2005, 144-145.

²¹ SINA 2004, 43.

²² MIKALSON 2005, 144-145.

²³ HARRISON 1955, 127.

²⁴ HARRISON 1955, 121; MIKALSON 2005, 144; SINA 2004, 44.

²⁵ THOMAS 1998, 280.

²⁶ THOMAS 1998, 283.

²⁷ THOMAS 1998, 292-293

²⁸ THOMAS 1998, 289

²⁹ ÖZGAN 2002, 98

³⁰ BULBA 2011, 23

³¹ THOMAS 1998, 288

were kept restrictive frames without any social function, in religious events they were able to have important roles and additionally the biggest responsibilities of the women were these religious duties.

The existence of concept of "Goddess" in Ancient Greek Religion and the coupling of various goddesses with Zeus reminds us the Mother Goddess belief which takes place in many creation myths and her unification with the Sky God which is named as "hieros games". Additionally, researchers think that the goddesses in Greek religion are the derivatives of the Mother Goddess concept that was dominating the previous societies' belief system.³² It has been thought that women in these societies were also in the forefront of the society. Besides the perception of Goddesses that continue in Greek Religion, the limited social rights of women serve as a model to the change of social status of women in the society while there is the transformation to -Sky God' Male Creator- and the Greek society represents a sample of transformation in this process. Because, in Thesmophoria Feast that is one of the most important mysterious rituals in the cult of Demeter -the Goddess of earth-crops-ears who shows Mother Goddess features, women have the primary roles and there is no place to men in this mysterious event. This situation underlines the transformation and seen as a religious fact which also includes many paganistic features that are already ongoing and to be continued.

The Thesmophoria that is celebrated only by women in a society in which they have no social rights in the Demeter cult which can be seen as the derivative of "Divine Female" that is Mother Goddess that generates the content of this research, displays a remarkable irony in a society where the male power is the superior. This situation makes us to think that the Ancient Greek Religion is a phase in the transition from "Divine Female" to "Divine Male". Because the women who are in backspace in the society are the main actors in this cult. On the other hand, the veil of mystery that shall open in order to understand these mysteries, is standing in front of the archaeologists, historians and theologians and keeps its privacy.

³² ELIADE 2003; TEKIN 2003

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