

Not much is known about Thesmophoria as only women were allowed to attend this decidedly Mediterranean festival. It was rare for women to journal their festival experiences since most women rarely wrote anything other than letters. Ancient playwright Aristophanes parodied this festival but was unable to provide much detail about the festival itself.



Thesmophoria - Rituals of September

This rite to Ceres and Persephone was held in late September or early October and was not restricted to Greece,

where it lasted three days, but was practiced in cities around the Mediterranean. In southern Italy and Sicily the ritual could last up to ten days. There, "older women respected for their noble birth and character" served as priestesses.

The Thesmophoria differs from other rites in that it is practiced only by women, young and old, mothers and daughters, "maidens and matrons." Here, too, the myth of Ceres and Persephone lies at the core of the ritual. The three aspects of the myth, the separation, the mourning and search, and the joyful reunion, were reenacted and collectively experienced by women in antiquity.

In preparation for the ritual, one month in advance, the priestess of the Thesmophoria threw live pigs into a sacrificial pit. On the first day of the rite, the women made a procession to a building or specially constructed huts at the outskirts of the town where they would live for the duration of the ritual. They refrained from wearing crowns of flowers on their heads as Persephone was collecting [flowers](#) when she was abducted. The women carried with them closed baskets-what they contained we don't know,

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The only attendees allowed at this festival were women who had Athenian spouses, no unmarried women and no men. However, the men were expected to send their wives and to pay for the festivals costs. Under no circumstances (by severe punishment) were people allowed to spy. The ceremony was supposed to promote fertility, but the women prepared for it with sexual abstinence and bathing for "purification".

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perhaps clay phalluses or sheaves of grain. Later this day, they would open the pit, and a priestess would descend and bring up the rotted remains of the pigs to be placed upon an altar.

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This unusual ritual of resurrection of the dead from underground began a period of mourning that lasted through the second day. The women remained secluded, fasting and sleeping on freshly cut green boughs and branches. On the second night, they would run through the streets with torches, stopping at crossroads to shout, reenacting Ceres' frantic search for Persephone.

The third day, or last phase, was festive with special meals, singing, and dancing. Though sexual abstinence was mandatory, sexual symbolism predominated. Phallic-shaped cakes were baked and eaten. Obscene gestures, songs, and dances were encouraged, to the great delight of the men passing by. Blood-colored objects, such as red wine and red pomegranates, were part of the ritual. In honor of Persephone, however, the pomegranates were not eaten. When all was over, the women returned home to be united with their families, as Ceres was with Persephone.

In September, we now look to the end, to a time when "Now all the fields and meadows appear the same somber color and a dark shadow covers the world. Now the watchdogs are silent ... "-a time of closure, withdrawal, and death. The goddesses guide us with burning torches, for the two gifts that Ceres gives to humans are the grain harvested in the fall and the mystery rituals.