

The *Megara* of the Thesmophoria: Reconciling the Textual and Archaeological Records

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*A scholion to Lucian Dialogi Meretricii 2.1 suggests that the Thesmophoria, a widespread ancient Greek women's festival, was centred on a rite involving the deposition of piglets into pits (*megara*), and later recovering their remains. The *megara* of the Thesmophoria are prominent in the secondary literature concerning this festival, but they remain curiously absent from many archaeological reports of sanctuaries dedicated to Demeter. This paper will examine evidence for pits excavated at sanctuaries dedicated to Demeter that can be identified as potential *megara*. The focus will be twofold, firstly to consider whether there was a standard form for such pits or whether there was considerable local variation occurring, and secondly to consider reasons for their absence in the archaeological record at the majority of identified Demeter sites. In this way, I aim to establish whether it is possible to reconcile the textual evidence with the archaeological evidence for the rites involving piglets during the Thesmophoria.*

Introduction

The focal point of the Thesmophoria is generally theorised to have been a rite that involved the deposition of piglets into pits (*megara*), and later, the recovery of their remains.¹ These *megara* are prominent in the scholarly literature, based on a small number of ancient literary sources, though there is not nearly as significant a focus on collating archaeological evidence for these features. This paper will survey some of the potential *megara* identified in excavation reports from sanctuaries in honour of Demeter in order to consider whether there is a standard representation of a *megaron* that can be identified. Based upon this information the universality of this feature of the Thesmophoria festival will be considered.

Literary Evidence

The rite involving the deposition of piglets into pits named *megara* is mentioned only in three ancient literary sources relating to the Thesmophoria and all of these sources are somewhat problematic. As it is based on these brief mentions that the *megara* have drawn such scholarly interest, it is necessary to consider the literary testimonies before moving onto the archaeological remains which could potentially be identified as *megara*.

Scholion to Lucian Dialogi Meretricii 2.1

The *scholion* to Lucian (*Dialogi Meretricii* 2.1) is believed to provide the only description of what was probably the main rite of the Thesmophoria.² However, the text is problematic and somewhat obscure.³ The author of the *scholion* is unknown, with suggestions ranging widely in date, but N. Lowe convincingly argues for an identification with one of the Hellenistic *exegetes*.⁴ The *scholion* is generally assumed to refer to the Thesmophoria in its entirety,⁵ but actually mentions

three festivals, the Thesmophoria, the Skirophoria and the Arrhetophoria. It appears that the *scholion* is, as R. Parker describes it, “a crude abbreviation of a fuller and more nuanced account.”⁶

The text describes the rite as follows.⁷ Certain women, the so-called ‘bailers’, for whom chastity was a requirement for three days prior to the event, collect the rotten remains of what had been thrown into the *megara*. These remains are later specified as models of snakes and phalluses made from dough, pine branches, and the rotten remains of piglets although there is some debate as to whether the piglets were deposited alive or already sacrificed.⁸ The *megara* are also stated to have snakes in them.

Supporting Textual Sources

Two other literary sources support this *scholion*. Clement of Alexandria (*Protrepticus* 17.1) preserves a brief account of the use of the *megara*.⁹ It is obvious that his account of this practice is a more condensed version taken from the same source as that of the scholiast to Lucian.¹⁰ Persephone is named as Pherephatta. This suggests an Attic origin for the source text as this version of the name is in the Attic dialect.¹¹ Clement (*Protrepticus* 17.1) notes merely that the ‘*megarizing*’ women of the Thesmophoria throw piglets into chasms.

Pausanias (*Graeciae descriptio* 9.8.1) also records an account of the practices involving the *megara* at Potniae, however, the main verb is corrupted and the passage is difficult to interpret.¹² The text does not name the Thesmophoria though it is clear from the context that this is the most likely identification for the festival described. Aside from the difficulties of the text, Pausanias also seems to be somewhat dubious about the truth of the events he is describing in this passage. He suggests that the piglets are deposited, living, in the

megara at Potniae and, perhaps, appear at Dodona the next year.¹³

In addition, Eustathius (*Commentarii ad Homeri Odysseam* 1.13.40) notes that the *megaron* is the subterranean dwelling of Demeter and Kore, and further explains that, according to Aelian, it was where the ritual holy things were kept or located.¹⁴

There are also sources that mention the occurrence of *megara* for the Thesmophoria at specific places. Herodotus (6.134.2) notes the presence of a *megaron* within the sanctuary of Demeter Thesmophoros at Paros. Pausanias (*Graeciae descriptio* 9.8.1), as noted above, discusses *megara* at Potniae. In addition, there are a small number of inscriptions that mention specific *megara*, including one from the Piraeus (IG II² 1177), one at Eleusis (IG II² 1363), and one from Delos (ID 2047).

Identification of a *megaron*?

Although for many, the term *megaron* has a specific technical meaning as a large hall in a Mycenaean palace, it has been noted in scholarship that even within Homer, *megaron* can be seen to have a much wider sense.¹⁵ B.C. Dietrich notes that “*megaron* in the singular can mean hall or any kind of room, whether bedroom, store, or workroom of men, women or gods.”¹⁶ By the time of Herodotus, the meaning of *megaron* appears to refer specifically to a sacred building.¹⁷ M-C. Hellmann notes that in the Classical period, the term is generally associated with mysteries or cult purposes.¹⁸ B.C. Dietrich identifies the usage of *megaron* that is found in festivals to Demeter as meaning “‘cave’ or ‘underground chamber’”.¹⁹ He suggests that the *megaron* was probably originally a special underground chamber but that it subsequently became incorporated into a temple structure.²⁰ M-C. Hellmann suggests that a *megaron* in the context of Demeter was a building or area enclosed

by walls in order to preserve the necessary secrecy for the rites,²¹ and within this area may perhaps have been a pit. She also notes that, based on notes from lexicographical sources and *scholia*, the term could also refer to caves or underground chambers.²² N. Robertson notes that there has been some dissension in the past, but concludes that the term *megaron* in the context of Demetrian ritual cannot mean anything other than a sacrificial pit.²³ Therefore, it can be seen that there is no definitive description of what Demetrian *megara* would be expected to look like.

Archaeological Evidence

In the past, little attention has been paid in scholarly literature to the overall picture provided by the excavated remains of potential *megara*. These have only been discussed by their respective excavators in the context of individual sites but there has not been a more encompassing focus on what information these *megara* can provide about the celebration of the Thesmophoria festival. In order to form a bigger picture of what constituted a *megaron* in the rites of Demeter, it is necessary to consider identified *megara* in the published literature. As the nature of this work is a survey, descriptions will be brief though detailed information on each can be found in the original excavation reports.

Eleusis

The site of Eleusis is much more associated with the Eleusinian Mysteries than the Thesmophoria, but there is evidence that points towards a local celebration of the Thesmophoria there (Aeneas Tacticus *Polioretica* IV.8).²⁴ There have been two options for *megara* flagged at this site, and an epigraphic source from the late fourth century BCE refers to a *megaron* at Eleusis in a specifically Thesmophorian context (IG II² 1363). K. Clinton suggested that some of the pit structures

abutting the porch might be the remains of Thesmophorian *megara*.²⁵ Although the sanctuary at Eleusis has a long history of continuous use, potsherds in the relevant pits suggest that they were in use during the third and second centuries BCE.²⁶ The pits are five in number and rectangular.²⁷ The width and length vary but the depth is generally more than 7 m.²⁸ Pit E is the largest of the five and has been said to resemble the supposed Thesmophorian *megaron* at Priene.²⁹ K. Clinton stated that there was no functional need for these pits and proposed that they owed their existence to a ritualistic purpose.³⁰ Contents of the pits included black soil, potsherds, animal bones, fragments of marble and stele, and bronze vessels.³¹

Alternatively, N. Robertson suggests that a pit located in the northeast corner of the temple may be identified with the *megaron* of the Thesmophoria.³² The pit is circular with a diameter of approximately 1 meter and a depth of 2 m.³³ In noting these two theories from Eleusis, an important fact becomes apparent – that the way in which scholars conceive of what a *megaron* constitutes will affect their inclination or disinclination to identify them as such. K. Clinton's criteria include stone walls, a link with the earth, and sufficient drainage.³⁴ N. Robertson notes that “these criteria for a *megaron* are far from self-evident.”³⁵ For his part, N. Robertson suggests that the ability to retrieve the remains of the piglets is the essential criterion by which to judge a potential example of a *megaron*.³⁶ It is important not to define the term too narrowly in the absence of primary evidence.

Mytilene

The sacrificial pit at Mytilene provides interesting evidence for the consideration of potential *megara* used in the celebration of the Thesmophoria.³⁷ The height of

its use was in the late Classical to early Hellenistic period (late 4th century BCE to 2nd century BCE).³⁸ It is a relatively shallow semi-circular pit with a maximum diameter of 2 m.³⁹ The construction is fairly crude, and the pit has been disturbed by later construction at the site.⁴⁰ It is located to the east of the altar and the excavators theorise that it may have been associated with a temple which has not yet been located.⁴¹ The remains of piglets dominate the archaeological assemblage recovered from the pit and show evidence of being burned *in situ*.⁴² Also found in the pit were barley and grape seeds, potsherds, seashells, and low numbers of bones of other animals, including birds, fish, and snake bones.⁴³ The piglet bones comprise more than 3,000 fragments, and are mostly identified as perinatal.⁴⁴ D. Ruscillo's study found these fragments came from at least 29 piglets.⁴⁵ However, she notes that due to damage, probably less than one third of the pit is preserved, and if the pit were intact, there may have been a minimum of one hundred piglets deposited there originally.⁴⁶ Despite associating the faunal remains at Mytilene with the Thesmophorian ritual, D. Ruscillo notes that “an underground *megaron* was not discovered during the course of the excavation,” and suggests that one may be found in the future.⁴⁷ However, it seems possible to at least consider that this pit itself might be the *megaron*, as the definitions above show that a *megaron* need not have necessarily been an underground chamber.

Priene

The sanctuary of Demeter at Priene where potential pits have been found was constructed around 350 BCE.⁴⁸ It seems relatively certain that the Thesmophoria was celebrated there, as, in addition to the normal Demetrian offerings of female figurines carrying *hydriai* and piglets,⁴⁹ there are unique female figures found only at this sanctuary.⁵⁰ These have been linked

with Iambe/Baubo,⁵¹ who is prominent in the justification of *aischrologia* (vulgar jesting) at the Thesmophoria.⁵² The pit is identified by the excavators as a *bothros*, a sacrificial pit for liquid offerings,⁵³ but has been identified as a *megaron* in other literature.⁵⁴ It is almost square, measuring 2.85 m by 2.95 m, and approximately 2 m deep.⁵⁵ It is located to the south of the temple building, and some care has been put into its construction. Remnants of the original roof to the pit remain, and a wall had been added some time after the pit's construction,⁵⁶ possibly to provide extra privacy.⁵⁷

Knidos

An early excavation at Knidos yielded a pit which has been touted as an example of a *megaron*.⁵⁸ The pit found was an elliptical limestone chamber.⁵⁹ It had been severely damaged, probably in an earthquake, and the excavator hypothesised that it was originally a circular room.⁶⁰ Dimensions were 2.74 m by 1.92 m, with a depth of more than 2 m.⁶¹ The pit had a wide range of objects inside it, including rubble (most likely the remains of the roof), sculptures, potsherds, hairpins, inscriptional material, marble votive pigs, and the bones of pigs, small oxen, goats and birds.⁶² From the finds, it appeared to have been in use during the Roman period; however, some elements of the *temenos* of Demeter at Knidos could not be located in more recent excavations and so re-examination of the evidence is not possible.⁶³

Other Sites

The above examples represent those sites mostly commonly identified as featuring *megara* in the secondary literature relating to the Thesmophoria. Mentions of other potential *megara* occur at a few other sites throughout the Greek world, but not enough information is available to discuss

these in depth. For example, a recent paper argues that there may have even been a *megaron* at Pagus Triopus outside of Rome though it has not been the subject of an official excavation.⁶⁴ It consists of a long underground cavern, measuring 2 m by 27 m, lying to the north of a small temple and within, or underneath, a sacred field.⁶⁵ Nonetheless without a proper excavation at the site, it cannot be definitely identified as a Demeterian *megaron*, and there are other possible explanations for this feature. Excavators at Cyrene suggested that the single-chamber buildings they found at the extramural sanctuary of Demeter may have been *megara* but were unable to narrow down the function and positively identify these structures in the absence of good epigraphical evidence.⁶⁶ Both W. Burkert and M-C. Hellmann flag a possible *megaron* or *megara* at Agrigentum though it is unclear whether they are discussing the same feature.⁶⁷

Conclusion

A summary of the main archaeological evidence for the presence of Demeterian *megara* leads to a firm conclusion. There is no evidence for a standard form for these pits if it is accepted that all the examples discussed above were used for the purpose of chthonic rites in the Thesmophoria. These can be circular, elliptical, rectangular, or square. Some feature roofs and others appear to have been open to the air. Some examples are very deep, whilst others are comparatively shallow. In addition, some of the pits under discussion were constructed with good materials and a great deal of care, whilst others are crudely and haphazardly constructed. Of course, there are also many cultic sites of Demeter where there have not been recovered pits which could be construed as a *megaron* or a *bothros*. In some cases, these sites have not been completely excavated, or the standards of excavation may be less in-

depth than the preferred standard today, but it does not seem unreasonable to conclude that some Demetrian sanctuaries never had these features. This suggests a widespread variation in the practices such as are detailed in the *scholion* to Lucian.

In the case of the varying styles of *megara*, perhaps the shape, dimensions and depth, as well as the standard of the construction, was not influenced by the ritual needs of the Thesmophoria festival. Instead, these may have been influenced by local conditions, such as the wealth of the community, or the natural landscape, which would indicate that certain structures would be easier to impose upon this landscape, especially in the case of those sites where natural clefts in the rock seem to have played a role in the desired ritual activities. In some cases, perhaps the ritual described by the scholiast was significantly modified in order to occur without the use of a *megaron* at all. An awareness of the potential variability of these features when considering excavations of Demetrian sanctuaries may reveal more examples of features that could have been used for these chthonic rites for Demeter Thesmophoros.

Endnotes:

- 1 Frazer 1911, 839; Parke 1977, 159; Stehle 2007, 169; Stallsmith 2009, 31.
- 2 Most modern scholars follow this viewpoint, but for example, see Zeitlin 1982, 138; Dillon 2003, 113-114; Goff 2004, 126; Parker 2005, 272; Stallsmith 2009, 30.
- 3 Frazer 1911, 839; Parke 1977, 159; Stehle 2007, 169; Stallsmith 2009, 31.
- 4 Lowe 1998, 163.
- 5 That is to say, discussion generally focuses solely on the Thesmophoria and the other festivals are only mentioned in passing or not at all. For example, see Burkert 1985, 242-243; Dillon 2003, 114; Goff 2004, 126; Stallsmith 2009, 31. Parke 1977, 159 suggests it is impossible to tell which rituals belonged to which festivals mentioned. Robertson 1996, 365 argues instead that the early part of the *scholion* describes the Thesmophoria, and the later part describes the Arrhetophoria, with the reference to the Skirophoria being merely a passing mention.
- 6 Parker 2005, 272-273.
- 7 See Lowe 1998 for the most recent treatment of the text. See also Rabe 1906 for the text.
- 8 As to whether the piglets were alive or dead at the time they were deposited, there are various viewpoints. For the assumption that the pigs were dead before they were placed in the *megara*, see, for example, Dillon 2003, 115 and Larson 2007, 70. For living piglets, see, for example, Frazer 1911, 840 and O'Higgins 2001, 150. Ruscillo 2013, 191 suggests that the piglets would have to be alive or freshly killed in order to attract the attention of snakes.
- 9 For original text, see Mondésert 1949.
- 10 Lowe 1998.
- 11 Larson 2007, 69;
- 12 For original text, see Rocha Pereira 1981.
- 13 The main verb is partially corrupt but is usually reconstructed as *epiphaino* (to appear).
- 14 Original text may be found in Stallbaum 1970.
- 15 Dietrich 1973, 11; Hellmann 1992, 259; White 1993, 98.
- 16 Dietrich 1973, 3. Likewise Hellmann 1992, 259 – “En réalité, si l'on examine l'emploi qu'en fait Homère, μέγαρον n'est nullement confiné dans ce sens et désigne n'importe quel abri, habitation, ou pièce à l'intérieur d'un bâtiment.”
- 17 For example, Herodotus 6.134.2. See Dietrich 1973, 4 for further information.
- 18 Hellmann 1992, 259.
- 19 Dietrich 1973, 5.
- 20 Dietrich 1973, 8.
- 21 Hellmann 1992, 259. Perhaps by this definition, the term *megaron* could be stretched to include something like the South Stoa at Pergamon which Cronkite 1997, 481 suggests “may have been used for chthonic cult purposes.”
- 22 Hellmann 1992, 260.

23 Robertson 1996, 339-340. He also rejects the possibility that it could refer to an inner sanctum inside a larger building.
 24 Original text may be found in Bon and Dain 1967. For discussion, see Clinton 1988, 72-73; Clinton 1993, 113.
 25 Clinton 1988, 73. White 1993, 99 concurs with this suggestion.
 26 Clinton 1988, 76.
 27 Clinton 1988, 73, 76.
 28 Clinton 1988, 76.
 29 Clinton 1988, 76.
 30 Clinton 1988, 73.
 31 Clinton 1988, 73, 76.
 32 Robertson 1996, 329-330.
 33 Robertson 1996, 329.
 34 Clinton 1988 73, n. 43, 80. See also Henrichs 1969.
 35 Robertson 1996, 330.
 36 Robertson 1996, 330.
 37 Ruscillo 2013, 187.
 38 Ruscillo 2013, 182.
 39 Ruscillo 2013, 187.
 40 Ruscillo 2013, 187.
 41 Ruscillo 2013, 184, 187.
 42 Ruscillo 2013, 187.
 43 Ruscillo 2013, 189.
 44 Ruscillo 2013, 188.
 45 Ruscillo 2013, 188.
 46 Ruscillo 2013, 188.
 47 Ruscillo 2013, 192-193.
 48 Cronkite 1997, 501.
 49 Cronkite 1997, 502.
 50 Schede 1962, 93.
 51 Schede 1962, 93; Cronkite 1997, 502.
 52 See O'Higgins 2001, 139-141.
 53 Schede 1962, 93.
 54 Burkert 1985, 243. See also Henrichs 1969, 35.
 55 Cronkite 1997, 502.
 56 Schede 1962, 93.
 57 Schede 1962, 93.
 58 Burkert 1985, 243.
 59 Newton 1863, 383.
 60 Newton 1863, 383.
 61 Newton 1863, 383.
 62 Newton 1863, 383-390.
 63 Love 1972, 399; Cronkite 1997, 411.
 64 Lucchese 2013, 161-163.
 65 Lucchese 2013, 178-179. The sacred field is, in Lucchese's description, a necessary part of the rite, being the location where the remnants of piglets recovered from the *megara* are plowed to ritually ensure human and agricultural fertility.
 66 White 1993, 99-101.
 67 Burkert 1985, 243; Hellmann 1992, 260.
 68 This is supported by a few other sources in the published literature. See Henrichs 1969, 35 – "Natürlich darf man dieses Beispiel nicht verallgemeinern. Es dürfte grössere *Megara* gegeben haben." as well as Burkert 1985, 243 – "The constructions were obviously not everywhere of the same type."

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