

Ancient Athenian Festival Calendar

The ancient Athenian year began on the new moon after the summer solstice. The beginning of each month was fixed by the observation of the lunar crescent after the dark moon (called the “new moon”). Evidence (though not conclusive) suggests that the “day” began at sunset, lasting until the next sunset. Due to the irregularities of a twelve-month lunar calendar, the month of Poseideon was occasionally repeated to maintain the integrity of the calendar year.

Most festival information comes down to us from Athens. However, certain demes recorded the dates of sacrifices, and I have added these to the list.

I also recommend the site [HMEPA](#) which aligns the ancient calendar with our current date and shows the festivals.

Holy Days: Certain days of every month were devoted to a particular deity. They are as following:

- 1: Noumenia – new moon festival, burn frankincense
- 2: Agathos Daimon
- 3: Athene
- 4: Aphrodite, Hermes, Herakles, Eros
- 6: Artemis
- 7: Apollon
- 8: Poseidon
- last three days: all chthonian deities
- last day: Hekate

Months:

- Hekatombaion
- Metageitnion
- Boidromion
- Puanepsion
- Maimakterion
- Poseideon
- Gamelion
- Anthesterion
- Elaphebolion
- Mounikhion
- Thargelion
- Skirophorion

FESTIVAL CALENDAR

HEKATOMBAION (an epithet of Apollon, alluding to his role as acceptor of sacrifices)

4: Aphrodisia — The bathing festival of Aphrodite and Peitho (Persuasion). First the temple was purified with dove's blood, then the altars were anointed. Finally the two statues were carried in a procession to the washing place.

12: Kronia — A festival in honor of Kronos as a god of the harvest, portrayed with a reaping scythe. A huge harvest feast was held, where slaves were invited to dine with their masters. A sacrifice was also made to Artemis on this day in the deme of Erchia.

15-16: Synoikia — A celebration of the Synoecism, the combining of Attika into one community. Every other year, it was celebrated for two days instead of one. On the second day, a sacrifice was made to Zeus Phratrios, god of the tribal brotherhoods (like clans). A sacrifice was also made to Athene in a formal manner. Eirene, goddess of peace, was also worshipped on this day.

28: Panathenaia — The celebration of Athene's birthday, when gods and mortals feasted together. A vigil was held the night before the Panathenaic procession. At sunrise a sacrifice was made to Eros and Athene at the altar of Eros in the Academy, then a torch race brought the sacred fire to the altar of Athene. Every fourth year, the Greater Panathenaia was held, when a new robe was given to the goddess. A huge procession brought the robe to her statue in her temple, where it was placed on Athene's knees, and later stored in the treasury; she was officially re-robed during the Plunteria. Sacrifices were also made to Athene Hugia (Health) and Nike. The three or four days following the procession featured contests of sport and art.

METAGEITNION (an epithet of Apollon)

Unspecified: Metageitnios — Named after Apollon's epithet, meaning "changing neighbors," it may have been a festival of the neighborhood.

Unspecified: Herakles' Day — A celebration of Herakles by athletes in the gymnasium in Kynosarges.

15-18: Eleusinia — games celebrated in Eleusis, not associated with the Mysteries. The prize was grain.

16: Sacrifice to Hekate and Artemis in the deme of Erchia.

20: Sacrifice to Hera Thelchinia in the deme of Erchia.

25: Sacrifice to Zeus Epoptes in the deme of Erchia.

BOIDROMION (an epithet of Apollon, meaning to help in response to a shout)

2: Niketeria

3: Plataia

5: Genesia — The Athenian state festival in honor of the dead, especially those who died in wars. (Families honored their own dead on the anniversaries of their deaths.) In the deme of Erchia, this was commemorated by a sacrificial holocaust without wine.

6: Kharisteria — The feast of Artemis Agrotera (the huntress). After the victory at Marathon, this became a commemoration of that battle, and was known as Kharisteria, “Thanksgiving.”

7: Boidromia — A festival of thanksgiving for Apollon as a god who rescued people in war.

15-21: Eleusinian Mysteries — The mystery rites of Demeter and Persephone, held at Eleusis.

18: Epidauria — Commemoration of Asklepios’ arrival, celebrated with a procession, offerings, and a banquet that reserved a couch for the god.

27: Sacrifices — to the nymphs, Achelous, Alochos, Hermes and Gaia in Erchia, and to Athene in Teithras.

PUANEPSION (“boiled beans,” a ritual food)

5: Proerosia — An agricultural festival of Demeter held at Eleusis, the name means “preliminary to ploughing.” Offerings of first fruits (mostly grain) are given to Demeter to ask for her blessing at the beginning of the sowing season. Apollon’s oracle told the Athenians to begin the Proerosia in order to end a horrible famine, and this story is recounted at the festival.

7: Puanepsia — A festival dedicated to Phoebos Apollon, held at Eleusis in ancient times. Apollon was offered a sacrifice of a he-goat and a lamb, and a meal was held for the god. During the procession, each boy carried an *eiresione*, the traditional sign of a suppliant. However, on this day, the *eiresione* (normally a bough of olive wreathed with wool) was possibly made of laurel, and was decorated with pastry shaped like wines, harps and cups, along with real fruit. The boys carried the boughs from house to house, begging for food, and singing, “The *eiresione* bears figs and rich cakes and honey in a jar, and olive oil to anoint yourself, and a cup of mellow wine that you may drink and fall asleep.” If the occupant gave them something, they would give him an *eiresione* to bless his house. The ritual food that gave its name to this festival and this month consisted of a mixture of boiled legumes. According to myth, Theseus and his crew returned to Athens on this day, and offered Apollon this dish, made from the remains of their provisions. The combination of all the plants also works well as a prayer for a bountiful harvest.

7: Oskhophoria — This is the celebration of the vine harvest, when men carried vine branches with the grapes still clinging to them through the town in a procession. Hymns about the harvest

and wine-making were sung. A ritual meal was held, where legends were told (mainly about Theseus) and acted out.

8: Theseia — A festival honoring Theseus, the son of Poseidon. There was a procession, sacrifices, athletic contests, and a feast where meat was given to the people. The feast included a porridge of wheat and milk.

9: Stenia — This was a nocturnal women's festival for Demeter and Persephone in preparation for the Thesmophoria. The women insulted each other light-heartedly to commemorate the way Iambe made the grieving Demeter laugh. Thesmoi, (Things Laid Down) were thrown into pits in the sanctuary of Demeter; including bread in the shape of snakes and phalluses, as well as sacrificed pigs, all of which are fertility symbols.

11-13: Thesmophoria — An all-female agricultural festival in honor of Demeter and Persephone, held in Demeter's hillside sanctuary. On the first day, the women climbed the hill and made camp, sleeping on the ground in huts. On the second day, the women sat on the ground and fasted from all solid food (except pomegranate seeds) in sympathy for Demeter's mourning, and to transfer their strength to the earth. They taunted each other in iambic verse, in imitation of Iambe and Demeter. They may also have whipped each other. On the third day, there was a torch-light ceremony, because Demeter sought Persephone by torch-light. This may have been when the Thesmoi were removed from the earth by purified priestesses, and placed on the altars of the goddesses. Later this "compost" was mixed with the grain to be sown the following month. Then the rest of the day was spent in joyous celebration.

30: Khalkaia — This was a festival of smiths, and was associated with Hephaistos and Athena. It was a day of rest from work, and a procession of workers moved through the town carrying baskets of corn. Later, a feast was held.

Unspecified, three consecutive days: Apaturia — Festival held by each Phratrhai, the brotherhoods of descent that functioned like clans. The first night was a reunion and feast. On the second, they made sacrifices to Zeus Phratrion and Athene Phratrhai. Hephaistos and Dionysos may also have been honored. On the third day, new members were inducted into the Phratrhai. The day after the festival was over was set aside for recovering from the excessive drinking and revelry.

MAIMAKTERION ("blustering," epithet of Zeus)

Unspecified: Maimakteria — This month begins the winter season, so people prayed to Zeus Maimaktes (Blustering) to be gentle.

Last third of month: Pompaia — A procession dedicated to Zeus Meilikhios (Kindly), a chthonic aspect of Zeus who appears as a snake. A sheep was sacrificed, and its fleece considered magical. A person could purify himself by standing on the wool with his left foot. The fleece, along with a caduceus, was carried in the procession.

POSEIDEON (Poseidon)

8: Poseidea — There was probably a festival in honor of Poseidon during this month, most likely on the eighth day, since that day was sacred to him. No other details are available.

16: Sacrifice to Zeus Horios in the deme of Erchia.

19: Meeting held about matters concerned with Dionysos, in the deme of Myrrhinus. Also, a private sacrifice to the wind gods was recorded on this day.

Last half of month: Rural Dionysia — This was a simpler version of the City Dionysia. It included a procession with men carrying a phallos, cake-bearers, revellers and singing. The god was carried into the city to represent Dionysos coming. A bull may have been sacrificed, and there were many localized rites, different in every region.

26: Haloa — This was a festival in honor of Demeter and Dionysos, named after the halos, or threshing floor. There was a feast including phallos- and pudenda-shaped cakes, but without the foods forbidden in the Eleusinian Mysteries (pomegranates, apples, eggs, fowls, some fish). Women danced around a giant phallus, leaving it offerings. Later in the night, men were admitted, and there was a great revel or orgy for the rest of the night. A priest and priestess presided over the fertility celebration.

GAMELION (month of marriage)

2: Theogamia

8: Sacrifices to Apollon Apotropaeus, Apollon Nymphegetes, and the nymphs in the deme of Erchia.

9: Sacrifice to Athena in the deme of Erchia.

12-15: Lenaia — The name of this Dionysian festival may have come from the word for wine-press, or another name for the maenads. It was celebrated to arouse the slumbering vegetation and bring Springtime. There was a representation of Dioynsos, probably a wooden pillar, for it was Dionysos Orthos (“the erect”) who invented mixing wine and water. There were also dramatic contests, like so many other Dionysian festivals.

26: Gamelia — The anniversary of the sacred marriage of Zeus and Hera, this festival gave its name to the month of marriage. This is a time of spring and new beginnings. In Erchia, sacrifices were made to Hera, Zeus Teleius, Kourotrophos, and Poseidon.

ANTHESTERION (flowers)

2: Sacrifice to Dionysos — in the deme of Erchia

11-13: Anthesteria — This is the Festival of Flowers, as well as a feast of the dead, and a drinking festival centered around Dionysos Limnaios (“of the marshes”). The first day, Pithoigia, was the Opening of the Jars, and the broaching of new wine. Celebrants gathered near the temple and opened wine-jars, pouring libations to Dionysos and drinking the rest. The second day, Khoes, was also the Day of Swings (Aiora) commemorating the hanging of Erigone. There was much drinking, drinking matches (where the prize was a skin of wine), and an erotic atmosphere. But also a sense of pollution, and the presence of ghosts was felt. That evening, a sacred marriage was performed in the inner chamber of the temple (which was only open for that night) between the Basilinna (queen) and the god. The details of this ritual were secret, and so have not been passed down to us. The last day, Khutroi, was the Day of Pots, devoted to the cult of the dead. Pots containing cooked vegetables and seeds (traditional food for the dead) were left out for the wandering spirits. However, precautions were taken to prevent the spirits from coming too close: people chewed buckthorn, smeared their doors with pitch, and tied ropes around the temples. At the end of the festival, they drove out the spirits, saying, “Out you Keres, it is no longer Anthesteria!”

23 or 28: Diasia — The festival of Zeus Meilikhios (Kindly), the chthonic Zeus who appears as a snake. Offerings were made of cakes shaped like animals, grains, and other fertility foods. The whole offering was burnt (instead of shared with the god), to propitiate him.

Unspecified: Lesser Eleusinian Mysteries — These were the preparations for the Mysteries, held at Agrai on the banks of the Illissos.

ELAPHEBOLION (epithet of Artemis – “shooter of deer”)

6: Elaphebolia — Festival of Artemis, where she was offered cakes shaped like stags, made from dough, honey and sesame-seeds.

8 or 9: Asklepia — Festival of Asklepios, including a large sacrifice and common meal with the god.

9-13: Greater (or City) Dionysia — The largest of the Dionysian festivals, this was held in Athens, where Dionysos had a theatre and where dithyrambs and plays were performed. Before the festival began, a statue representing the god was placed on the road to the city, offered a sacrifice, and escorted back to the temple, thereby bringing in the god to the festival. On the first day, there was a procession with various offerings, which led into the komos, or revel, a night-long feast and celebration. The next few days were set aside for the famous dramatic contests of Athens.

14 or 17: Pandia — A festival of Zeus, immediately following the Greater Dionysia.

15: Sacrifice to Kronos — private sacrifice recorded on this day.

MOUNIKHION (festival of Artemis)

4: Feast of Eros — This may have been held on the fourth due to it being the god's holy day each month. No details are known.

6: Delphinia

6 or 16: Mounikhia — Festival of Artemis as the moon goddess and mistress of the animals. A procession of girls carrying boughs came to the shrine of Apollon and Artemis. A she-goat was sacrificed to the goddess, along with other offerings. Another procession consisted of people carrying *amphiphontes* (shining-all-round), round cakes containing lit candles arranged in a circle.

19: Olympieia — Festival of Olympian Zeus, including a huge sacrifice, possibly of a bull.

THARGELION (festival of Apollo)

4: Sacrifices to Leto, Pythian Apollon, Zeus, Hermes and the Dioscuri in the deme of Erchia.

6: Offering to Demeter — On this day, a ram was offered on the Acropolis to Demeter Khloe, the goddess of green shoots.

6-7: Thargelia — This festival marked the birthday of Apollon and Artemis. The first day was devoted to purification. Two poor people were chosen as *pharmakoi* (scapegoats), each representing the women or the men; they were fed well, then beaten in order to purify the city. The second day was devoted to offerings of first fruits, called the *thargelos* (a stew of corn and other vegetables). Hymn-singing contests were held for the men's and boy's choirs.

16: Sacrifice to Zeus Epacrios in the deme of Erchia.

Last Week (25?): Plunteria — This festival was dedicated to washing the ancient statue of Athene Polias (Guardian of the City). The temple had been cleaned, and Athene's eternal flame relighted, by her priestesses a few days before. Women removed the robe and jewelry from the statue, which was then wrapped and carried in a procession to the washing place. Figs were offered to the goddess on the shore. After washing, the statue was taken by torchlight procession back to the temple and clothed with a new, clean robe (from the Panathenaia) and adorned with jewelry. This day was considered inauspicious because Athene was absent from the city.

SKIROPHORION (festival of Demeter)

Beginning (3?): Arrhephoria — This was the hidden rite revolving around two young priestesses of Athene, called the Arrhephoroi (perhaps "Carriers of Unspoken Things"). After living in Athene's temple for two years, they perform various secret rituals, including carrying a package by a secret path to the sanctuary of Aphrodite in the Gardens, and bringing back another secret package. Then they were replaced by two new girls. The Arrhephoroi wore white robes and ate a special light bread.

3: Three Sacrifices — On this day, a ewe was sacrificed to Athene, a ram to Zeus and a ram to Poseidon.

12: Skiraphoria — Also called the Skira, the festival of the cutting and threshing of the grain. Priests and priestesses went in procession to the Skiron, the sacred sanctuary of Demeter and Kore, where the first sowing supposedly took place. The festival was celebrated mostly by women, who abstained from sex on this day in order to bring fertility to the land. They threw cakes shaped like snakes and phalluses as well as sucking pigs into the sacred caverns of Demeter. The men had a race carrying vine-branches from the sanctuary of Dionysos to the temple of Athene Skiras. The winner was given the Fivefold Cup, which contained wine, honey, cheese, corn and olive oil. He shared this drink with the goddess, pouring her a libation to request her blessing on the fruits of the season.

14: Dipolieia — This was a festival of Zeus as god of the city. Barley and wheat were placed on an altar. When the sacrificial bull ate the grain, he was killed by a priest, who immediately threw down his poleax and fled. The poleax was later tried formally for murder. This festival was considered antiquated by the fourth century.

Last Day: Sacrifice to Zeus the Savior and Athene the Savior — A sacrifice (possibly a bull) was made on the last day of the old year to ensure good health, etc., for the coming year.