Overview of Women in Ancient Greece.

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**Summary:** From the sixteenth century until the first century BCE, when the ancient Greek civilization was enveloped by the Roman Empire (and throughout the Roman Empire as well), most women were relegated to a role of second-class citizenry in ancient Greece's male-dominated culture. In general, their livelihoods were limited by public policy, and their value to society was viewed from the narrow window of motherhood, sexuality, and domestic skills and responsibilities.

**Background & History**

Scholars have gained much understanding about the lives of the ancient Greeks from studying their writing, including poetry, drama, and prose, sculpture, and painted pottery. However, these resources were produced almost exclusively by males, as women were denied the education and skills necessary to create such works. Because of the scarcity of female art and literature, most of the assumptions made about the lives of women in ancient Greece were colored by the male perspective some 2,500 years ago.
Contemporary scholars are, therefore, still sifting through available artifacts to learn more about the thoughts and attitudes held by ancient Greek women. The prevailing opinion is that women were denigrated, confined to the home, and controlled by men from birth through death. Some scholars believe, however, that aristocratic women in some time periods, and in certain parts of Greece, may have engendered more respect, if not also admiration. Some also believe that the hetairai ("flute-girls" or courtesans) who worked at the male-only symposia, or concubines who lived with men outside of marriage, represented the most liberated women of the time period, and were valued for both their sexual and intellectual prowess. Evidence also supports the idea that women's material contributions were especially important to the ancient Greek economy.

**Marriage & Children**

Marriage gave most ancient Greek women their primary identities. A girl was usually married off at about the age of fourteen to a man in his late twenties or thirties. The bride was rarely consulted about the choice of mate; instead, her father and the potential bridegroom made the arrangements, sometimes years in advance of the wedding ceremony. The value of the dowry was a major consideration on the part of the bridegroom, as was the girl's virginity.

Marriages were economic pacts and viewed mostly as legitimate relationships in which to bear children. The inability to reproduce was seen as a social stigma, and infertility was the most common reason for divorce (or an incentive for a man to take on a concubine, or mistress). Although marriage was legally binding for the purpose of dividing up land or declaring citizenship for the offspring, it could be terminated at will at any time by the man or, in rare cases, by the woman.

The goal of marriage was to produce at least one male heir, as females could not own property. Most families were relatively small, and there was a high infant mortality rate due to disease, malnutrition, and other factors. Childbirth was the most common reason for early death in women, and the primary factor for their shorter lifespan. In fact, women lived ten years less than men, with an average life expectancy of only thirty years. However, some women did live well into their sixties or later.

**Domestic Responsibilities**

The amount of work performed by a woman was directly related to the family's financial status. In wealthier homes, slaves cooked, cleaned, tended to farm chores, and fetched water from the well. Slaves also watched the children and, in some cases, provided a basic education in reading, mathematics, and music. They also handled most of the difficult and sometimes dirty work related to textile production, such as cleaning and dyeing the wool, as well as weaving the cloth. In addition, they might have managed the family's inventory of farm goods or crafts, a responsibility also relegated to women.

The primary work of aristocratic women then would have been to manage the domestic slaves, leaving her ample time to socialize with friends or indulge in other leisure activities. Peasants, however, would have spent every waking moment from dawn until dusk taking care...
of these chores. Women were also responsible for taking care of members of the extended family: a mother- or father-in-law, or unmarried, widowed, or divorced sisters.

**Clothing & Appearance**

Ancient Greek women seemed to be as conscious of their appearance as women are today. They indulged in cosmetics and hair dyes, scented their skin with perfume, shaved or waxed, and conditioned their bodies with olive oil. Hair was left long and coiled or braided, although some married women wore their hair short. To distinguish themselves from the female slaves, who were required to wear their hair short, they would have chosen a more sophisticated style accented with a gold headpin.

Although fashion changed throughout the 1,500 or so years of the Greek civilization, the peplos was the most common piece of clothing for women, in style for several hundred years. Made from a long, rectangular piece of fabric, the edge was folded over to form a bodice, and then the fabric was pinned in place at each shoulder and belted at the waist.

During the fourth century BCE, the chiton, or sleeveless tunic, became common and was often worn with a himation, a mantel or cloak, which could be draped over the head and arms. Aristocrats and other "refined" citizens wore their clothing to the ankle, while prostitutes and Spartan woman were known to wear them above the knee, or slit the tunic up the sides to flaunt their legs.

Wealthy women indulged in fine embroidered clothing made from linen, while peasants made do with plain wool. Women also wore a breast-band underneath, for support or enhancement. Sandals and jewelry completed the outfit, with peasant women settling for bronze pieces, while aristocratic women would have shown off their fine gold and silver necklaces, bracelets, earrings, and other embellishments.

**Women in Art & Literature**

While the women of ancient Greece remained largely in the home, the men served as ancient Greece's artists and writers. Often, women were parodied or overdramatized in comedies and tragedies, and exaggerated on painted pottery. While it is likely that these imaginative depictions did represent a range of realistic personalities, if somewhat exaggerated, in some cases, women seemed to fare better in art and literature than in real life.

The first women of Greek literature were the mortals and goddesses in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, where some of these characters were quite audacious. For example, there is Helen, the wife of King Menelaus, whose affair with Paris ignited the Trojan War; Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, who patiently waits for him for twenty years, all the while fending off her suitors with tricks; Athena, wife of Zeus and the goddess of wisdom and war; and Calypso, who held Odysseus captive for seven years. Not all of Homer's characters were so influential, yet the thread that unites them and also grounds them in reality are their relationships with men: as lovers, wives, and temptresses.
Although women were prohibited from acting on stage, they were often the lead characters in drama. Euripedes' *Medea* and Aeschylus' *The Oresteia*, each feature a revengeful wife (Clytaemnestra and Medea, respectively) who murders her adulterous husband. Aristophanes' comedies, *Lysistrata* and *Thesmophoriazusae* ("Women Celebrating the Festival of the Thesmophoria"), presented women as less emotional while also giving them some credit for being intelligent and rational human beings.

Other poets ridiculed women, especially those who wrote for the symposium, the evening gathering of men that involved drinking, games, and relations with hetairai. Among the most notorious was Semonides, whose poem "Women" compares wives to domesticated animals such as pigs and dogs.

**The Role of Women in Ancient Greek Religion**

Religion was the only place where women may have been equal to men. As priestesses, they served in the cults of some of the most important deities, including Demeter, the deity of grain and agriculture, Aphrodite, goddess of love and fertility, and Dionysus, god of wine and ecstasy. There, they would lead processions, preside over funerals, weddings, and sacrifices, and may have managed the property owned by the cult. In addition, it was a priestess who led the procession for the Panathenaea, one of the largest and most important annual festivals in ancient Greece, held in Athens in honor of the goddess Athena.

Arguably one of the most important people in ancient Greece was the Pythia at Delphi, a position held for life by a virgin woman. While seated on a tripod inside the temple of Apollo, the Pythia passed on the oracle to the pilgrims who came from near and far throughout Greece to ask whether they should have more children, or perhaps more importantly--as was the case with King Croesus of Lydia against the Persians--whether one should attack their enemies.

Women were responsible for preparing the bodies of deceased family members and were expected to visit graves regularly with offerings and to perform libations (ritual pouring of a drink). They were also expected to "mourn" the deaths of public officials as well as their own kin. Women also organized and participated in annual festivals that honored deities, such as Thesmophoria, a women-only autumn festival in honor of Demeter, and the Lenaia, one of the chief Athenian festivals, held in honor of Dionysus.

**The Role of Women in Ancient Greek Society**

For the most part, women were treated as commodities in ancient Greek society. They could be claimed as part of the plunder won by soldiers, forced into slavery or prostitution, and given away in marriage for the price of the dowry.

For the most part, women led segregated lives from men. They were forbidden from participating in politics and symposia, banned from acting and from attending dramatic festivals, and prohibited from attending the Olympic Games and other male-centric athletic events.
Instead of leading the public life so familiar to men, many Greek women were confined to the household and, in some cases, were locked inside the house by a father or husband. When they went into the agora, the center of politics and trade, they were supposed to be chaperoned by a male.

Nevertheless, many women could not afford not to visit the agora by themselves. Driven by financial necessity, they sold woven clothing and blankets, farm produce, wreaths, bread, or other goods in the marketplace. Then there were the prostitutes who walked the streets or worked in the brothels, many of whom had no home or were traded on the slave market. At the bottom of the social ladder, although no less important to society, were the female slaves who toiled in the house, farm, or agora.

Many wives probably helped their husbands with the family business. Others earned money teaching or playing a musical instrument. It was the rare woman who was educated well enough to produce works of intelligence: the poetry, dramas, and prose of the elite males. In fact, the only female to have made a significant lasting contribution was the seventh-century poet Sappho, who was so revered that she was named the tenth Muse.

A few women became philosophers, primarily those who gained credibility after studying with the sixth-century BCE philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras. In the arts, several women became successful painters, including Timarete, the daughter of the painter Micon, who lived during the fourth century BCE. Most women, however, did not make any strides in this male-dominated profession until well into the Hellenistic period (roughly 323 to 31 BCE).

The Role of Women in Ancient Sparta
The life of a woman in Sparta was unique. Young girls were given an education at home much like their brothers. When the boys went off at the age of seven to be drilled in militaristic skills, the girls continued to be educated. Some became poets and philosophers while still in their teens.

Spartan girls were also trained in athletics and became so skilled that they offered female-only Panhellenic competitions, much like those held for males at Olympia, except that few women outside of Sparta could compete. In Sparta, athletic training was offered to strengthen women’s bodies so they would bear stronger male babies.

Unlike their counterparts who married when they were fourteen, Spartan girls were able to enjoy their childhoods and took on their wifely duties only when they reached eighteen. Many of them remained at home with their parents until they gave birth.

A Spartan woman had full responsibility for the household until her husband reached the age of thirty, when he returned home from the military. To make life easier, the state provided slaves to do all the spinning and weaving. Thus, Spartan women tended to spend more time catering to their children’s needs. They were also entitled to own land, and enjoyed a higher status than women in Athens.
Spartans also practiced another unusual custom: wife-lending. If a woman had already proven that she could bear hearty males, she could be required to produce children with another married man.

**Interesting Facts**

- An epiklēros was a woman who, in the absence of male heirs, had inherited her father’s property. Rather than being legally entitled to the property, she was required to pass the property on to her sons. Until the sons were old enough to manage the oikos (household), however, the closest male relative had the right to marry the woman. In the event that either party was still married, he or she would be forced to divorce.

- Unmarried women wore a girdle around their hips as a symbol of virginity. Homer was first to make note of this “virgin girdle,” or “maiden’s girdle.” In one scene in the *Odyssey*, Neptune unloosens the virgin girdle around Tyro and impregnates her with twins, Pelias and Neleus.

- A maenad was a female member of the cult of Dionysus, known for their frenzied ritual of dancing, singing, and shouting until they dropped from exhaustion.

- While many women made do with undyed clothing, purple was considered extremely fashionable and added to the peplos or himation for decorative effect. It was also considered a status symbol for the wealthy, as some of the dye was imported from the Near East, where it was obtained by the crushing of Mediterranean whelks (marine snails).

- Aspasia, the concubine of Pericles and mother of two of his children, was well-respected by Pericles, who consulted her on matters of the state. Because she was not an Athenian, she enjoyed more freedom than many of the other women in Athens. It is reported that her gatherings featured stimulating conversation and intellectual discourse.

- It was customary for a bride to be given a ritualistic bath prior to the wedding ceremony with water carried in a loutrophoros, a special vessel used just for the occasion. In those cases where a girl had died before ever being married, a loutrophoros was left at her tomb to represent the bath she would have taken before her marriage in the after-life.

**Bibliography**


- These easy-to-read translations of *Lysistrata*, *Women at the Thesmophoria*, and *Assemblywomen* include introductions, notes, and additional reference material.


- Lewis examines the roles and images of women in ancient Greece depicted on painted

- This chapter focuses on the role of women in society, while other chapters, also written by Oxford professors, provide a wealth of historical background information.


- All the traditions surrounding the wedding ceremony are presented here, with dozens of related illustrations of painted pottery.


- This book contains everything a reader would want to know about the role of the Spartan woman in supporting the city's legendary militaristic society.


- This fifty-six-page pamphlet discusses the latest research about the lives of women based on the artifacts uncovered at the Athenian Agora.


- A highly acclaimed translation of Sappho that dedicates entire pages to simple phrases, or in some cases, just one poignant word. Contains a glossary and Greek text.

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