

# ANCIENT HISTORY

## Essay on Spartan Women

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As the ancient Greek orator Demosthenes noted, Spartan men had “prostitutes for physical excitement; mistresses to look after [their] daily comforts and wives to produce legitimate children and to act as trustworthy custodians for [their] households.” However, contrary to popular belief, Spartan women enjoyed a status and respect that were unknown to the rest of the Hellenic world and held important roles in social, economic and religious spheres. Although the female voice of Sparta is unheard of, this is known to us due to the writings of Greek men of other city-states, including Xenophon, Aristotle and Plutarch.

From early childhood, Spartan women were trained to become mothers of strong sons and warriors. The education of Spartan girls came under the protection of the state-supported educational system, which incorporated physical training and fitness along with cultural instruction. The education was similar to that of the Spartan males, which involved exercising with boys to increase their physical resilience, and to encourage competitiveness and equality. This involved sports such as running, wrestling, javelin and discus throwing, and certain ball games. According to Plutarch, these exercises were designed to give women a chance to produce fit, healthy males so they could become great warriors of Sparta.

However, Spartan women required not only strong bodies, but also strong minds, hence a girl’s education also included the basics of reading and writing. The state often employed poets like Alcman to oversee their cultural education, which included poetry on the subjects of Spartan legends, as well as social and religious customs, pottery, choral recitations, dance, and music. Although they learned weaving and other domestic skills, this was mainly intended to enable them to supervise such work, rather than to carry it out themselves.

The labour of helot women freed female Spartiates from much domestic work. When Xenophon mentions the physical training and athletics on which Spartiate women spent time, he says in explanation that, “Lycurgus believed that female slaves would suffice for producing clothes.” Another role of helot women was probably the bearing and rearing of illegitimate children fathered by Spartiates. According to Plutarch, a Spartan female slave who was up for sale was asked what skills she possessed, in which she replied ‘To be trustworthy,’ where another woman answered ‘To manage a household well.’ This demonstrates the roles of Spartan women were expected to undertake, in being loyal to their men and to sustain a good lifestyle within the home. Furthermore, it is presumed that most *perioikic* women lived like other Greek women raising children, managing their households, and performing domestic labour in their own homes. Some probably worked in service jobs like baby nursing and prostitution.

In Xenophon’s explanation of the Spartan constitution, the most important role in Spartan society for a free woman was to continue the Spartan legacy through childbirth. Thus, marriage and motherhood were every Spartan female’s social and anatomical destiny. Mothers with numerous sons were afforded special status and “only women who lost their lives to perpetuate the state were honoured as heroes,” that is, awarded tombstone inscriptions for their sacrifice. In the absence of fathers during children’s formative years, women were the sole influence in the creation of Spartan citizens. According to modern historian Blundell, “females in Sparta were so thoroughly indoctrinated that they formed an effective branch of a state propaganda machine.” This propaganda most often occurred during festivals such as the *Homos*. Girls composed songs for boys deserving praise, cheered the winners in competitions, and mocked those who lost. To avoid disapproval from their female counterparts, Spartan boys were motivated to continually strive for excellence. Accordingly, it can be seen how the women of Sparta became tools for the state in encouraging rivalry among their offspring, and in creating a determination to excel in the young male population.

Since marriage existed strictly for the procreation of children and not as an answer to emotional or social needs, the arrangement did not have the same meaning to Spartans as in modern times. Spartan girls, according to Plutarch, were married when 'they were ripe for it' – that is, when they were physically mature, most probably in their late teens. The marriage ceremony began with a rape – no doubt a purely symbolic and ritualised rape, but the symbolism in itself was revealing of the potential for male dominance. In contrast to this violence, modern historian Pomeroy claims that Spartan mothers did have some say in who their daughters would marry. Then the 'bridesmaid' shaved off the bride's hair, dressed her in a man's cloak and sandals, and lay her down on a mattress in the dark to await her husband. These wedding arrangements have been interpreted as the means by which Spartan males, up to this point apparently only familiar with homosexual relations, were eased into the new experience of heterosexual intercourse. Alternatively, the head shaving and clothing as a male have been interpreted as abrupt markers that the girl had left behind her previous unmarried state.

Ancient writers describe Sparta to be monogamous, yet the overriding aim of Spartan marriages was to produce more warriors. Thus, the Spartan society had an open-minded attitude towards extramarital relations, if it was to produce more children. As such, both Plutarch and Xenophon refer to the practice of wife sharing. A young wife with an elderly husband was encouraged to use another man, whose physique and character they admired, to impregnate her. Furthermore, a man wishing not to cohabit with a wife, but desiring fine children, could breed with "any distinguished woman with fine offspring, once he had persuaded her husband." It was also required that a king whose marriage had not produced a son should take a second wife to ensure a male heir. This was not considered as adultery, however these practises sprung from a desire to continue the social order, to raise male heirs to inherit property and carry on the family line. Plutarch described distinct paternity appropriate for a utopian society, in which reproduction was the primary goal of marriage and the economic aspects of the private *oikos* (family) were overlooked in favour of the state. As for the wives in this society, they are said to have welcomed such an arrangement, as Xenophon assures us, since it gave them the chance to manage more than one household.

During the archaic and classical periods, Sparta did not have a coinage system and women were prohibited from possessing gold and silver. Despite this, Spartan women were known to be wealthy – a wealth derived from property ownership. In times of war, when their husbands left for military duty, wives were expected to control and maintain their husband's estate and protect it against invaders. Even in divorce, according to Pomeroy, a wife took her own property and half the produce of the household. As noted by Aristotle, women had amassed two-fifths of the land in Sparta by the fourth century BC. Unlike the women of Athens, Spartan women were granted an equal stake in the success or failure of their state. Controlling the family property meant that the women could control the family wealth and therefore the entire Spartan agriculture. With this great economic power came increased status, and hence their significant role in the running of the economy.

Spartan women also played a leading role in public and private religion, which involved such things as prayers, libations and visiting temples. The most famous cult centre in Sparta is that of the goddess Artemis Orthia, associated with childbirth. It is believed that women who were infertile, pregnant or had survived childbirth brought offerings here. Lead figurines dated to the seventh and sixth century found at the Orthia sanctuary depicts women and men playing flutes and lyres, and one shows a woman playing cymbals. This demonstrates that women still undertook a significant role in religious ceremonies, free to perform ritual services. Yet it is also possible that the female-shaped figurines represented the understanding of importance and deep respect for the 'maternal figure' in Spartan religion.

More specific information is available about royal women than about any other group. The wives and daughters of Spartan kings could not be labelled "queens" and "princesses" for they had no special role to play in society or religion. Some of the royal women at Sparta did, however, wield a great deal of authority because of their influence on the kings, beginning with the child Gorgo, daughter of King Kleomenes I. According to Herodotus, her father took advice on matters of the state from Gorgo when she was just eight years old. She advised her father about how he should

treat a foreign ambassador and consequently resist a bribe. Gorgo was later said to be responsible for decoding a warning that the Persian forces were about to invade Greece. Being asked by a woman from Attica, 'Why is it that you Spartans are the only women who can rule men?' Gorgo replied, 'Because we are the only ones who give birth to men.' Due to this biological advantage of being able to give birth to real men, Gorgo insinuates that Spartan women were entitled to this unique form of power.

Archaeological and written sources highlight that the women of ancient Sparta played a significant role in their society. From the responsibility of rearing new generations of warriors and leaders, to maintaining social order, and contributing to religion, Spartan women formed a critical part of the perpetuation of their idyllic society. Described and interpreted by the writings of Xenophon, Aristotle and Plutarch, this image is primarily restricted to Spartiate (free) women. Much is still to be learnt about the other women in Spartan society however, such as those who served as slaves and domestic help, as sources revealing the lives of *helot* and *perioikic* women are almost non-existent.