

ANCIENT HISTORY

Ancient Society – Sparta – Spartan Women Speech

Every creator of an artefact and each historian who interprets it, are all prone to bias. Consequently, our picture of a Spartan woman maybe be clouded by partiality and inaccuracies or the picture may simply be incomplete. Ancient and modern sources are not unanimous about the position of women in Spartan society. For example, modern historian Anton Powell believes that gender discrimination was much less relative to other Hellenic states. While his Athenian prejudice must be noted, classic philosopher Aristotle, expresses that “from the earliest times, lack of control of women was a feature of Spartan society”. However, the political structure suggests otherwise. Women were not Spartiates, and hence did not enjoy citizenship or suffrage, or participate in the ecclesia or army. So, let us explore these two opposing views concerning the role and status Spartan women.

First, we shall discuss the traditional view, that the concept of the ‘lesser sex’ did not exist. Spartan women were allowed to socialise and exercise with men. For instance, girls trained in athletics level with men, which included the very challenging bibasis, where one jumped up and down, touching their buttocks with their heels. Perceptions from the other states, which may carry bias, such as Aristophanes’ in his satire *Lysistrata*, featured the Spartan woman as masculine, dominant and aggressive in the character of Lampito.

According to William Hale, Spartan girls had quote “long since been parading bare in the stadiums”. Although, it is widely accepted that they wore a short, revealing peplos – a loose-fitting Greek garment – split up the side for freedom of movement. The British Museum houses a bronze figure of a Spartan girl running in the peplos, as shown in picture 1. Euripides finds the immodesty of these “thigh-displayers” quite intolerable. However, his work is well known for misogyny. It is claimed that women were not allowed to wear jewellery, and Lycurgus expelled makers of gold and silver ornaments from Sparta. On the contrary, archaeological evidence is abundant in elaborately-carved ivory combs worn in the hair [as in figure 3] and brooches worn on the peplos [in figure 4].

Now, one may view this liberty to resemble feminism. But their lifestyle was in fact as equally bound by Spartan etiquette as their male counterparts. It dictated that, to quote Xenophon, “for free women, the most important job was to bear children”. Xenophon is quite reliable, as he wrote during the time he wrote about, which was from 431-355 BC. However, he had a military background, and hence it could have influenced his views to favour the more disciplined aspects of society. As mentioned earlier, Spartan women had a reputation for being promiscuous. The married could have sexual intercourse with other men her husband had chosen for her, but only in the interests of the state; that is to produce healthy children.

As mothers, they served as “a state propaganda machine” to quote Blundell, for this highly regimented system to enforce loyalty to the Spartan state. At a young age, they instilled in their sons the ideal of dying with honour, and their daughters the duty to be mothers of warriors.

In the oikos, “many things were managed by women”, quoting Aristotle, due to their husband’s frequent absence. They managed the kleros and all it produced. Barrow adopts a slightly different slant though, saying that they “may have been rather bored”, because they were free from domestic duties.

They were not expected to remain at home and weave. However, it is assumed that they possess this skill for they made ritual garments for statues, as in figure 2. Apart from the physical training, Spartan girls had a defined public role in singing and dancing in choruses, such as the Hormos. With other education such as literacy, Herodotus suggests in his work *The Histories*, that Gorgo – wife of King Leonidas – could read, however the reliability of his documenting can be questioned and he often exaggerated for greater narrative impact.

Wealth in Sparta was measured by horse and land-ownership. Although they could not own land, Spartan women played an important role in the transfer of property down the male heir line. Aristotle notes that in the 4th Century BC, “two-fifths of the territory belonged to women” due to large dowries and inheritances. It was a common practice for heiresses to be married to uncles or cousins to keep the estate within the family. Herodotus mentions that “when a maiden has been left heiress of her father’s estate, the kings decide who is to marry her.” This reflects their lack of choice and freedom. However, A.J. Ball proposes that mothers did have some say in who their daughters would marry.

Nevertheless, the pre-nuptial wedding feast involved the eating of breast-shaped cakes, and the singing of poet Alcman’s ‘Maiden songs’. For the ceremony, the girl had to shave her head and wear a man’s cloak and sandals, which suggests her chastity and subjection to her husband.

As can be seen, women’s place in Spartan society is contentious, as views and sources on this matter conflict each other.