

GODDESSES, WHORES,
WIVES, AND SLAVES

Women in Classical Antiquity

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totally male, the colonists were often forced to find wives among the native population.

One particularly violent episode is related by Herodotus: Athenian colonists did not bring women with them to Miletus, but rather seized the native Carian women and killed their male relatives outright. To revenge this homicide, the daughters of the abducted Carian women swore an oath that was passed down to their female descendants never to dine with their husbands or call them by name. Herodotus also reports the strange practice that developed between the male colonizers of Thera and their native wives at the time the city of Cyrene was founded: the husbands found that their wives had completely different tastes in food, so the men and women in that colony continued to maintain separate diets.²

The Bronze Age mores that judged marriage to be more important to the growth and the strengthening of the *polis* and the family than to the fulfillment of the individuals involved carried over into the pre-Classical periods in more ways than one. While some colonists in distant reaches of the expanding Greek world literally captured their wives by force, the upper classes in the established centers of power arranged marriages among sons and daughters to aggrandize their political and economic standing much as they had during the Bronze Age. After the mid-seventh century B.C. a number of Greek cities were ruled by extraconstitutional monarchs known as tyrants. Greek tyrants, aristocrats, and foreign rulers were linked by means of a complex matrix of dynastic marriages. This situation implies, of course, that the relationship between husband and wife in these cases did not supplant their relationships with blood relatives. Rather, the wife served primarily as a material bond between her father—and implicitly his political and economic power—and the power of her husband's family. The benefits of marriage were such that some tyrants were bigamous.³

Elements of Bronze Age prenuptial rivalry were preserved in the lively competition that was generated for the daughters of influential fathers. The extremes to which suitors went to prove their worth is illustrated in the stories surrounding the marriage of Agariste, daughter of Cleisthenes, who reigned as tyrant in Sicyon from 600 to 570 B.C. After Cleisthenes was victorious in the games at Olympia, he proclaimed that he would entertain suitors for his daughter's hand. Thirteen illustrious suitors from twelve cities entered the competition. Cleisthenes entertained the suitors for a year—they feasted as

royally as the suitors of Penelope—and rated them according to their lineage, their manly virtues, their prowess at running and wrestling, their family connections, and other criteria. Hippocleides was chosen, but when he behaved in a ridiculous fashion by dancing at his betrothal feast, he was quickly replaced by Megacles, one of the Alcmaeonidae, a powerful Athenian family.⁴ Thus the runner-up in the competition was suddenly elevated to the prized status and the marriage of Agariste was celebrated with due extravagance.

A few marriages in ruling families were influenced more by sentiment than by politics. Pisistratus arranged a marriage between his daughter and a young man who loved her so much that he kissed her when he happened to meet her on the street. The marriage of Periander, tyrant of Corinth, and Melissa was also an affair of the heart. Periander first caught sight of Melissa, daughter of the ruler of Epidaurus, when she was pouring wine for workmen in a field, wearing a revealing Dorian-style dress not covered by a cloak. (It is interesting to note that these two young daughters of tyrants were not kept secluded but in fact mingled with men: one on a city street, the other on a farm.) Periander married Melissa, but later in a fit of jealousy he murdered her. His passionate attachment was so strong that he had intercourse with her dead body. When her spirit returned and complained that she was cold and naked, since the clothes that had been buried with her had never been burned, Periander ordered all the women in Corinth to gather in the temple of Hera wearing their best clothing. He stripped them and burned the garments for Melissa.⁵

Women of wealth—even if they lacked prestigious fathers—were also desirable. In the latter part of the sixth century B.C., Theognis of Megara wrote: "Even the finest man does not mind marrying the bad daughter of a bad father, if he gives much wealth; nor does a woman refuse to be the bedmate of a bad but wealthy man, for she would rather be wealthy than good."⁶

Dorian Women: Sparta and Gortyn

Because the law codes of Sparta and Gortyn, a city in Crete, were established relatively early, there is more written information about the lives of their women than there is for Athenian women in pre-Classical times. But much of our knowledge of the Spartans is

derived from non-Spartan authors of later periods, who attempted to emphasize the difference between Dorian Sparta and Ionian Athens, and the role of women was an index of the contrast between the two ways of life.

The Spartan regime, developed in the seventh century B.C., was traditionally attributed to the lawgiver Lycurgus. This archaic code remained nominally unchanged throughout Spartan history.⁷ Bearing children was the most important function of Spartan women, since the state was constantly at war and the production of warriors was of highest priority. Accordingly, the law of Lycurgus on burials forbade the inscription of the name of the deceased on a tomb except for a man who had died at war or a woman who had died in childbirth.⁸ Because the biological role of the mother in reproduction was seen as at least as important as the role of the father, a program with a goal of physical fitness for girls was prescribed. Unlike the Athenian, the Spartan girls were as well nourished as the boys.⁹ Housework and the fabrication of clothing were left to women of inferior classes, while citizen women were occupied with gymnastics, music, household management, and childrearing.

There is some doubt about whether the girls exercised in the nude. However, Spartan art of the Archaic period portrays the nude female body, while the art of other Greek cities does not.¹⁰ Spartan women's dress was appropriate to their life style. They wore the Dorian *peplos*, with slit skirts which bared their thighs and permitted a freedom of movement impossible to women dressed in the voluminous Ionian *chiton*. Ancient opinions varied on whether their scanty costume encouraged chastity or licentiousness. Herodotus states that at one time all Greek women wore the Dorian dress, which was fastened at the shoulders with broochpins. However, the Athenian women once used these pins as weapons on a man who brought them news of their husbands' deaths, and were then punished by the men and forced to dress in the Ionian *chiton*, which, being stitched, did not require pins.¹¹

In Sparta the interests of the community prevailed over those of private citizens. A newborn male was examined to determine if he would become a strong warrior. If he passed the test, he was permitted to live. All girls, apparently, were reared, for Plutarch reports that they were merely handed over immediately after birth to the care of the women.¹² The state had no interest in whether any child was born of the husband of its mother, so long as the father was a

Spartan citizen. But when at the end of the eighth century B.C. the Spartan men were absent on a campaign of long duration, the women resorted to intercourse with unfree men known as helots.¹³ It may well be that the state encouraged relations with the helots so that there would be a new crop of young men if there were heavy casualties and the army did not return.¹⁴ The children of these unions were euphemistically termed "children of unmarried mothers," but they were not recognized as Spartan citizens when the army did return home successful from the war. They were sent off to found the city of Tarentum.

Adultery was not as strictly defined as in some societies. Various Athenian writers report on wife-sharing among the Spartans, viewing extramarital relationships in terms of the husband's lending his wife to another man when that man needed an heir to his estate. The Athenians' interpretation of Spartan behavior may have been influenced by their own strictly monogamous society. It is difficult to believe that Spartan women, who were notoriously outspoken—so much so that there is an anthology of their witticisms attributed to Plutarch—passively submitted to being lent by their husbands as childbearers to others. While there is no firm evidence to confirm the hypothesis, I find it easier to believe that the women also initiated their own liaisons, whether purely for pleasure or because they accepted the society's valuation of childbearing. This would not have been difficult when a husband was off on a campaign. The Archaic Spartans may have actually had no particular interest in curtailing extramarital sexual unions, with the proviso that both partners be healthy Spartan citizens, since more frequent intercourse would tend to produce more children who were potential warriors.

Marriage was encouraged at Sparta as the most desirable basis for procreation, however, and bachelors were ridiculed and suffered legal disabilities. Spartan marriage customs were unusual among the Greeks, although the basic pattern was the familiar marriage by capture. One novel way this was accomplished was by shutting up young men and women in a dark room, each man leading home whichever woman he caught—sight unseen.¹⁵ Another way, more frequently practiced, was for the groom to carry off his bride in secret. Here the marriage by capture was not a display of real force, but rather a symbolic enactment of a previous engagement. The bride was dressed for her wedding in man's clothing, with her hair cut short in a mannish style. Whether this transvestitism was to

signify her entrance upon a wholly new way of life, or whether—as psychoanalytic interpretation would have it—the groom, accustomed to homosexual involvements in his army career, would find it easier to relate to his bride if she looked somewhat masculine, is uncertain. The husband went on living with his army group until the age of thirty and visited with his wife by stealth. Since Spartan youths were wed at eighteen, married couples did not live together for the first twelve years of their marriage. Lycurgus supposedly made this regulation so that when the couple were together they were never satiated, and their offspring were thought to be as vigorous as their desire. Spartan marriage, then, was a kind of trial marriage, the purpose being to determine whether the woman was capable of conceiving. If the bride did not become pregnant, the marriage—which was held in nearly complete secrecy—could be inconspicuously nullified without public dishonor. The fact of a trial marriage implies that the bride could marry again with the hope of proving her fertility with a different husband.

The simplicity and rigorousness of life in Sparta during the Archaic Age gradually gave way to a more relaxed and luxurious way of living. Greek and Roman writers tend to blame the women for this corruption of the earlier regime. Aristotle states that the Spartan women had never really accepted the laws of Lycurgus from the time of their first promulgation.¹⁶ Women were not directly responsible for the declining vigor of Sparta after the Peloponnesian War, but they adapted readily to a less archaic and less demanding mode of life.

For women, abandoning the Lycurgan regime meant abdicating their role as child-producers.¹⁷ Economic conditions in the society as a whole also encouraged individuals to limit the size of their families, for if the population increased, wealth would have to be divided into very small parcels. As a result of this change of attitude, the Spartan population began to dwindle after 479 B.C., and fell catastrophically in the fourth century B.C.¹⁸

The conspicuous prosperity of women while the state was floundering provoked criticism. Formerly women were not permitted to wear jewelry, cosmetics, perfume, or dyed clothing. By the fourth century B.C. they controlled by means of their dowries and inheritances two-fifths of the land and property in Sparta, and some spent their money on expensive racehorses and fancy clothing.

In the mid-third century B.C. King Agis attempted to restore the Lycurgan discipline. According to Plutarch, who gently disapproves of the freedom enjoyed by Spartan women, the reforms failed due to the refusal of the women to give up their ease and luxury in favor of the earlier ideals.¹⁹ Aristotle also criticized Spartan women, linking various elements in the decline of Sparta with the degeneracy of its women.²⁰ Here Aristotle anticipated the Roman tendency to connect the vigor of the state with the virtue of the women, and political weakness with moral degeneracy—particularly of women.

Aristotle also noted that the physical absence of men, who were abroad for extended periods owing to military obligations, was largely responsible for the freedom enjoyed by Spartan women. The separation between the sexes and the relative freedom of women can be documented also for the Dorian city of Gortyn during the Archaic period. However, at Gortyn the geographic separation between the sexes was less marked, warfare was not as constant, and, as a result, the powers of the women of Gortyn were less than those of Sparta. Parts of the law code of Gortyn, dating from the seventh or sixth century B.C. and preserved in a fifth-century inscription, have a large number of provisions pertinent to women—many of which are notably liberal. Some scholars believe the Gortynian code represents a stage in the evolution of increasing freedom for women. Others, including those who believe in the existence of matriarchal and matrilineal systems in Bronze Age Crete, suggest that the code documents a gradual restriction of female freedom but retains traces of the earlier patterns.²¹

Social structures at Gortyn are comparable to those at Sparta. The lives of free men centered around all-male groups in which they were trained for warfare and slept and ate together. Homosexual relationships were not discouraged. The age at which a married man could live at home in Gortyn is not known, but Aristotle suggests that the separation of men and women was encouraged in order to reduce the birthrate.²²

Since the men concentrated on their military duties, the women were involved in managing the home and property. Thus, at Gortyn, free women had the right to possess, control, and inherit property, though the inheritance of a daughter was less than that of a son. Upon divorce a wife took her own property and half the produce of the household, and if the husband was at fault, he paid a small fine.

A woman's work was recognized as producing wealth which ought to be evaluated, and there are stipulations in the code indicating the fraction of what she has "woven" that a divorced or widowed woman could take with her. Women not only controlled their own property, but when a father, husband, or son violated the regulations concerning the property of children, the control passed to the mother or wife.

Since the code recognized homosexual relations as valid, there were rules about rape in which the penalty for raping a free person, male or female, was the same: a monetary fine. The penalty was doubled if committed by a slave against a free person, but there was also a penalty for raping a household slave. Elsewhere in Greece the punishment for adultery was severe (for example, at Italian Locri the punishment was blinding), but in Gortyn the penalty was only monetary.²³ The fine for adultery was doubled if the act took place in the home of the woman's father, brother, or husband. No penalty is named for adultery between a free man and a nonfree woman.

If a free woman married a nonfree man and lived in his house, the children were not free, but they were considered free if he lived in her house. Thus, under Gortynian law a woman could have both free and nonfree children. On the other hand, in the provision concerning a baby born after divorce, the child belonged first to the father. The mother was required to present the child to its father; he could accept or reject it. If he rejected the child, the mother could rear it or get rid of it (*apoballo*—"to throw away"—is the verb employed). Hypergamy was possible only for males; there is no mention of marriage between a free male and a nonfree female. Of course, no Greek state needed to regulate sexual relations between a free man and a nonfree woman, since the children of such a union would not be considered the father's heirs.

Regulations regarding the *patrōiōkos*—a fatherless girl without brothers—are interesting in the Gortynian case, especially in comparison with the Athenian stipulations concerning the equivalent *epiklēros*. The primary obligation for such a girl was to perpetuate her father's line by bearing a child, and thus to keep her inheritance within the paternal tribe. Her paternal uncles, beginning with the eldest, were first in the order of succession to her hand. They were followed by their sons—her paternal cousins—also ranking by age, and finally by any man within her father's tribe. Marriage to a *patrōiōkos* may have not been highly desired, especially if she

were not particularly wealthy, because she continued to manage her own property after marrying and did not become part of her husband's family. Instead, in an inversion of usual dynastic practice, her husband eventually became an instrument in the perpetuation of his late father-in-law's household. Gortynian law also afforded the *patrōiōkos* some measure of choice in her marriage. In the case that she did not wish to wed a member of the tribe who presented himself, the *patrōiōkos* could escape the obligation by paying him a monetary compensation from her inheritance and then marry freely. If no one from the tribe requested her hand, she was also allowed free choice of a husband. The one irony here—a stray matrilineal element in the midst of an otherwise patrilineal tradition—was that although the paternal uncles of the *patrōiōkos* looked after her property, her maternal uncles were entrusted with her upbringing.

The rearing of young women was likely to have been a short-lived responsibility, however, as *patrōiōkos*, and perhaps all girls, were considered marriageable at the age of twelve. In Gortyn, the regulations concerning adultery in the house of a girl's father, then of her brother, and finally of her husband may indicate that a bride did not move out of her parental home until she was of a competent age to manage her own household.²⁴

For Gortyn, though unfortunately not for Sparta, we also have legal regulations governing the women of the lower classes—serfs and slaves. Marriage, divorce, birth, and possession of chattels were subject to laws rivaling in complexity and comprehensiveness those affecting the upper classes. Extensive regulations were required concerning marriage of slaves when the partners were owned by different masters. For instance, the wife of a slave, as well as any children produced by his marriage, became the property of the husband's master. A married female slave could herself possess property, for the divorce regulations state that she may take her movables (presumably personal property) and small livestock, and—since she does not gain the status of a free woman by divorce—must return to her former master.²⁵ A child born after divorce must be offered first to her ex-husband's master, in a manner analogous to the presentation of the free divorced woman's child to her ex-husband. If the ex-husband's master refuses it, the child becomes the property of the master of its mother. An illegitimate child falls under the jurisdiction of the master of the mother's father or, if the

mother's father is deceased, of her brother's master. It appears that decisions about unfree women and their children were in the hands of men to a greater extent than those about free women.

Dorian women, in contrast to Ionians, enjoyed many freedoms, and among Dorians the Spartans were the most liberated of all. The freedom of Spartan women seems to have been a result of the Dorian tradition with its communal social structure and separation of the sexes. But a comparison with Gortyn shows that Spartan women were unique in important details, including their marriage at a mature age and their exemption from women's traditional work. A chronological arrangement of the codes of Dorian Sparta and Gortyn and the code of Ionian Athens shows that the Spartan code, which antedated the Gortynian by a century or two, was the most favorable to women. The Athenian, codified only in the sixth century B.C., was the most restrictive, as we shall see in detail in Chapter IV.

Ionian Women: Voices from the Grave

For Athenian women in the Dark Age and early Archaic period preceding the codification of their city's laws, the principal source of evidence is archaeological, especially the material from female burials and the depiction of women on pottery.²⁶ The survival and sometimes the excavation and reporting of such material is haphazard, and when the record is so uneven, the historian can more responsibly describe it than venture interpretations. However, where reasonable, I will infer from the dead to the living.

Sex roles that will be familiar to the modern reader were firmly established in the Dark Age in Athens. Both the living members of the family who supplied the dead with gifts for the grave and the craftsmen who fashioned the grave furnishings were concerned that the contents of the grave and the grave-marker itself be appropriate to and indicative of the sex of the deceased. The sex was indicated in various ways. In the Protogeometric period (ca. 1000–900 B.C.), male and female burials in Attica were distinguished by the shape of the amphoras in which ashes were buried or which were used to mark graves. The burials of males were normally associated with neck-handled amphoras, those of females with belly-handled ones with horizontal handles placed at the point of the greatest diameter of the

belly. The belly-handled shape may have been used for carrying water, a chore traditionally performed by women.²⁷ In the late tenth century B.C., shoulder-handled amphoras began to replace belly-handled ones for female burials, and became usual in the ninth century B.C. [Plates 2 and 3]

On Geometric vases—which span the Dark Age and the early Archaic period—human figures are depicted for the first time since the fall of Mycenae. The earliest such figure is of a female mourner on a pottery fragment found in the Ceramicus in Attica.²⁸ With respect to the shape of the vases, the tradition established in the Protogeometric period tends to prevail. A belly-handled amphora is used for four of six female burials from Attica in which *prothesis* (lying-in-state of a corpse) and *ekphora* (transporting a corpse to its grave) are depicted in the vase paintings. Because the figures are sketched in a simple silhouette, it is very difficult to judge the sex of the deceased at a glance. Therefore an attempt has been made to decode various iconographic features in order to determine the sex of the corpses portrayed on *prothesis* and *ekphora* vases. More male corpses than female are depicted on the amphoras so far studied. Judging from the shape of the vases, and the sex of the corpses portrayed, it appears that more vases with scenes of *prothesis* and *ekphora* were associated with burials of males than with those of females.

The sex of a deceased Athenian from this time can also be determined by the nature of the offerings placed within the graves. Unlike the Spartans, Athenian women continued to perform the household tasks that were described in the Homeric epics. Thus the graves of women contain such items as spindle whorls, certain types of jewelry, and cooking pots, while those of men were provided with items typifying warriors—spears, shield bosses, and drinking cups. In addition, openwork *kalathoi*—small models of baskets probably used for produce or wool—though rare, are found in women's graves, yet another indication of the continuity of their domestic roles.²⁹

Besides depictions of Athenian women as corpses, they are also shown on the Geometric *prothesis* and *ekphora* vases in the traditional role of tending the dead. To kinswomen fell the responsibility of washing, anointing, and dressing the corpse in preparation for burial. They also served as the chief mourners—joined by both the slave women of the household and professional female mourners