

The experience of a woman in ancient Greece was certainly distinct to that of a man. Operating in a different sphere, having different responsibilities and expectations. Whether women's experience changed over the period of our course is less obvious, we can see Women's experience and agency in Greece to change over the period of study, to a very small extent and mainly in Athens. In this essay I will consider cases from both archaic and classical Greece between the years 700 BCE to 323 BCE. Women's experiences did not change drastically over this time period with very limited evidence of any change at all, however variation in experience and agency did occur between geographical regions. In this essay I will take agency to indicate an ability to enforce action and dwell on Greek women's experience both inside the oikos, outside the oikos, through the eyes of the law, religion, and ritual.

The experience of spartan women in the eyes of the law was very much distinct from that of Athenian women. Thought as of 'enforcers' of the spartan warrior code¹ allowing them to have agency over men in their ability to enforce the action of the warrior code, shown in many of Plutarch's 'sayings of the spartan woman' conveying the message 'with your shield or on it'. This is clearly a reference to enforcing the spartan warrior ideal on the men of Sparta. What is even more significant about spartan women being 'enforcers' of this code is the fact that as women, they were not subjected to any code of conduct themselves. This indiscipline was a common criticism of spartan women² as seen in Aristotle's politics:

¹ James Redfield, 'The Women of Sparta' (1977) 73 *The Classical Journal* 146
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3296868.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A076be136c89d976b9920ed2275182054&ab_segments=&origin=&acceptTC=1> accessed 6 December 2022.

² Ibid.

'Furthermore the indiscipline of the women undercuts the organising principle of the constitution and the happiness of the state. Just as the parts of a household are a man and a woman, so it is clear that a city must be thought of as divided nearly in half into a group of men, and another of women, so that in constitutions where the women are handled badly, one must think of half of the city as lawless. Which happened there. The lawgiver wished the whole city to be strong; in the case of the men it obviously is so, but he disregarded the women. They live in every sort of intemperance and luxuriously. So that by necessity in such a city wealth will be honoured, especially if they are in fact controlled by women ... And this is true of the Spartans; much is managed by women in their regime. Indeed what difference does it make if women rule, or if the rulers are ruled by women? It comes out the same. Then again while boldness is not useful in daily life, but only in war, still even in this respect the women of Sparta turned out very damaging-as became clear in the Theban invasion. They were not the slightest use (as they might be in other cities) but made more uproar than the enemy. . . . The fact that the women are handled badly, as was said before, not only produces an internal disorder in the constitution, taken itself by itself, but also contributes to avarice (philochre-matia)' .

Aristotle Politics 1269b12-70a15

Here, Aristotle associates the role of women in enforcing the warrior code to undermining the position of the state, especially in matters to do with war, since women were overstepping their designated role in society and interfering in matters he believes they should not be involved with. There is little evidence that this role changed over time but with Sparta consistently being engaged in conflict from the archaic period (Messenian war) through to the classical period (Peloponnesian war) we can assume women to have enforced the warrior code throughout the period of the module. Hence, we can see spartan women to have agency through their experience under spartan law during the period of this module and this agency to have been consistent and unchanging through this time period.

With Aristotle's 'Politics' having such a scathing point of view on the involvement of spartan women in matters of the state, it is important to consider the circumstances under which he

was writing it. Aristotle wrote 'Politics' whilst teaching at the Lyceum, in Athens³. The fact that this work was written in Athens is telling due to their very different stance on women in the public sphere hence showing a different picture of women's agency when looking at Athenian women's experience of the law, women were very much subordinate to men in all aspects of public life, they didn't have an opportunity to enforce anything over their husbands in the eyes of the law, with them being considered minors under it⁴. Women had a male 'kyros' who represented her in the law, being her father or brother if unmarried and her husband if she was and had no standing in any questions relating to her marriage⁵. Women also did not have agency over re marriage should she become widowed, becoming 'assignable' - epidiktoi⁶. Hence, the agency Athenian women had was distinct from the agency Spartan women had in the public sphere and law. Athenian women can be seen to have very little agency, evident in their position as minors under the law and male guardianship. This shows the agency and experience not to change over time in the public sphere, but to have geographical variation, with the experiences of women in Athens and Sparta being in complete contrast to each other.

The idea of change in agency being defined by geographical location rather than time is further consolidated when looking at marriage in Crete. Women from Crete had a significant amount of agency when looking at marriage and inheritance, if a woman's father was to die before she was able to marry, she would be able to choose between eligible candidates for

³ 'Politics | Work by Aristotle | Britannica' (www.britannica.com) <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Politics-by-Aristotle>>.

⁴ John Gould, 'Law, Custom and Myth: Aspects of the Social Position of Women in Classical Athens' (1980) 100 *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 38 <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/3670340FD12AE5AF16E5E86DADB02C3A/S0075426900095628a.pdf/law_custom_and_myth_aspects_of_the_social_position_of_women_in_classical_athens.pdf> accessed 14 December 2019.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ AW Gomme, 'The Position of Women in Athens in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries' (1925) 20 *Classical Philology* 1.

marriage whilst retaining her full inheritance. If she were to reject all eligible candidates, she would still be able to keep a half of her inheritance and have free choice over who she could marry⁷. This amount of agency is far from that of Athenian women having no influence over who she could marry and being placed under a male guardianship, hence strengthening the argument that varying agency came with geographical location rather than time.

Moreover, women's agency in Crete is enhanced by their rights when it comes to inheritance. Daughters were able to inherit property such as land, livestock, and money, even if she had a brother, with her brother taking a larger share and her still retaining a portion. In Gortyn, there were no dowries exchanged when a woman got married, in contrast to in Athenian women acting as vessels to transfer wealth from one man to another through their dowries and inheritance, which they were only able to access through their husbands⁸. In Sparta, there is a similar situation to Gortyn, women could own land, with Aristotle calculating that spartan women owned around 2/5 of spartan land. Hence, showing distinct differences across women's experience in marriage in differing geographical locations, with Creteian women having significantly more agency than Athenian women when it came to marriage, showing variation in agency and experience to lie very much in geographical area rather than time period.

However, women in Athens were able to have some agency, this was usually achieved through religion. Religion is often seen as the one way women could assert agency in ancient Greece, we know this not to be true for all of Greece as women in city states outside of Athens had some agency outside religion, but with Athenian women religion was one of

⁷ Sue Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece* (Harvard University Press 1995) pp58–59.

⁸ AW Gomme, 'The Position of Women in Athens in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries' (1925) 20 *Classical Philology* 1.

the few ways they could have agency. Instead of being outcast from religion, Athenian women were central to religious practise in Athens and are thought to have participated in 85% of religious activity in the city⁹. Women had agency through assuming powerful priestess positions, these positions were often afforded to daughters of wealthy families and presented an 'escape' from an oppressed domestic life¹⁰. One key example of the priestess position improving Athenian women's experience and agency is Chrysis' privileges she was awarded whilst the priestess of Athens Polias. She received Proxenos, the right to be a special representative from Athens to Delphi and Asyilia, the right to consult the oracle of Delphi, freedom from taxes and the right to houses and land¹¹. Having a woman hold this higher status is telling of the agency that came with being a priestess in ancient Athens, and how central the role of women was to religion if Athenian officials were so unwilling to grant women any freedom in the public sphere but so willing to do so when in the religious sphere.

We can see continuity in the way women were involved in religion both through the period of our course and across geographical location. Spartan women were also heavily involved in ritual and religion, with women being heavily involved in sport and dance which were both considered ritual activities in Sparta¹². Moreover these ritual dances were seen in Corinth on pottery as in figure 1.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Joan Breton Connelly, *Portrait of a Priestess: Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece* (Princeton university press 2007).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² James Redfield, 'The Women of Sparta' (1977) 73 *The Classical Journal* 146

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3296868.pdf?refregid=excelsior%3A076be136c89d976b9920ed2275182054&ab_segments=&origin=&acceptTC=1> accessed 6 December 2022.



Figure 1

This vase was found in a sanctuary of Demeter¹³ and is significant as it portrays women dancing with padded dancers (men), in this situation ritual is being performed together by both men and women, showing women as more equal to men and thus to have more agency. There are some limitations for the argument that women had more agency when it came to religious aspects of life, In Theban tragedies, women were often prevented from participating in religious rituals, with participation on thesmophoria or arrephorria often being presented as harming the city's welfare¹⁴. This shows women's experience in religion to be negative and this aspect of women's freedom to be controlled hence limiting the agency religion gives them, however we have to be sceptical of this evidence as it is based in

¹³ Elizabeth G Pemberton, 'Wine, Women and Song: Gender Roles in Corinthian Cult' [2000] Kernos.

¹⁴ Barbara Goff, 'The Women of Thebes' (1995) 90 *The Classical Journal* 353
<<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3297827>> accessed 6 December 2022.

fiction. Hence, women almost universally find agency through their experience of religion and ritual in ancient Greece.

When considering change over time, there is a limited amount of evidence to suggest that women's experience changed over time, rather than over geographical area. Looking at tombs however, may suggest that there was some change. The tomb of Phrasikleia, features an archaic tomb inscription reading:

'I am the tomb of phraiskleia: I will be called maiden forever having received this name from the Gods instead of marriage'

This is significant in a number of ways. It presents maidenhood as a gift from the Gods, contrary to later sources which suggest women should be controlled by a man, preferably her husband. This perhaps suggests that there was a change in attitude towards maidenhood and marriage from the archaic period towards the classical period. Moreover, the tombstone names Phraiskleia, significant as women in Athens in the classical period rarely had their own name on their tombstones, but the name of their guardian (whether that be father, brother or husband)¹⁵. This shows women in archaic Athens to perhaps have more agency than in classical Athens. However, this is one tombstone so to draw conclusions from it would be unwise, tombstones from this period are a rare find so we can't take this one to be representative of all. Hence, there is some evidence to suggest that agency of women changes from the archaic period to the classical period in Athens, but no conclusive evidence showing this.

¹⁵ John Gould, 'Law, Custom and Myth: Aspects of the Social Position of Women in Classical Athens' (1980) 100 *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 38 <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/3670340FD12AE5AF16E5E86DADB02C3A/S0075426900095628a.pdf/law_custom_and_myth_aspects_of_the_social_position_of_women_in_classical_athens.pdf> accessed 14 December 2019.

There is however, variation in geographical location when looking at burial and tombs. In Sparta, tombstones were often left unmarked and multiple bodies were buried together, with spartan people often encouraged not to mourn¹⁶. This shows spartan women to have less agency when mourning, having to conform and perhaps suppress feelings of sadness. This is very different to the Athenian's rituals surrounding death with women being central in the role of mourning the dead¹⁷. Hence showing women to have more agency in Athens when mourning the dead than in Sparta. Hence, although there is some evidence of variation over time surrounding women's authority in death rituals in ancient Greece, there is more geographical variation in these instances.

The household has traditionally been an area in which women can assert agency, whilst also being separated and suppressed by her husband.

'But returning to the house, attend to your work the loom and the distaff, and bid your handmaidens to do so also; but the men will have charge of the fighting, all those from ilium but I more than others'

Iliad 6.490-93

Traditionally, it has been argued that women have agency over their portion of the household, weaving as suggested above and domestic tasks such as retrieving water, whilst men are able to shut them into their quarters and shield them from the public view.

However, when looking at the development of the traditionally Greek courtyard house, with separated men's and women's quarters, we can see this must not have been the case in the

¹⁶ Noel Robertson, 'The Collective Burial of Fallen Soldiers at Athens, Sparta and Elsewhere: "Ancestral Custom" and Modern Misunderstanding' (1983) 27 *Echos du monde classique: Classical views* 78 <<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/655901/pdf>> accessed 8 December 2022.

¹⁷ 'Fallen Heroes: Athens Mourning - Archaeology Magazine Archive' (*archive.archaeology.org*) <<https://archive.archaeology.org/online/features/athens/3.html>> accessed 8 December 2022

archaic period. In the early archaic period, courtyard houses were not widespread. Especially in less developed states such as Crete, 1 to 2 roomed houses used primarily for shelter and sleep were more common across ancient Greece at the beginning of the archaic period¹⁸ meaning that the idea that women were confined to their quarters is less true at the beginning of the archaic period. This affords women more agency, in being more visible to visitors who call and present in front of male members of the oikos rather than hidden. Thus, we can see women's agency to diminish over time as the physical fabric of the household move from an archaic 1 to 2 room houses towards the classical Greek courtyard houses. Women's experience did not necessarily also change over this period of housing development, due to the fact they had the same responsibility of looking after the household issues.

Thus, in conclusion there is some, limited evidence to suggest that there was a change in the agency and experience of women in ancient Greece. We can see the agency and experience of women to change over the period of the course within the household and in death rituals, both in Athens, and in both cases the agency diminishes over time with women losing agency. However, we can see more variation in the experience and agency of women in terms of geography, with women in Crete and Sparta generally having more agency than women in Athens. Social class was of course a factor in how much agency a woman had, yet there is limited evidence which distinguishes between classes of women, so this aspect is harder to evaluate. In conclusion, the experience and agency of women did change over the period of the module, but to a very small extent.

¹⁸ Stephanie Lynn Budin and Jean Macintosh Turfa, *Women in Antiquity : Real Women across the Ancient World* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group 2016) <<https://doi-org.ezproxy.st-andrews.ac.uk/10.4324/9781315621425>>.

Bibliography

Blundell S, *Women in Ancient Greece* (Harvard University Press 1995) 58

Boehringer S, Caciagli S and Stevens A, 'The Age of Love: Gender and Erotic Reciprocity in Archaic Greece' [2015] *Clio. Women, Gender, History* 24

<<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26273656>>

Breton Connelly J, *Portrait of a Priestess: Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece* (Princeton university press 2007)

Dillon M, 'Were Spartan Women Who Died in Childbirth Honoured with Grave Inscriptions?' (2007) 135 *Hermes* 149 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40379113>>

'Fallen Heroes: Athens Mourning - Archaeology Magazine Archive'

(archive.archaeology.org) <<https://archive.archaeology.org/online/features/athens/3.html>>

accessed 8 December 2022

Fantham E and others, *Women in the Classical World : Image and Text* (Oxford University Press 1994) <<https://www-fulcrum-org.ezproxy.st-andrews.ac.uk/concern/monographs/8910jt869>>

Goff B, 'The Women of Thebes' (1995) 90 *The Classical Journal* 353

<<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3297827>> accessed 6 December 2022

Gomme AW, 'The Position of Women in Athens in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries' (1925) 20
Classical Philology 1

Gould J, 'Law, Custom and Myth: Aspects of the Social Position of Women in Classical Athens' (1980) 100 The Journal of Hellenic Studies 38
<https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/3670340FD12AE5AF16E5E86DADB02C3A/S0075426900095628a.pdf/1aw_custom_and_myth_aspects_of_the_social_position_of_women_in_classical_athens.pdf>
accessed 14 December 2019

Hemingway C, 'Women in Classical Greece' (*Metmuseum.org* October 2004)
<https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/wmna/hd_wmna.htm>

Ingalls WB, 'Ritual Performance as Training for Daughters in Archaic Greece' (2000) 54
Phoenix 1

Katz MA, 'Sappho and Her Sisters: Women in Ancient Greece' (2000) 25 Signs 505
<<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3175564>>

Pemberton EG, 'Wine, Women and Song: Gender Roles in Corinthian Cult' [2000] Kernos
'Politics | Work by Aristotle | Britannica' (*www.britannica.com*)
<<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Politics-by-Aristotle>>

Redfield J, 'The Women of Sparta' (1977) 73 The Classical Journal 146
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3296868.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A076be136c89d976b9920ed2275182054&ab_segments=&origin=&acceptTC=1> accessed 6 December 2022

Robertson N, 'The Collective Burial of Fallen Soldiers at Athens, Sparta and Elsewhere: "Ancestral Custom" and Modern Misunderstanding' (1983) 27 Echos du monde classique: Classical views 78 <<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/655901/pdf>> accessed 8 December 2022

Stephanie Lynn Budin and Jean Macintosh Turfa, *Women in Antiquity : Real Women across the Ancient World* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group 2016) <<https://doi-org.ezproxy.st-andrews.ac.uk/10.4324/9781315621425>>