

Woman in Classical Greece

By Cornelia Isler-Kerényi, © MoneyMuseum

Introduction

One of the most characteristic features of any culture is the position it assigns to women and the relationship it maintains between the sexes. Descriptions of other cultures, both foreign cultures and historical ones like Classical Greek culture, can bring them alive and hence help people of today to understand their own world better. In considering Classical Greece, two problematical factors have to be considered.

The first is that "Classical Greece" is actually an abstract concept. It is true that from the middle of the 2nd millennium BC, there were Greek-speaking people in the eastern Mediterranean, who at least from the age of Homer, the 8th and 7th centuries BC, jointly worshipped a number of gods. However, unlike most of the cultures that surrounded it, that Greek-speaking world was not subsumed under a single state for the 700 years between around 1000 BC and Alexander the Great (336-323 BC). The internal and cultural individuality of the separate Greek city-states survived at least partly into the period of Roman rule. Beyond the narrow range of common practices, each city and each region cultivated its own traditions and possessed institutions that were capable of evolving over time. The life of a woman in Mileto in the Archaic period had little in common with that of a woman in Syracuse in the 3rd century.

The second problem arises out of the gaps in documentation. Only a few sporadic literary texts or inscriptions have survived that tell us about the private life and institutions of the Greek city-states. So whereas we know a lot about Athens, we know next to nothing about most other places. And what was said above about the individuality of the various centres of population prevents us from drawing conclusions about them based on conditions in Athens. We have to learn to see Athens as merely one possible model among a wide range of social types.

The relations between the sexes and the place of women in a culture can be deduced not only from written texts but from works of art and religious practices. However, both art and religion portray ideals, and give at best only an indirect account of real life. What people thought about women – or dreamt about women – may well have been far removed from actual reality. And of course the presentation of artistic utopias was man's work; what women thought about themselves and their lives is hard to establish.

Woman in the realm of the imagination

There were three things the Greeks regarded as their common property: first their language, secondly the epic poetry of Homer, and thirdly the pantheon of gods described by Homer. So the Greek goddesses were also among the women of Classical Greece. Those goddesses are noticeable for their number, their power and their dignity. Though Zeus, the father of the gods, was the highest authority in the family of Greek gods, his authority over goddesses was no higher than over male gods. There were even cases in which even Zeus had to defer to the dictates of goddesses. For example, during the events leading up to the Trojan War, he was forced to react to the complaints of the earth-mother Gaia about the intolerable weight of the humans on the earth, then to the warning by Themis, the highest law-giver, against a union with Thetis, and finally to the decision of the goddess of fate on the lifespan of his favourites among the fighting heroes. For the Greeks, there seems to have been equality of the sexes at the level of the gods.

In addition to the Olympian family of gods, there was a vast range of deities which influenced the religious life of the Greeks wherever they went – in towns and in the countryside, in public and domestic areas, in humble holy places that were hardly recognisable as such, and in large, internationally respected and politically influential cult centres. At this level too, the goddesses seem to have been equal to the gods. Although the most famous panhellenic shrines of Olympia and Delphi were dedicated to Zeus and Apollo respectively, the shrines of Hera in Argos and on Samos, of Artemis in Ephesus, and of Athena in Athens (and a number of other places) had hardly less influence inside and outside the Greek world. The equality of the sexes among the gods proclaims the fact that men and women need each other and can only assure the continuity of life if they work together.

That this equality did not exist on the human level is made clear by the world of art. In sculpture just as in the typical Greek ceramics ornamented with human figures, there are many attractive female figures, but they are present in a selection which has little to do with the reality of life. Small girls and old women are extremely rare, and there are no female babies. The women portrayed are almost exclusively at an erotically interesting age, young mothers, or equivalent figures from the world of mythology. From Thetis through Helen of Troy to the Amazons and Medea, all the types of women represented are those who affected the fate of men, both positively and negatively.

Woman in real life

So the portrayal of women in art gives a very one-sided view of the institutional and real-life reality of the position of women in archaic and classical Athens as it emerged from the system established shortly after 600 BC by the famous law-giver and poet Solon. In that system, the state of Athens was made up of the sum of its *oikoi*. That term included the house, the household and the family, in other words the building, its inhabitants and the property out of which the *oikos* makes its living. For the continuity of the state (the *polis*), the continuity of families was very important, so children were strongly desired. But since Attica, in common with most Greek regions, was strictly limited both in area and in its products, the *oikoi* could not be allowed to increase out of control either in number or in inhabitants. Responsibility for ensuring that this was so rested with the head of the household, to whom all the other inhabitants of the *oikos*, particularly the women, were subject. It was his decision alone as to whether a child was to be recognised as legitimate, or brought up without being recognised, or even abandoned.

That conception of the state reflected not only the general subjugation of women, but also the division of the female population into different classes: that of legal wives, that of subordinate women living in the house, that of courtesans and mistresses (*hetairai*) in the all-male festivities, that of prostitutes and that of slave women. We are very patchily informed about the lives of all those women.

The legal wife

What was the life of the legal wife like? She was from a respected Athenian *oikos*; as a child she had escaped abandonment and early death, and in her earliest years had been brought up at home by her mother. A select group of the most aristocratic girls then passed through a complex religious initiation in several stages, presided over by the state. It involved a stay on the Acropolis as well as at the remote shrine to Artemis at Brauron. These girls were trained, as representatives of all Athenian girls, in weaving, washing and baking. At the age of about 14, after an engagement arranged by their fathers, they were married and moved to the *oikos* of their husbands, where they

were to make themselves useful, screened from the eyes of the outside world as they had been hitherto. Their bridegrooms, who were mostly much older – they were supposed to be at least 30 years old – had likewise passed through a long phase of initiation into musical, sporting, military and erotic life.

The change of *oikos* may have been a difficult step for some. But the real change in their status came with the birth of the first child. Only then was a young woman regarded as the lady of the house. The birth of sons was especially advantageous for her position, because in the eyes of the state that was the principal purpose of marriage. As a married woman and the mother of sons she could also, provided she survived to the requisite age, take on the functions of a priestess and thus move outside the confines of the women's quarters. But even the most aristocratic of women did not exist officially as a female citizen, but only as the daughter, sister or wife of a citizen, of her *kyrios*. Thanks to the fortune she brought into her marriage, which remained her personal property even after marriage, she might find it possible to play a public role at consecrations of shrines or in charitable works.

The women of the lower classes

As well as the women who presided over *oikoi* or who were destined to do so, there were in Athens many other women: superfluous daughters of citizens, or girls who had been abandoned and brought up by pimps or owners of brothels and "commercialised," or else foreign women, i.e. those from a different *polis*, aristocratic and cultivated women who had been brought to Athens as booty of war or piratical raids. The lower class of women was recruited from that heterogeneous group. We know little of their lives except that they must have been hard. But it is clear that occasionally they may have changed for the better, not from the legal point of view, but in a practical sense. The position of subsidiary women, the *pallakai*, might for example improve if the lady of the house produced no sons that were recognised by the head of the household, or if her sons died and it thus became necessary for the continuity of the *oikos* to recognise an illegitimate son, a *nothos*. The same happened with favoured concubines, as in the case of Aspasia from Mileto, the companion of the leading politician Pericles, who adopted her son by him after the death of his own legitimate sons. On occasion, successful *hetairai* seem to have attained prosperity and relative independence with a household of their own. From the same heterogeneous group came the wives of Athenians without landed property or citizen's rights, who earned their living as artisans or tradesmen.

Accepted as erotic beings and mothers of soldiers

Despite their legal and practical domination by others, the women of Athens in the 6th to 4th centuries BC were not simply to be pitied. That was at any rate the opinion of writers of comedies such as Aristophanes in his "Lysistrata." In those days too, women knew how to use their erotic charms and their ingenuity to make the best of their situation for themselves, and in the last analysis for their menfolk and for the state too. That of course was only possible as long as they were young, pretty and healthy.

The women of Sparta, who were highly valued as mothers of soldiers, and those of Doric Crete, seem to have been more closely comparable to women of today. In general the position of women improved after the Alexandrian age, in the Hellenistic period. But here too, much remains unclear owing to the lack of documentary evidence. Clarification might be expected if future research were to proceed on the assumption that the situation of Greek men was not exactly enviable either. They too lived in states in which the interests of the community were placed much higher than those of the individual, which for us seem natural and legitimate.

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