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**Abstract:** This paper sheds some light to the position of women in Classical Greece regarding their economic and legal rights including property rights and standing in marriage. In essence, the paper cautions against sweeping generalizations about the view of women in Ancient Greece as lower-class citizens and offers a more nuanced view of women.

**Keywords:** Women's economic and legal rights, Classical Athens

## 1. Introduction

The present essay sheds some light to the position of women in Classical Athens regarding their economic and legal rights including property rights and standing in marriage. In essence, this paper cautions against sweeping generalizations about the view of women in Ancient Greece as lower-class citizens and offers a more nuanced view of women.

There is a biased view, fortunately in only a small section of the international bibliography which, by intentionally interpreting ancient sources in a one-sided way, argues that the Ancient Greeks were generally *misogynists*. *Misogyny*, means hate, contempt for, or prejudice against women or girls. So far, some authors, based on certain ancient sources such as Aristotle who, for example, saw women as subordinate to men, but as higher than slaves, and lacking authority[1] have provided arguments in favour of the belief that ancient Greek society was a misogynist one. This is of course not truth.

[1] He also believed that the husband should exert political rule over the wife. From his point of view, women differed from men in that they were more impulsive, more compassionate, more complaining, and more deceptive (Aristotle, *Politics*).

An analytical view regarding the position of women in Ancient Greece and especially in Classical Athens is provided by authors such as Schaps (1979), Cohen (1989), Pomeroy (1995), Dillon (2002) and Pritchard (2014) among others. Pomeroy (1995, 58) who has worked diligently on the position of women in Ancient Greece, observes that some historians insist that the position of women was very restrictive, while others argue otherwise. These contradictory views give us an impetus to provide a brief analysis regarding the issue of women's economic and civic rights in Ancient Greece by especially focusing on Classical Athens (508-323 BCE). The contribution we provide here is a shorter version of a paper published by us (Economou and Kyriazis 2019) in the *German-Greek Yearbook of Political Economy* with the title: *The social position and the rights of women in ancient Greece: A Response to Barbara Klose-Ullmann's "Medea on Stage"*.

## 2. The economic and legal rights of women during the Classical period in Athens

There is no doubt that women did not participate in the political life of Ancient Greece, not even in the period of democracy. Women in Classical Athens (510-323 BCE) still had no political rights. Mosse (1983) argues that marriage was not a free option for a young woman. Two men decided her fate: her father and her prospective husband. Their agreement was also related to the so-called *proika* ("dowry").

Women's age for marriage ranged from 15 to 18 years, while for men it ranged from 25 to 30 years. Women from wealthier families were assumed to be part of the *oikos* (household) headed by the male *kyrios* (master). Until marriage, they were under the guardianship of their fathers or other male relatives; once married, the husband became a woman's *kyrios*. Although these women mostly stayed at home, being responsible for the management of the house (see Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*) they still had the right to participate in a series of social events, such as rituals, funerals, etc.

But the social status of women in Ancient Greece was not as repressive as it seems. First of all, the deprivation of women's political and some economic rights should not be seen as an isolated fact from the situation that existed in the rest of the world during that time (at least in the part of the world known to the Greeks). Women in the pre-Classical Mesopotamian kingdoms, Egypt, Israel, Phoenicia and in the Persian Empire

during Classical times, etc., possibly had even fewer rights than women who were living in Greece at the time.

Except for those (mostly wealthy) women who managed their *oikos* (see Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*) the situation was rather different for women from poor or medium income families, whether they were wives or daughters, spinsters or widows. Those women actively participated in the economic and commercial life of the Athenian metropolis (Garland 1998). Possibly, this was the case for women in every other Greek city-state of the era.

There is verified evidence in ancient sources regarding women's daily economic/commercial activity in the Athenian *polis* for the sale of bread, beans, groats, salt, sesame, figs, processed products, clothing, perfumes, hats, women's jewellery (garlands, ribbons), pottery, food, wine, and so on, and even as decorators of soldiers' helmets, and as nurses, housekeepers, etc. Couples, either free or slaves, could work together, as well as parents and their children such as Euxitheos who worked with his mother in selling ribbons in the marketplace known as the *Agora* (Schaps 1979: 20, 50; Cohen 2002: 105). Many "ordinary" women ran their own businesses, and not only in Athens. Artemis of Piraeus had the best women's fashion store in the area.

Another woman named Artemis headed a building materials store (Cohen 1992). Archippe, a widow of the former slave and later very wealthy man Pasion, had been initiated into all aspects of her husband's bank business before and perhaps after his death. Archippe was also involved in a legal dispute with Apollodoros, who tried to appropriate her assets of 3,000 drachmas. Archippe was judicially vindicated. In addition, Archippe had provided 2,000 drachmas to the children of Phormion, her second husband and a former slave. Pasion had left one *talent* as a dowry to Archippe, a large amount of money (Cohen 2002: 110). One *talent* was equal to 6,000 drachmas when the daily wage of the median Athenian worker in the 4th century BCE was approximately 1,5 drachmas. Thus, Archippe's wealth was undeniably high.

The fact that a woman, in our case Archippe, was vindicated by a court, denotes that women had property rights that were protected by law, even if, to some degree, inferior to those of men. Women, from the time of their marriage and as part of their dowry, could receive valuable utensils, money and real estate, that their fathers entrusted to them. A woman could become *epicleros*, that is, she could become the actual owner of

the wealth of her husband or father if he died, in place of the sons, until they became adults (Schaps 1979). Foxhall (2002: 212) argues that concerning matters of inheritance, women were at a disadvantage in comparison to male heirs, but they still had the right to hold cash and valuables, but less than men. If a father died and had no male offspring, his daughter(s) had considerable *de facto* rights on the family's property "but she did not become a legal owner" (Schaps 1979: 4). On the other hand, a woman could not represent herself in court alone. She had to be accompanied by her father or brother if she was not yet married and by her oldest son if she was a widow. However, a woman's testimony was accepted by jurors in courts. Also, a woman had the right to abandon her husband if he was behaving badly or was abusive (Economou and Kyriazis 2017: 70, ft. 21).

The freest women in the Greek Classical world were the so-called *hetairai* as well as prostitutes (*pornai*), due to the nature of their professions. *Hetaira* actually means a "female companion" and thus this service should not necessarily be related to sexual services and favours. *Hetairai* had only a few men as clients at any one time, and had long-term relationships with them, providing them with companionship and intellectual stimulation as well as sex (Kurke 1997). Many *hetairai* were highly educated in order to be able to participate in public gatherings called *symposia*, such as those held among famous philosophers. Some of the most famous *hetairai* were Aspasia (a very influential woman who later became the wife and adviser in politics of Pericles, one of the most important figures in Athenian history), Neaira from Corinth, Phryne from Boeotoia and Lais of Corinth, possibly, the most famous *hetaira* ever.

In addition, in Sparta, as well as in Gortyna in Crete (both being non-democratic), women had equal property rights with men concerning land and all other types of property. In Sparta 2/5 of land belonged to women. In Gortyna even 46% of land, and in the region of Thessaly (central Greece) about 1/3 belonged to women. Women's ownership of land is also attested for the islands of Tenos and Kios (Cartledge 2001: 106-126; Fleck and Hansen 2009; Economou and Kyriazis 2017) and in Asia Minor's Greek city-states (van Bremen 2013: 227-229).

## 3. Some further aspects concerning the position of women in Greek antiquity

During the Hellenistic period (323-146 BCE) till the subjugation of Greece to Rome (Pomeroy 1997: 204-219). During this period wealthy women could lend large sums of money not only to individuals, but even to city-states, as in the case of Nicareta. A citizen of the Boeotian city-state of Thespiai, Nicareta gave a loan of 10,085 drachmas and 2 obols to the city-state of Orchomenos, (at a time when both Thespiai and Orchomenos were members of the Boeotian federation). It appears that Orchomenos did not repay the loan at the specified time and Nicareta appealed against Orchomenos before the federal court. She won the trial and the city-state of Orchomenos was forced to provide a significant sum of money to her as compensation, almost 50,000 drachmas, an amount almost five times the value of her loans to Orchomenos in their entirety.[2] Similar cases of women who won such trials include Kleuedra and Olympichia (Schaps 1979: 13, 63-65; Mackil 2013).

But ancient Greeks appreciated women also for their spiritual cultivation. As with men, women also had the right to hold ritual posts. Women priestesses were called *hieriai* and held very important institutional positions in the society. They led various processions such as litanies, they were responsible for guarding the treasures of temples, they lit the fire on the altars of the sanctuaries and preached at the sacrifices.

Many inscriptions that have been discovered testify to the generosity that many priestesses exhibited as the benefactors of their city and their sanctuaries, since they undertook the expense of building temples, markets and water reservoirs. Women priestesses felt very proud of their contributions in building these constructions. They were also responsible for the adherence to operating regulations in the sanctuaries and to the provision of their services in favour of the *polis* as a whole. Inscriptions and tombstones reveal that priestesses were buried at public expense, with great processions and were remembered with impressive burial monuments that were erected in their memory. A famous Athenian priestess was Chryseis, who dedicated her life to the worship of the goddess Athena (*Polias*). Her compatriots considered her to be equal to male priests. Perhaps the most famous was Pythia, the high priestess of the temple of Apollo at Delphi who also served as the oracle, commonly known as the Oracle of

[2] For a detailed description of this incident see Schaps (1979: 13, 63-65) and Mackil (2013).

Delphi. To this point, we mention a series of recorded cases of women-philosophers in ancient Greece, such as, Arete, Diotima (from Mantineia in Arcadia), Periktione, Thymista of Athens, Hyparchia, Lasthenia (from Arcadia), Theano (from Thourioi in Magna Grecia, today's southern Italy), etc. This indicates that women's social position and opportunities had further advanced during the Classical period and later on.

Another issue of the rights of women as a whole is related to athletics. It is well-known that athletics were practiced in Sparta also by women, as a means of training rugged male warriors and healthy vigorous mothers. But athletics were also an option for women in the rest of the Greek world (Spears 1984). There were even athletic events exclusively for women, such as the so-called *Heraia*, dedicated to the goddess Hera, which took place in Olympia, the same place where the famous Olympic Games for men were held. But women also had the right to participate in the Olympic games, indirectly, as the owners of chariots, to receive glory, win trophies and increase their prestige, just like men. The first recorded female chariot winner in the Olympic Games was Princess Cyniska, sister of King Agesilaus II of Sparta whose chariot won the famous *tethrippon* race (with four horses) in two consecutive Olympic events in 396 and 392 BCE. It is worthwhile mentioning that other Greek women, such as Eurileonis from Sparta and Bilistiche from Macedonia[3], also won chariot races (see Pausanias' *Description of Greece*, 5.8.11; Golden 2008).

The fact that a great number of statues, vases and wall paintings, on show in museums world-wide, bear depictions of women and portray women cooperating, on equal terms, with men in various aspects of social life (household, love, war, rituals, etc.), is an additional indication that women were not considered, in general, as inferior to men in the daily life of the ancient Greeks.

Finally, we finish our brief analysis with Alexander the Great. In 336 BCE, the young Alexander (the later known as *the Great*) at the age of 20, ascended to the throne of Macedonia after the murder of his father and, although he was already preparing the campaign of the Greeks (except the Spartans) against Persia, he was still very naïve regarding love. He finally made a relationship with Pangaste (known also as Campaspe) an *hetaira* from the city-state of Larissa, who was very famous for her beauty. However, Alexander decided to "release" Pangaste, possibly to his dismay, "in favour

[3] A necessary prerequisite for participating in the Olympic Games for an athlete was to be (only) of Greek origin.

of art," because she was to sit as a model for the famous sculptor Apelles, who wanted to create a new statue of Aphrodite. Apelles later fell in love with her. This is a characteristic example showing that the ancient Greeks had a high appreciation of the beauty of a woman's body.

## 4. Conclusions

As a final comment, the position of women in either the pre-Classical or Classical Greek world was not equal to men, in political and economic terms, but what is also true is that it is wrong to believe that women's superior qualities were not accepted or appreciated in Ancient Greece. We have argued in favour of a more nuanced view of women as lower-class citizens in the Greek antiquity.

We believe that with this extended brief analysis we contribute to the discussion on the social status of women in Greek antiquity which are still inconclusive, as are many other sociological phenomena that are related to history.

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