

ANCIENT GREECE

Background Information 18: Women, Children and Slaves

NB: The following focuses on life in Athens. For info on this theme as it applies to Sparta, see 'Spartan Life'.

WOMEN

Religious Role

- Some festivals were restricted to citizen women; in others women had an important role.
- Women were included in the Panathenaea: in the procession, groups of maidens head the procession but those of noble families came before those of lower status.
- Citizen women particularly figured in rituals connected with Demeter and Kore.
- Most prominent ritual linked to Demeter/Kore was Thesmophoria: it was exclusively female, but was only for citizen wives.
- All of the population celebrated the Diasia, a festival of Zeus Meilichios.
- Likely that there were other ritual occasions where women could participate e.g. public sacrifices – were spectators.
- Women had an important role in funerals.

Legal position

- Women couldn't inherit property.
- Women could give evidence under oath under a special procedure.
- Women didn't appear in court as jurors or as litigants (i.e. party to a lawsuit).
- Women didn't have the opportunity to commit most crimes as were not in the public sphere.

- Family law was handled by a woman's guardian e.g. father, husband.

Political Position

- Women could not achieve political rights, although metics (resident foreigners) and even slaves could.
- Citizen wives shared citizen status in as much as they could have sons who were citizens and daughters who could marry citizens.
- On the festival of the Thesmophoria, women, 'took over' the assembly: they would set up an encampment there; the council and law courts were not in session on their day of fasting; they elected their own officials for the festival.

Economic Position

- The social ideal was that a woman did not keep a shop or do market business.
- Sources show that in wealthier households men or slaves do shopping.
- Ideally women were absent from the agora – the central public space and core of political/judicial/economic/cultural life.
- Reality was that wives of poorer people did visit the agora: likely that the majority of Athenians were poor.
- Many women did work in the agora, but not clear if they were citizen women, metics or slaves.
- Some women traded foodstuff, perfume or garlands.
- Some women were tavern-keepers or woolworkers.
- Women don't appear in occupations where real money could be made.
- Many known occupations of women overlap with those of female slaves.
- One area of commerce under female control was prostitution: courtesans were usually metics; prostitutes were mostly slaves working in brothels run by a woman or a man.

Role in the community

- All citizens were registered in a deme (mini polis): citizen women belonged to a deme through a father or husband.
- Citizen women were active in the demes, particularly in religion.
- Citizen women also involved in religious life of phratries – social & cultural 'fraternities' of which all citizens were members.

Domestic role

- The social ideal was that (Athenian) women spent most time at home and indoors.
- The ideal only related to a minority i.e. the wealthy.
- Poorer women would have worked: in agriculture if from the country; in trade/shops if from town.
- Amongst the better-off women, part of their time was spent in religious activities including festivals, so not always at home.
- Sources do reveal that wealthy women met the ideal 'spinning wool, baking bread, keeping house'.
- Wealthier women would learn to supervise the house slaves; guard the house provisions; budget expenditure and arrange for storing belongings neatly.
- Women also responsible for the nurture of children.
- Women appear in the sources to spend time together.
- Women of wealthier families had their own quarters in the home.
- Wealthier women had less opportunity to mix socially.

CHILDREN: Boys

Religious role

- Citizens and sons took pride of place in most of the city's ritual occasions.
- Were certain festivals where boys had a particular role e.g. Anthesteria.
- Boys (and girls) were involved in choral song and dance on ritual occasions.
- Boys (and men) took part in the athletic and musical contests of major festivals e.g. Panathenaea.

Legal position

- Children were represented in court by fathers/guardians.
- Boys could represent themselves from 18.

Political position

- Once 18 and had passed 'citizenship test', would serve in the army.
- Could then participate in the citizen assembly

- At 30 could hold public office or serve on a jury.

CHILDREN: Girls

Religious role

- Involved in religious festivals e.g. Panathenaea involved citizen daughters.
- Girls had specific ritual roles in the polis e.g. weaving the peplos for Athena, washing the cult statue, serving Artemis as acolytes in the sanctuary at Brauron.
- Cult functions often restricted to a few girls or just noble girls, but were symbolic of their ritual importance to the city.
- Girls involved in choral song and dance on ritual occasions.

Domestic role

- Girls married at a young age: the marriage was arranged by her parents and the groom and she would bring a dowry.

SLAVES

Religious role

- Slaves had a role in some festivals e.g. Anthesteria.
- They could be initiated into the Eleusinian Mysteries.
- There was a holiday especially for slaves – the Kronia – where state business was suspended and slaves dined with their masters.
- Likely there were many ritual occasions where slaves participated informally.

Legal position

- Were mostly treated as property under Athenian law.
- Could be bought, sold, and beaten (only by master).
- Legal action for offences against slaves had to be brought by masters.
- If slaves required to give evidence in a law suit, this evidence would have to have been obtained under torture, otherwise the evidence was invalid.

Political position

- Public slaves were the property of the polis, were a sort of 'elite'.
- In theory, a male slave could become a citizen as if freed he became a metic (most slaves were foreigners) and could then be granted citizenship.
- Although slaves had no political rights they made up about one third of the city-state's population.

Economic position

- In wealthy houses, slaves or men did the shopping.
- Female slaves are known of in occupations such as woolworking, retail trade and wet-nursing.
- Female slaves worked in craft shops around the agora.
- Male slaves were involved in the building of the Erechtheon.
- Prostitutes were mostly slaves working in brothels.
- In unusual circumstance slaves could become wealthy: some worked in trade, manufacture and banking.
- Slaves are sometimes described as 'living apart': they lived and worked independently, made periodic payments to their masters.
- Most slaves in the public domain were skilled workers e.g. miners, artisans, craftsmen.
- Many slaves worked in the silver mines of Laurion.
- Many slaves were private slaves working in family houses.