The View of Ancient Greek Women

Rebecca Istre

250: Historical Methods

04-29-2020

As a young child, our perceptions of history are laid out in front of oneself and are carried throughout high school careers. What if these perceptions are not accurate? Through time and extensional research, subjects that are perceived to be straight forward may not be what it seems. History changes over time in the way people view certain aspects due to the newfound research displayed. What is thought to be the case of a certain time period may not be the case in all aspects. When it comes to ancient Greece, we think we know all the answers about the lifestyle of women. What if that is not the case? Through a series of articles and excerpts, the history of the role of women in ancient Greece is shown through various lenses to show the side of history not normally exposed to the public.

 In an article most prevalent for its work on ancient Greece studies and their relationship with mythology, Moses Finley states that through mythology, the Greek people had no intention to write accurate history due to the lack of evidence or records during the fifth century.[[1]](#footnote-0) Through the lens, Finley expresses the sheer understanding of the role women played in society with the every now and then patriarchal structure present. Through the last half-century, the research dedicated to the lifestyle of ancient Greek women have progressed beyond the slander attached to it and extended beyond any barriers from previous generations. Through the work of Sarah Pomeroy, these barriers are pushed behind to expose future possibilities to expand this field of research. What can be said is that her work is the starting point for many researchers looking into the field of ancient Greek women.[[2]](#footnote-1) Stories of the past that were seemingly lost have now resurfaced to expand the knowledge of what was present before to produce the finer details. In the following article, the finer details are focused within the family structure.

Simon Pembroke offers a new perspective into the eyes of women in ancient Greece with the thought of matriarchy. With the evidence provided by J.J. Bachofen, Pembroke evaluates the authenticity and accuracy of his stance. Through the work of Herodotus and antiquity, Pembroke discusses the lifestyle of having a matriarchal society. It states in regards to this, “The first thing to be established is how antiquity itself saw the problem and how close it became to making a category out of matriarchy.”[[3]](#footnote-2) This article makes it known that while the evidence is present for a matriarchal setting, there are a lot of factors going into the reasoning including religious ceremonies, geographical areas, lawmaking, etc. In the example presented on page 19, it discusses the relationship of children from a first marriage and the case of slavery. If the slave man pursues a relationship with a free woman, the children are free but if the pursuing was the other way around, the children would be slaves.[[4]](#footnote-3) This creates a controversy in whether the relationship is that of a matriarchal one or that of a patriarchal relationship. Aristotle puts it in his section of the article that while matriarchy is not the proper word, the signs of it show the outreach of women expressing their power and getting out of hand.[[5]](#footnote-4) All these sightings of women having more control than expected are seen as societies that are warped in their understanding. To conclude this article, it makes it apparent that while these societies have moments of women expressing their power, it is not considered a matriarchal society in any form. It would have to bring more independant examples to the table for it to be considered.[[6]](#footnote-5) Because of all the outside elements, it can not be distinguished one way or another. While this article may seem back and forth, one element of the gender roles placed in ancient Greece is presented in the fashion of sports.

In the work created by Betty Spears, “A Perspective of the History of Women’s Sport in Ancient Greece.”, a relationship can be explored between sports and the involvement of women during ancient Greece. The focus of this research in this work is pulled from four periods on ancient Greece history. The four periods consist of: the Archaic Period, the Classical Period, the Hellenistic Period, and lastly the Roman period.[[7]](#footnote-6) Before diving in, the author does make it known that the sources used for research are focused mainly on the upper class citizens and only includes activities that are known as a sport or developed into a sport by modern-day definition. Although the research is focused on one aspect and does not account for everyone, it can still provide some insight into the lives of women in this time. In the first two periods, Archaic and Classical, most of the evidence is derived from literary works of Homer and a few others to set the role of women in this time.[[8]](#footnote-7) His works set women up to be reliant on men or in the position of a goddess who assisted men. However, the term goddess was also used to depict women with unnatural hobbies that went against the norm according to early scholars on the subject.[[9]](#footnote-8) This creates some fragments in how the evidence should be perceived in the eyes of the researcher. While they act a certain way due to sports, they lack the true definition to be classified as a goddess. The common theme that is apparent in this work that is also displayed in the others is the common trend of marriage to preserve the bloodlines.[[10]](#footnote-9) The Hellenistic era brought a new element of education becoming more cohesive between genders. Boys and girls pursuing education were no longer learning separate material to provide jobs that in the past were only meant for men.[[11]](#footnote-10) Lastly, the Roman era held both aspects of Roman and Greek lifestyles and it reflects in the role of women of this time. Many women continued to stick with the traditional roles, but others had the advantage to explore their social freedoms and joined clubs outside of their homes.[[12]](#footnote-11) This allowed for women to expand beyond their home life and become more active in their society. To conclude this article, It points out the need to be seen on a comparative level next to the history of men with sports to truly see the evidence in a narrative sense. While it was nice to see women participate, at the time it was seen as insignificant to the public on a general level.[[13]](#footnote-12) While this article seems to be filled with more open roles of women, the following article by Eva Cantarella speaks the opposite.

The article, “Dangling Virgins: Myth, Ritual, and the Place of Women in Ancient Greece.”, provides a darker tone to the role women play in myths, rituals, and their status. The beginning starts with the concept of if women commiting suicide by hanging oneself was a common occurence. Through various examples, it shows how women used the method of hanging to commit suicide to avoid possible punishments or certain fates. Not only is it present in literature, but also present in mythology. The act of hanging was frowned upon and often mocked when it was used as a way out for the women. Many ceremonies were held to mock the women from using the route to end their suffering, but it was seens as a rite of passage. “The virgins hanging from the tree are reborn in the form of walnuts.”[[14]](#footnote-13) This is seen as a resurrection in a new form to symbolize these women changing their social status in society. The author has made a correlation between this act of suicide and virginity. This shows the relation between purity and the women’s role in society. If they were not pure, they would lose their connection in society and be seen as not acceptable before marriage. To bear fruit is the purpose of women according to the evidence provided, so much so that they cannot gain ownership of the parental estate.[[15]](#footnote-14) It all began the moment a child was born what their path would be. From using the ancient rites of passage and symbolism, the Greek culture kept their past alive by following these practices to value their ancestors.[[16]](#footnote-15) In the eyes of the evidence, women in ancient Greece knew their place throughout their lives, even after they departed from this world creating the ultimate role of women. With the women having a permanent status in society, how did it affect the acts of sacrifice in ancient Greece? Robin Osborne in her article, “Women and Sacrifice in Classical Greece” addresses this question to prove the answer.

This article begins with the cult of Herakles and his will to prohibit women from being a member. Is this peculiar for his hatred of women or is it acceptable for women that were abnormal?[[17]](#footnote-16) Herakles follows the message of mythology or simply despises women to preserve his warrior status and not have his gift taken from him.[[18]](#footnote-17) While seemingly against women’s participation at the time, Herakles cult is just one instance to the whole spectrum. It is not until after 1979 that more evidence came to light to support the involvement of women in religion. There were countless indications of women being involved through becoming a priestess in cults and participating in religious ceremonies or festivals. There was no indication between men and women that would make the involvement of women not allowed in society.[[19]](#footnote-18) A question remains in the eyes of the author. Why was religion separate to everything else that had specific rules to exclude women? What made religion, specifically sacrifice acceptable for women to partake in? The views to answer this question vary in the eyes of the historians who dare attempt to answer. To sum up the views, it all depends on the cult. The status of women compared to men inside a cult do not hold the same value. They are seen at a different level in status.[[20]](#footnote-19) To finish off this article, Osborne's last line says it all in terms of women within religion. It states, “ Sacrifice reached parts of society in which politics did not reach, and in doing so it reached some parts that were the exclusive domain of women.”[[21]](#footnote-20) While religion held some exclusive messages towards women, Marilyn Katz takes the role of women to new heights that parallel themes of modern-day life.

This article written by Marilyn Katz titled, "Sappho and Her Sisters: Women in Ancient Greece.", brings to light a side not normally mentioned in ancient times is the role of LBGTQ+ in the times of ancient Greece. In Marilyn Katz’s work, "Sappho and Her Sisters: Women in ancient Greece", the poetess Sapho brings to light issues that can be paralleled to modern-day society. In the article, it takes a span over the past few decades to compare their knowledge of ancient Greece to get to the revelation that is the sighting of homosexuality. When the rise of the feminist movement began, so did the gender studies that took place in 1970.[[22]](#footnote-21) From this focus into the lives of the women in ancient Greece, it created a new avenue to stray from the classic ideal to something more inclusive in regards to Athenian culture. Philosophers including Aristotle and Plato include their thoughts on the lives of Athenian women to spot out the rarity of feministic ideas and express their opinions on the matter.[[23]](#footnote-22) Thus, it gives a perspective from men in the time period it was prevalent. With the use of Sappho’s poetry, interpretations can be made that spots out the feministic views of this time period. While it is fragmented and can be both sided at times, duBois makes it apparent that it is better to question the concept than to completely dismiss it.[[24]](#footnote-23) While it was very evident that the patriarchal structure was still present in the time of ancient Greece, it also held a time for women to extend beyond what was expected and take back some of their subjectifications from society.[[25]](#footnote-24)

Over time, the role of ancient women of Greece have been evaluated and researched to explain the past beyond the surface. From the beginning of determining what history was in the eyes of Greece through seeing parallels of history to modern-day issues. It makes the question of what the role of women was to be beyond just black and white. The role of women in this time was to serve their husbands and provide children to carry on the family name, but it was more than just those aspects. Time allowed women to branch into new activities including sports and religious festivals. It gave women a chance to break away from aspects only dedicated to men to make it inclusive to everyone. Education and sports were an example of inclusion whether it be deemed important or not to the people in the Hellenistic period. It allowed them to protect their worth through methods that are not recommended today to preserve their purity and youth. To clearly define the role of women is to state it over time as it molded through history to create something inclusive beyond what stigmas mythology creates in society. Ancient Greece went through changes and for that the role of women had changed with it from something more traditional in the eyes of society, to a lifestyle that was just short of equal.

Bibliography

Cantarella, Eva. “Dangling Virgins: Myth, Ritual, and the Place of Women in Ancient Greece.”

*Poetics Today* 6, no. 1-2 (1985): 91-101. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1772123>.

Katz, Marilyn A. "Sappho and Her Sisters: Women in Ancient Greece." *Signs* 25, no. 2 (2000):

505-31. [www.jstor.org/stable/3175564](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3175564).

Finley, Moses, “Myth, Memory, and History,” *History and Theory* 4:3 (1965): 281-302.

Osborne, Robin. “Women and Sacrifice in Classical Greece.” *The Classical Quarterly* 43, no.2

 (1993): 392-405. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/639178>.

Pembroke, Simon. “Women in Charge: The Function of Alternatives in Early Greek Tradition

and the Ancient Idea of Matriarchy.” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*

Vol. 30 (1967): 1-35. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/750735>.

Pomeroy, Sarah, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975).

J.P.V.D. Balsdon,“Review of Sarah Pomeroy, Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves,” in

The Classical Review 27:2 (1977): 207-08.

Spears, Betty. “A Perspective of the History of Women’s Sport in Ancient Greece.”

*Journal of Sport History* 11, no.2 (1984): 32-47. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43609020>.

1. Moses Finley, “Myth, Memory, and History,” History and Theory 4:3 (1965): 281-302. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Sarah Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975). J.P.V.D. Balsdon, “Review of Sarah Pomeroy, Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves,” in The Classical Review 27:2 (1977): 207-08. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Simon Pembroke, “Women in Charge: The Function of Alternatives in Early Greek Tradition and the Ancient Idea of Matriarchy.” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* Vol. 30 (1967): 1-35. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/750735>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Ibid., 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Ibid., 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Ibid., 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Betty Spears, “A Perspective of the History of Women’s Sport in Ancient Greece.” *Journal of Sport History* 11, no.2 (1984): 32-47. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43609020>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Ibid., 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Ibid., 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Ibid., 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Ibid., 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Ibid., 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Ibid., 46-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Eva Cantarella, “Dangling Virgins: Myth, Ritual, and the Place of Women in Ancient Greece.”

*Poetics Today* 6, no. 1-2 (1985): 91-101. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1772123>. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. Ibid., 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. Ibid., 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. Robin Osborne, “Women and Sacrifice in Classical Greece.” *The Classical Quarterly* 43, no.2 (1993): 392-405. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/639178>. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
18. Ibid., 393. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
19. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
20. Ibid., 398. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
21. Ibid., 405. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
22. Marilyn A Katz, "Sappho and Her Sisters: Women in Ancient Greece." *Signs* 25, no. 2 (2000): 505-31. [www.jstor.org/stable/3175564](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3175564). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
23. Ibid., 513. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
24. Ibid., 525. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
25. Ibid., 527. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)