**PRE-DEPARTURE**

The science department at Longwood University put up flyers around the school for volunteers for their new time-traveling invention. Seeing as it counts as study abroad and I really do not have anything to do this coming weekend, I said why not. So here I am in Chichester and they want me to document where I want to go and why.

I want to visit ancient Greece. Specifically, I want to visit Athens during the Golden Age of Pericles. For this to qualify as study abroad, I need to have a topic to study while I am there, and I decided to study the polarized roles of women in ancient Athens and to see what actually was going on there.

So, next time, I will be writing to you from over two thousand years in the past.

**DAY ONE**

I can’t believe it actually worked. I am here in Athens. The time-traveling machine must have changed my appearance to match those of this century because I am now clad in a long piece of linen that is loosely fitted in the right places to keep me modest and it comes up to create a sort of hood over my head.[[1]](#footnote-0) I also am not wearing any shoes, which is slightly concerning, until I realize that no one in the city center are wearing shoes either.[[2]](#footnote-1) I look around and see buildings all around me and notice it is starting to get dark. I decide to make my way indoors for the first night to get used to the jetlag of time-traveling and gather my bearings.

Since I am under the guise of a foreign woman, I end up having to stay in a low-class house that is relatively small and reminds me of apartments you find in a cramped city like New York. I made my way up a wooden staircase outside of the house that leads to one of the two bedrooms that are on the upper floor.[[3]](#footnote-2) Once I get to my room, I look around and take in the furniture. Besides the basic furniture of a bed, table, and chairs, there was a chest for my clothing and many vases around the room that seemed to be used for decoration.[[4]](#footnote-3) I looked out the window and noticed that the owner of the house was cooking outside in a type of fire pit because of the lack of an indoor kitchen.[[5]](#footnote-4)

I decided to go and see what kind of food was being made and try to see how the ancient Athenians used to eat. Apparently, grain was a huge deal in Athens. Almost like a type of cereal, everything was basically made from wheat or barley. The main part of the meal was a type of loaf of bread or scones that was served on a big leaf. The locals called it *maza* and they seemed to eat it with every meal. Here, instead of bread being a side to the main meal, it was the main part of the meal. The side was what they called *opson,* but it was basically vegetables and meat, specifically fish. There was not much else besides the bread and when I asked, they said that the vegetables were rather expensive to buy.[[6]](#footnote-5) I quickly realized while watching the others eat that forks had not yet been invented and that the bread was used as a type of scoop and most of the meal was eaten with one’s fingers.[[7]](#footnote-6)

I went to bed that night averagely hungry since the diet here seems to be moderately less than back home.

**DAY TWO**

I woke up with a plan to observe the other women around me and see what kind of roles they played in society and to see how they were treated. This quickly proved to be a rather hard task.

The women in Athens seemed to stay mostly indoors in a place of the house reserved for the women, the locals called it the *gynaikeion*. Women and young girls were almost required to stay where they could not be seen by other men or people outdoors.[[8]](#footnote-7) This I realized while listening to gossiping women getting water outside their respective houses. They were doing the work their slaves typically did, so that they could meet with their fellow women and talk.[[9]](#footnote-8) While sitting and listening, a young girl came up to me and started talking to me about what she was learning at the moment from her family’s slave-girl. As she was talking, I realized that these women were only being taught domestic skills such as cooking and weaving.[[10]](#footnote-9) These are skills, I realized, that keep them from wondering about the outside world and keep them under their father or husband’s thumb.

After the little girl leaves, I hear the women gossiping about something rather interesting that they had overheard their husbands talking about. Apparently, Pericles, the general of Athens, had divorced his Athenian wife for a foreign woman from Miletus.[[11]](#footnote-10) This seemed to be really hot gossip for these women, and they continued the conversation. They discussed how Pericles was intimately living with this foreigner and that Pericles could be seen publicly kissing her when he returned home.[[12]](#footnote-11) The women seemed to be very disappointed in their beloved statesmen since he replaced his Athenian wife with a foreigner.[[13]](#footnote-12)

I was very curious about this foreign woman that seemed to have the great Pericles wrapped around her finger in a world where women were not even treated as humans. So, I decided to ask the women who she was. One of the older women said, “Her name is Aspasia, she is apparently an educated woman.” I then decided to ask if they knew how she was educated. Again, the older woman answered, “It is said that she taught Socrates and Pericles the art of rhetoric and that she has a school to teach the *hetaira*.”[[14]](#footnote-13)

At this point, I was drawing too much attention to myself and decided to go back to my room. When I got there, I decided that I needed to meet this so-called Aspasia.

**DAY THREE**

Deciding to test my luck, I went out into the Agora the next day in search of the one man I knew would not turn down the chance of discussion, Socrates. It did not take me long to find him and when I told him I knew how to play the flute; I was quickly invited to the symposium that was to be held that evening and I was to be the flute-girl.[[15]](#footnote-14)

Once I got to the house with Socrates, I watched as he removed his shoes and the slaves immediately cleaned his feet before he entered the banquet-chamber. As we made our way inside, me behind Socrates, they adorned a type of flower crown and necklace on his head and around his neck.[[16]](#footnote-15) Once inside the chamber, I quickly moved to the side of the wall in hopes to not be noticed so that I could observe the symposium tradition. I watched as the men all laid out on the various couches around the room with their legs propped up on the side. On some couches there would be two or three quests sitting on them. After a bit, the slaves came out and set out food. Before eating, the guests washed their hands in bowls and passed around a cup of wine to begin the feast. After a while, the guests sprinkled wine on the ground and sang a hymn in libation to Dionysus.[[17]](#footnote-16)

I noticed after a while the other women in the room were also standing against the wall, seeming to disinterestedly look at the guests. I made my way over to one and asked why she was here. She said, “I am a *hetaira* and I am here to entertain the guests and take them home once they get too drunk.” Curious, I asked more questions and learned about the *hetaira*. They are basically educated prostitutes that pay for their freedom by getting loans from different clients, much like the guests here tonight. I also found out that they were intellectually educated by Aspasia and that they were artistically talented as well.[[18]](#footnote-17) Seeing this as my chance to meet Aspasia, I asked the woman if she could take me to meet Aspasia the next day. She agreed.

I went back to my room that night, luckily getting out of the symposium before any guests noticed me.

**DAY FOUR**

The *hetaira* woman I met the night before came to my room early the next morning and brought me to Aspasia’s residence. When I got there, I noticed a man leaving the house, but before he left, I noticed that he openly kissed the woman in the doorway.[[19]](#footnote-18) As I had never seen such a display of affection between men and women since I got here, I was thoroughly surprised.

Once I got close enough to see her, the woman with me informed me that it was Aspasia and left us to talk. Although this random meeting seemed very odd to me, Aspasia seemed to treat it like it was a natural occurrence for her to have discussions with men and women she had never met before.[[20]](#footnote-19) Despite what I had been expecting when I first heard of her, Aspasia was rather simple and had an average beauty that others in this region also seemed to possess.[[21]](#footnote-20)

Once we got inside, she asked me what I came here for and in response I just asked her to tell me about her life and how she came to be in Athens with Pericles. She seemed momentarily taken aback, but then she easily began to talk. She told me that she came from Miletus, a Greek colony in Ionia, which is situated rather closely to Persia. She then informed me that Miletus has a strong philosophical tradition with its inhabitants.[[22]](#footnote-21) She told me that she has a passion for rhetoric and the political arts, which is originally what drew Pericles to her. She even has helped teach Socrates and Pericles the art of rhetoric and helped Pericles with many of his political speeches.[[23]](#footnote-22)

Finally, it was getting late and time for me to leave the now not-so-mysterious Aspasia. When I got back to my room, I decided that my study abroad trip and learning in Athens was over and that I had gotten all of the information I needed, so I decided to go back home.

**POST-DEPARTURE**

After returning through the time-travel machine back to Longwood University, I realized many things about the women in ancient Athens.

Although most of them may have been forcibly secluded in their houses without the ability to meet people and learn what they want, they were still able to persevere in any way they could. Whether it be the women who did the slave’s work of going to the fountain house to get water just so that they could gossip with other women, or the *hetaira* who, although were basically slaves, were able to learn and have intelligence that most women were denied during that time period. By getting the chance to meet Aspasia, I was able to see that women throughout history make do with what is given to them and some are even able to get remembered in history for their perseverance.

1. Robert Flacelière, *Daily Life in Greece at the Time of Pericles* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), 156, 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Ibid., 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Ibid., 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Ibid., 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Ibid., 15. Even if there were kitchens, the fire would still be made outside to avoid the access of smoke indoors. This is still very common today in Greek villages. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Ibid., 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Ibid., 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Ibid., 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. The scene of women getting water from a fountain house was a very common scene featured on various vases. See an example here: <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/06.1021.77/> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Flacelière, *Daily Life in Greece*, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Ibid., 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Loren J. Samons II, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 166-167. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Flacelière, *Daily Life in Greece*, 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Andrea A. Lunsford, ed., *Reclaiming Rhetorica: Women in the Rhetorical Tradition* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. Flacelière, *Daily Life in Greece*, 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. Ibid., 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. Ibid., 174-175. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
18. Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
19. Samons, *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles*, 166-167. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
20. Lunsford, *Reclaiming Rhetorica*, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
21. Madeleine M. Henry, *Prisoner of History: Aspasia of Miletus and Her Biographical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
22. Lunsford, *Reclaiming Rhetorica*, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
23. Ibid., 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)