

CHAPTER 11

“A SHADOWY EXISTENCE” THE WOMEN OF ANCIENT GREECE

“ EURIPIDES, PLATO,
HOMER, HESIOD,
SEMONIDES,
XENOPHON, AND
PHINTYS

Is this fair? A whole separate chapter on women? Where's the chapter on men? Why do women get special treatment?

Actually, it's the men, not the women, who are getting special treatment. In the rest of this book, you can read about an awful lot of men but not many women. Since they're hardly mentioned in history books, some people wrongly assume that ancient Greek women must not have been very important.

The problem is that nobody knows precisely how women lived and what they did in ancient Greece. Historians pick and choose what they put into their books and few ancient Greek historians chose to include women very often. Herodotus mentioned women and even girls, but he was unusual.

Thucydides, on the other hand, was mainly interested in the kind of history that records warfare and diplomacy. And even though we don't know much about Greek women, we do know that they had very small parts to play in those areas of life. They couldn't hold office in most ancient Greek governments and they weren't allowed to be soldiers. The important work that women did at home to keep things going—farming, supervising households, raising families, everything they took care of in peacetime plus assuming the jobs customarily done by men in times of war—wasn't the focus of his histories. So Thucydides rarely mentioned women.

The playwright Euripides assumed there was friendship and support between women when he had one of his characters in *Iphigenia Among the Taurians* say, “Women we are, each other's steadfast friends, allies whenever common needs arise.”

TAKE THAT!

Not only was it rare for a woman to be in charge, but it was also unusual for one to fight in a war. Queen Artemisia of Halicarnassus did both, siding with the enemy Persians against other Greeks. Artemisia commanded a war ship and a reward was offered for her capture.

One Greek ship came close to collecting the money. But Artemisia tricked them by ordering her sailors to make her ship turn and ram a Persian ship. The Greeks figured that they must have been mistaken and that the ship they were chasing must not be Artemisia's. Why would she attack someone on her own side? So they sailed away to look for her somewhere else and she escaped.

“ Euripides, *Iphigenia Among the Taurians*, about 413 BCE

66 Plato, *Laws*, mid-fourth century BCE

The philosopher Plato showed some sympathy for their lives when he said in the *Laws* that women were “accustomed to a confined and shadowy existence.”

Even by the time the very early poet Homer was writing, women had fairly defined roles. Or at least they were supposed to. Penelope, who waited for many years for her husband Odysseus to return from the Trojan War, wanted to get rid of the men who had been trying to force her to marry one of them. But her own son Telemachus wouldn’t let her do anything about it. In the *Odyssey*, Homer shows Telemachus saying,

66 Homer, *Odyssey*, about 725 BCE

Go therefore back in the house, and take up your own work,
The loom and the distaff, and see to it that your handmaidens
Ply their work also; but the men must see to discussion,
All men, but I most of all. For mine is the power in this household.

But in another part of the *Odyssey*, Homer shows us that maybe all houses weren’t run that way. A princess tells Odysseus:

Go on quickly across the hall until you come to
My mother, and she will be sitting beside the hearth,
in the firelight, . . .
And there is my father’s chair of state, drawn close
beside her. . . .
Go on past him and then with your arms embrace
our mother’s
Knees; do this, and you will behold your day of
homecoming
With happiness and speed, even if you live very far off.

So in this house, anyway, the father just *thought* he was running the show.

Penelope was everything the Greeks believed a woman should be: loyal to her husband, a good daughter-in-law, dedicated to running her house well, spending most of her time spinning and weaving, never going outdoors. But

Homer also shows another kind of woman: Clytemnestra, the wife of King Agamemnon, was unfaithful to her husband and then killed him. Unfortunately, Homer said in the *Odyssey*, Penelope's goodness doesn't help women's reputation. All it shows is that one woman was good. Clytemnestra's wickedness, however, makes *all* women look bad:

[A] song of loathing
 Will be hers among men, to make evil the reputation
 Of womankind, even for those whose acts are virtuous.

“Homer, *Odyssey*, about 725 BCE

But Homer was unusual in recognizing that some women were virtuous. Most Greek writers had many nasty things to say about women and they didn't often bother to find the exceptions to their negative images. Hesiod, who lived at about the same time as Homer, had much to say about Pandora, the woman who, according to Greek mythology, brought evil into the world. Zeus sent her to punish men because he was angry at them. Hesiod says she was a “sheer inescapable snare for men” and since she was the mother of all women, they are all just as bad as she was. He says that women are “a great plague” and “an evil for men.”

“Hesiod, *The Theogony*, around 700 BCE

It's sometimes hard to know if a poet means what he says, or is just exaggerating to make a point. It is also hard to take a writer seriously when he claims something totally ridiculous. The poet Semonides said that one kind of woman descends from pigs and you can tell this because she leaves her house in a mess. Another woman is the



Many women were involved in the important task of making cloth. Large looms, like the one depicted on this vase, required skillful hands working together.

AMAZONS

The Amazons were supposed to be a tribe of warrior women who lived apart from men. Many people think they never existed. In 1997, however, archaeologists found some burial mounds in Russia that seem to indicate that wandering groups of women rode horses and fought with arrows. It's possible that tales of these women inspired the stories of Amazons told by the Greeks.

Atalanta, shown on this vase, defied tradition by refusing to marry. When her father told her that she had to find a husband, she said that she would marry a man who could beat her in a race. Aphrodite, the goddess of love, helped a man trick her into losing.

great-granddaughter of the mischievous fox, who gets into trouble through her nosiness. Still another must have a donkey for an ancestor, because she's so stubborn and loves to eat. Only the woman who descends from the bee—hard working, humble, neat, with lots of children—seems to be worth marrying. The Greeks had some ideas about natural history that seem very odd to us today but surely nobody, even at that time, believed that all this was true. It's so silly that Semonides was probably joking.

One thing most ancient Greek writers seem to have agreed upon is that the reason there are women is so that there can be children. Women seem to have had very little worth in many writers' eyes, except for that one function. The historian Xenophon wrote in *The Spartan Constitution* that except in Sparta

“girls destined for motherhood and who are considered to be well brought up subsist on the most basic diet and are allowed a minimum of delicacies.” Why do they need good nutrition, after all? It's not as if they're going to do anything hard, like plowing a field. (The Greeks had no idea how important it is for pregnant women to eat well.)

Have you noticed anything about who wrote all these plays, poems, and histories? They're all men. Actually, that's true in most other chapters, too. This doesn't mean that women would necessarily have said anything nicer about



66 Xenophon, *The Spartan Constitution*, early fourth century BCE

themselves than men did. But it's clear we're not getting a well-rounded view of how women lived in ancient Greece. The female poet Sappho wrote some poems about individual women, but it's hard to find out much about women in general from them, except that some women were well-enough educated to write exceptionally beautiful poems. Some upper-class women were educated, but we'll probably never know how many of them could read and write (we don't know that about men, either). They certainly weren't expected to work outside the home, so their education was not for job training.

So what do we know for sure from the women themselves? Precious little. We do have an essay *On the Proper Behavior for Wives* that was probably written by a Greek woman named Phintys, who saw basic differences between men and women:

I agree that men should be generals and city officials and politicians, and women should keep house and stay inside and receive and take care of their husbands. But I believe that courage, justice, and intelligence are qualities that men and women have in common. . . . Courage and intelligence are more appropriately male qualities because of the strength of men's bodies and the power of their minds. Chastity is more appropriately female.

In general, females were not valued as highly as males in ancient Greece. Aside from not being given as much to eat, as Xenophon mentioned, girls were probably not as well taken care of in other ways, too. Lists of citizens, gravestones, and other kinds of evidence show many more adult males than females, which suggests that many girls died as babies and toddlers.

Many people, naturally, loved their little girls and even took their advice. King Cleomenes of Sparta allowed his daughter Gorgo to sit in on a conversation with Aristagoras, the tyrant of the *polis* of Miletus, when she was about eight years old. After listening to the Milesian's offers of money if



MEANWHILE IN CHINA . . .

In ancient China, women rarely had political power, and married women were taught that their husbands ruled over them. Few women learned to read and write. One exception was Ban Zhao, who wrote a history of the ruling family of China in the first or second century CE. This text became a model for histories written by Chinese scholars who came after her. She also was the author of a *Lessons for Women*, a manual instructing women how to behave.

“” Phintys, *On the Proper Behavior for Wives*, about 200 BCE



**ARCHAEOLOGIST AT WORK:
AN INTERVIEW WITH BARBARA TSAKIRGIS**

Professor Barbara Tsakirgis is an archaeologist who excavates ancient houses in Athens and in Greek Sicily, and studies how people lived in them. She teaches classics and art history at Vanderbilt University.

What's different about excavating a temple and a house?

The techniques are the same, but honestly, the expectations are quite different. Most houses are built in a much more modest fashion, as you'd expect if you were to compare a modern house with a church, say, or with a courthouse. The temples were made of large blocks of stone, but the houses were built with very low stone bases to the walls, and the rest was made of mud brick. What's also different are the things that you find inside. In general, Greek temples didn't have much inside. What was inside was extraordinarily valuable and long since taken away. Houses have, in some instances, a vast amount of stuff in them. They might have pots and pans, they might have loom weights used by the women of the house who wove wool or linen. They might have braziers—little charcoal burners that they used in heating and cooking and for light.

Did you ever find anything that surprised you?

It's usually the case that ancient cities were abandoned, and the people would take with them anything of value. On occasion, the pieces that are left behind are very puzzling. One large object found in a house looks for all the world like a chimney pot. But there is a great deal of debate over whether Greek

houses had chimneys. So either it came from a very unusual house, or we have to revise our view of Greek chimneys.

Have you ever found human remains?

I haven't myself dug where there were human remains, but they have occasionally appeared in houses. In one of our houses in Sicily, the excavator found a human skeleton in a cistern, a water storage tank. And we have no idea how that person ended up in the cistern. It's certainly not a place where people are buried, certainly not within a house.

And certainly not if you're going to drink water out of the cistern! So when you find something unusual, do you call in an expert? Do they call in a forensic scientist to find out if the person was murdered, for example? Absolutely. There's a whole class of archaeologists who deal with human bone remains, and they can tell all sorts of things from the bones. By careful examination, all sorts of evidence can be read from the human bones. We had one person in the excavation in Athens who deals with the bones from a number of graves from the Byzantine era, the Greek Middle Ages. She showed me this most horrific part of a jaw, which was the best advertisement I've ever seen for going to the dentist regularly. It was a jawbone

with literally a hole through it. What she thought was the case was that the person had a cavity or some kind of infection in the tooth that developed into an abscess in a period, of course, long before antibiotics, and the tooth was not pulled. Eventually the infection ate through the tooth, through the jawbone, and then erupted into the brain cavity where undoubtedly the infection killed the person.

It's horrifying but it's fascinating. When I look at bones, I just see bones. But when these bone people look at bones, they show you these delicate little holes through which the nerves were strung, they can show you the points of attachment for the various connective tissues. They can, in some cases, tell you the gender of the individual, the age, the quality of nutrition.

Do you ever find artworks?

One of the most attractive aspects of the ancient Greek houses are the floors. Often in one or two rooms, especially the dining room, there will be a mosaic floor, made up of pebbles, and later of little cubes of stone. Sometimes they show mythological scenes, and sometimes they're just decorative borders with animals and flowers. And I have to say that many of these mosaics are quite beautiful.

They preserve quite well, but unfortunately they're extremely difficult to excavate. In one case in Morgantina (a city in Sicily that was once a Greek colony), the figure is made up of really quite minute pieces of stone, some of which are only a millimeter on a side. If the soil is loose, if there have been trees or plants allowed to

grow around a mosaic like that, even the most delicate roots can dislodge the tesserae (small, usually four-sided pieces of glass, stone, or tile used to make a mosaic).

So do you have to remove it in one huge piece?

Well, it's a very time-consuming process to excavate a mosaic, and generally you have to use very delicate tools. The tool that dentists use to clean the spaces between your teeth is one of our favorite tools to use in cases like this.

If a mosaic has to be moved for its own safety or to be restored, it's usually taken up in sections. The way that's done is that a reversible glue is spread over the top of the mosaic or a part of it, and then a mesh sheet is laid over that. And then that rectangle or square that has been covered is literally cut from the rest of the mosaic. The sheet adheres to the face of the mosaic and then you can lift it up. There's often a great deal of damage to the edge where the cut is.

I bet the pieces are heavy.

They are very heavy, and it's very labor-intensive work. A friend of mine digging a Roman bath mosaic said that the removal process took over a year.

When you remove something like that, do you restore it on-site or do you send it to somebody?

Most large excavations will hire a conservator to work on-site. Conservators are hard to come by, and they're very expensive. They have to go to school for seven years. There's chemistry involved, there's art history, there's a lot that goes into it.

Women's lives were so controlled that when they had the chance to be free, they sometimes went wild. This dancing maenad, or worshiper of the god Dionysus, carries a staff called a thyrsus in her right hand and a dead leopard in her left.



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Cleomenes would do what he wanted, Gorgo cried out, “Father, this stranger will corrupt you if you do not leave at once.” Cleomenes followed her advice and never did make an alliance with Aristagoras. The Milesian must have been astonished that the king would follow the advice of a child, especially a female.

What would a woman do all day? In most periods of Greek history, upper-class women were supposed to stay indoors all the time. They didn’t even go out to do the shopping, but sent their servants and slaves to the market instead. (Some of these servants were women, but since they weren’t from the upper classes, no one seemed to care that they were exposed to all the roughness of the outside world.) Instead, the women were in charge of running the household, and they did the spinning and weaving that provided the clothes, sheets, and everything else made of cloth that the family needed. They must have looked forward to religious festivals, where they would get to see the town and mingle with other people.

MAENADS

Women rarely managed to break free of their restricted lives. But female followers of the god Dionysus held rituals where they would go into ecstasies. (The word comes from *ek-stasis*, which means “standing outside yourself.”) In one myth, they tore a young man limb from limb because he said he didn’t believe in Dionysus.

Many women had to work, of course. They farmed and made crafts and played music and danced. A few served as priestesses to goddesses. And there was one job for which women were considered ideal: being a professional mourner. When a wealthy person died, women were hired to weep and carry on at the funeral so that everyone would be impressed at how beloved the dead person was. No one seemed to find it odd that the people making a big fuss over someone’s death weren’t his friends or relatives, but someone paid to cry. Most women in Greece led lives that look very restricted to many of us today. This makes the achievements of the women who did manage to contribute to their society even more remarkable.