



A woman purifying herself, detail from a vase, fourth century BC.

The Rise of Women in Ancient Greece

Michael Scott looks at how a time of crisis in the fourth century BC proved a dynamic moment of change for women in the Greek world.

The sources that survive from ancient Greece are overwhelmingly written by men for men. The surviving physical evidence – temples, buildings and battle memorials – all speak of a man's world. Surviving works of art feature women in various guises, but rarely give an insight into any other kind of world except that in which women were controlled, contained and often exploited. Even ancient Athenian democracy, which the modern world honours, denied women the vote. The place of women in ancient Greece is summed up most acutely by the historian Thucydides writing in the fifth century BC when he comments: 'The greatest glory [for women] is to be least talked about among men, whether in praise or blame.'

Yet in the last 50 years or so a revolution has taken place. Fuelled by the rapid evolution in the roles of women in modern society, historians have taken a fresh look at women in ancient Greece. The result has been a change in the depth and nature of our understanding of them. The range of female influence and experience has slowly been brought to the fore: from the divine power of the female gods to the social and religious power of female priests, from the model women of Homer to the anti-heroines of myth and drama, from women who were the power behind the throne to those who wore the crown themselves, from

female-enforced prostitution to female-authored sex manuals and poems of literary genius.

In a single lifetime, between the fall of Athens in 404 BC and the rise of Alexander the Great in the 330s BC, the Greek world was turned on its head. What does the tale of this brutal dawn reveal about the role of women in ancient Greece? The transformations that occurred were motivated in part by the catastrophic effects of the Peloponnesian War, the 30-year conflict which had brought democratic Athens to its knees. In response to the increased poverty that resulted, Greek women began to work outside the home. The orator Demosthenes, writing in the middle of the fourth century, complained that they now worked as nurses, wool-workers and grape-pickers on account of the city's penury. This primarily economic drive was coupled with great political upheaval, an increasingly muddled distinction between public and private worlds and new forms of religious expression. In different parts of ancient Greece women become visible for different reasons. In Athens they appear centre stage in comic discussions of sexual and political equality and in the law courts on issues relating to citizenship. In Sparta, women emerge as landowners and are portrayed in training for motherhood and athletics. Throughout Greece, new forms of expression for women are evident that were energetically taken up in response both directly and inadvertently to the unpredictable world around them.

In 395 BC, just nine years after Athens had suffered catastrophic defeat in war, internal political revolution and the loss of its world empire, the comic playwright Aristophanes wrote and produced a play called *Women in the Assembly* (*Ecclesiazusae*). The plot is simple and striking. The women of Athens are fed up with the mess men have made of the city and its affairs. They infiltrate the political assembly and persuade it to hand over all power to the women. Now in control, women set about reforming Athens. Their specific target is the growing disjuncture between the haves and the have-nots. The women institute a radical reform agenda in which everyone is to be made equal in all aspects of their lives (a policy echoed in the works of the philosopher Plato, writing at this time). Such equality would even apply to the sex lives of Athenian citizens. If a man wanted to go to bed with a good-looking woman, or a woman wanted to sleep with a handsome man, the man would first have to have sex with an ugly woman and the woman with an ugly man – to ensure that everyone got a fair share of the treats. The play ends with the radical reform agenda falling to pieces as even the women balk at having to be so scrupulously fair in their sexual pursuits.

At first sight it is a play written by a man for a mostly male audience. In some ways, too, it only reinforces a traditional stereotype: men may have mucked up the city's affairs, but the women also get it wrong. It would be a mistake therefore to see this play as a radical call for female emancipation. But it does show how women were the chosen voice for a city engaged in painful soul-searching as it attempted to rebuild itself



The female athletes of Sparta were referred to as 'thigh showers'. This early Greek bronze figurine shows why.

and to negotiate its way in a rapidly changing world. The voice of women in Aristophanes' play may not have revolutionised the political position of women in ancient Athens, but that voice, perhaps better than any other, articulated the problems the city found itself in and the need for radical change.

Exciting discoveries

But women did not need a man to write their words for them. Some of the most exciting discoveries of this period have been the excavation at Dodona in northern Greece of many small sheets of metal inscribed with questions to the oracle of Zeus, king of the gods. Similarly inscribed 'curse tablets' have been found more widely across Greece, which are a form of written prayer by which individuals could invite the gods to harm their opponents and enemies. The crucial aspect of these rare finds is that some of the oracular questions and curses are written by (and talk about) women. Both reveal not only what advice women were seeking from the gods, but the ways in which they thought about themselves and were perceived in turn by men in the changing world around them. At Dodona one woman asks the oracle 'by sacrificing and prayers to which of the gods would [I] do better and be released from this disease?'

The curses reveal how men treated those women they saw as cunning and a potential threat. One man in Athens curses 'O Hermes Binder and Persephone [Gods of cursing] restrain the body and spirit and tongue and feet and deeds and plans of Myrrine, the wife of Hagnotheos ... until she goes down into Hades and withers away.' Women themselves were most active in curses concerning sexual relationships. In Macedonia one woman seeks to prevent the sexual union between a man she loves and her rival – the curse tablet prays that the rival may perish wretchedly. Another writes: 'I bind Aristokydes and the women who strip for him. Do not ever let him marry another woman or youth.' These small sheets of metal thus give us an unparalleled window into women's personal lives and motivations and their interactions with men.

One of the effects of the major social instability that characterised the fourth century BC is that women became physically more visible and vocal in death and mourning than ever before. Graves may seem an unlikely place to look for clues about the position of women, but they are one of the archaeologist's best friends in interpreting the past, particularly the tomb markers, or grave 'stele' as they are known. The stele record both who is buried and sometimes their age and epitaph; they are also often elaborately carved and decorated with an image of the deceased and their family. They leave a material record of how the dead were thought of by the living and in some cases of how the dead themselves chose to be remembered.

During the fourth century BC not only do images of deceased women become more elaborate and detailed, but they also receive poetic epitaphs more frequently at their own burials and are much more visible as part of the 'first circle of mourners' at the burials of others.

According to Thucydides: 'The greatest glory for women is to be least talked about among men, whether in praise or blame.'

There is a palpable change as women make public their lives, thoughts and emotions and men make public their love for their women. 'Telemachus,' reads a fourth-century burial inscription, 'is buried at the right-hand side of his mother, and is not deprived of her love.' Nor is this change confined only to grave stele. Female poets are also known from this period who wrote public laments for their lost childhood friends.

For all that it attempted to train its men to be single minded in their service of the city (the Spartan wedding night was portrayed as a shameful if necessary event in which a man had to slip away from his male comrades to have sex with his wife and be back before dawn), Sparta also brought its women perhaps more to the fore than any other city in mainland Greece. Spartan women were put through physical training in order to be good mothers (they were known by the other Greeks as 'thigh-showers' because of their revealing sportswear). They could own their own land (as much as 40 per cent of Spartan land in the fourth century BC was owned by women). Sayings of Spartan women were collected that became the essence of the Spartan code of behaviour and ethics. For example, a Spartan woman, on hearing her five sons were dead in battle, replied to the messenger: 'Don't tell me about that you idiot, tell me whether our city has won.'

It was also a Spartan woman who broke into the most male of Greek arenas during this period: the Olympic games. Cynisca, the sister of one of the Spartan kings, entered her own chariot team in 396 and 392 bc. She won both times, becoming the first female to win the Olympic games (albeit by proxy) in its 400-year history. Pausanias, the ancient traveller and first 'guide book' writer, saw the victory monument erected by Cynisca at Olympia to commemorate her success still standing 500 years later. The monument simply stated:

My fathers and brothers were Spartan kings, I won with a team of fast-footed horses, and put up this monument, I am Cynisca: I say I am the only woman in all Greece to have won this wreath.

After her death, Cynisca would be worshipped as a hero in Sparta: the ultimate female sporting pin-up.

Naming and Shaming

In Athens women had no independent existence in the eyes of the law, despite the fact that Plato had recently in his *Laws* proposed that women should be given the same education as men, the same access to the law courts, the same rights to own and inherit property, to hold public office, to compete in athletics and to live and work as equals to men. If they did bring a case in the increasingly litigious environment of fourth-century Athens, they did so under the auspices of a male guardian who spoke for them. But, equally cases could be brought against them. Often, these were specifically designed to name

Grave monuments such as this fifth-century marble carving of a woman making an offering, provide evidence of the changing lives of women in ancient Greece.



and shame a particular woman and tarnish her reputation. The orator Demosthenes (384-322 BC) serves as a perfect example. In his speech entitled 'Against Neaera' (which some believe not to be by him but by a later scholar, Apollodorus), Demosthenes sets out to steep Neaera, a resident foreigner in Athens, in sexual scandal. Why? Because she had been passed off as an Athenian citizen by her partner, an Athenian called Stephanos, in order for their children to be given full Athenian citizenship. Women carried the key to the continuation of Athens not just because they were the ones giving birth – Athenian law demanded that both parents be Athenian citizens in order for offspring to be granted full citizenship rights. Neaera's reputation is torn to shreds by Demosthenes in the name of protecting Athenian purity and identity.

What voice for women here one might well ask? Demosthenes' bitter condemnation and insistence on the seriousness of the case reveals Athens' most pressing concerns in the later part of the century. As the city faced the possibility of military attack from Macedon and further internal political unrest, the figure of poor Neaera shows all too clearly how seriously the Athenians took the maintenance and security of their citizen body. Not long after this case, Athens would undertake a census of the entire citizen body to weed out such 'illegitimates'. Though they had no direct voice in politics, women were increasingly being held up to public scrutiny as a crucial element in the machinations of the Athenian city state.

Queens of the East

While women were being named and shamed in Athens, winning Olympic victories in Sparta and cursing to their heart's content in mainland Greece, across the Aegean sea, on the coast of Asia Minor (western Turkey), some women were in positions of actual power. At Halicarnassus (now Bodrum) King Mausolos (r. 387-353 BC) ruled with his Queen Artemisia. Decrees from the king and queen often went out as joint statements: 'It seems good to Mausolos and Artemisia that ...' Honours were bestowed on both of them in almost equal measure by other cities. After the king's death, Artemisia ruled alone for several years. She was not the first woman to do so – over a century before, another Queen Artemisia had been the only female commander to help the king of Persia attack Greece and in fact had been the only commander not to disgrace herself in the decisive sea battle of Salamis.

After the death of her husband, Mausolos's widow Artemisia was consumed with grief. She may even have drunk a potion made up of her husband's bones and ash. In fact, so famously extravagant was her mourning that it became the subject of several poems and comedies in later years. But, despite her grief, she was also extremely active. She held poetry and oratorical competitions in honour of her dead husband, completed the building of his mausoleum at Halicarnassus, which became one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, and fought off



Women depicted as relaxed and chatting, from a stone relief of the mid-fourth century BC.

an attack from the nearby island of Rhodes whose people, supposedly, were ashamed that a woman was sole ruler of such a city and territory. Artemisia, like her namesake before her, was a paradigm breaker in a world that was being changed beyond recognition.

Western Greece, too, was not without women who played critical roles at key moments of dramatic change. One of my favourite stories is told by Plutarch about an unnamed woman who inadvertently helped to start a rebellion. In the early decades of the fourth century BC, the city of Thebes, in Boeotia in the central region of mainland Greece, was occupied by the bullish Spartans. Pressure was mounting for a rebellion against them. The uprising was organised by a few key Theban figures, some of whom were in exile in Athens.

Plans were laid and timings agreed for the exiles to leave Athens, enter Thebes in disguise and begin the coup. But the day before it was due to take place, a member of the conspiracy in Thebes lost his nerve. He ordered a trusted messenger to ride as fast as he could to Athens to tell the exiles not to return the next day. The messenger returned home to saddle his horse to ride to Athens. But he couldn't find his horse's bridle. It transpired that the previous day his wife, during an ancient version of a 'coffee-morning', had offered it to a neighbour whose own had broken. The messenger was speechless with rage. But what could he do? He could not demand the bridle back or borrow another without arousing suspicion about the urgency of his errand, thus perhaps revealing the entire plot. He decided that the only thing for it was to do nothing and stay at home. The exiles left Athens the following

The wife of the tyrant Alexander of Pherae is said to have stood over her husband's bleeding body, encouraging his brothers to stab him as well

day as originally planned, slipped into Thebes and the rebellion went ahead that night. The Spartans were thrown out of Thebes, which then began its own rapid ascent to domination of Greece, all thanks to an unknown woman who had chosen to do her neighbour a favour.

A mother's influence

It was not only unintentionally that women changed the course of history in mainland Greece during this turbulent period. Wives might murder their husbands, as happened in Thessaly where the wife of the tyrant Alexander of Pherae (r. 369-358 BC) is said to have stood over her bleeding husband's body, encouraging his brothers to stab him as well. But the figure who stands out among all of these is the fourth wife of Philip of Macedon (r.359-336 BC), Olympias (c.370-316 BC). Few people, male or female, contributed as much as she in bringing about the new pattern of kingdoms and monarchical dynasties that emerged in the Greek world towards the end of the fourth century BC. This formidable woman, mother to Alexander the Great (r.336-323 BC), may have had a hand in the murder of her husband, Philip, to ensure her son's succession and she almost certainly murdered one of Philip's other wives and their daughter herself.

Olympias was probably the most powerful female influence in Alexander's life and he stayed in constant contact with her throughout his years on campaign. While he was away from home, she, her daughter Cleopatra and one of Alexander's generals seem to have been *de facto* rulers of Macedonia. After



Olympias, the formidable mother of Alexander the Great. Her influence was wide-ranging and this gold medallion was produced in the century after her death.

Alexander's death, Olympias would stop at nothing to protect his infant son, her grandson, in the power vacuum that ensued in the Greek world (during which time another powerful woman, Cynane, was trying to get her own daughter married off to a potential heir to the throne). She tricked, murdered and fought on the open battlefield in the name of her son and grandson. She did not rest until she herself was taken prisoner and executed by her enemies in 316 BC.

Queen bees

It would be misleading to think that by the end of this turbulent period women in ancient Greece were not still primarily tied to managing the home. The historical and social commentator Xenophon regarded women as the 'queen bees' of the household. It would also be wrong to imagine that great female accomplishments, like Cynisca's victory at the Olympics, were not sneered at and derided by men (in Cynisca's case by her own brother). But without doubt a change in the position and role of women was afoot – both in the ways that women were more visible and in the variety and importance of the roles they played within ancient society.

The revolution for women in terms of their position in political, economic and literary circles would only gather speed during the following 'Hellenistic' age. Women would become sellers and purchasers, lessees and lessors of land, bestowers of legacies, borrowers of money and owners of slaves. They would achieve economic independence and enjoy greater relaxation of physical and ideological constraints; they would be subject to increased interest from the developing medical profession (several medical treatises focusing on women survive from the early fourth century onwards) and benefit from a growing call from philosophers for equality between the sexes (the philosopher Epicurus was the first to make his 'school' open to both sexes, at the

beginning of the third century BC). They would become captivating central figures in ancient art – the first fully naked female statue of the goddess Aphrodite was created at the very beginning of the Hellenistic age – and, increasingly, rulers in their own right.

Not all boundaries were broken. But it is undeniable that the visibility and role of women during this time of violent change in ancient Greece was in the ascendant. Women had a great deal to do with it.

Michael Scott is the Moses and Mary Finley Fellow in ancient history at Darwin College, Cambridge. His book *From Democrats to Kings: the Brutal Dawn of a New World from the Fall of Athens to the Rise of Alexander the Great* is published by Icon this month.

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A stone carving showing a woman putting folded garments into a coffer, 450 BC. In spite of the changes that occurred during the following century, women would remain tied to the home.

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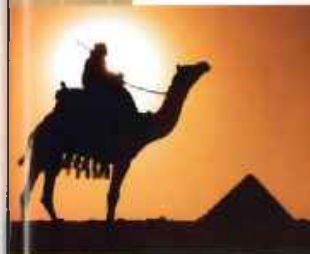
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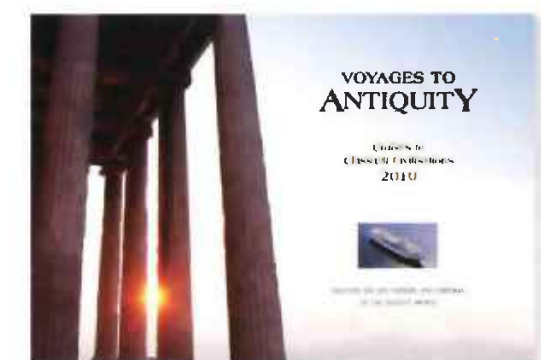
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