

Paonessa, Simon M  
Spanier, Ethan  
Ancient Greek History 43 225  
15 October 2011

### Spartan Women and the Freedom Mirage

Little is known of ancient Sparta, and that which is known is in many ways merely hearsay. The bulk of writing about Sparta pertains to the Spartan minority, the male Spartiate, around which the entire Spartan System revolves. The lack of writing and archaeological evidence about the Spartans leads to what is known today as the “Spartan Mirage.” Even less is written about the other half of the Spartiate population, women. What is known about women in Sparta sets them equally apart from the rest of Greek Poleis as Spartiate men. Where women in most Greek Poleis lived in overwhelmingly patriarchal societies, women in Sparta had what would today be seen as relative civil liberty. Looking into the limited written accounts of women in Sparta, however, it can be gleaned that they were not in fact free by any modern sense of the word, but rather given sufficient latitude in order to perpetuate the Spartan System.

The Spartiate made up a small percentage of the whole of Laconia. These Homoioi, or “equals,” came from only five villages in and around the city of Sparta and made up only about 10% of the population. The rest of the population was comprised of the Perioikoi, or the “dwellers around,” and the Helots, or slaves. It was this other 90% of the population that comprised the backbone of the Spartan economy. The unique socioeconomic circumstances that allowed the Spartan System to exist would not have been feasible without them. The Homoioi, both men and women, were the Spartan war machine which intended on churning out perfect warriors. These warriors, in turn, kept the entire system in balance by ensuring that the other ninety percent stayed in their

place. It is for this reason that not only the men of the Homoioi, but also the women, were given a great deal of prestige but also strict roles within this system.

The word Homoioi, meaning “equals,” is very accurate in describing the top tier of Spartan society. This word does not however imply that the Homoioi themselves have anything in the way of liberty, but rather that they are equal in their servitude to what amounts to a totalitarian state. According to the sources available on the Spartan System, all Homoioi had to conform to certain roles within the society. Plutarch wrote that in Sparta no one was to have their name inscribed upon their grave “except ... men who fell in the wars, or women who died in a sacred office [child birth].”<sup>1</sup> This excerpt clearly defines the roles for the Homoioi. Men were to fight for the state and women were to give birth for the state.

Spartiate girls were given an education similar to the boys, something very uncommon in Ancient Greece. The education that girls received was not comparable to the agoge that boys were subjected to, in which boys were taken from their mothers at age seven to be brutally trained for military service, but the fact that girls were educated at all is unique among the Poleis. The educational system for girls was separated into different age groups similar to that of boys, except that it did not last as long. Girls were taught music, poetry and how to read and write.<sup>2</sup> They were only taught what was deemed necessary in order to make them better producers of future hoplites, however.

Spartiate girls were also made to train in athletics like the boys. Though boys were taken from their mothers to enter into the agoge where they would train until adulthood and girls were allowed to live with their parents, the goal of this athletic

---

<sup>1</sup> Plutarch, *Lycurgus*, Trans. John Dryden, 15 Oct. 2011 < <http://classics.mit.edu/Plutarch/lycurgus.html> >.

<sup>2</sup> Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Spartan Women*, (Oxford University Press, 2002) 4-5.

training was the same. Xenophon wrote that the mythical founder of the Spartan System, Lycurgus, “believed motherhood to be the most important function of freeborn women.” He therefore “insisted on physical training for the female no less than for the male sex ... believing that if both parents are strong they produce more vigorous offspring.”<sup>3</sup> This program of athletics was perpetrated solely for the sake of eugenics. Women were not allowed to train for athletics the same as men because of any amount of freedom they were allotted. Rather, they were mandated to train in order to produce a more viable offspring. Athletic training was the metaphorical key to the door of Spartan eunomia, or good order, in which eugenics would produce the ultimate hoplite warrior in order to perpetuate the Spartan System.

Marriage between men and women was also a strictly regulated affair in Sparta. Men and women were encouraged to marry while they were “in their prime.” This meant that women in Sparta married older than those in other Poleis and men married younger. Xenophon again attributed this to Lycurgus saying, “He withdrew from men the right to take a wife whenever they chose, and insisted on their marrying in the prime of their manhood, believing that this too promoted the production of fine children.”<sup>4</sup> The actual marriage ceremony as well as married life was highly structured in the Spartan System. According to the writings of Plutarch, after a very strange marriage ceremony in which the bride is dressed as a man and the groom sneaks in during the night to consummate the marriage, the husband would only “[visit] his bride in fear and shame, and with circumspection, when he thought he should not be observed.”<sup>5</sup> This practice of putting

---

<sup>3</sup> Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, 15 Oct. 2011 <<http://perseus.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/getobject.pl?c.389:1.GreekFeb2011>>

<sup>4</sup> Xenophon, *Constitution*.

<sup>5</sup> Plutarch, *Lycurgus*.

shame upon the visitation between husband and wife was intended to keep the married couples' bodies "healthy and vigorous"<sup>6</sup> and presumably capable of producing healthy and vigorous progeny.

Land ownership is one of the privileges that most set Spartiate women apart from women of other Poleis. Aristotle, in his description of the faults of the Spartan System, wrote that women owned two-fifths of the land of Laconia during his time.<sup>7</sup> Spartiate women, being equal within the system to Spartiate men, had an equal stake in the management of the land. Aristotle claims that ownership of Laconian land by women "existed from the earliest times" because "during the wars of the Lacedaemonians ... the men were long away from home."<sup>8</sup> Since men were required to live in the common messes and spend all of their time and effort training for war, or were away from home on campaign, the responsibility of maintaining the land seemed to have naturally fallen upon the Homoioi women.

Spartan women were expected to weave and perform "women's work" much in the same manner as other Greek Poleis, child bearing being foremost. Women in Sparta could not vote or participate in the government or military. In this way, Spartan women had no more 'rights' than women of any other Poleis. In Athens, an oikos, or household, was divided into two spheres, the man's sphere and the woman's. In her sphere, an Athenian woman would have had control over her limited areas. The same can be said, to a different degree, of Sparta. The women controlled the sphere of household and childbearing and the men controlled the sphere of government and military.

---

<sup>6</sup> Plutarch, *Lycurgus*.

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *The Politics of Aristotle: Spartan Women*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (London: Colonial Press, 1900), 15 Oct. 2011, < <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/aristotle-spartanwomen.asp> >.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *Spartan Women*.

Although much of the latitude afforded Spartan women could be misconstrued as freedom, it cannot be regarded as such. Our modern definition of the word freedom involves the ability to think, say or act as one wants without obstruction. Clearly the women (and men, for that matter) of ancient Sparta were not afforded anything like this. They were obliged to remain within a strict system of eugenic reproduction under a totalitarian society whose end goal was the creation of a superior race of hoplite warriors. Any latitude they were given was simply a means to an end. This can best be summed up in the words of a famous quote recorded by Plutarch. When Gorgo, wife of Leonidas, was asked why it was that Spartan women were the only women who could rule men, Gorgo replied, “[because] we are the only women who bring forth men.”<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Plutarch, *Lacaenarum Apophthegmata: Sayings of Spartan Women*, 15 Oct 2011 <[http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Moralia/Sayings\\_of\\_Spartan\\_Women\\*.htm](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Moralia/Sayings_of_Spartan_Women*.htm)>.