

Women

A Restricted Life

Apart from in Sparta, where women had greater freedom, life for women in ancient Greece was extremely restricted. Men were seen as superior and the leaders of the household. Women had to stay in the house for the vast majority of their lives.

A girl's father would look for someone suitable for his daughter to marry and that marriage would then be arranged with the girl often having no say at all. Girls got married at around the age of 15. Once married, they would be treated as if they were the property of their husband.

While people nowadays look back at some aspects of ancient Greek civilisation with admiration, the way that women were treated is not something to admire. There was sometimes great disappointment when a baby girl was born to a family. Aristotle described women as being 'incomplete males' and this is largely how the ancient Greeks thought about women.

Leaving the Home

Women needed permission from their husbands to do everything. The only time they left the house was to visit neighbours or to attend religious ceremonies or festivals. Richer women had less freedom to go out of the house than poorer women because richer women had more enslaved people within their household who would go out to do the shopping and to collect water in jugs to bring back to the house. Poorer women would have to leave the house to do these jobs themselves. Some poorer women could even work in shops or on a farm. Spinning and weaving were something that even rich women had to do and making clothes for the family was a time-consuming activity.



Priestesses

The only important role that was open to women in ancient Greek society was that of a priestess in the temple. Priestesses were the only women in ancient Greece who enjoyed such freedoms as being paid and owning property. They were respected members of the community and they had the power to influence decisions in a city state.

Notable Women of Ancient Greece

Women generally had very little power in ancient Greece. Despite this, some women still managed to have a big influence on Greek society.

For example, Sappho was known for being a talented poet. She was alive from around 620 BC to 580 BC and wrote lyric poetry. This is a type of poetry that describes emotions, especially love. Lyric poetry was often performed with music from a lyre. Although she wrote many poems, much of her work did not survive and we now only have two full poems and extracts of her other poems.



Another example of an ancient Greek woman whose name has been remembered is Agnodice of Athens. Historians are not all in agreement as to whether her story is fact or myth. Agnodice lived at a time when only men were permitted to be doctors. In fact, women who practised medicine risked the death sentence. Agnodice disguised herself as a man to train and then work as a doctor, specialising in helping women during childbirth.

Hydna of Scione was an extremely talented diver and swimmer. During the time of the Persian invasion at Salamis, she and her father swam 16km so they could cut the ropes that tied up the ships of the Persians. The ships then drifted off and were wrecked in a storm. This helped Greece to win the Battle of Salamis.

