instance, one obol equaled twelve measures of barley; one drachma equaled six obols, or seventy-two measures of barley; and one mina equaled one hundred drachmae, or seventy-two hundred measures of barley.

See Also: money; trade

women

Throughout antiquity, Greek society was male-dominated, and women were, with occasional exceptions, second-class citizens, especially when compared to women in today’s progressive, democratic nations. Yet it would be misleading to generalize too much about the lives and experiences of ancient Greek women. Though nearly all of them possessed fewer civic and legal rights than men, their status, treatment, and opportunities differed, sometimes significantly, from one city or kingdom to another and from era to era. Much of the difficulty in constructing a realistic picture of ancient Greek women’s lives derives from the fact that the vast majority of the surviving evidence comes from Athens, and to a lesser degree from Sparta, in the Classical Age. Very little of a definite nature is known about women in other Greek states and eras. And it is possible that Athenian women led more restricted, regulated lives than women in some other Greek states, while treatment of women in Sparta may have been more liberal and equitable than in most other places in Greece. A further complication is that the vast majority of the surviving written sources about Greek women were written by men. So a true female perspective is often lacking and scholars must be careful and critical in examining the ancient writ-
ten sources available to them about Greek women.

**Early Greek Women**

Unfortunately, no written sources at all about women have survived from Greece’s Bronze and Dark ages. However, some educated guesses can be made about Minoan women from archaeological evidence, including wall paintings and carved scenes on seals found in the Cretan palace-centers and at Akroteri on Thera, where the ruins of a Minoan town have been found. The Naval Festival Fresco from Akroteri and the Grandstand Fresco from Knossos, among others, show dominant female figures who were probably priestesses. Another painting from Knossos shows three young women who may be wives or daughters of palace-center officials. Their colorful attire and carefree demeanor suggest that at least some Minoan women were highly regarded and happy. They may well have enjoyed an unusual amount of status and freedom of movement and expression. However, no evidence has been found that these women had any political rights. Also, nothing is known about average Minoan women who lived outside the palace-centers, nor is anything of a definite nature known about the lives of everyday Mycenaean women. Perhaps some indirect information about these women can be found in Homer’s epics, however. Most modern scholars think that Homer captured some dim memories of Bronze Age and Dark Age people that had survived through oral retellings over many generations. He then proceeded to place them in the social setting of his own time—the early Archaic Age. Homeric women (not counting the fanciful goddesses and sorceresses) are largely subservient to men. In general, men are seen as political leaders, warriors, hunters, and traders, while women tend to the home, raise the children, cook, and make clothes.

Most of the few surviving written descriptions of women in the generations following Homer tend to depict them as inferior in worth to men and not to be trusted. The Boeotian poet Hesiod calls the mythical first woman, Pandora, “the hopeless trap, deadly to men.” From her, he says, “comes all the race of womankind, the deadly female race and tribe of wives who live with mortal men and bring them harm, no help to them in poverty but ready enough to share with them in wealth.” *(Theogony* 587–592) A younger contemporary of Hesiod, the poet Semonides, agreed, writing that women constituted a plague inflicted on men by Zeus. It must not be inferred from these purely male tirades that Archaic Greek women either felt or acted inferior to their husbands. In fact, Hesiod’s and Semonides’ negative view of the opposite sex seems to have been based in large part on their dealings with women who were strong-willed, opinionated, and demanding. Nevertheless, Greek society in Archaic times remained patriarchal, with the male head of the household acting as the legal guardian (*kyrios*) of his wife, who was expected to attend to household duties. These duties included maintaining the household food storage, supervising the family slaves, cooking, spinning and weaving, bathing their husbands, and overseeing funeral preparations. In well-to-do households, female slaves performed most of the same duties, often working right alongside their mistresses. Evidence suggests that Archaic Greek women were not always confined in the home, however. Some poorer women and widows did work, usually as housekeepers, wool workers, or nursemaids.
**Women in Classical Athens**

In the late Archaic Age and early Classical Age, men in some, and perhaps many, Greek city-states passed laws that strictly controlled women’s social and sexual behavior and limited what they could own or inherit. The laws enacted in Athens in the early sixth century B.C. by the social reformer Solon are the best-known example. His new law code included numerous restrictions on women, including one that limited the number of women who could participate in funerals and regulated their behavior at such gatherings. In Classical times, an Athenian woman’s husband remained her *kyrios* in all legal matters. If he died and her sons were not yet eighteen, her father became her guardian until such time, if ever, that she remarried. Also, Athenian women normally did not own land, although they owned household properties such as furniture, clothes, jewelry, and slaves. (Usually they acquired such items as gifts, especially wedding gifts.) With few exceptions, Athenian women spent most of their time in the home. Here, the chief rationale and goal of fathers and husbands seems to have been to prevent respectable wives, mothers, and daughters from conversing with unrelated males. Husbands and fathers were highly preoccupied with their wives’ and daughters’ chastity and marital fidelity. And men outside the family unit were seen as potentially corruptive influences that threatened the stability of the family. Thus, on those infrequent occasions when a respectable woman did leave the house, a male relative or family slave customarily accompanied her. Similarly, when the man of the house was entertaining his male friends, his wife, daughters, mother, and sisters had to retire to the *gynaeceum*, or “women’s quarters,” located in the back of the house or upstairs. Evidently the rest of the time the family women had the run of the house and went about their various duties. These were largely the same domestic activities performed by most Greek women in the Archaic Age.

**Spartan Women**

If the lives of women in many other parts of Greece in the Classical Age were at least similar to those of Athenian women (which, because of the lack of proof, remains an assumption), the case of Spartan women was a marked exception. In Sparta a strict, regimented military system took young men away from their families for years at a time. This made a large percentage of Spartan men absentee husbands and fathers. It also meant that a Spartan man held much less authority and personal say in family life than an average Athenian man.

Indeed with the father and sons absent most of the time, a Spartan home was largely a female environment populated by mother, daughters, and other women. This made the typical Spartan woman more independent and assertive, and she enjoyed a number of rights and privileges that many other Greek women did not. Many Spartan women made and enforced the rules of their households, for example. And they were not confined in the home or denied contact and conversations with nonfamilial men. With minor exceptions, a female Spartan could appear in public whenever she pleased. Although men still held all the positions of real power in Sparta and their wives had no more political rights than Athenian women did, a Spartan woman could inherit land and other family property directly. And women in Sparta eventually gained control of large amounts of land. Aristotle, who felt that Spartan women enjoyed a great deal too
much freedom, said that they owned two-fifths of Sparta’s land by the mid-fourth century B.C.

**Women Make Advances in the Hellenistic Age**

In the Hellenistic Age Greek women in many places outside of Sparta experienced some improvements in their economic opportunities and legal and social status (although things did not change all that much for Athenian women). Documents written on papyrus, mostly found in Ptolemaic Egypt, indicate that women in that region (both Greek and native Egyptian) regularly gave and received loans; bought and sold land, slaves, and other property; inherited and bequeathed property and other legacies; and even made their own marriage contracts, perhaps without the consent of their male guardians. One surviving marriage contract from Greek-ruled Egypt, dated 311 B.C., reveals both the bride’s considerable legal rights and her husband’s obligation to respect them. He was forbidden by law to bring home a mistress or to have children by a mistress, whereas an Athenian man could still do both. Also, both the wife and husband named in the contract had equal recourse to seek legal and financial damages in case the other did not honor the document’s contents. In addition, passages from Hellenistic poems, plays, and other writings suggest that Greek women were less segregated than before and in some areas could walk around the streets without a male escort. At the same time, Hellenistic literature began to depict romantic love and passion between men and women and emphasized them as sexual equals who were genuinely interested in each other’s needs and pleasures. Finally, in the Hellenistic Age, more women became literate than ever before. And there is evidence that in some areas girls attended formal schools along with boys. This resulted in the emergence of several female poets and even a few women painters, sculptors, and philosophers. Granted, these accomplished women did not represent the norm, even in the more liberal Hellenistic period, yet a fair proportion of Greek women in that era enjoyed more freedom and opportunity than their grandmothers had known. At any rate, times were changing for women in others ways, in large part because of the absorption of the Greek lands by Rome in the last two centuries B.C. These lands became Roman provinces, and over time the lives of most Greek and Roman women in a sense merged in the larger melting pot of the vast Roman Empire.

**See Also:** children; citizenship; clothing; education; family; marriage and divorce

**Women at the Assembly**

A comedy by Aristophanes, produced circa 392 B.C. in Athens. As in his earlier comedy, *Lysistrata*, in *Women at the Assembly* (Ekklesiazousai) the playwright plays with what was then viewed as a radical, even ridiculous notion—women seizing political power from the city’s men. To this end, an uppity woman named Praxagora leads a conspiracy. She and her cohorts disguise themselves as men, infiltrate a meeting of Athens’s Assembly (Ekklesia), and vote to transfer most state authority from men to women. Praxagora, who has been chosen to rule the city, goes home and explains society’s new rules to her husband. Among others, these include communal sharing of child-rearing responsibilities and the elimination of private property. Aristophanes proceeds to introduce various speeches and plot twists designed to show the absurdity of such a system.

**See Also:** Aristophanes, 1; Lysistrata