

Exceptional Women in Archaic Greek History

It is a central difficulty in studying the history of women in the ancient world that the women who tend to be most extensively attested in historical sources are the exceptional female figures whose lives are recorded precisely because they differ significantly from the usual lives of women in their time. This trend is certainly true of Archaic Greece, where the Carian queen Artemisia and the lyric poetess Sappho are two examples of women who are remembered to this day for excelling in roles that were rarely afforded to their sex during the Archaic period¹. Given the relative paucity of evidence from this era, our understanding of the roles played by women in Archaic Greece hinges fundamentally on the extent to which we consider the lives of these exceptional women to be evidence for the lives of women in general. Although it must be emphasized that Sappho and Artemisia cannot be taken as direct models for Greek women of the Archaic period, their lives nonetheless serve as significant evidence for a range of powerful roles held by women in Archaic Greece.

Before any conclusions about women in Archaic Greek history may be drawn from the stories of Artemisia and Sappho, it is necessary to acknowledge the many problems that using such evidence presents. A foremost consideration that must constantly be kept in mind is how generally male-authored accounts of women incorporate personal biases and reflect broader contemporary views about the role of women in society. It is important to note, for example, how Herodotus describes Artemisia's actions during the Battle of Salamis as deceptive, and how both Artemisia and Sappho are said to have died from falling in love and killing themselves as a result.² Although these may be accurate accounts, they should also be challenged for aligning closely with the dominant perception of women as deceitful and passion-ruled creatures.³ Even when we possess evidence from the women themselves, such as the poems of Sappho or the words allegedly spoken by Artemisia, we must be aware that what is recorded and preserved bears the influence of predominately male ancient authors and historians. It is suspect, for example, that Herodotus quotes Artemisia, when she is asked by Xerxes for military advice, as comparing the superiority of the enemy Athenian ships to the superiority of men over women.⁴

¹ Most explicitly: Artemisia (Eva Green) in the movie 300, Sappho in the etymology of "lesbian"

² Herodotus *Histories* 8.87.1-4 for Artemisia's deception. Photius *Myrbibliothikon* Codex 190 and Menander Fr. 258 for the demise of Artemisia and Sappho.

³ Hesiod *Works and Days* 57-82 on Pandora

⁴ Herodotus 8.68

Despite these cautions, the lives of Sappho and Artemisia nevertheless serve as important evidence for the fact that women in the Archaic Greek world, although they were usually barred from political office, were nevertheless able to fulfill powerful roles in society. In the case of Artemisia, she gained political power when her husband died, leaving her Queen of Caria. Although the extent of her power is certainly exceptional in Archaic Greek history, the notion that a woman might gain some measure of autonomy or increased worth as the result of the men in her life dying is one that prevails. Most directly, women often took on the role of preserving the memory of her deceased relatives. In a world where being remembered after death was extremely important, this role was a powerful one.⁵ There are several examples of funeral inscriptions dedicated by mothers to their sons, and others that represent dedications by wives to husbands and sisters to brothers.⁶ Artemisia II of Caria, a 4th century descendant of our 5th century Artemisia, fulfilled this role to an even greater degree: she ordered the construction of the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus for her husband, a structure so impressive that it became known as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.⁷

Epikleroi are another important example of this idea: as “heiresses” to the wealth of their deceased male relatives, the decision of who they ought to marry was one of paramount importance.⁸ Although they rarely had personal agency in this process, and simply had to marry a particular person according to law, it is clear that women who were *epikleroi* held an important legal role. The women of Sparta, for whom such circumstances were more common as a result of the Spartan penchant for military engagement, came to hold even more power. According to Aristotle, “nearly two-fifths of the whole country is in the hands of women, both because there have been numerous heiresses, and because large dowries are customary.”⁹ Thus it is clear that there were ways for women in Archaic Greece to gain power as result of their male relatives dying, much like Artemisia came to power after the death of her husband.

Both Sappho and Artemisia also show how women in Archaic Greece could gain power by means of their own merits. In the case of Sappho, her continued renown is a result of her significant contributions to the poetic tradition: she composed verses that have influenced love

⁵ *Iliad* 24-25, the funerals of Patroclus and Hector

⁶ D&G 4.36-41

⁷ Pliny *De Natura* 36.4.64 – the name of Artemisia II’s husband, Mausolus, in fact gives us the word mausoleum.

⁸ D&G 4.50-51

⁹ D&G 4.18

poetry for centuries after her death.¹⁰ Artemisia, as a naval commander under Xerxes, came to be valued for the honesty and intelligence of her strategic advice: after correctly predicting that the Battle at Salamis would result in a Persian loss, contrary to the opinions of Xerxes' other commanders, she is praised by Herodotus for becoming one of the king's foremost advisors in later military affairs.¹¹ Although Sappho and Artemisia represent two of the most well-known examples of women gaining power through their own skill and talent, evidence from other sources makes clear that they were not the only women in Archaic Greece to do so. In the realm of poetic skill, we hear of a number of female poets besides Sappho: one such poetess was Praxilla of Sicyon, who lived in the fifth century, and was well-known for her drinking songs and somewhat infamous for her "silly" portrayal of Adonis.¹² Other women poets, such as Nossis, were active in later Greek history and were heavily inspired by the works of Sappho.¹³

Women were also able to gain powerful roles by means of their physical prowess, especially in Sparta. The poet Alcman, whose works were written in the late seventh or early sixth century, speaks of one such woman in a hymn for a girls' choir: "I sing of the light of Agido: I see her like the sun . . . Agido appears to be preeminent as if one were to set a horse among grazing beasts, a strong, thunderous-hoofed prizewinner of winged dreams"¹⁴ This description of Agido reflects an ideal of female beauty that places an emphasis on the strength and physical power, even calling her "preeminent" and a "prizewinner". This language need not be considered an exaggeration since, according to Xenophon, Lycurgus set up athletic competitions for women as well as men in Sparta.¹⁵ In later Greek history, we hear also of women being victors at the Olympics. Kyniska, a Spartan woman who won a chariot race at the Olympics in 396 BCE, was honored with a heroon at Sparta and a statue at Olympia; it is said that a number of other Greek women followed in her footsteps and became Olympic victors thereafter.¹⁶

Although it would be a mistake to assume that the lives of most women in Archaic Greece bore close similarities to those of Sappho and Artemisia, it is nonetheless clear that women of this period in general could achieve powerful roles through means that mirrored the

¹⁰ See, for example, Catullus 51.

¹¹ Herodotus 8.100

¹² D&G 4.6

¹³ Barnard, 210-211

¹⁴ D&G 4.14

¹⁵ D&G 4.16

¹⁶ D&G 4.17

stories of these exceptional women. Even though we must be cautious in drawing specific parallels between these extraordinary female historical figures and women more generally, Sappho and Artemisia speak to the diversity of powerful roles that women could fulfill in Archaic Greek history: as mothers, athletes, poets, and wives, women in Archaic Greece resist monolithic characterizations at every turn. Although not every name has come to us through the centuries, and those women who are remembered are seen through the distorting lens of history, it is important that we do not dismiss the larger-than-life female figures of Archaic Greece. It is through them that we may discover how other women of the period could, by means more commonplace than exceptional, gain powerful roles in society.

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