

# ANCIENT GREECE SOCIAL HISTORY

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## Greek Class structure

**Bronze Age.** By the third millennium B.C.E. the Bronze Age had permeated Greek culture, and with it the age of metallurgical sophistication. Implements, shields, and swords were produced at a new level of effectiveness, sharper, stronger, better looking. Lead, silver, and gold joined bronze in building out a new culture. Driving these changes was *homo faber*, now deployed into skill crafts and specialized training settings. The relatively homogeneous class world of Neolithic Greece, in which men (hunters) and women (gatherers) achieved surprising parity of social value, was about to transition into that dynamic interplay of classes in which the class- hierarchy of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. was remotely visible.

**Class structure.** Elites (rich men, not aristocrats) were visible on the horizon, as were various other denizens of the sub-elite class—free independent farmers, slaves (who made up one third of the population of many city states in the 5<sup>th</sup> century), and *metics* (resident foreigners)—and with them we enter the chemistry of a restless and brilliant fifth century in which many winners and many losers appeared. Citizenship, which had been conferred already in the 7<sup>th</sup> century in Athens--on the rich, on those rich enough to ‘buy their own metal armor’, and on the poor—and excluding always slaves and women—citizenship was by the mid-fifth century conferred on all resident adult males in Athens, perhaps 30,000 out of a total city population of 250,000. With citizenship, which brought people together, it was possible to soften the edges dividing one class from another.

**Cultural dynamics.** The abiding mystery of the power of the Athenian fifth century is wrapped into the development of a stratified but still interactive social mix. That fifth century chemistry was not to last. With the opening out, of the Hellenistic cultures of the late fourth and third centuries B.C.E., the gap between rich (divinized kings like Alexander) and lower class-- specialized merchants, organized laborers, and independent farmers—grew wider, and at the same time the miraculous homogeneity of citizen spirit, that had marked the fifth century, faded. Why that fifth century dynamic lost its steam, or for that matter where it got that steam in the first place, remains lost in the continuing debate over what makes for the great human centuries—Florence in the fifteenth century; Paris in the seventeenth—and yet the social trigger of the hoplite revolution, in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C., seems a promising kind of account of the Greek steam-building that empowered the fifth century achievement. The new class of adult males who were able to arm themselves, defend their society as phalanx-fighters, insisted (how exactly?) on being recognized as a fully participant social class; the independent farmer gained new consciousness of society’s dependence on him; and from these two social class developments a true *vox populi* made itself heard, in a fifth century programmed for greatness.

## Readings

Farrar, Cynthia, *The Origins of Democratic Thinking: the Invention of Politics in Classical Athens*, Cambridge, 1988.

Martin, Thomas, *Ancient Greece: From Prehistoric to Hellenistic Times*, New Haven, 1996.

## Discussion questions

The transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age, in ancient Greece, appears to be a case in which material conditioning and cultural achievement are closely inter-related. Please do some research on this tricky issue, and evaluate the claims of many historians that culture is driven by material developments.

What are the major stages of development of social class relationships in ancient Greece? Track that development from the Neolithic period through the Bronze Age into the Iron Age.

What was the hoplite revolution? Can it be taken as the driver for the growth of the dynamic fifth century B.C.E. culture of Athens?

## Gender Relations

**Marriage.** Marriage was without question the woman's destiny in Ancient Greek social life, and the procreation of children was recognized, as openly as possible, to be the purpose of marriage. If we travel with a bride and groom to fifth century Athens, we will find that their wedding itself is simply the keystone in a wide network of affiliations that hold them to one another. As in most pre-industrial societies—and to some extent perhaps in all of them—two individuals who marry are essentially bringing together two different families and their interests. In the Ancient Athenian marriage the bride price, paid by the groom to the bride's family, may be either in cash or land, depending on the status of the groom's family, and it is his responsibility to see to the maintenance of that gift, for the support of his bride, in case of a divorce or death of the groom. In exchange for which the bride commits herself totally to the household and welfare of her husband.

**The new home.** While it is likely that the marriage, between the bride and groom we follow here, was long in the preparation, it will be during the marriage itself that the bride makes evident that she is acting through her own decision. (The revelatory act? During the night time chariot procession, in which the bride and groom are driven to the husband's home, the bride will eat a quince or apple from the husband's larder, thereby signifying her dependence on his provisions, and her abandonment of the provisions previously furnished by her parents.) Flute music will accompany the pair through the torchlit night until they reach the new home that is prepared for them. There they will make the most of the marriage night, receive propitious gifts the next day, and begin their life together, sharply severed from the girl's former household.

**Women in the polis.** The new bride's life would from that point on be devoted to taking care of her house and family, performing useful and essential tasks like spinning and weaving, and on the whole remaining indoors, to be seen as little as possible except by her women friends, and in the intimacy of her own house. The husband could, at his own discretion, go on to lead quite a different life. If he were prosperous he could 'go out with the boys' as often as he liked--say to *symposia*, drinking events where men indulge and talk politics, or to chat with *hetairai*, women who were up for higher class, and expensive, sex, and who were educated enough to talk with men of culture, even indeed with rulers, as was the case of the well known closeness of Pericles with his mistress Aspasia. Our married friend could even visit prostitutes, abundant but risky as always.

**Lesbos.** Let's open where the topic is gentle, and the level of complex sublimation high. The sixth century Lesbian poet, Sappho, writes of her beloved, and does so in a subtle indirection which fantasizes the mood of a male in the proximity of Sappho's own girl. The difficulty of the translation is apparent especially in the last stanza, where the particular color of Lesbian sedge is in the balance, and the reader must contribute something personal to the notion of 'cold sweat.'

*'He's equal with the Gods, that man'*  
He's equal with the Gods, that man  
Who sits across from you,

Face to face, close enough, to sip  
Your voice's sweetness,

And what excites my mind,  
Your laughter, glittering. So,  
When I see you, for a moment,  
My voice goes,

My tongue freezes. Fire,  
Delicate fire, in the flesh.  
Blind, stunned, the sound  
Of thunder, in my ears.

Shivering with sweat, cold  
Tremors over the skin,  
I turn the colour of dead grass,  
And I'm an inch from dying.

**The thiasos tradition.** Despite the difficulties imposed by distance in time and language, we read into this poem a profound longing of woman for woman, and mark this poem among the many poems and fragments Sappho addressed to women she loved. The farther we go into this Lesbian theme, on the island of Lesbos in Archaic Greece, the more we understand, what we knew anyway, that love and desire dwell deeply inside social practice—as deeply as habits of eating or worshipping—and that gender relations can assume many forms. Thus the love group inside which Sappho realized her desire life was a remarkable fragment of Archaic Greek social existence, the *thiasos*, or women's affective group. On Lesbos the *thiasos* tradition, which was destined to die with the change of cultures, brought together, pre-marriage, young women of aristocratic line, in dance, chorus, and pure socialization. The bond holding these lovers to one another was the narrow space they occupied between youth and the married condition, which was without question their social destiny, but the cost of which, to freedom of female affections, could be felt in their bones, and wanted expressing.

### Readings

Davidson, James, *Courtesans and Fishcakes* (New York, 1997), pp. 73-182.

Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* (411 B.C.)

### Discussion questions:

What kind of learning experience do you see in the *erastes-eromenos* relationship, as it played out in the *gymnasium*? Would there have been 'content' to this learning? Or was it, as you understand the system, primarily a combination of sensuality with learning the social ropes, fitting yourself out for social membership?

Have you trouble understanding our description of the role of married women in Greek society? Is it possible that we thoroughly misunderstand the intimacies on which the family is based? Is there any way we can penetrate into the *gunaikeion*, and see into the world views of women there? Or did Greek culture close tightly over its female secrets, leaving us with an opaque veil across the *gunaikeion*?

Does marriage in ancient Athens seem to you primarily a means for bringing families and property together, and thus serving economic rather than emotional needs? Is that true at all of the society in which you yourself live? Have you seen *The Father of the Bride*, starring Steve Martin?

