

3.10

Entertainment at a symposium

...At this moment the other girl began to play for her [the dancer] on the pipes and a man standing by the dancer handed her hoops until she had twelve. She took them and threw them spinning up into the air as she danced, judging how high to throw them so as to catch them in time with the music.

Xenophon, 'The Dinner Party' in *Conversations with Socrates*, Penguin 1990, p 231.

What do you think?

- 1 What forms of entertainment were popular at a symposium?
- 2 See if you can work out the answers to the riddles in source 3.11.

Athenian women

Wives and daughters of Athenian citizens were expected to live quiet, fairly secluded lives in the *gynaikon* or women's quarters in the home. Most homes, even the smaller ones, usually had an area where the women and slaves spent their days away from the gaze of strangers. Wives and teenage daughters of citizens were not allowed to mix with men other than their husbands or fathers. If male visitors came to the home, they were entertained in the *andron* or area set aside for the men.

Women of child-bearing age were protected so that there was no chance of any illegitimate children being born into a household. Only by proving that a boy was the legitimate son of a legitimate marriage could he be accepted as a citizen.

All women had a guardian who had total authority over them. In most cases this was their father or husband. If either of these was dead, then a close relative, such as a brother, took over the protection and control of the woman. A girl's guardian chose her husband for her. Some fathers promised their daughters to an older man when they were as young as five.

Although women of the citizen class were expected to remain relatively secluded, they did go outside the home to visit friends, and to attend weddings, funerals and festivals. Some poorer women were forced to work in the markets, or alongside their husbands in the fields.

There are two main problems for historians in trying to find out about women in the ancient world. Because women took no part in political life, most of the ancient writers ignored them. Where there is information about women it is biased because it was written by men and gives a man's view of what women were like.

3.11

These riddles are the kind that might have been asked during a symposium — they are rather like our 'Who am I?' riddles

If you do not speak, you will express my name; but if you do name me by saying my name, you will not express me at all.

I am the black child of a bright father; a wingless bird, I climb up to the clouds. No sooner am I born than I vanish into the air.

When you look at me I also look at you, but without actually seeing you, as I have no eyes; when you talk while looking at me I open my mouth and move my lips, but without talking, as I have no voice.

Xenophon, 'The Dinner Party' in *Conversations with Socrates*, Penguin 1990.

Using the information

Draw an illustrated diagram summarising some of the daily activities of a reasonably wealthy Athenian citizen. Include such things as:

- meals
- time in the agora
- at the palaestra
- pastimes
- symposia
- attending the assembly or the courts.

3.12

The role of women

It is a wife's duty to remain at home and send slaves to do jobs outside the house.

Xenophon, 'The Estate Manager' in *Conversations with Socrates*, Penguin 1990, p 73.

Using the information

- 1 Where were well-to-do Athenian women expected to spend their day?
- 2 What evidence is there in source 3.13 to show that many women had no choice about going out in public?

Most Athenian girls were married at 14 or 15 and were expected to run their husband's household efficiently. It was a heavy responsibility for a teenage girl to manage the house and slaves of her much older husband (he was probably about 30 when he married her). She had to be well trained. Girls spent much of their childhood with their mothers in the home learning domestic tasks. As well as being a good household manager, the wife of a citizen had to care for the children. Some wealthy citizens employed a **wet-nurse**, usually a metic woman or slave, to look after the child, but this practice was criticised by many Athenians.



A scene from a painted Athenian vase showing women making cloth

3.13

A woman's life in Athens

... I should just like to tell you what I've been through myself, you see my husband died in Cyprus and left me with five young children to look after, it was as much as I could do to keep them half alive, selling myrtle in the market. ... Well, I must be getting back to the market myself, I've got some gentlemen waiting for twenty wreaths — specially ordered.

Aristophanes, 'The Poet and the Women' in *The Wasps, The Poet and the Women, The Frogs*, trans. D. Barret, Penguin, 1964, p 114.

3.14

What a well-to-do Athenian citizen expected from his wife

You must keep an eye on those who work at home and check what is brought in from outside. If the wool is brought into the house, you must take care that everyone is clothed. You must make sure that the grain is kept dry and prepared well for eating. When anyone in the house is sick, you must see that they are nursed back to health. Keep everything in the right place; the men's clothes and women's clothes, the bedclothes for the women's room and those for the men's, women's shoes and men's shoes, each in a separate place. Weapons have their own special place, as do the various utensils for wool spinning, the grinding of corn, the preparation of vegetables, washing, baking and eating. The more you are a good helper for me and protector of the children, the more you will be respected and honoured.

Xenophon, *The Estate Manager*.

3.15

Using the information

- 1 List the duties expected of a wife.
- 2 What activities are being carried out in source 3.15? How does this support source 3.14?

The use of slaves gave well-to-do women time for leisure. They enjoyed the company of female friends and relatives as well as reading poetry, and playing music and games. Vase paintings also show women dancing. This was probably the closest Athenian women came to doing any strenuous exercise. There are also scenes on vases of women reading from papyrus scrolls, which show that the daughters of wealthy citizens were probably taught to read and write.

The written and archaeological evidence shows that Athenian women spent a lot of time on personal hygiene, grooming and fashion. They liked to wear make-up and went to great lengths to hide any features of their bodies that they did not like. For example, small women added cork to their shoes to give them height while those with small hips added padding to their clothes. They paid a great deal of attention to their hair, which they arranged in a variety of styles, sometimes adding false pieces.

A scene from a painted vase showing a woman and her attendant slave



3.16

A list of toiletries and accessories used by well-to-do women

Razor, mirror, scissors, ointment, native soda, wigs, fringes, headbands, fancy headgear, **alkanet**, **ceruse**, perfumes, pumice stone, sashes, hairnets, veils, make-up, collars, eye-pencils, linen dresses, **hellebore**, belts, cloaks, long robes, curling tongs, earrings, pendants, bracelets, clasps, rings for the legs, seals, chains, rings.

From the plays of Aristophanes.

3.17

Using the information

- 1 What was the name of the basic woollen or linen tunic worn by both men and women? What was the name of the cloak worn over this tunic?
- 2 What evidence is there in sources 3.17 and 3.18 that Athenian women paid particular attention to their hair?
- 3 What do you think alkanet and ceruse were used for?

A terracotta figurine of a woman with an elaborate hairdo wearing a chiton and himation, and holding something that looks like a fan

Writing about history

Imagine you are the wife of a respectable Athenian citizen. Write a journal entry about some of the things that happened in the women's quarters during the day.

3.18



alkanet a plant from which comes a red dye used as a cosmetic
ceruse white lead used to lighten the skin colour
hellebore a herb, the powdered root of which can be used for killing lice

chiton a garment made from a rectangular piece of woollen or linen cloth, stitched up the sides and fastened at the shoulders
himation a garment worn over a chiton by men and by women on cold or special occasions