

FAMILY LIFE

Women's status

From the earliest years of ancient Greek civilization, women's status was defined by their relationship to men. As Greek society changed, from the age of warrior kings to the age of democracy, women's lives changed too. But men always remained in charge, and women took second place.

Kings and heroes

Stories composed as long poems by the poet Homer, between about 800 and 700 BC, record a way of life that had existed almost 500 years earlier, when warrior kings ruled Greece. It is dangerous to rely on poetry as a description of real life, but Homer's work, later written down, is our only source for women's lives in that era. One of Homer's woman characters is Penelope, wife of Odysseus. Her usual task is to manage her husband's household, but when Odysseus sets off for war, he leaves her in charge of his lands. Penelope is brave and intelligent, although the poem makes it clear that though she is worthy of respect, she is never equal to her husband.

Greek women were expected to support their husbands and sons. This vase painting shows a wife offering wine to the gods before her husband sets off for war.



Often I have thought about what it is to be a woman and realized we are nothing. When we are girls our lives are sweet and pleasant at home... But once we grow up, and begin to understand things we have to leave, and become something to be bought and sold...

LINES FROM A PLAY BY THE GREEK WRITER SOPHOCLES, WHO LIVED ABOUT 496-406 BC. ONE OF HIS FEMALE CHARACTERS DESCRIBES WOMEN'S LIVES.

New laws

By about 500 BC Homer's world of kings and warriors had vanished. Greece was divided into city-states full of soldier-citizens, ruled by tyrants, or oligarchs, or by democracies. City governments made new laws, designed to strengthen the family as the basic unit of society. As a side effect, they controlled women even more than before.



At the end of the Greek era, goddess worship gave some women more strength as individuals. This carving shows a married couple, with the wife dressed as the Egyptian goddess Isis.

Politics

The city-state of Athens was famous throughout Greece for its democratic system of government. But women had no direct role in political life. They could not attend meetings of the Assembly, where important decisions were discussed and voted on. They could not sit on juries, or serve as government officials. They could not even speak in public, but had to ask their guardian to speak for them. Unlike Homer's Penelope, they could not rule on behalf of absent husbands, or win public respect for their wise acts.

This open space in the city of Athens was called the Pnyx. Male citizens met here to debate government decisions and make new laws.

Classical times

Women remained second-class inhabitants in most city-states until the end of the Classical Age and beyond. Laws varied from place to place, but a woman was usually under the legal control of a man. Her father or closest male relative was her guardian until she married. After marriage her husband, and later her eldest son, took over the task. A woman's guardian had to protect her, provide her with food, clothes and lodgings, and act for her in any dealings with the law. He controlled any goods or property she was given or inherited, and could sell them without her permission. He also had the right to kill any man (except her husband) who had sex with her, and to sell her as a slave to punish her.

