Greek Women Essay, Research Paper

The women of Ancient Greece lived through a period of critical oppression, which would last several centuries. They were completely inferior and separated from a male society. Women were confined to the homes and restricted against free movement in the streets. Their duties were to bear children and attend to household affairs.

The roles of women in the family differed between the upper and lower classes. Women of the upper class were confined to the household – bearing children, child-care, spinning and weaving, and other domestic affairs. Women were wholly in charge of the production of textiles for the members of the family. Additional roles included bathing and annoiting their husbands (Beard 30-1).

Lower class women were not as strictly confined to the household as the upper class women were. Instead their duties included those of the upper class women as well as street or market vending and midwifery. They were considered inferior because many of their duties took place outside of the home, working side-by-side with slaves (Beard 30-31).

As less of a division of class, women in general shared many rituals and duties. On festive occasions women would have the honor of preparing meat. Preparation included such tasks as the slaughter, dressing, cooking, and distributing of the meat. Other rituals women shared were making breads and cakes. Because women were confined to the homes, they had free time to artistically express themselves. Many vases have been found showing women in-groups weaving, singing, and reading (Finnegan 13).

Women of Ancient Greece were given many restrictions on what they could or could not do outside of the home. With a strong division between upper and lower class, women either stayed at home or were shunned in the streets. Women were restricted to motherhood only. They were not the companions of their husbands. In fact, within the home the husband and wife stayed in different quarters. The wife was confined to quarters with the children and slaves, while men stayed in the easeful quarters.

Another restriction on women was that they were not allowed to attend dramatic festivals or comedies. In fact, if women were portrayed in a dramatic play, men would play them. These restrictions prevented women from enjoying the Athenian culture. Inheritance was strictly partrilineal in Archaic Greece. When a man died all of his land and substantial properties would be divided up among the sons. If the man had no sons the property would be passed to distant relatives.

Beginning with the birth of women, there was an attempt to control the female population. The practice of killing newborn girls occurred at times when more females than males were being born. This would have caused a detrimental imbalance in the adult population so it was probably never practiced regularly. In fact, nearly fifty percent of all infants died before they reached twelve months. Many of the women died during childbirth.

Throughout the majority of the Archaic Age, bringing together two individuals for marriage would begin with a transfer of property. In most cases of the upper class courtship, the future husband would enthuse the father-in-law by bringing him gifts. These gifts, also known as bridewealth, would consist of valuable properties, countless gifts and in one known case a bid for the future wife s hand. Towards the end of Archaic Period bridewealth was no longer considered a standard practice. During this transitional period, moving from the Archaic to the classical age, bridewealth was replaced with the notion of dotal marriage. Dotal marriage was “marriage with a dowry”. This was an allotment of assets given to a woman at the time of marriage. Her husband would however control these assets. Dowries usually consisted of money or valuables and held great importance.

The average age for a woman to marry was between fourteen and eighteen, while most men married around the age of thirty. Marriages were typically arranged in this manner in order to assure that a husband could educate his young wife to run his household in the way that he wished. The age difference between husbands and wives reinforced the conjecture that women were intellectually inferior, and augmented patriarchal attitudes towards them (Blundell 119-20).

“Marriages alliances were political acts” arranged by the intended groom s and bride s guardians (Brosius 190). A guardian would be his/her father or male relative. Guardians made arrangements for marriage to ameliorate relations among families. The execution of exogamy, marriage outside the community, was a common practice of the upper class to create strong political ties between families. In fact, this great alliance between noble families was the most prominent reason behind marriages. The feelings of the two individuals were not considered in the act of marriage. Women did not have any say in marriage arrangements. They were subservient to all men. After the arrangements were made, having both guardians agree, the couple would customarily move into her husband s family.

In the period of Archaic Greece, the oikos, or family unit, was the basic group within the polis. The oikos would include the immediate family, husband, wife, unmarried children, and married sons and their families. They would live within the organized polis, which “took on the role of providing the family with protection from its enemies, and in return the family owed it a variety of obligations, including military service (Blundell 66).”

Through the explanation of women s existence, marriage, family unit, and role in Ancient Greece it is evident that they held many rituals but were none the less oppressed by men. Ancient Greece was a very interesting study because it can be conceived as one of the roots of the superior versus inferior relations between men and women.