

**A STUDY OF
WOMEN IN ATTIC
INSCRIPTIONS**

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A Study of Women in Attic Inscriptions by Helen McClees

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BY
HELEN McCLEES

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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INTRODUCTION

IN making this study my object has been to collect all the information upon the life and position of women to be found in the Attic inscriptions. With this purpose in mind I have tried to examine all published inscriptions which relate directly or indirectly to women, individually or collectively.

A careful reading of them has not brought to light any fact contrary to our knowledge of the manner of life or position in society of Athenian women derived from literary and artistic sources; but from them we gain confirmation and copious illustration of knowledge acquired by other means, as well as a vivid picture, composed of accumulated details, of the everyday occupations of women at home and abroad, of their religion and superstitions, their family relationships and public honors.

And although not many new facts have been added to our knowledge by the inscriptions, they effect a decided change in the view which is given by Greek literature alone. We recall Pericles' speech after the first year of the Peloponnesian war — a speech full of the deepest feeling for youth, for the loss inflicted upon the state and upon the family, but harsh, even to a shocking degree, toward the bereaved mothers and wives of the dead; yet in Pericles, because of his association with Aspasia, a different attitude might well have been expected. The *Oeconomicus* of Xenophon shows us in some detail the life of a young married woman of the upper classes, a picture which was intended to be cheerful, but which reveals little

appreciation of the physical and mental needs of a young, healthy human being. Plato, again, in admitting women, as equals into his ideal state, presents a contrast to the ideas of our time, as well as to those of his own, but woman, to him, is an inferior variety of man and in depriving her of family life and of the care of her children he proved that his knowledge of her real nature and most valuable qualities was slight, or was much obscured by his interest in his theory of the state. Moreover in the Symposium woman is declared by Socrates to be naturally inferior and love for her to be a lower order of emotion. But indirect testimony is always the strongest, and in writing of the last hours and death of the man whom he called the best and wisest of his time, Plato did not consider it incompatible with that judgment to show Socrates behaving toward his wife in a manner quite contrary to what seems to us either good or wise.¹

The inscriptions, on the other hand, show that in practice there was much to render the lot of Athenian women comparatively happy and normal.

To begin at the end of life, the sepulchral inscriptions, which are by far the most numerous, and are common to every class in the community, are full of an appreciation of the character of women and their contribution to human society which has not often been exceeded in later times, and the sepulchral reliefs which have come down to us produce the same impression.

Again, the dedications make it plain that, while the legal position of women in regard to property was unjust and harassing, it must have been greatly mitigated in practice, for large numbers of women were able to make gifts varying in value from a rude relief or a few coins in a cloth or small dish to valuable ornaments and artistic objects, as well as contributions in money for public monuments.

¹ For a different view see Burnet, *Phaedo*, notes, p. 60.

Religious life, however, offered the most considerable opportunity for usefulness and activity beyond duties toward the family, and while the state religion of Greece did not require or promote depth of thought, its service must have enabled intelligent women to employ their powers in following out observances, in arranging the festivals, and often in managing the practical details and expenditures of a cult. For we must remember, I think, that at least in the extraordinary society of the fifth and fourth centuries, from which so much of all that we value most has come down to us, there must have been women who inherited the qualities of their fathers, and in natural gifts, even though they were untrained, were not far behind their brothers and husbands. There were, undoubtedly, women of shrewdness and wit, some who possessed ability to persuade, some even, who could have used their reasoning faculties, if that had been regarded as a woman's function, and certainly some of them possessed a sense of form and measure and fineness of taste, in that society of lovers of the beautiful. The daughter of some humble vase painter, perhaps, whose work we now regard with admiration might well have inherited the qualities which made him group his figures so charmingly and draw his outlines with such delicate perfection, even though she must manifest them only in the *sophrosyne* with which she lived in her father's household. This taste and intelligence, with natural womanly devotion, could be offered to the service of the gods, which was also the service of the state.

Opportunities for public office and public honors increased greatly under the Roman rule, and at this time the position of women in the family must have become more important, for now the name of the mother as well as that of the father is found on grave monuments of men. The number of honorary inscriptions for women is also very large. It would be interesting to know whether the life of women really changed for

the better at this time or whether the gain in public recognition, empty in itself, was offset by a decline in the dignity of family life, just as at the same period, when legal restrictions seem to have been lightest for Roman women, and when the old religious form of marriage with *manus* to a great extent went out of use, the position of women among the upper classes was in reality most degraded.

Another interesting consideration is the immediate effect of the introduction of Christianity. Toward the poor, toward slaves, and in its moral effects in general it must have been good, but, as an ascetic religion taught by Asiatics, for some centuries it materially lowered the position of women, and modern civilization is far from having freed itself from those influences. It would be difficult to imagine a woman occupying in a modern state a position which would correspond in public estimation with that of the priestess of Demeter at Eleusis.

For Athens, as for all communities, a study of legal enactments and the opinions of individuals more or less extraordinary does not offer as true a view of social conditions as is provided by testimony which comes from the everyday life of ordinary persons. And such evidence is especially valuable when it comes to us in a form so little liable to falsification as the inscriptions.

NOTE

All Greek proper names have been transliterated except a few well-known forms such as Lycurgus, Pluto, Propylæa, Erechtheum.

In an appendix is given a list, intended to be complete, of Attic inscriptions in which women are mentioned. They are arranged under the same headings as the chapters.

All references are to the *Inscriptiones Graecae*, unless other-

wise stated. The abbreviations used to designate the other works referred to are given in the Bibliography.

RELIGIOUS ASSOCIATIONS AND PUBLIC HONORS

The principal field for the Athenian woman's activities beyond the household, to judge from inscriptions, was found in the service of the gods. Women presided over many important shrines, as well as lesser cults, and, as the worship of the gods was a function of the state, and as priesthoods were in fact public offices, they may properly be said to have taken part in public life, within this restricted area. For the most part it was to the women of certain distinguished families, as the Euboutadai from whom the priestesses of Athena Polias were chosen, the Eumolpidai and the Kerykes, to whom these offices fell. In a way this may be considered fortunate, as it was the women of high station that Athenian ideas of propriety would most restrict, while on account of wealth and position they had none of the freedom which the necessities of common life, as earning part of the family income, marketing, washing in the streams or at the fountains, or working in the fields, gave to the poor woman. As usual, the women of the middle class, to whom both kinds of opportunity were denied, had a life of less variety than the other two.

From inscriptions we know of about forty cults to which women were attached as priestesses; among them those of three male divinities, Dionysos Anthios,¹ Helios² and Apollo Delphinios.³ Some of these positions were of great importance, as that of the priestess of Athena Polias, and of the priestess of Demeter at Eleusis, who was in some respects superior to all others in the service of the goddesses.

Many priestesses of Athena Polias are mentioned in dedi-

¹ II. i. 631.

² III. i. 313.

³ III. i. 939.