

# WOMEN *in the* CLASSICAL WORLD



ELAINE FANTHAM, HELENE PEET FOLEY,  
NATALIE BOYMEI, KAMPEN, SARAH B. POMEROY,  
AND H. ALAN SHAPIRO

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*Image and Text*

Elaine Fantham  
Helene Peet Foley  
Natalie Boymel Kampen  
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*We dedicate our book to those scholars who have played an important role in our lives and careers and offer them our thanks. Elaine Fantham's dedication is to Lily Ross Taylor, Helene Foley's to Helen Bacon, Natalie Kampen's to the memory of Russa Calsa, Sarah Pomeroy's to Barbara M. Levick, and Alan Shapiro's to Erika Simon.*

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## PREFACE

The purpose of this book is to gather the most important primary sources, both written and visual, for the lives of ancient women, and to present them within their historical and cultural context. This is the first sourcebook organized in a chronological framework that allows the changing roles of women to unfold in their proper historical sequence. It is also the first sourcebook in classical studies to give equal weight to artistic representations and to written texts, and not to use photographs as mere illustrations of what is already known from the written texts. This book is not intended to serve as a comprehensive introduction to the subject of women in classical antiquity, but should be used in conjunction with a social history text such as Sarah B. Pomeroy's *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York, 1975).

The arrangement of the book is both diachronic and synchronic. We have organized the chapters to provide a sense of the development of ancient societies and the changing social conditions that relate to the roles, status, and images of women. The chapters follow the usual chronological divisions of ancient history (see the introductions to "Women in the Greek World" and "Women in the Roman World"). Although much interesting work is now being done on religion and society in the Minoan-Mycenaean Age (ca. 1500–1200 B.C.E.), we have decided to begin with the historical period in Greece, in the late eighth century B.C.E., the first period for which both written texts and archaeological evidence are available. Similarly, we have chosen to end with the later Roman Empire and not to deal with the Early Christian period, when many new issues relating to the role of women arose.

The excursions are devised to present special or "deviant" aspects of women in the ancient world: for example, the "deviant" aspects of Spartan women, Amazons, and Etruscans, products of male fear and fantasy and distorted perceptions of "the other;" the changing views of the female body presented in male-authored gynecological treatises; the "new woman" represented by the love poetry of the late Republic and Augustan Age, emancipated and outside respectable society; and upper- and lower-class life in Pompeii, everyday and ordinary, but unique in historical preservation.

Bits of information about women are scattered throughout the frag-



mented mosaic of ancient history. Our intention was not to include a welter of unrelated, fragmentary sources in each chapter and excursus, but rather to highlight particular themes such as women's creativity, sexuality, and experience in marriage, and to select documents and images relevant to these themes. We thought it important to include such famous women as Aspasia, Cleopatra VII, and Lucretia, who have captured the imaginations of later audiences, but we have declined to discuss goddesses and purely mythical females, except insofar as mortal women were involved in their cults or were affected by their imagery. We have also endeavored to discuss contradictions generated by the presentation of material from different genres that were produced over a thousand-year period, and the historiographic and methodological problems that the various pieces of evidence pose. We have tried to create an independent narrative in which the texts are allowed to speak for themselves, but within a setting that guides the reader and frames the most important issues.

The book was written in a collaborative mode; we thought that this was the best way to approach the different types of evidence relating to women in antiquity. The first draft of each chapter in the Greek section was written by at least two of the authors. The other authors commented on each draft of the entire manuscript. In some cases, a third author took responsibility for writing a subsequent draft. Alan Shapiro, Sarah B. Pomeroy, and Helene P. Foley were the principal authors of the chapters and excursuses on Greek women; Natalie B. Kampen and Elaine Fantham were responsible for most of the Roman material.

Historically, this book evolved from a much larger collaborative effort. Four of the five authors directed or participated in the National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute on "Women in Classical Antiquity" at Hunter College in 1983. Together with other participants, we wrote "Women in Classical Antiquity: Four Curricular Modules." We distributed more than two thousand copies of that pamphlet to scholars and teachers in North America, Australia, and Europe who requested it. This document was, in large part, the basis for the organization and content of the present book, and the book responds to a need expressed by many readers of the modules. We would like to thank the participants in the institute and the readers of the curriculum modules for their help.

We are grateful to David Castriota and Barbara McManus for their comments on the manuscript, to Lesley Dean-Jones for writing the excursus on Greek medicine, and to Larissa Bonfante for writing the excursus on Etruscan women.

We thank our editors at Oxford University Press, Rachel Toor who initiated the project, Angela Blackburn and Robert Dilworth who kindly saw it to completion, and Susan Hannan, whose help throughout was invaluable; Hedda Garza did the index in good time and with admirable thoroughness.

We are also grateful to Ingrid Muan of the Department of Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University, who checked references and credits with a patience and enduring good humor that boggles the mind; she also provided some of the photography.

To our kin and friends, as always, we owe our thanks, and to one another for being wonderful to work with. We dedicate this book to the fine women who pioneered in the fields of ancient history, classics, art history, and archaeology without whom our work, and our participation in these fields, would be unlikely at best!

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E. F.  
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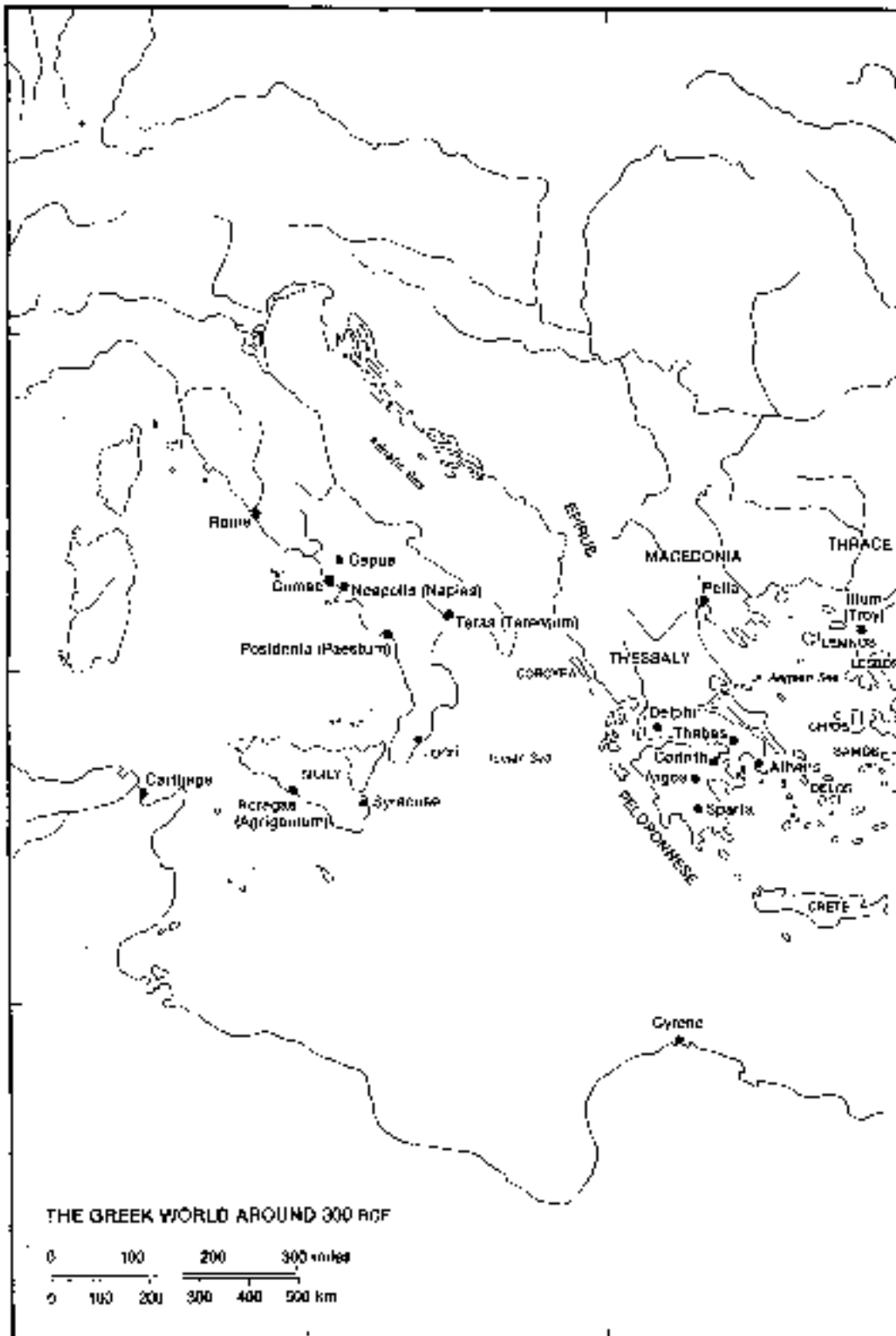
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I

**WOMEN IN  
THE GREEK WORLD**







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Mnesarete, daughter of Socrates.

This woman left a husband and siblings, and grief to her mother,  
and a child and an ageless renown for great virtue (*aretê*).

Here the chamber of Persephone holds Mnesarete,  
who has arrived at the goal of all virtue (*aretê*).

*Inscriptiones Graecae* II/111<sup>2</sup>

Ed. J. Kirchner, 1916-1935 (Berlin) = W. Peek,  
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This epigram celebrates the life of an early fourth-century B.C.E. Athenian woman, Mnesarete, who has lived up to the promise of her name, which means "remembering (*mnes-*) virtue or excellence (*aretê*)." The poem balances the sorrow that she has left to her husband, siblings (the word *adelphoi*, which ordinarily means brothers, includes sisters in some cases), and above all to her mother against her imperishable reputation for great virtue. In the presence of the goddess of the underworld Persephone, Mnesarete will continue to receive divine honor in the world of death. The marble grave stele on which this epigram appears (Fig. 1) shows the dead Mnesarete seated on the right, her head bowed in mourning and her left arm wrapped in her mantle. On the left she is observed by a standing (and probably still living) young woman dressed in a thin chiton with long sleeves. The identity of this second woman is uncertain; various scholars have suggested that she is the daughter, younger sister, or less probably the slave of Mnesarete, who apparently contemplates and absorbs this example of deathless womanly achievement. Both the poem and the physical beauty of the monument, with its graceful curved and vertical lines and its moving composition, aim to create a permanent testimony to the excellence of a woman who still links her natal and marital family in grief and admiration.

This stele is one of the best preserved of its type: many are fragmentary, inscriptions lost or obliterated. It preserves not only the full epigram, but also two names neatly carved on a ledge above the epigram, that of Mnesarete herself and of her father.



Figure 1 Marble stele of Mnesarete, Attic (early 4th century B.C.E.).

Socrates. The use of the patronymic, long after Mnesarete's marriage and the death of her father (he is not mentioned as alive in the epigram), suggests that a woman was thought to belong to her natal family, and especially to her father, throughout her life.

Socrates was a common name in Athens (Mnesarete's father must have been a close contemporary of the famous philosopher), and this man is not known from other sources, but sometimes such inscriptions help us to reconstruct the family tree of a woman who would otherwise be unknown to us. This was obviously an affluent family, judging from the large size of the monument (about five feet in height) and the high quality of the carving. The stele is said to have been found in the Attic countryside, in an area where several prominent Athenian families are known to have owned property. Such rural cemeteries have yielded some of the most impressive archaic and classical grave monuments (see Chapter 1).

Although this book aims to bring together visual, written, and archaeological evidence for the lives of ancient women, history rarely provides us, as in this case, with all three in conjunction. Normally we are left with even less substantial fragments, mute unnamed images without precise historical provenance, tantalizing passing references in works that do not make the lives and concerns of women their central area of investigation, or named women who play a role in the imaginary creations of artists and poets that may bear only an oblique or distorted relation to the lives of actual women in Archaic, Classical, or Hellenistic Greece. Even a relatively undamaged grave monument such as this one may be deceptive and leave us with difficult questions that go far beyond the identity of the standing woman and her function on the monument.

To read it properly we would need to know, for example, what virtues brought a woman renown in Classical Athens. Paradoxically, our other sources suggest that the virtues for which Mnesarete receives eternal public recognition in death would in life have been known only to her family and probably to some women friends, and that her name would not have been publicly announced while she was alive. Ideally, every man in the Classical period spent his life aiming to establish a permanent honorable reputation for himself and his city. But his relatively secluded wife avoided a public reputation and turned her energies above all to familial concerns, to producing children and to eating for her household. Yet the same monument, if it were dated to another time or place in the Greek world, might hint at greater public recognition of a living wife's virtues. We know that a girl who died a virgin was often said to become a symbolic "bride of Hades," lord of the underworld, and thus to acquire in death the marriage that would have given full meaning to her life. It is more difficult to interpret Persephone's welcoming reception of the virtuous, married mother Mnesarete. Was Mnesarete to be recognized for her excellence by Persephone, who in one myth at least, was said to have sent the noble queen Alceste back to the

upperworld in admiration for her courage in dying for her husband? Or was she, perhaps, guaranteed this reception through her initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries, which promised the initiate a better life in the world below? The grief that Mnesarete bequeathes to her mother in particular reflects the generic sorrow felt by parents who live to mourn a child and perhaps in addition the special role that Greek women had in mourning the dead.

Women were often represented on grave monuments with the child (above all, the male child—here the word *teknon* does not allow us to specify the child's sex) who signified a fulfilled life; if the young woman on this monument, however, is not Mnesarete's daughter or sister or a female slave, we have no way of knowing why she is there. Perhaps the family chose a ready-made design that does not accurately reflect this particular woman's case (the scheme of seated woman and standing attendant occurs often on gravestones [see Fig. 3.1], and this particular design reappears elsewhere). Nevertheless, it seems possible that image and epigram were designed to complement each other, and that Mnesarete is indeed meant to serve as a model for a younger, unmarried woman (such as a sister or daughter) who has not yet reached the goal of a woman's life.

The monument suggests how visual and written evidence can reinforce each other (if we had found the offerings and grave goods in her tomb, or, as is less likely, the physical remains of Mnesarete herself, yet another piece could have been added to the puzzle) and how carefully we must use our nevertheless fragmentary knowledge from other sources to interpret its possible meaning. By contextualizing as much as possible the visual, physical, and written evidence for women in the Greek world from the eighth through the first centuries B.C.E., and by considering what problems and questions our sources present, we aim to provide the groundwork for a study of women in this period. We are concerned as much with the poet's, prose writer's, or artist's image of women as with reconstructing "reality," and we have tried to present our material in the context of a narrative that stresses what we believe are the issues concerning women that are central to each of three shorter periods within this larger time-span.

In Chapter 1 (the Archaic period, late eighth–early fifth centuries B.C.E.), for example, we have little more than poetry, sculpture, and vase painting scattered over the whole Greek world to examine. Hence we chose to emphasize what sources throughout the Greek world aimed to praise or blame in all women, and to examine how these texts and monuments represented the major phases of a generic (and above all aristocratic) woman's passage through life. All the Greek excurses (Chapters 2, 4, and 6) present material from all three of our historical periods. Chapter 2 uses evidence that begins in the Archaic period in order to offer a more

detailed picture of women in the changing context of a particular, important Greek city-state, Sparta, which differs considerably from our next focus of concern, Classical Athens.

In the Classical period (early fifth–late fourth centuries B.C.E.) we have concentrated on Athens, in large part because it is the city-state about which we know the most. Legislation that began to be passed in the Archaic period and continued into the Classical period apparently aimed to control family life and the relation of public to private life in Athens far more precisely than before. We have organized our often highly tendentious and contradictory evidence on women's lives in the light of the historical transition to democracy and the social and ideological changes that accompanied it. Chapter 4 explores the way that representations of the mythical Amazons served in part to define by inversion the proper role of Athenian women. Whereas Athenian women took no part in war and politics and served to reproduce children of their husbands' lineage, Amazons rejected marriage and domesticity, perpetuated their line through female children, engaged in war, and ruled their own societies.

Chapter 5 concentrates above all on the lives of women in Hellenistic Egypt. From after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C.E. and until the defeat of the Ptolemaic queen Cleopatra by Roman forces under Octavian in 31 B.C.E., Greek culture was imposed on Egypt (as well as on other parts of the Eastern Mediterranean) by ruling Macedonian kings. This international context contributed to changes in the role of women in all social classes. The preservation in the dry climate of Egypt of written documents on papyrus enables us to study more closely the lives and transactions of ordinary citizens as well as queens; the art and literature of the period also expresses interest in the experiences of a greater range of social classes. Chapter 6 stresses the important gynecological discoveries of Herophilus, who, under the patronage of the Ptolemies, dissected human cadavers for the first time, and examines the ways that Greek medical and biological theories in both the Greek and Greco-Roman worlds shaped attitudes to female biology and to childbirth practices (and vice versa). Thus Chapters 5 and 6 also serve as a bridge to the study of women in the Roman world.

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# I

## WOMEN IN ARCHAIC GREECE: TALK IN PRAISE AND BLAME

### Sources and Their Limitations

From the time of the Homeric poems in the eighth century through the close of the sixth century B.C.E., aristocratic women in most parts of Greece seem to have passed through a similar life cycle. The visual arts and poetry, which, along with fragmentary archaeological remains, constitute our entire contemporary evidence for the Archaic period, marked for public attention rites of initiation and marriage, wifely fidelity, and death. Accordingly, this chapter reflects the limitations of our historical evidence in emphasizing the representation of important roles and social transitions in the lives of aristocratic (and where possible middle- to upper-middle-class) women: in particular, the transition from maidenhood to marriage, conflicting representations of the wife in Archaic literature, and finally, the important role of women in death rituals.

Art and poetry in the Archaic period were largely made by and for the ruling classes; to the degree possible, however, we include a discussion of the lives of slaves and lower-class women. Occasionally we catch glimpses of historical women in, for example, religious dedications (some of which were made by nonaristocratic women), or in Sappho's reference to her period of exile from Lesbos during one of the frequent political struggles among competing aristocrats that punctuated this often unsettled period. But Archaic art and literature generally aimed to immortalize the praise or blame of individuals and to hold up behavior to be imitated or avoided in a timeless and ahistorical fashion by its audience. Yet although the wives and maidens of the Archaic period are largely fictional and measured according to received paradigms of deportment, the important moments of their life cycle and the constraints under which they lived in many ways remained characteristic of

Greek women in the Classical and later periods as well. The evidence does not permit us to contextualize the lives of Archaic women, but we can offer vivid fragments of the cultural conceptions that aimed, through praise and blame, to shape their experience.

In this chapter we draw on evidence from Ionia and the islands near the coast of Asia Minor, the cultural center of the early Archaic period, as well as from the Greek mainland. To the degree that we can reconstruct it, the environment in which a work of art or literature was created clearly affects the vision of social roles represented by that work. On the one hand, the societies that produced the epic poems attributed to Homer and the lyric poetry composed by Sappho were aristocratic. The wealth of the ruling aristocrats was based on land, and much of the labor was performed by slaves. The exchange of women among the aristocrats was an important part of foreign policy among Greek city-states, since it established, along with the exchange of gifts, a panhellenic network of social obligations and a complex group of kin relations. In some cases, women brought dowries to their marriages, but it seems they rarely owned property or controlled inheritance (Dorian Crete and, possibly, Archaic Sparta, are exceptions). Yet, as we shall see, they performed important functions in the household. On the other hand, Archaic poets like Hesiod speak for a lower stratum of society than the Homeric hero. Hesiod in his *Works and Days* portrays himself as a free farmer who must struggle to farm with abundance and to retain his property. He speaks of having one female slave to do the work, and a wife who performs few if any functions in the household beyond producing children.

Reconstructing the social life of this period is highly problematic. For example, the Homeric epics may reflect an actual historical context at any time from the tenth to eighth centuries B.C.E., possibly even earlier, or an imaginary social world, a tapestry that includes historical detail from a number of different periods and social contexts woven together over a period of centuries by an oral poetic tradition. To give just one example, some scholars have argued that the Homeric epics show a puzzling mixture of practices involving the exchange of gifts at marriage (see further, Lacey 1968, Snodgrass 1974, Donlan 1981-82, Morris 1986, Leduc 1992). As the city-state emerged in Greece, husbands no longer offered gifts to the bride's family at marriage; rather, dowries were often given with the bride. This shift may have occurred because husbands no longer acquired the same political and social advantages from aristocratic marriages, and families wished to maintain their own interests in the bride and to insure her welfare. The largely idealized picture of both sexes in the Homeric poems and much Archaic art and lyric may well reflect the demands of a tradition that aimed to praise and blame rather than to reflect contemporary attitudes at any historical period. Certainly the epic tradition is known to have suppressed negative details in its poetic inheritance in order to succeed in this aim. Similarly, Sappho's poetry is conditioned by the need to fulfill the demands of her social role



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