

Female Athletes in Ancient Greece

In Ancient Greece, women had defined roles and very domestic lives. For the most part, these revolved around bearing children and managing household tasks. Despite these limitations to their daily lives, women were sometimes able to participate in athletic events in Ancient Greece. In a culture that primarily expected the women to occupy themselves in the home, however, what was the contemporary reception like for women who did participate in athletic events?

Although athleticism remained primarily the domain of men throughout the history of Ancient Greece, numerous examples of female participation can be found in literature. Much of the evidence for female involvement in ancient Greek sports comes from male sources and was generally a result of them witnessing activities “seen as odd, improper, or erotic” (Kyle 2014, 259). Most discussed are the physical training of Spartan women, the Heraia at Olympia, female athleticism in mythology, and women winning the chariot races at Olympia.

A famous and early instance of female involvement in sports was Cynisca’s victory in the four-horse chariot race at Olympia c. 390 BCE (Scanlon 2021, 666). This was celebrated by a surviving epigram that confirms that she was the only woman to have accomplished this at the time. In these races, victory belonged to the chariot’s owner, and therefore participation in the event did not require a woman to physically race the chariot herself. Consequently, contemporaries could depreciate her victory, as shown in the following passage: “[King Agesilaus] persuaded his sister Cynisca to breed horses for chariot-racing, and showed by her victory that this breed is not an example of manly valour, but of wealth” (Xen. *Ages.* 9.6). Cynisca’s victory was not afforded the same degree of celebration as her male counterparts.

In Sparta, the anomaly of intensive physical training for women was instituted by Lycurgus. This captured the imaginations of Athenians and resulted in numerous depictions of Spartan women engaged in physical activity in Ancient Greek art. As Kyle emphasizes, “Such images of athletic females, on vases used in male social settings (symposia), reflect Athenian male fantasies, a ‘voyeuristic interest’ or imaginative fascination with the beauty, allure, and real or imagined activities of Spartan women” (Kyle 2014, 262). Despite their physical training, however, Greek authors point out that Spartan women were not prepared for war. “Plato (*Laws* 806A) and Aristotle (*Pol.* 1269b) complain that despite their physical education, they were no better than other Greek women when it came to defending their country” (Pomeroy 2002, 16). These Greek authors remind us that the accomplishments of these women can’t be compared to those of men.

The myth of the “man-hating huntress” Atalanta has also garnered special attention from scholars (Scanlon 2002, 175). Hoping never to marry, Atalanta challenges her suitors to a footrace, agreeing to marry only if one of them defeats her. She is tricked by one of the suitors, causing her to lose the race and be forced to marry. Atalanta held enough intrigue in Ancient Greece to be mentioned in literature and depicted on vases. But even in portrayals of the one mythological mortal to develop athletic traits that rivaled men, “The images were doubtlessly seen by male viewers as a validation of their natural dominance in the athletic domain and by females as a warning against challenging men or against rejecting their natural destiny in marriage” (Scanlon 2002, 197).

Throughout the evidence discussed above, a theme emerges in the contemporary reception of female athletes in Ancient Greece. Though some women certainly did play an active role in athletics, the ancient sources, as they are composed primarily by Greek men,

suggest that they could never attain the same status as their male counterparts. The traditional status of each respective gender was repeatedly reinforced through the reception of these female athletes. Male authors and artists even go so far as to use instances of athletic women like Atalanta as cautionary tales and to underscore the gender binary. Further study of the reception of female athletes in Ancient Greece will aid in understanding modern attitudes toward female athletes, who still contend with many of the challenges women have faced historically.

Works Cited

- Kyle, Donald G. 2014. "Greek Female Sport: Rites, Running, and Racing." In *A Companion to Sport and Spectacle in Greek and Roman Antiquity*, edited by Paul Christesen and Donald G. Kyle, 258-275. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Pomeroy, Sarah. 2002. *Spartan Women*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Scanlon, Thomas F. 2021. "Gender and Sexuality in Greek Sport." In *The Oxford Handbook Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*, edited by Alison Futrell and Thomas F. Scanlon, 653-676. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2002. *Eros and Greek Athletics*. New York: Oxford University Press.