

# A Perspective of the History of Women's Sport in Ancient Greece

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Two or three decades comprise a brief moment in history. However, within such a moment, from the 1950's to the 1980's, women's sport expanded at an astonishing rate. In 1964 women participated in six sports in the summer Olympic Games and in 1984 will enter events in sixteen sports. An important new event is a women's marathon. In the United States neither intercollegiate championships nor athletic scholarships for women existed in 1966. In 1981 four national organizations offered intercollegiate tournaments or championships for women and over 800 colleges and universities provided women with athletic scholarships. Women professional golfers and tennis stars command a following unheard of twenty years ago. Women's sport today plays a viable and visible role in Olympic, collegiate, professional, and recreational sport. A carefully thought out perspective on the history of women's sport is needed to explain such an expansion.

Such a perspective requires that each period in sport history be studied to examine the evidence and suggest the relationship of women's sport to society and to men's sport. The first step is to investigate the period to which the beginnings of organized sport in Western society are usually ascribed, the time of the ancient Olympic Games and other athletic festivals. While Harris thoughtfully analyzed women's sport in ancient Greece, he did not intend to propose a perspective to study women's sport in later periods.<sup>1</sup> Laemmer's more recent work treats the subject topically. Like Harris, he did not plan to offer a historical perspective on women's sport as a basis for further study.<sup>2</sup>

This investigation examines literary, archaeological, and epigraphical evidence in four historical periods in order to draw as accurate a picture as possible of women's sport in ancient Greece. The four periods are: the Archaic Period (c.800 B.C.-c.500 B.C.); the Classical Period (c.500 B.C.-c.323 B.C.); the Hellenistic Period (c.323 B.C.-c. 146 B.C.); and the Roman Period (c. 146 B.C.-c.400 A.D.). The intent is to examine and analyze the available evidence in each period. The transmission of ancient literature often reflects chance, not design, and arguments from silence are tricky, but this chronological arrangement of evidence will give the reader an exposure to the often

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1. Harold A. Harris, *Greek Athletes and Athletics* (London: Hutchinson, 1964), pp. 179-186.

2. Manfred Laemmer, "Women and Sport in Ancient Greece," in ed. E. Jokl. *Medicine and Sport*. 14 (Basel: Karger, 1981), pp. 16-23.

deafening silence about women's sport in antiquity and the implications of that silence. Where it seems necessary, corroborating tales or facts from a later era are introduced briefly in the logical historical period, but presented in detail in the period in which the evidence can be documented.

Women's sport, and indeed all games and sport, are meaningful within the context of social history and, therefore, this study will examine briefly the place of women in Greek society for each period. The knowledge of women's place in society is limited to the meager evidence which has survived and recent investigations which have provided demographic data and other details about life in ancient Greece. More is known about the upper classes than the lower classes, and, further, life varied among the city-states scattered across the ancient world. Thus, generalizations are often difficult.

So far as possible this is a study of real women in an actual society; consequently it includes goddesses, mythological women and Amazons only when they offer helpful insights. Further, this is a study of women in activities which are perceived as sport today or which have developed into sport and, therefore, it omits dance activities and board games.

#### *Archaic Period (c.800 B.C.-c.500 B.C.)*

Evidence of women's daily life in the Archaic Period comes largely from Homer and a few other authors such as Hesiod, Semonides, and Sappho. Homer's epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, thought to have been assembled in the late eighth or early seventh century,<sup>3</sup> depict events which presumably occurred several hundred years earlier. However, the poems represent life in early Archaic society, including the qualities expected of and valued in women. Throughout Greek history feminine *arete* or the desirable characteristics for women were beauty and "chastity, modesty, obedience, and inconspicuous behavior."<sup>4</sup> Wives were expected to bear children, excel in tasks such as spinning and weaving, and to manage the household. They fulfilled both the demands made on the central figure of the household and endured the subjection resulting from the fact that they were subordinate and sometimes virtual property belonging to their husbands or potential captors. In spite of these seeming inconsistencies, Homer's women are generally not unhappy, secluded, or repressed.

Hesiod and, later, Semonides present women as troublesome and annoying, but necessary to manage the household and bear children. Hesiod counseled men not to marry until they were about thirty, to find a wife about five years beyond puberty, and to teach her carefully so that the "marriage will not be a joke to your neighbors."<sup>5</sup> Semonides' satirical treatment of women reinforced many of Hesiod's views. A much happier picture of women in this

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3. See among others G.S. Kirk, *Homer and the Epic* (Cambridge, 1965), pp. 197-201 and M. L. West, *Hesiod Theogony* (Oxford, 1966), pp. 40-48.

4. Helen North, *Sophrosyne* (Ithaca, Cornell, 1966), p.1.

5. Hesiod, *Works and days* 698-705 (tr. Hugh G. Evelyn-White, Harvard, 1914).

period occurs in Sappho's poems, possibly because they are written by a woman expressing a love for life as well as for other women.

These poets depict life of both mainland and Asia Minor city-states in which women's lives were somewhat similar. Women in Sparta led very different lives. Lycurgus, the semi-mythological Spartan law-giver, established a strong garrison state. After early childhood, boys and girls lived apart under a strict regimen of activities to toughen them physically and train them in traditional athletics. The boys' training produced rugged warriors and the girls' training produced healthy, vigorous mothers. Even after marriage the men lived in military groups except for an occasional visit to their wives. Such an arrangement required the women to handle their husbands' properties, appear outside the home, and lead more public lives than women in other city-states. Authors of the Classical and Roman periods corroborate the testimony concerning exercises demanded of Spartan girls. Xenophon refers to a girls' exercise program and "trials of strength for women,"<sup>6</sup> and Plato describes these exercises as current practice in his day.<sup>7</sup> Further confirmation of exercises for girls comes from the Roman period in Plutarch's biography of Lycurgus.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to Spartan customs, when Solon organized the incipient democracy of Athens he furthered a system in which the male citizens administered the polis and ruled their individual households. The women played a domestic role, managing the home and rearing the children. Throughout Greece, with the exception of Sparta, women sought to attain feminine *arere*. While the actual range of behaviour permitted under this rubric remains a scholarly debate, in general Greek women sought to be modest, chaste, obedient, and inconspicuous.

Of all the well-known female characters in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* only Nausicaa, the young virgin daughter of King Alcinous and Queen Arete, indulged in playful games and sport-like activities. In the opening scene of Book VI of the *Odyssey*. Odysseus, exhausted from his adventures, has fallen asleep near the home of King Alcinous. While Odysseus slumbers, the goddess Athena appeared to Nausicaa in a dream and directed her to ask permission to take a mule cart and go with her friends to do the family laundry at the washing pools. The next morning she followed Athena's directions and set out, not only with the laundry, but also with a picnic hamper, wine, a ball and the makings of an enjoyable outing. At the washing pools the girls took armloads of laundry and trod on them. "making a match of it." After finishing the laundry they bathed themselves, rubbed down with olive oil, lunched, and played ball. Just before starting for home, Nausicaa threw the ball one last time, missed her target, and the ball fell in a stream near Odysseus. The

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6. Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians* 1.4 (tr. E. C Marchant, Harvard, 1925).

7. Plato, *Laws* 7. 806 (tr R. G. Bury. Harvard, 1952).

8. Plutarch. *Lycuguss*, 14.2 (tr. B. Perrin, Harvard, 1914).

shouting of the young girls awoke Odysseus and the narrative of the poem is resumed.”

This scene of a ball game, possibly the first written account of a sport-like activity for women, reveals three significant factors. First, is the age of Nausicaa and her friends. Nausicaa is not yet married but old enough to think about marriage and be responsible for the laundry. Since marriage for young women took place in ancient Greece a few years after puberty. Nausicaa is probably between 15 and 17 years of age. Second, the language of the poem is explicit in its use of words to distinguish play from sport. In the laundry episode the girls “made a match of it,” but an informal match is not a serious athletic contest. The girls bathed, but they did not swim. They did, indeed, play with a *sphaira* or ball, but they played an informal game, tossing the ball to one another. Third, the contest or match to finish the laundry, the bathing, and the ball game are not the focus of the scene, but a literary device to discover Odysseus and introduce him to Alcinous, who helps him return to his home in Ithaca.

During the Archaic Period the Heraean Games were held at Olympia. but there is remarkable silence about them until the age of Pausanias in the second century A.D.<sup>10</sup>

Vase paintings of goddesses and Amazons can be useful in the study of women's sport in two ways. First, it is possible that earlier scholars may have assigned the term goddess to women engaged in sport-like activities on the premise that Greek women would not undertake such activities. Such may be the case of a fragment from the British Museum which is described as a “goddess (presumably)” although the woman has none of the identifying attributes of a goddess such as a helmet, shield, or spear. Found in Daphne, the fragment depicts a woman driving a small chariot, with two reins in each hand, and intent on her task.<sup>11</sup> A similar controversy exists over a black-figured amphora of the sixth century showing a woman wrestling with men. Gardiner<sup>12</sup> identifies her as Atalanta while Robinson states:

On the black-figured storage jars in common use in the sixth century B.C. the Greeks felt no repugnance at scenes picturing a woman clad in trunks, applying a technically perfect hold in wrestling against her male partner.<sup>13</sup>

Fighting Amazons abound on Greek vases and may suggest techniques and styles for women of the period. Amazons ride astride and appear to handle their mounts skillfully. On most of the vases examined, the mortal women appeared to be running or fleeing from a god or man. Both feet touch the ground with the rear heel raised as if pushing off from the foot. However, a step is suggested rather than a true run. In a few scenes women lift their

9. Homer, *Odyssey* 6 (tr. R Fitzgerald. New York: Anchor. 1975).

10. Pausanias 5.16. 2-4 (tr. Peter Levi, Penguin, 1971).

11. Mary H. Swindler, *Anient Painting* (New Haven. Yale. 1929), pl 8, d.

12. E. Norman Gardiner, *Athletics of the Ancient World* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1930). Fig. 158, Munich. 1541.

13. Rachel S. Robinson. *Sources for the History of Greek Athletics* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1955). p. 266.

knees, suggesting a good stride in sprint fashion, supporting the thesis that women ran or raced.

A statuette from about 500 B.C. shows a young girl running. [fig. I ] She is in a wide stride and, while the front foot and rear toes touch the ground, there is an impression of running in good form as opposed to the movements seen in the “fleeing” on vase paintings. The impression of running is enhanced by the girl’s short skirt well above the mid-thigh which is further lifted by the runner’s left hand, suggesting that the lifted skirt permits a better run. Typical of the Archaic art style, her legs are hefty, thighs well developed, and calves bulging.<sup>14</sup> This statuette reflects typical proportions for the Archaic female figure; another statuette from the British Museum shows a girl runner of the period with a slender waist and less developed calves.<sup>15</sup>



1. Spartan maiden. c. 500 B.C.  
National Archaeological Museum, Athens: Kar. 24.

*Classical Period (c.500 B.C.-c.323 B.C.)*

In the Classical Period more evidence exists for life in Athens than in other Greek city-states. In Sparta, the era brought little change for women, while in Athens. it subjected women to more control over their private lives and greater seclusion. Many houses had separate quarters for women and children

14. National Archaeological Museum, Athens, Kar. 24.

15. Gisela Richter, *The Sculpture and Sculptors of the Greeks* (New Haven: Yale, 1950), Fig. 86.

and, unlike the household of Homer's time, women did not occupy a central role in family life. The women of the Athenian aristocracy were confined to houses described as "dark, squalid, and unsanitary."<sup>16</sup> They managed domestic tasks such as cooking, weaving, and rearing the girls and very young boys. The women rarely left their quarters except to attend religious functions.

In general, an Athenian girl lived in the women's quarters and learned about essential household tasks until the time of her marriage. In marriage, her most important responsibility was to bear sons in order to continue her husband's line. From the age of 16 to 26 she might have from four to six children, two or three of whom might live. Early marriage, childbirth practices of the period, and a cloistered existence did not lead to a long life. The average life of women in Classical Greece has been estimated at 36.2 years.<sup>17</sup> Greek society in general reinforced the feminine *arete* of the Archaic Period as underscored by Pericles who told an audience that "the greatest glory of women is to be least talked about by men."<sup>18</sup>

Literary evidence of women in sport in Classical Greece comes from historians, philosophers, and playwrights. Herodotus of Halicarnasus, born in 484 B.C. set out to record the history of the world as he saw and understood it. His accounts of local customs appear to blend folktales, mythology, and hearsay. While he wrote about men's games and athletics in a knowledgeable manner, his accounts of women's sport-like activities sound like folklore.

In one incident he recounts a Greek victory over the Amazons after which three shiploads of Amazons and Greek men set sail for an unknown destination. At sea the Amazons killed the Greeks and subsequently landed in Scythian territory where they found horses and resumed their Amazonian lives. When the young Scythians discovered the Amazons, the men pursued them successfully and eventually the Amazons lived happily with the Scythians who attempted to lure the Amazons to return to their Scythian village, but the women explained:

We and the women of your nation could never live together: our ways are too much at variance. We are riders; our business is with the bow and the spear, and we know nothing of women's work; but in your country no woman has anything to do with such things.<sup>19</sup>

They proposed, instead, that the men come to live with them. This they did and Herodotus concludes the tale:

Ever since then the women of the Sauromatae (Scythia) have kept to their old ways, riding to the hunt on horseback sometimes with, sometimes without, their menfolk, taking part in war and wearing the same sort of clothes as men.<sup>20</sup>

Xenophon, a well-born Athenian who lived from 430 to 354 B.C., wrote

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16. Sarah B. Pomeroy *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* (New York: Schocken, 1975), p 79.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

18. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* 2.45. (tr Rex Warner, Penguin Books, 1954)

19. Herodotus, *Histories* 4.114. (tr. Aubrey de Selincourt, Penguin, 1954)

20. *Ibid.*, 4.116.

history, essays, and commentaries on a variety of subjects. His essay on the "Constitution of the Lacedaemonians" describes some of the decrees issued by Lycurgus. One is an exercise program for girls which required "physical training for the female no less than for the male sex: moreover, he instituted races and trials of strength for women competitors as for men, believing that if both parents are strong they produce more vigorous offspring."<sup>21</sup> In addition he wrote several minor works including a *Symposium* in which he discussed women's prowess. Following the horse race at the 420 B.C. Panathenaic Festival, Callias persuaded Socrates and others to join him for supper and conversation. After supper, the company enjoyed the performance of a flute-girl, a dancing girl who tumbled and a boy harpist and dancer. In one performance the girl tumbler juggled twelve hoops at one time. Socrates commented that her performance helped prove that a woman's nature was not inferior to man's, but that women lacked physical strength and judgment. In her next act the girl performed somersaults in and out of a ring of knives, which Socrates said showed her ability to learn courage. At the end of the entertainment the group returned to a discussion of serious, substantive matters which did not include women as entertainers or sportswomen.<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps the most influential writer of the Classical Period was Plato, a pupil of Socrates. In both the *Republic* and the *Laws* Plato proposes girls' and women's sports in his Utopian communities far beyond those of any Greek city-state including Sparta. He suggests gymnastics, riding, archery, javelin throwing, footraces, and fencing. However, Plato refers to an ideal society and does not describe sport for women in his time.<sup>23</sup>

During the Classical period dramatic as well as athletic festivals flourished. Incidental evidence of Spartan women in sport-like activity is found in the plays of Euripides and Aristophanes. Euripides, a wealthy Athenian, born about 480 B.C., grew up during Athens' prime. Euripides' plays deal with moral problems in which he examines the basic nature of human emotions. In *Andromache*, the position of women in Greek society is highlighted in the antagonism between Andromache, no longer the wife of the Trojan prince Hector but a prize of war and a slave, and Hermione, the wife of Neoptolemus. In a quarrel over Andromache, the behavior of Spartan women is questioned:

They gad abroad with young men from their homes,  
And with bare thighs and loose disgirdled vesture  
Race, wrestle with them,--things intolerable  
To me!<sup>24</sup>

Clearly, Spartan customs rather than sport is the topic, but the passage furnishes additional evidence for the persistence of exercise for Spartan women.

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21. Xen., *loc. cit.* (see N. 6 above).

22. Xen., *Symposium* 2.7-12 (tr. O. J. Todd, Harvard, 1922).

23. Plato, *Republic* 5.451, 452 (tr. Paul Shorey, Harvard, 1930) and *Laws* 7.794 and 8.833 (tr. R. G. Bury, Harvard, 1952)

24. Euripides, *Andromache* 597-600 (tr. A. S. Way, Harvard, 1929)

Aristophanes uses women's sport in much the same manner. An Athenian citizen and comic playwright, he employs a sex-strike to bring an end to a war between Sparta and Athens. While waiting for the women from both city-states to assemble, Myrrhina of Athens sees Lampito of Sparta approaching and remarks:

O welcome. welcome Lampito. my love.  
 O the sweet girl! how hale and bright she looks!  
 Here's nerve! here's muscle!  
     here's an arm could  
     fairly  
 Throttle a bull!

Lampito replies:

Well, by the twain. I think so.  
 Since I exercise and fling my heels to  
 my rear-end.<sup>25</sup>

Lampito refers to an exercise in which the heels touch the buttocks during a jump. These few lines from Euripides and Aristophanes show that, while the customs of Sparta were well-known, they were not accepted as typical behavior in other city-states.

Vases from the Classical Period continue to depict scenes of Greek mythology and daily life. Women, possible goddesses, are shown running or fleeing and driving chariots just as they did in the late Archaic Period. Many objects depict Amazons riding and fighting which, again, could suggest that some women were familiar with sport-like activities. An exciting red-figured amphora in the Louvre depicts three Amazons on one side and three women bathing or swimming on the other side. [fig. 2] Whether or not these are the same three women is not indicated. In the bathing and swimming scene the left hand woman appears to be anointing herself and the right hand one looks as if she is about to dive into the water. The third woman is painted in a swimming position with her right arm stretched forward and her left arm backward with the swimmer looking back over her left arm.<sup>26</sup> If the three women are Greek, we have evidence for swimming as a woman's pastime or sport in addition to bathing at Nausicaa's picnic.

A female entertainer appears on a Campanian red-figured hydria housed in the British Museum.<sup>27</sup> The girl is standing on her hands, head erect and her feet well forward of her head, as if she is about to complete a walkover. The performance of Xenophon's entertainer and this painting are significant, suggesting women's gymnastics and tumbling movements were known in ancient Greece, but regarded as entertainment and not sport. Two lekythoi show women juggling balls. One is seated with her balance adjusted to the activities at which she appears to be quite skilled.<sup>28</sup> Another, in a standing position

25. Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 78-93 (tr. B. B. Rogers, Harvard, 1931).

26. Louvre, F203

27. British Museum, 028583.

28. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 41.162.145.



2. Women bathers. c. 500 B.C.  
Louvre, Paris. F 203.

juggles three balls. A Vatican statue about five feet high depicts a girl runner in a more demure posture than in the Archaic Period, probably indicative of change in art style rather than athletic technique.<sup>29</sup>

Inscriptions concerning women victors at Olympia exist in this period. Cynisca, the daughter of King Archidamus of Sparta and sister of Agesilaus, owned horses which won the chariot race in 396 and 392 B.C. A portion of a statue base carrying this information is housed in the museum at Olympia. The inscription on the base of the statue indicates that she was considered an Olympic victor.<sup>30</sup> About thirty years later another woman, Euryleonis, also of Sparta, won a chariot race at Olympia.<sup>31</sup> It is four hundred years later that Plutarch tells in greater detail of Cynisca's victory in Agesilaus' biography.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, the Classical Period reveals somewhat more evidence of women in sport-like activity in ancient Greece. Literary evidence pertains to exercises

29. Muss Vaticanì, 9.27.19.

30. Luigi Moretti, *Olympionikai, i vincitori negli antichi agoni olimpici* (Roma, 1957), no. 373 Dates for Olympic Victors are taken from Moretti, *Olympionikai*.

31. *Ibid.*, no. 418.

32. Plutarch, *Agesilaus*, 20.1 (tr. B. Perrin, Harvard, 1914).

for Spartan women, and both literary and visual evidence depict women tumblers as entertainers. Vase paintings show women swimming and juggling balls, apparently for their own amusement. Although women did not actually participate, the inscriptions of women victors in the chariot race of the Olympic Games add a unique element to the history of women's sport.

*Hellenistic Period* (c.323 B.C.-c. 146 B.C.)

The Greek world changed dramatically when Philip of Macedon, who claimed Greek heritage, brought the Greek city-states under his rule in 338 B.C. Philip's conquests, followed by his son Alexander's brief, brilliant attempt to conquer the world, diffused Greek culture throughout the empire. Following Alexander's death in 323 at the age of 32, a lengthy power struggle ensued from which Rome emerged as a political power. These political and social upheavals resulted in many changes among which were increased freedom for some women. In time, they were subjected to fewer legal, economic, and educational restrictions. In the far-flung Greek cities from Alexandria in Egypt to Pergamum in Asia Minor some women no longer relied on male members of the family to act in their behalf, but entered into marriage and business contracts themselves. Without the need to produce large armies, Greek families became smaller, but sons were still preferred over daughters and more than one girl was rarely raised.

Evidence in the fourth and third centuries suggests that in the new Greek cities girls attended school and learned the same subjects as boys—reading, writing, gymnastics, the musical arts, and perhaps painting. Pomeroy proposes that “this is likely to be one of the major reasons for the ability of adult women to enter professions that had previously been open only to men.”<sup>33</sup> Women became midwives, physicians, writers, artists, musicians, and poets who competed for prizes. However, it is likely that the number of women in these occupations and professions was small and that the women were well educated and considered exceptional. Despite the changes in some parts of the empire, many Greek cities, especially on the mainland remained conservative and expected women to be dutiful, quiet, and domestic.

Little literary evidence of women in sport-like activity has been uncovered for this period. Theocritus, a poet from Syracuse, born about 310 B.C., who later lived in Alexandria, alludes to Spartan women and their customs. In *Idyll* 18 he includes a section on Spartan girls:

And we, all her contemporaries, together anoint ourselves in manly fashion by the bathing places in Eurotas and run there together. a girlish band of four times sixty maids, of whom, when matched with Helen, not one is faultless.<sup>34</sup>

Theocritus suggests that the girls exercised, confirming Spartan customs.

During the second century B.C. several women are listed as winners of chariot races. These women include daughters of Megacles, Ariston, and Po-

33. Sarah B. Pomeroy, “The Education of Women in the Fourth Century and the Hellenistic Period.” *American Journal of Ancient History*, 2 (1977), 51-68.

34. Theocritus. *Idylls* 18. 22-24 (tr A. S. F. Gow, Cambridge, 1965):

lycrates.<sup>35</sup> Other inscriptions show that in 264 and 263 B.C. Belistiche, mistress of Ptolemy Philadelphus, owned the colts which won the four-colt race at Olympia.<sup>36</sup>

*Roman Period* (c. 146 B.C.-c.400 A.D.)

The melding of Greek and Roman cultures during this period affected the larger cities more than the remote villages. In the larger and newer cities Greek women continued to enjoy increased economic and social freedom as they had in the Hellenistic Period. Upper-class girls were expected to be educated, but most of them married soon after puberty. There is evidence that women controlled many facets of their personal lives and formed groups outside the home, perhaps for religious or social reasons. Some women continued in occupations discussed in the Hellenistic Period and, occasionally, were named to the honorary position of gymnasiarch.<sup>37</sup>

While some women managed their affairs, entered professions, and met women outside the home, others, probably the majority continued to reflect the traditional feminine *arete*. Plutarch admonished one wife to let her husband make advances to her, that she should not make them to him; to take pleasure in her husband's friends and not to have friends of her own; and, when her husband was away, to stay at home out of sight.<sup>38</sup> Philo agreed, stating that, except for special occasions women should be confined to the house and manage the household. Further, Philo underscored women's inferiority and men's superiority.<sup>39</sup>

Evidence for women's sport in this period comes from inscriptions announcing victors of races for girls, attesting to the increased freedom of some women. Accounts of sport-like activities are provided by Plutarch, Pausanias, and Athenaeus. These authors, however, have an antiquarian bent and their records of athletic events do not necessarily reflect an interest in women's sport.<sup>40</sup> The biographer, Plutarch, born in the middle of the first century A.D., came from a fairly wealthy family and studied at Athens. Later he traveled in Greece, Asia Minor, and Italy, where he lectured in Rome and wrote his famous *Parallel Lives*. In his biographies he included two Spartans, Lycurgus and Agesilaus. While he did not focus on women's sport, Plutarch did recount Lycurgus' age-old prescription for girls' physical training:

He made the maidens exercise their bodies in running, wrestling, casting the discus, and hurling the javelin, in order that the fruit of their wombs might have vigorous root in vigorous bodies and come to better maturity, and that they

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35. *Inscriptions Graecae* 2-3:2.2 no. 2313, 9-15, 60; 2314.50, 92-4. See also Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B Fant, *Women's Life in Greece and Rome* (London: Duckworth, 1982), p 24; hereinafter cited as *WLGR*.

36. Moretti, *Olympionikai*, no. 549, 552.

37. Lentowitz and Fant, *WLGR*, pp. 244, 157, 159.

38. Plutarch, *Morolia* 139c-9; 140c-18, d-19 (tr. by R. Warner in Lefkowitz and Fant, *WLGR*, p. 239).

39. Edwin R. Goodenough, *An Introduction to Philo Judaeus* (New Haven: Yale, 1940), p 167.

40. E. L. Bowie, "Greeks and their Past in the Second Sophistic." in ed M. I. Finley. *Studies in Ancient Society* (London: Rutledge, Kegan Paul, 1974)

themselves might come with vigour to the fullness of their times. and struggle successfully and easily with the pangs of childbirth.<sup>41</sup>

Plutarch also reports that the girls' program inculcated in them a "desire for health and beauty of body."<sup>42</sup>

In Agesilaus' biography Plutarch gives an infrequently reported account of Cynisca's Olympic victory some 400 years later. According to Plutarch, Agesilaus wished to demonstrate that an Olympic victory was not the result of excellence. but of wealth and position. He persuaded his sister Cynisca to enter horses in the chariot-race in the Olympic Games. Plutarch indicates that perhaps she was used by her brother to mock the status of wealthy Spartans rather than to show that a woman could enter horses in the Olympic Games and be declared a victor.<sup>43</sup>

Many of the detailed descriptions of Greece come from Pausanias, who wrote a guide for second-century travelers in Greece. describing the landscape, the towns, and places of local interest including the ancient athletic festivals. He relied mainly on his own observations which suggest that most of the sites in his writings were intact at that time. His accounts combine bits of history, interesting legends, and other miscellaneous information.

About 175 A.D. he described Olympia, the temple of Hera. the Heraean Games for girls, and the relationship of women to the Olympic Games. Writing 900 years after the first victory at Olympia was recorded. Pausanias states:

Every fourth year there is woven for Hera a robe by the Sixteen women, and the same also hold games called Heraea. The games consist of foot-races for maidens. These are not all of the same age. The first to run are the youngest: after them come the next in age, and the last to run are the oldest of the maidens. They run in the following way: Their hair hangs down, a tunic reaches to a little above the knee, and they bare the right shoulder as far as the breast. These too have the Olympic stadium reserved for their games, but the course of the stadium is shortened for them by about one-sixth of its length. To the winning maidens they give crowns of olive and a portion of the cow sacrificed to Hera. They may also dedicate statues with their names inscribed upon them. The games of the maidens too are traced back to ancient times.<sup>44</sup>

Pausanias relates in detail the manner in which the races were run and his description of the girls' dress corresponds to the statues from the Archaic Period and Classical Period. He states that "They may also dedicate statues with their names on them," but no such statues have been found at Olympia. Pausanias also refers to Heraean games at Argos and other ritual races at Delphi and near Kameios in Lakonia.<sup>45</sup>

Pausanias provides his reader with two accounts of the founding of the Heraean Games. According to one, the first Heraean Games can be traced to Hippodameia, who celebrated games honoring Hera to give thanks to her marriage to Pelops. She selected sixteen women to compete in these games which

41. Plut., *loc.cit.* (See N. 8 above)

42. *Ibid.*, 14.4.

43. Plut., *Agesilaus*, 20.1 (tr. B. Perrin, Harvard, 1914).

44. Paus., *loc.cit.* (See N. 10 above).

45. *Ibid.*, 2.24.2, 3.13.7.

were won by Chloris. The number sixteen figures prominently in the second legend. After a period of strife between Elis and Pisa,<sup>46</sup> the Eleans chose a wise, elderly woman from each of sixteen city-states to settle their disputes. The women's duties included weaving a robe for Hera every four years and conducting games in her honor.<sup>47</sup>

In his writings Pausanias points out Mount Typaeum from which women were thrown if they were caught at the Olympic Games<sup>48</sup> but later states "Maidens are not debarred from looking on at the games."<sup>49</sup> (Much of the modern literature discards the statement about girls watching the Olympic Games in favor of the more sensational account of women thrown from Mount Typaeum.) He recognized women as victors in the Olympic Games and included accounts of Cynisca, Euryleonis, and Belistiche, whose horses won races at Olympia. His account of Cynisca indicates that she was an ambitious woman who entered her horses in the chariot race and was the first woman victor at Olympia.<sup>50</sup>

Elsewhere, Pausanias recounts the tale of Scyllis and his daughter Hydna whom, according to legend, Scyllis taught to dive and who helped him drag away the anchors of the Persian king, Xerxes', fleet. Hydna's story is followed by the statement, "Only those of the female sex who are pure virgins may dive into the sea."<sup>51</sup>

Fifty years later, perhaps about 228, Athenaeus, a native of Naucratis, Egypt, lived in Rome and composed the *Deipnosophists*, a series of dialogues at a symposium, following the style of Xenophon and Plato. In the dialogue, *Concerning Women*, he mentions that girls wrestled on the island of Chios, and that "it is very pleasant just to walk to the gymnasium and running-tracks and watch the young men wrestling with the girls."<sup>52</sup>

Inscriptions establish that girls took part in and were victors at athletic festivals during the Roman Period. At Delphi some fragments came to light in 1894 and were pieced together in 1909 by Martinaud.<sup>53</sup> The inscription, thought to be from the first century A.D., reads:

Hermesianax, son of Dionysius, Caesareus of Tralles (also from Corinth), for his daughters, who themselves have the same citizenships.

1) Tryphosa, at the Pythian Games with Antigonos and Cleomachis as judges, and at the Isthmian Games, with Juventius and Proclus as judges. each time placed first in the girls' single-course race.

2) Hedeia, at the Isthmian Games with Cornelius Pulcher as judge, won the race in armor. with her chariot: at the Nemean Games she won the single-course race with Antigonos as judge and also in Sicyon with Menoites as judge. She also won the children's lyre contest at the Augustan Games in Athens with

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46. Elis and Pisa were two districts near Olympia.

47. Paus., 5.16.6 (tr. Peter Levi, Penguin, 1971).

48. *Ibid.*, 5.6.7.

49. *Ibid.*, 6.20.9.

50. *Ibid.*, 3.8.1.

51. *Ibid.*, 10.19.2.

52. Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, 13.566 (tr. C. B. Gulick, Harvard, 1923).

53. Ecole Francaise D'Athènes, *Fourlle de Delphes* (Paris, 1929), no. 1823.

Nusius son of Philinus as judge. She was first in her age group. citizen a girl.

3) Dionysia won at with Antigonus as judge. the single-course race at Asclepian Games at the sanctuary of Epidaureus with Nicoteles as judge.<sup>54</sup>

The girls' father dedicated a statue to Apollo in honor of their victories in three of the four major ancient athletic festivals—the Pythian, Isthmian, and Nemean (but not at Olympia) and two local festivals, the Sicyonian and Asclepian at Epidaureus. Three sport events are listed, the single-course race, the chariot race, and the race in armor. The inscription does not indicate whether these girls were the first to participate in the major festivals. One other inscription found at Patrae names Nicegora, the sister of Nicophilus, as a victor in a girls' race.<sup>55</sup> However a definite date has not been established for this inscription. While the evidence verifies only four girl athletes, the fact that the races were held and winners recorded suggests that other girls competed in these events, which were likely to be for girls only. The inscription from Delphi refers to the "girls' single-course race" at the Pythian and Isthmian Games, identifying the event for girls only. Hedeia won the single-course race at the Nemean Games and in Sicyon, and Dionysia won the single-course race at the Asclepian Games. Assuming that the events were similar from festival to festival, it is likely that these events were only for girls. The other event, the race in armor, with a chariot, is not described as an event for girls. However, given the age of the girls and the athletic traditions of ancient Greece, it is probable that no males entered this competition.<sup>56</sup>

During this period the names of two women appear in the victors' lists for Olympia. In the first century B.C. one family commemorated Olympic victories for two generations and possibly more. Included were Theodota, who is assigned a victory in the chariot-race in 84 B.C., and possibly another woman of the same name.<sup>57</sup> In 153 A.D. Kasia is listed as an Olympic victor in the horse race.<sup>58</sup>

This investigation analyzed women's sport in ancient Greece according to the chronological evidence available. However, in order to construct a perspective on the history of women's sport, these facts must be reordered as a narrative of women's sport in ancient Greece. In summary, sometime before 700 B.C. Nausicaa and her friends played an informal ball game and Heraean Games were instituted at Olympia. Spartan women engaged in strenuous athletics for eugenic purposes. A few women drove chariots, swam, juggled balls, performed acrobatic tricks, and, perhaps, wrestled. Women owned winning horses in the Olympic Games, and the Panathenaic and other festivals. In the first century A.D. three girls and possibly a fourth won events at athletic festivals. Girls in the second century A.D. continued to compete in

54. Lefkowitz and Fant, *WLGR*, p. 160.

55. Moretti, *Iscrizioni agonistiche greche* (Roma, 1953), p. 168.

56. Hulse M. Lee, "Did Women Compete Against Men in Greek Athletic Festivals?" Abstracts of the American Philological Association (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), p. 188.

57. Moretti, *Olypionikai*, no. 657.

58. *Ibid.*, no. 866.

the Heraean Games and other ritual races. This narrative may be interpreted to suggest that women's sport in ancient Greece was more significant than the evidence warrants.

Examined chronologically, however, the data reveal that little women's sport existed and that it was insignificant. It is true that there is archaeological evidence of sport or sport-like activity during the earlier periods, and the inscriptions of the three and possibly four female victors in athletic festivals are authentic and most important in the history of women's sport. Moreover, the five women whose horses won races in the Olympic Games are indisputable as are those of victorious horses in other festivals, but ownership of horses does not prove women participated in sport themselves. The literary sources generally do not focus on women's sport but mention it only casually. The authors who provide extensive literary evidence of women's sport, Plutarch and Pausanias, are confirmed antiquarians and, thus, write about incidents which occurred several hundred years before their time.<sup>59</sup>

The history of women's sport in ancient Greece must be viewed in the perspective of men's sport of the same period. Throughout the ancient literature any suggestion of sport-like activity for women becomes evidence because of its rarity. This is not true for men's sport. Reference to men's athletics and sport in ancient Greece abound. Historians, philosophers, and other authors refer many times to athletics, games, and athletic festivals. For each vase depicting women in sport-like activities there are many, many more showing men in athletic activities or in palaestra scenes. Also, while a few women are recorded on surviving victory lists, hundreds of men are reported. The history of women's sport is based on a very few facts and the history of men's sport on abundant data.

The significance of athletics for men in ancient Greece with its vital role of honoring gods in religious rituals, and the insignificance of women's sport during this period are clear. Women's place in Greek society, feminine *arete*, their exclusion from political decision-making and from male religious rites, early marriages followed by several births, child rearing, home management and short lives were not conducive to sport. Ordinarily, girls participated in sport, not women. They did so under a state edict in Sparta, to honor the goddess Hera, and to entertain others with acrobatic tricks. Some women engaged in sport-like activities or pastimes such as chariot driving and juggling. Why girls competed in athletic festivals in the first century A.D. is not clear, but their participation may represent more freedom for women resulting in social changes over time. Throughout the period of ancient athletic festivals, Greek society appears to have accepted a few highly skilled sportswomen. This concept may explain powerful skilled goddesses, Amazons, entertainers, and the few known female victors at athletic festivals.

This analysis leads to the following perspective on women's sport during the period of the ancient athletic festivals. Sport for women was determined

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59. Bowie, *op. cit.*

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by women's place in society which was represented by female *arete*, and generally, women's sport was perceived as insignificant except for a few highly skilled women.