

Women and Athletics in Ancient Sparta

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The purpose of this study was to analyze the participation of women in gymnastics and other physical activities, including equestrianism and dance, in ancient Sparta. In order to understand the question of women's athletics in ancient Sparta, an analysis of the status of women and their activities was essential. This analysis was based on translations of primary sources such as the writings by Plutarch, Pausanias, Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, Aristophanes, Athencius, Euripides, Theocritus, and Philostratus. The thrust of this study was on literary evidence, although archaeological artifacts in the museums of London, Berlin, Rome and Athens were also scrutinized.

Women in Sparta enjoyed greater personal, including sexual, freedom than women in other Greek city-states. Spartan maidens were educated in the same manner as the boys and actively participated in physically vigorous activities such as running, jumping, throwing the discus and javelin, and wrestling, as well as in equestrian events. Moreover, they were actively involved in the choruses, dances, and processions which were associated with religion and war. The intention of the Spartan system was not to make the female sex equal to the male sex, nor to prepare them for war or athletic competition, but to prepare them for motherhood. The physical education of maidens was specifically designed to make them healthy mothers who would have physically healthy children for Sparta.

Greek-style athletic festivals were popular in many parts of the Byzantine Empire, until they were suppressed by the Christian emperors during the late 6th century. Horsemanship and equestrian sports dominated Byzantine recreations, particularly among the aristocratic class; a wide variety of wild animals were hunted for sport, a form of polo flourished in Byzantium, and horseback games were popular with young members of the nobility and the military. In later centuries the tournament of feudal Europe was introduced and staged in the Hippodrome at Constantinople.

Sport and physical recreation activities played an important role in Byzantium at various times throughout the long history of that civilization. These activities possessed unique characteristics that were reflections of the society in which they operated.