



History Extension – Spartan Shifts: An Investigation into the Changing Perception of Spartan Women. How have historians’ portrayal of Classical Spartan women changed over time and to what extent are these changes the result of a changed cultural context?

Sample proposal

The proposal criteria

The proposal needs to be carefully scrutinised by the teacher in order to ascertain that it:

- describes preliminary research
- has questions for the project
- has research intentions in relation to areas/texts and methodology.

Historical Debate:

For my Extension History Major Project I have decided to investigate the changing perceptions of women in Classical Sparta over time. The perception of women from this era has changed significantly, from the classical period, right through to post Women’s Liberation Movement and the present day. Historians’ attitudes to various aspects of Spartan women’s lives are often conflicting and a wide variety of interpretations are acknowledged as historically viable. Therefore, in researching the lives of women in Classical Sparta I hope to investigate this changing approach to their history, and why this has occurred.

As such, the research question I shall be undertaking is as follows:

How has historians’ portrayal of Classical Spartan women changed over time and to what extent is this change the result of a changed cultural context?

Preliminary
research

Research
intentions

Research
questions

Research Zone

Research:

Historian One: ARISTOTLE

Bibliographical Details of Work:

Aristotle (translated by Warrington, John), 1959, Politics and The Athenian Constitution, London, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd.

Statement summarising the approach of the historian to the historical debate:

Aristotle, described by historian Eva Keuls as “one of the fiercest misogynists of all times”¹, has an extremely negative perception of Classical Spartan women. Despite his tutelage by Plato, recognised as “the Western world’s first feminist”², he is far less advocatory of equality between men and women, and in the case of Sparta, for the most part, blames its’ women for the city state’s downfall. Aristotle sees Spartan women as the cause of many of Sparta’s problems, and that their influence over men was nothing short of “pernicious”³. Essentially, his from his deeply anti-female writings it is possible to observe his interpretation of Spartan women as a group of individuals who strayed far from Athenian ideals, and hence, Aristotle’s ensuing beliefs about the evils of this deviation from his own cultural context.

Preliminary
research

Historian Two: Simone DE BEAUVOIR

Bibliographical Details of Work:

Quoted in: Fantham, E., Foley H.P., Kampen, N.B., Pomeroy, S.B., Shapiro, H.A., 1994, Women in the Classical World, New York, Oxford University Press.

Statement summarising the approach of the historian to the historical debate:

de Beauvoir, one of the most significant feminists of the modern era, has a vastly different perception of Classical Spartan women. Where Aristotle has little regard for the freedom that Spartan women enjoyed, de Beauvoir idealises their treatment “almost on an equality with man”⁴. Her depiction of Spartan women is evidently shaped by her post Women’s Liberation Movement values, and hence it is apparent that her beliefs about the role that women played in Spartan society arise as a result in the changed cultural context.

Preliminary
research

¹ Keuls, Eva C., 1985, The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens, California, University of California Press, pg. 405.

² Ibid, pg. 402.

³ Aristotle (translated by Warrington, John), 1959, Politics and The Athenian Constitution, London, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, pg. 52.

⁴ Quoted in: Fantham, E., Foley H.P., Kampen, N.B., Pomeroy, S.B., Shapiro, H.A., 1994, Women in the Classical World, New York, Oxford University Press, pg. 56.

Other Historians:

de Beauvoir will provide an alternate viewpoint for inquiry as part of my Extension History Major Project, however I will be limiting myself to only evaluate the portrayal of Spartan women by two historians. For this reason, I shall include in this document a list of historians whom I intend to include in my Major Work:

George GROTE: a leading Victorian era historian of Ancient Greece. Having written at a time before the emancipation of women, he was most puzzled by Spartan women and the amount of power they exercised. His famous observation, “of all the attributes of this remarkable community [the Spartans] there is none more difficult to make out clearly than the condition and character of the Spartan women”⁵ will be an interesting point of research.

Sarah B. POMEROY: one of the “leading authorities on women in antiquity”⁶ of the modern era. Pomeroy has written many books on women in antiquity, including the only full length historical study of Spartan women (Spartan Women, see footnotes for bibliographical details). Her views on Spartan women will complement the feminist beliefs of de Beauvoir.

PLUTARCH: the Ancient Greek historians’ books On Sparta and Lives, provide an insight into another historian’s perspective of Spartan women. In particular, the chapter *The Sayings of Spartan Women* is a valuable resource.

XENOPHON: being one of the few ancient historians who actually resided in Sparta, his portrayal of Spartan women is important, if not biased as a result of his ethnicity (Athenian). His text, The Politeia of the Spartans (often called The Constitution of the Spartans) is another important resource that must be considered when undertaking the Major Project.

PLATO: his views on women are a very important source of contextual information. His ideas would have been “revolutionary to the ordinary Greek”⁷ and although he does not refer directly to Spartan women, from his inferences to women taking part in athletics competitions it is evident that many of his comments do refer to a comparison between Athenian and Spartan women.

ARISTOPHANES: his dramatic text Lysistrata, written 17 years into the war between Athens and Sparta, may provide further evidence to indicate the perceptions of Spartan women.

Research Intentions - methodology and resources you intend to use:

In terms of methodology, I intend to research the Major Project to the greatest extent possible. At present, I have accessed resources from the SCEGGS library, the internet,

⁵ Quoted in: Mitchell, H., 1952, Sparta, Connecticut, Greenwood Press Publishers, pg. 45.

⁶ Pomeroy, Sarah B., 2002, Spartan Women, New York, Oxford University Press, back cover.

⁷ Plato (translated by Lee, H.P.D.), 1955, The Republic, Middlesex, Penguin Books Ltd, pg. 201.

Sydney University's Fisher Library and personal collections from Mr. Gallagher that concern my area of study. I have also purchased Pomeroy's text, Spartan Women, which is of great use. At the time of writing, I am waiting upon the arrival of an article from *The Classical Quarterly*, an Oxford University classics journal, from America.

There are still further resources I intend to access. Books and internet websites will continue to provide me with important information; however I intend to use fictitious works from the era, such as Aristophanes' Lysistrata and Euripides' Andromache, as well as magazine and journal articles, films, and documentaries to aid in my research. Obtaining a copy of Paul Cartledge's television series The Spartans is another resource that I shall view to increase my understanding of the subject area.

Furthermore, I would really like to discuss my project with a historian or Professor of Classical Greek History so that that I can perhaps get some advice about where to look for more resources, or other lines of inquiry that I may like to investigate. In order to do this, I will have to contact a University or another organisation with historical interests.

Research Zone