

**Did the Spartan *agoge* produce greater freedom for Spartan women or more greatly oppress Spartan women?**

The analysis of Greek philosophers Xenophon, Plato, Plutarch, and Aristotle has created generalizations of very autonomous Spartan women in the elite social class. Compared to other Greek women, especially those of Athens, Spartan women are considered to have more freedom and autonomy. The condition of Spartan women could have been a consequence of institutions like the Spartan *Agoge*: the state's age and gender-segregated education system, which maintained Sparta's military state. However, the *Agoge* is not responsible for manufacturing or limiting freedom because misinterpretations of the Spartan female condition and the patriarchal paradigm of 7<sup>th</sup> century Greece make the *Agoge* irrelevant concerning autonomy. To understand why the *Agoge* is not responsible for the condition of women's freedom, we must first thoroughly understand the structure and intentions of the *Agoge* system. Additionally, we must understand the condition of elite Spartan women in comparison to other Greek women whose city-states did not have an education system similar to the *Agoge*, like the women of Athens. Once we understand the general condition of all Greek women, the existence of the *Agoge* clearly affects other social structures in Sparta more greatly than the freedom of Spartan women. If there are consequences from the *Agoge* relating to women's freedom, then they are minor implications of a Spartans women's freedom.

The Agoge was Sparta's age and sex-segregated education system. Its purpose was to socialize Spartan men into agents who carried out the militaristic ambitions of the state. Sparta's dependence on its military is related to its subjugation of the Helot population, which Sparta must always control to maintain feeding its society. Additionally, Sparta had strong ambitions of conquest and other enemies like the Persians or Athenians that required Sparta to maintain its military prowess. Many accounts from ancient Greek philosophers Xenophon, Plato, Pericles, and Plutarch allow the structure of the Agoge to be credible; even Plutarch, who wrote on Athens nearly five hundred years after the other sources listed, offers validity through the conservative nature of Sparta (Powell 2018, 528). Structures of the Agoge remained similar between each source's account because Sparta's conservative ideology prevented the Agoge from changing dramatically over a long period of time.

“First, from around seven years of age, he belongs to the *paides* (Xenophon, *Lak. Pol.*, 2. 1–2 with Ducat 2006, 85–6): at that stage he probably could start learning letters and arithmetic. Later, towards fourteen years of age (Ducat 2006, 89–90), he was part of the *paidiskoi*. Then, at twenty, he joined the group of *hēbōntes* (these three stages are also mentioned by Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 5. 4. 32, and these terms may have been the ones actually used at Sparta, according to Ducat 2006, 89–91 and 101 on age limits) (Powell 2018, 528).”

Within this education, from seven to twenty, besides the early teachings of literacy, it is entirely an education surrounding the art of war. Young Spartan men entered a socialization process where the *Syssitia*, the communal group men were assigned to, replaced the role of the family. Younger men in the Agoge could be subjected to fatherly roles by an older man in the *Syssitia*.

Moreover, young boys were assigned one older Spartan man who would behave somewhat as a surrogate father. The relationship with their mother, besides the status they received from her at birth, was focused on bringing honor to her through acts in battle and conquest. Life was focused on physical activity; Ephors constantly monitored Spartans in their physical shape. They were also given incentives to perform well with opportunities for upward mobility in an individual's status. For example, becoming a hippeis, an elite group of three hundred Spartans acting as military police could be achieved after earning the title Krypteia. Krypteia was earned by a young Spartan man who separated himself from society for a year with very limited resources. All aspects of the male Spartan life are composed of training and executing the best possible actions for the community. His contribution decides a Spartan's worth. The Agoge socializes to the extent that emotions of Spartan men were related to the success of the group.

The information on the female position in the Agoge is not as credible as the structure we have for the men. For example:

“Plato has his revered Socrates say that at Sparta not only men but women too can pride themselves on their education, on their paideusis. This implies that lessons in reading and writing, and probably in arithmetic, were available for girls, or at least for some of them, though we have no information on where and how such teaching occurred.” (Powell 2018, 538)

Women participated in physical activities like foot racing and wrestling. Additionally, they were educated in song and dance performed at festivals and for other religious purposes. It is believed that the education of Spartan women paralleled that of the men -

physical and mental socialization for the benefit of the state. However, there is no evidence that the state sponsored women's education. Lastly, the loose interpretation of the female role in the Agoge is also a factor in the interpretation of their general condition in 7<sup>th</sup> century Sparta.

Spartan women have been generalized as more autonomous in comparison to the condition of other Greek women. Assumptions were made from stories of powerful Spartan women, implications of the Agoge, and property laws as support for this generalization. However, there are questions of whether the sources reporting on Spartan life in from the 7<sup>th</sup> century onward create a credible context of the Spartan female condition. More importantly, the condition of Spartan women compared to the women of Athens. Sources that wrote of Spartan women were not from Sparta and also came from the perspective of Athenians, who had a rivalry with Sparta for control of the Aegean region. During the time of the source's writings, Sparta was the hegemonic power that existed in the region. Millender explains the biases of the sources:

“(1) the role which sexuality and gender played in Athenian self-definition and definition of others in the context of this conflict and (2) the effect which Athens' antagonistic relationship with Sparta had on contemporary depictions of Spartan sexual mores and gender roles.” (Millender 2018, 355 )

The Athenian women's gender norm is described as a

monogamous person who completely submits to the male patriarchy. Sources have explained that the Spartan women's gender norm is described as sexually free and objects of a gynecocracy. The description of sexual freedom and promiscuity comes from the stories of the most elite Spartan women and the Agoge's education. First, stories of powerful Spartan women like Helen, the daughter of the king of Sparta, who had committed adultery by leaving her husband, Menelaus, for the prince of Troy, Paris. Leading to a coalition, including Sparta, to retrieve her from Troy in the Trojan War. Athenian sources claim that Sparta was a gynecocracy because actions like those of Helen led to Spartan men going to war. Other stories lead to this same generalization that Spartan women had control over their Spartan husbands, therefore ruling society. All of these ancient stories are told about Spartan women from the most elite class. The Agoge perpetuated female autonomy from the physical nature of its education. Women were prescribed a regimen not as rigorous as men's but consisted of physical activity like foot races, wrestling, and dance. The Athenian sources also described Spartan women as showing more skin and having very fit, attractive physiques, which was likely a result of their physical education. Physical education was prescribed for the belief that more fit women are able to bear more children. The Agoge was an institution designed to sustain the state's ambitions. In the same way, Spartan men must fight in warfare;

Spartan women must supply those men. Wife-sharing was a consequence of the need for men in the Agoge. If one man's wife could not birth children, another mans wife could be offered as a surrogate. Spartan women were similarly socialized as Spartan men. Along with physical education, they were also taught to uphold their future husbands and sons to the standard the state prescribed. Women were thought to have gained independence from the lack of the husband's presence in the household. Lastly, they are thought to have gained freedom by being responsible for the household contributions towards citizenship. Finding power from the responsibility and effectiveness of the household. The largest institutional factor that separated Spartan women from the condition of other Greek women was their ability to own land. Moreover, land in Sparta was transferred through women. Spartan women served as a proxy to transfer wealth in marriages between two families. In instances of some extremely powerful Spartan women like Hermione, the daughter of Helen, independent wealth was used as a stronghold against her husband's wishes. While the stories of the most elite Spartan women and the physical consequences of the Agoge make Spartan women seem more autonomous than other Greek women, the lack of credible evidence that exists for the structure of the Agoge leaves speculation for the realistic condition Spartan women experienced.

In the question of whether the Agoge manufactured more or less freedom for Spartan women? I argue that the Agoge is not responsible for manufacturing or limiting Spartan female autonomy because the non-realistic generalization of the Spartan female and the patriarchal paradigm of 7<sup>th</sup> century Greece make the Agoge irrelevant concerning autonomy. If Spartan women were under the same condition as other Greek women who lived in a society without an education system similar to the Agoge, then the Spartan Agoge would have no impact on female autonomy. The oppression that seems to be a consequence of the Agoge is a consequence of large-scale patriarchal forces that can manufacture oppression through any institution. The condition of the Spartan women would remain the same with or without the existence of the Agoge.

The rite of passage Spartan women experienced in the Agoge is based on a loose interpretation of ancient Athenian sources. This loose interpretation allows the physical education of Spartan women to seem like an aspect of autonomy. Moreover, this aspect of autonomy is created by the social biases of Athenian sources whose women do not receive physical education. The physical requirements of the Spartan women were for eugenic purposes (Millender 2018, 369). In that sense, physical activity prescribed by the Agoge can seem oppressive. However, the nature of eugenics in Sparta is more related to the patriarchy over women that subjugates them to the possibilities within

institutions like the Agoge. Women do not have the social mobility to challenge the requirements to birth boys who supply the Agoge. Along with physical education, the Agoge prescribed the actions of wife-sharing, where one man offers his wife to another man whose wife is infertile for the purpose of creating Spartan men (Millender 2018, 372). Once again, this consequence can be seen as oppression from the Agoge towards Spartan women. However, the nature of wife-sharing also comes from the standard Greek condition of patriarchy. Both physical education and wife-sharing are consequences of the gender norms that exist without the Agoge. Regardless of the Agoge, women are defined by their relationship to men as wives, daughters, or sisters. In Athens, women are described as monogamous within the institution of marriage. It is not marriage that keeps the Athenian women monogamous, but the natural condition of living in a patriarchal society. If Athens were to adopt an Agoge system, the consequences of it would stem from the patriarchal paradigm of Greek societies in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

The neutral nature of the Agoge is not the only evidence disproving its relation to autonomy. The generalization of the autonomous Spartan women comes from Athenian exaggerations of Spartan sexual freedom, education, attire, and ability to own land. Ancient writers of Sparta constantly allude to the mythical stories of women like Hellen who influenced the cause of the Trojan War. The



implications of sexual freedom that people like Hellen displayed were not limited to Spartan women (Millender 2018, 375). All married women in Greece have the opportunity to commit adultery. However, the story of Hellen is used, along with other mythical stories, as support for why Spartan women seem more free than other Greek women. Moreover, Helen was of the most elite class, meaning that the condition of her sexual freedom was neither a result of the Agoge nor the general condition of all Spartan women. It is an individual experience that does not offer validity to the group. If the generalization of Spartan women is not true, then we can assume their autonomy condition is similar to Athenian women. If Athenian women lived in a society without an institution similar to the Agoge, then we can assume the Agoge is entirely irrelevant when concerning autonomy.

The freedom and oppression Spartan women experienced in the 7<sup>th</sup> century was a fixed condition that touched all institutions in Sparta. The institution of marriage could oppress Spartan women by being shared with another male in the community or create more freedom by giving them married status. The institution of property ownership could allow women to have leverage in a relationship or can create oppression when the women can not protect that ownership in a court dispute. The macro-scale paradigm of male dominance is responsible for the oppressions and freedoms women experience in Sparta. We

can also assume that because Athenian women and Spartan women are generally similar, and Athens does not have an Agoge, the existence of the Agoge in Sparta is not responsible.

Works Cited:

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