



“I, Cynisca”: Gender and Agency at Olympia



K.M. Cashdollar, C.J. Horvath, A.M. King, A. Riggs, J. Self, and M.H. Parks

Department of Classics and Ancient Mediterranean Studies, Knox College, Galesburg, IL

Can Money Buy Virtue?

Cynisca of Sparta was the first woman to win at the Olympics, winning the four-horse chariot race in 396 and 392 BCE (Pomeroy 2002, 22).

Xenophon, the only contemporary author to mention her victory, claims that her brother, the Spartan King Agesilaus, entered her in the Olympics to prove that wealth, not “masculine virtue,” was key to victory (Xen. Ages. 9.6).



Stone bases of Zanes, 4th century BCE (image: Andronicos 1976, 40)

Our research team investigated different interpretations of Cynisca’s agency regarding her victory by asking two questions:

- How were Spartan women treated differently from other Greek women?
- How was Cynisca’s victory memorialized and how did it influence later victors?

Spartan Women

Few texts from Sparta have survived, so most texts about Sparta are from Athenians. A comparison is worthwhile to see how women were portrayed and viewed in different political contexts.

Athenian women	Spartan women
Taboo to name women in text	Upper class women were named in text
Rarely written about and only mentioned in context to men	May be mentioned without male context (though rare), misogynistically portrayed
Only schooled on housekeeping (weaving, etc.)	Extensive physical education similar to boys
Virtually no experience with horses	Typically informed about horses and partly charioteers
Always dependent on a man with essentially no agency	Respected and exercised their agency in many matters that concerned them

Being Victor

To honor her victory, Cynisca erected a victory monument of herself, her horses, chariot, and charioteer at Olympia. It was sculpted by Apelleas, whom she likely chose due to his depictions of maidens (Pomeroy 2002, 22). Below her monument was an epigram (above and to the right) that cements her legacy in a clear, authoritative voice, which highlights her agency.

Her Olympic statue was near the Temple of Hera and other Spartan victory statues, which signifies a woman’s ability to stand equal to men.

Women at Olympia

Women’s attendance at the games was extremely limited, thus women who competed in chariot races only bred and sponsored race-horses while a man drove them.

The next women to win at Olympia after Cynisca included another Spartan elite named Euryleonis and a Macedonian elite named Bilistiche. Despite Xenophon's claim that Cynisca's victory was without merit, these women saw her as a role model and aimed to show off their own wealth and status by following in her footsteps (Pomeroy 2002, 82).

On the one hand, kings of Sparta were my fathers and brothers; and on the other hand I, Cynisca, winning with a chariot of swift-footed horses, erected this statue. And I assert that I alone out of all the women in Greece won this crown.



Charioteer of Delphi, 470 BCE (image: Hartt 1989, 157)



Bronze horse part of a four-horse chariot votive offering, 480-460 BCE (image: Andronicos 1976, 67)

Conclusion

After looking into these two questions, our team has concluded that Xenophon’s interpretation of Cynisca’s victory does not consider her own possible agency in the matter. Other contemporary observers, including Cynisca herself, may have viewed it differently. We assume that Xenophon, as an Athenian, portrayed the abilities of Spartan women as well as their relationship to Spartan men tendentiously.

At the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, 5,386 women competed. Although none of them won the chariot race, Cynisca helped pave the way for women to compete and celebrate their victories.

Works Cited

- Andronicos, Manolis. 1976. *Olympia*. Athens: Ekdotike Athenon S.A.
- Hartt, Frederick. 1989. *Art: History of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated.
- Pomeroy, Sarah B. 2002. *Spartan Women*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Further Reading

- Christesen, Paul. 2019. *A New Reading of the Damonon Stele*. Newcastle upon Tyne: HISTOS.
- Dillon, Matthew. 2000. “Did Parthenoi Attend the Olympic Games? Girls and Women Competing, Spectating, and Carrying out Cult Roles at Greek Religious Festivals.” *Hermes* 128 (4): 457–80.
- Neils, Jenifer. 2012. “Spartan Girls and the Athenian Gaze.” In *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World*, edited by Sharon L. James and Sheila Dillon, 153–166. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.