

Concubines in Classical Athens

Concubines, or *pallakḗ* (meaning girl) are women who permanently live with a currently married or unmarried man and engage in a sexual relationship with said man without a formal marriage agreement.¹ The taking of concubines was a relatively controversial topic in Athens, Plato even wrote against it in *Laws*, saying sex outside marriage should be banned.² It was most common for older men who had lost their wives and already possessed legitimate children to take on a concubine.³

Concubines played many roles in Classical Athens, they would often accompany soldiers on campaign and some foreign women would travel around, visiting different festivals to find work and would often take up temporary residence in an Athenian's house, however these women were considered more as prostitutes.⁴

Another role played by the concubine was a more political role, if a politician took on the concubine sometimes she would be quite politically savvy; an example of this is the case of Aspasia⁵, the concubine of the famous statesman Pericles. She was believed to whisper in his ear and influence him on political issues, more specifically on the Megarian decree which is thought by some to be a catalyst for the Peloponnesian War.⁶ Another scandal she was involved in was the legitimization by the state of her and Pericles' illegitimate son which was practically unheard of.⁷

¹ And. 4,14

² Plat. Leg. 841d

³ Demosth. Or. 59,122

⁴ Demosth. Or. 59. 23-24

⁵ Roberts, J. (2007). *The Oxford Dictionary of the Classical World*, p.84

⁶ Ar. Ach. 527

⁷ Hornblower, S, Spawforth, T. (2003). *Who's Who in the Classical World*, p.283

On the topic of illegitimate children, they were banned from inheriting property as they were not a member of the father's *oikos*⁸. This also means that the father would not be legally responsible for the actions of the child⁹. All the child would be able to access is a sum of money if his father was wealthy, the sum would amount to around 500 to 1000 drachmae, apart from this they would often rely on the charity of others to avoid abject poverty¹⁰. This highlights the abnormality of the legitimisation of Pericles' illegitimate son.

The life of an Athenian concubine was often unstable and dangerous, she could face expulsion from the household at any time if her partner took a dislike to her. An example of this is found in Demosthenes' *Against Aristogeton I*, where a concubine of Aristogeton named Zobia, a metic, helped shelter him after he escaped prison, after a few days she gave him eight drachmas to flee to Megara. When she complained to him about his actions, he banished him from his home. After she persistently protested, he forcibly took her to a slave market and checked if she had paid her *metoikion*, a tax on foreigners that if unpaid means she would be sold into slavery¹¹

In conclusion there were advantages and disadvantages of being a concubine in Classical Athens, one could achieve significant power, scratch out a living or lose everything.

⁸ Dem. Or. 59, 122

⁹ Dem. Or. 54, 26

¹⁰ Humphreys 1974: 93

¹¹ Dem. Or. 25, 56-57

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