

# Greek Women and Greek Warfare

NB: This blog is for 20-30 year old non-university attending English speakers.

When it comes to warfare in the ancient Greek world, the focus always seems to be on the men. From the gory cinematic experience of *300* to the conquests of Alexander the Great, the role of women appears to be underexplored.



Indeed, modern interpretations may lead one to understand ancient Greek women as entirely pacifist – take for example the Lysistrata Project (find out about them at <http://www.lysistrataproject.org/aboutus.htm>). This pacifist organisation takes its name from the *Lysistrata*, a comedy by the ancient Greek playwright Aristophanes who lived around the year 400 BCE. In this play, a group of women take the city of Sparta hostage – threatening to withhold sex until the end of the Peloponnesian War. Pasi Loman (2004) argues that these women should not really be understood as pacifists – the only motivation the women describe for being anti-war is being ‘lonely’.



“And I too! Why, to get a peep at the shy thing  
I'd clamber up to the tip-top o' Taygetus.”

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(Lysistrata 115-116)

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A woman claiming that she would climb to the top of a mountain for merely a glimpse of... 'the shy thing' – this does not sound like a woman ideologically opposed to war!

Regardless, the *Lysistrata* should not be taken as factual representation of ancient Greek women. It is a work of **fiction**, with fictional women whose actions transgress female expectations. Loman thus argues we should look elsewhere.

One woman sent forth  
her sons, five in  
number, to war, and,  
standing in the  
outskirts of the city,

Plutarch's *Moralia*, 241c7

she awaited anxiously the outcome of the battle. And when someone arrived and, in answer to her inquiry, reported that all her sons had met death, she said, "I did not inquire about that, you vile varlet, but how fares our country?" And when he declared that it was victorious, "Then," she said, "I accept gladly also the death of my sons."

It would seem that Greek (or at least Spartan) women were intensely proud of military might, but there is no evidence that they were ever trained for it. Loman however claims that "Greek women actually had many active roles in warfare".

A helpful way to think about women's roles would be to separate them into two categories – women at home on the defence, and women on foreign campaigns on the offence.

## Women on the defence

1. The presence of loved women within the walls of the cities men were defending would encourage and inspire them. Consider Archidamus in Xenophon's *Hellenica* – "let us now prove ourselves brave men and thus be able to look people in the face...let us cease to feel shame before wives and children and elders and strangers..."

2. Providing funding for the war effort, either voluntarily or by force – Polybius describes both Carthaginian women handing over jewellery, and the wife of the Spartan king Nabis torturing the women of Argos until they handed over their possessions.

3. Food preparation – Thucydides talks of a city besieged, manned by 480 men "and a hundred and ten women to dress their meat."

4. Projectile Violence – William D. Barry's 'Roof Tiles and Urban Violence in the Ancient World' points towards the killing of Pyrrhus as a result of a tile on the head dropped from a roof during his assault on Argos, a story told by Plutarch.

## Women on the offence

1. Combat – Despite Xenophon insistence that "since [God] has made her body less capable of such endurance, I take it that God has assigned the indoor tasks.", a few women were known to take part in active combat roles. Women of royal ranks were able to hold command of armies in the Hellenic period and Ptolemaic (the Greek dynasty of Egypt) women could also achieve this – one only has to imagine powerful Egyptian women like Cleopatra to see how this pattern can emerge!

2. Camp followers – It is once again Xenophon who mentions that during the return of the mercenary army known as the Ten Thousand, the women and children depart by sea while the fighting men continued on land. Once again, this moral support must have been invaluable to the soldiers.

3. Equipment maintenance – Plutarch tells us of a scene in which "in the hands of women there were helmets and plumes for dyeing, and horsemen's tunics or soldier's cloaks for embroidering."

This post should hopefully show you how, despite the focus on men during war, that women had their own place within the Greek battleground that should not be underestimated. Their effect may not always be direct, but it would certainly have been important.