

Spartan Women by Sarah B. Pomeroy (Oxford 2002)

Marriage

Spartans were reputed to have chosen their spouses by several systems, some similar to those practiced in other poleis, others unique. The former was based on the Oikos system, and the goal was the perpetuation and prosperity of the individual family; the latter evolved from the communal ideal of equality, and the goal was the production of children for the good of the state.²⁰ In the former system, personal inclinations and ambitions determined the choice of a spouse; in the latter system, the state provided incentives for marriage. Women were active players in both systems.

Xenophon's description shows that in his day, the two systems overlapped. Although there was an oikos system in place, the welfare of society was fostered by means of what is commonly referred to by scholars as 'wife-sharing for reproductive purposes. Although it is not always obvious that Xenophon is reporting an entirely logical system, it is apparent from his language that the wife is an active participant in the arrangement whereby she produces children for a partner in addition to her husband. This practice should, therefore, be called "husband-doubling," "male-partner duplication," or "nonexclusive mono-gamy," or, at any rate, some term that does not suggest passivity on the wife's part.

He [Lycurgus] saw, too, that during the time immediately following marriage, it was usual elsewhere for husbands to have unlimited intercourse with wives. He decreed the opposite of this, for he ruled that the husband should be embarrassed to be seen visiting his wife or leaving her. Thus, the desire for intercourse was more fervent in both of them and if there were a child, it would be more sturdy than if they were satiated with one another. In addition to this, he took away from men the right to take a wife whenever they wanted to and ordered that they marry in their prime, believing that this too was conducive to the production of fine children. If, however, it happened that an old man had a young wife—seeing those men of that age guard their wives—he thought the opposite. He required the elderly husband to bring in some man whose body and spirit he admired in order to beget children. On the other hand, in case a man did not want to have intercourse with his wife²² but wanted children of whom he could be proud, he made it legal for him to choose a woman who was the mother of a fine family and well-born, and if he persuaded her husband, he produced children with her. Many such arrangements have developed. For the wives want to get possession of two oikoi, and the husbands want to get brothers for their sons who will share their lineage and power, but claim no part of the property. Thus, in regard to the breeding of children, he thought the opposite to those of other states. And anyone who wishes to may see whether it turned out that the men in Sparta are distinctive in their size and strength.

Plutarch also describes marriage customs as appropriate for a utopian society in which reproduction is the primary goal of marriage, and the economic aspects of the private oikos are deemphasized in favor of the common good. Though he reiterates much of Xenophon's report on husband-doubling, in Xenophon, the child born of extramarital intercourse would have no claim on the estate of the biological mother's husband.²³ It appears that the Spartans were

not concerned with the legal issue of illegitimate birth; rather, arrangements between consenting males, with the practical consent of the woman involved, were valid in assigning paternity. Children belonged to the oikos of the father, and therefore, the biological mother would have no legal claim on the newborn, except after adoption. Plutarch introduces the new idea that the biological mother and her husband might adopt the child born from extramarital intercourse, and then, of course, the child would inherit from them:

There were also incentives to marry. I mean the processions of girls, and the nudity, and the competitions in view of the young men, who were attracted by compulsion, not of an intellectual type, but (as Plato says)²⁴ a sexual one. In addition, he [Lycurgus] decreed that those who did not marry would lose a civic right, for they were excluded from the spectacle of the Gymnopaïdaii ["Nude Youth"]...

They used to marry by capture, not when the women were small or immature, but when they were in their prime and fully ripe for it. The so-called "bridesmaid" took the captured girl. She shaved her head to the scalp, then dressed her in a man's cloak and sandals and laid her down alone on a mattress in the dark. The bridegroom, who was not drunk and thus not impotent but was sober as always, having dined with his mess group, then would slip in, untie her belt, lift her, and carry her to the bed. After spending only a short time with her, he would depart discreetly so as to sleep wherever he usually did with the other young men. And he continued to do this thereafter.

While spending the days with his contemporaries and going to sleep with them, he would cautiously visit his bride in secret, embarrassed and fearful in case someone in the house might notice him. His bride, at the same time, was scheming and helping to plan how they might meet each other unobserved at a suitable time. They did this not just for a short period but for long enough that some might even have children before they saw their own wives in the day. Such intercourse was not only an exercise in self-control and moderation but also meant that partners were fertile physically, always fresh for love, and ready for intercourse rather than being satiated and impotent from unlimited sexual activity. Moreover, some lingering spark of desire and affection always remained in both.

After making marriage as modest and orderly as this, he showed equal concern for removing empty womanish jealousy. Banning from marriage every kind of outrageous and disorderly behavior, he made it honorable for worthy men to share children and their begetting and derided people who think that there can be no combination or sharing of such things and who resort to murders and wars. Thus, if an older man with a young wife should take a liking to one of the handsome and virtuous young men and approve of him, he might well introduce him to her so that he might fill her with noble sperm and then adopt the child for themselves. On the other hand, a respectable man who admired someone else's wife noted for her lovely children and her self-control might persuade the husband that he has intercourse with her—thereby planting in fruitful soil and producing fine children who would be linked to fine ancestors by blood and kinship.

Some of the bizarre customs Plutarch mentions, such as the cutting of the bride's hair and the secret marriage, could not have existed simultaneously, certainly not where women regularly

spent much time out of doors. Nor are they mentioned by Xenophon. We can only speculate that they were created over time like other reforms attributed to Lycurgus, were enforced by the ongoing fear of oliganthropia (sparse population) after the Second Messenian War (see below) or even later, and relaxed when the Spartans realized that they were able to win the Peloponnesian War despite their small population. Another possibility is that these customs were revived or invented in the Hellenistic period, either in connection with the reforms of Agis IV and Cleomenes III or under the influence of some other utopian philosophical program.

The “capture” of the bride was a ritual enactment of a prearranged betrothal. The bridesmaid was ready and waiting with the bride’s costume. The bride herself, fully grown, would have been able to put up a good struggle if she truly objected and the groom was really raping her. An abduction rather than a joyous, spectacular wedding ceremony may serve to ward off the jealous evil eye. The shaving of the head and dressing of the bride as a man may have been part of a rite of passage that signaled her entrance into a new life. As a maiden, she wore her hair long and uncovered; as a wife, she wore it short and covered by a veil. In some sense, she was transformed into a youth in the agoge. Since participation in the agoge was a prerequisite to becoming a full-fledged citizen, the transvestism may have been symbolic of the bride’s inclusion in the citizen body. It may also have been an attempt to ward off the evil eye or the supernatural spirits who were deemed to be jealous of the bride’s fortune. The bride’s costume may have also helped to ease the husband’s transition to procreative sex from the homosexual intercourse to which he was accustomed.

We may ask if there were any analogous comforts for the bride who had been accustomed to female caresses. At Athens, vases depicting weddings often show Eroses (“Cupids”), an attempt to enlist the services of the supernatural in making the bride receptive to the bridegroom. The Athenian bride, however, was much more in need of help than the Spartans. The Athenian was not quite fifteen: she married a stranger nearly twice her age, moved to a new house, and rarely saw her friends and relatives again.²⁹ The Spartan, in contrast, married a young man close in age. The couple had seen each other nude at festivals and during exercise since childhood. Because the marriage was a secret until the bride became pregnant, she did not change her domicile for a while (see below). Since the bride and groom were around eighteen and the groom was obliged to live with his army group until the age of thirty, the wife would not have been obliged to adapt to her husband’s personality; she raised the children and managed the household for the most part by herself. These responsibilities made it necessary for the bride to be mature, not an adolescent like the Athenian bride. Furthermore, the Spartan bride’s principal source of companionship and sentimental attachments would continue to be other women. In cases where the bridegroom was older than normal, the scenario would be quite different, for the husband would no longer be sleeping with his army group.

Yet, even in such households, the husband probably did not completely dominate the wife. If he was impotent or infertile, he nevertheless was obliged to participate in the social goal of reproduction as well as to consider his wife’s desires. Xenophon implies that her wishes and ambitions were consulted in cases where she was to be inseminated by a younger man to whom she was not married. Marriage between an older man and a younger woman could be the consequence of the epiklerate.³⁰ Though Spartan law is not so well understood as

Athenian, some form of the epiklerate may have existed, for it appears that when a daughter was the sole survivor and heiress in a family, she was under some obligation to marry a close kinsman of her father, though he might have been elderly. In such cases, nevertheless, the pressure to produce an heir was intense.