

9.2 Women in the Ancient Mediterranean World

Instructions: These documents have been adapted to make them more accessible to readers. They are presented in chronological order. As you read the documents consider the question, what do these three passages share in common? **Source:** Lefkowitz, M. and Fant, M. (1992). *Women's Life in Greece and Rome: A Source Book in Translation, 2nd. ed.*, (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press).

A. The Plight of Women as described by Sophocles (Athens, mid-5th century BC)

This passage is a surviving piece from a play written by Sophocles, a poet and playwright in ancient Athens.

“But now outside my father’s house, I am nothing. Often I have looked on women’s nature in this regard, that we are nothing. Young women, in my opinion, have the sweetest existence known to mortals in their fathers’ homes, for their innocence always keeps children safe and happy. But when we reach puberty and can understand, we are thrust out and sold away from our ancestral gods and from our parents. Some go to strange men’s homes, others to foreigners’, some to joyless houses, some to hostile. And all this once the first night has yoked us to our husband, we are forced to praise and to say that all is well.”

Questions: Why is Sophocles upset about the plight of women in Athens? What do we learn about the rights of women and their social status in Athens during this period?

B. Funeral Eulogy Delivered by a Husband (Rome, 1st century BC)

While the woman discussed in this funeral oratory had second-class legal status, she appears to have been the full social partner of her husband.

“You became an orphan suddenly before the day of our wedding, when both your parents were murdered together in the solitude of the countryside. It was mainly due to your efforts that the death of your parents was not left unavenged for I had left for Macedonia. So strenuously did you perform your filial duty by your insistent demands and your pursuit of justice that we could not have done more if I had been present. While you were engaged in these things, having secured the punishment of the guilty, you immediately left your own house in order to guard your modesty and you came to my mother’s house, where you awaited my return. Then pressure was brought to bear on you and your sister to accept the view that your father’s will, by which you and I were heirs, had been invalidated. If that was the case, then you together with all your father’s property would necessarily come under the guardianship of those who pursued the matter. You defended our common cause by asserting the truth, namely, that the will had not in fact been broken, so that we should both keep the property. It was your firm decision that you would defend your father’s written word. You maintained that you would not come under the state of legal guardianship, since there was no such right against you in law, for there was no proof that your father belonged to any gens [clan] that could by law compel you to do this. Marriages as long as ours are rare, marriages that are ended by death and not broken by divorce. We were fortunate enough to see our marriage last without disharmony for fully 40 years. I wish that our long union had come to its final end through something that had befallen me instead of you; it would have been more just if I as the older partner had had to yield to fate through such an event.

Questions: Why did the woman being eulogized have to fight to protect her inheritance? What do we learn about the rights of women and their social status in Rome during this period?

C. Legal Complaint Against an Abusive Husband (Egypt, 4th century AD)

This account appears to be taken from a petition to a court complaining of the misconduct of a husband in his role as male guardian of his wife’s assets.

“He shut up his own daughters and mine, along with my foster daughters and his agent and his son for seven whole days in his cellars, and treated his slaves and my slave Zoe violently, virtually killing them with blows. He stripped my foster-daughters naked and set fire to them, in complete violation of the law. And he said to the foster-daughters, ‘Give me everything that belongs to her,’ and they said that they had nothing that belonged to me. To the slaves as they were being beaten he said, ‘What did she take from my house?’ Under torture they said, ‘She has taken nothing that belongs to you; all your property is safe.’ He swore in the presence of the bishops and his own brothers, ‘from now on I shall not hide all my keys from her and I shall not attack her and insult her from now on.’ He made a marriage agreement, and after his contract and his oaths he hid the keys from me again. When I went to the church in Sambatho, he also shut the outside doors and said about me ‘Why did you go to church?’ He made many abusive comments to my face, and further insulted me by speaking through his nose . . . And he kept on saying that ‘a month from now I’m going to take a mistress for myself.’”

Questions: Why is this woman pursuing a legal case against her husband? What do we learn about the rights of women and their social status in Egypt during this period?