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Women and Property

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Deborah Lyons
Raymond Westbrook

Women and Sacred Property: The Evidence from Greek Inscriptions

Diane Harris-Cline

Any citizen... shall have the right to dispose of his property however he wishes if he has no legitimate male offspring, unless he is not of sound mind as a result of one of these things: madness, old age, drugs, disease, the influence of a woman, or unless he is constrained by bonds. - Demosthenes 46.14.

It is widely recognized that ancient Greek women were not generally included in the public sphere, especially in classical Athens, the source of so much of our evidence. The one striking exception is the realm of the sacred, where women could appear in public, hold positions of high dignity, and participate as principals in rituals and ceremonies. As Roger Just has said, “The participation of mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters of Athenian citizens was vital to the religious life of the city. They took part in the rites and cults of individual households (*oikoi*), of the various divisions of the state – the demes, phratries, tribes, and *gene* – and of the polis itself” (Just 1989: 23). When women donated gifts to temples or contributed to public funds for building temples, it was possible that their names would be inscribed on stone and remembered for all time. My question here whether women truly owned the objects they dedicated, either those used in daily life or those obtained specifically for giving to the gods.

Women came to marriage with their dowry and inherited property but all these assets belonged to and were managed by males. The dowry was a transfer of wealth from the woman’s father to the groom, to be returned to the father if the marriage was dissolved. Although women could inherit property from a man who died intestate, Isaios 10.10 tells us that “It is impossible for a child to make a will. For the law explicitly forbids a child or a woman to contract for the disposal of anything of value above one medimnos of barley.” Aristophanes *Ekklesiazusae* 1024-5 with commentary by scholiasts supports this view (Sealey 1989: 44-45 with evidence). While the evidence is not all that strong that women could not conduct financial business, it still provides a benchmark by which to judge the expense of dedications in metal to the gods. Women did own their personal clothing and jewelry, referred to in orations of Demosthenes as “*himatia kai chrysie*” (Isaios 2.9, 8.8, Demosthenes 41.27028, Demosthenes 45.28). The clothes and jewelry were referred to collectively as the “maternal property,” *ta metroia* (Demosthenes 36.32). If they did own their personal items, the *phernē*, they can be said to have dedicated such items as rightful legal owners, independently of male kin.

It is generally assumed that except for personal items a woman possessed, everything in her home was the actual property of her *kyrios* or guardian. This was a world where the marriage ceremony consists of the new husband and the bride's father shaking hands. A woman in Athens could not own property, and was practically an object herself. If the husband died she generally vacated the house and returned to her father's house or to that of his nearest living kin.

In considering the intricacies of women's relation to property in classical Athens, I find useful the distinction between a positive and negative account of ownership. A positive account defines the owner as the individual who possesses the authority to use and give away property. But a negative account is perhaps a more useful test: the individual can be said to own the property if all other people are denied access to that property. "A negative account treats ownership not primarily as a relation between a person and a thing, but as a relation between persons, namely between one person, the owner, and all other persons" (Sealey 1989: 47-48). Following Sealey, I will use this test in my discussion of the treasures dedicated by women to Greek temples in the Classical period.

In Demosthenes 45.28, dated to 348 BCE, the speaker Apollodorus lists the items he includes in the dowry which a certain Archippe brought to Phormion: "A talent from Peparthos, a talent from here, a lodging house worth 100 minai, female slaves, the gold jewelry, and the other things of hers." Raphael Sealey notes that the orator is trying to lump the maternal possessions in with the dowry for the benefit of his client, but that normally her possessions were regarded as distinct from the dowry (Sealey: 26-27). Rites of passage for girls and women included making dedications at sanctuaries, and these gifts needed to come from the individual to have efficacy. For example, prior to a marriage ceremony, the girl was expected to give away her toys to the temple of Artemis, and to make a dedication of her hair. In some places she offered her belt (*zōnē*) to Athena Apatouria.

Working Greek women such as bread-sellers or flute-girls did trade in the markets and earn money, but whether they had rights over their wages or were constrained to turn them over to a male relative is completely unknown. Literary references to working women occur at Aristophanes *Frogs* 857, *Wasps* 496, and Pseudo-Demosthenes 57.30 but these passages tell us little about their economic and legal rights.

Women held the highest posts in the ritual events of Athens and fulfilled an important ritual or sacred function, without which the religious life and culture of Athens would suffer. Priestesses could acquire property as payment for their offices. Sara Aleshire compiled a list of the sixteen women whose names are still known who served as priestesses of Athena (Aleshire 1994: 336). They all appear on inscriptions dating from 430 to 18 BCE. The priestess of Athena Nike received pay of fifty drachmae and the hides of the sacrificial animals (IG I², 24). An early fourth century law gives the Priestesses of Hera, Demeter Chloe, and Dionysus Anthios portions of the offerings, consisting of the hides from sacrificial animals, meat, wheat, honey, oil and firewood (IG II², 1356). These priestesses were given financial authority to purchase and equip the sanctuary and festivals, and were held accountable – they could be fined fifty drachmae for extravagance (IG II², 1328).

Contributions to public monuments were made by Athenian women (or their guardians). The earliest recorded occurrence is from the fourth century BCE, when women contribute to the building fund for the temple of Apollo at Delphi after the earthquake of 373 BCE. A stele dated to 180 BCE is inscribed with the name of contributors to some unknown building, including forty women (IG II², 2332). All of these donors gave either five or ten drachmae, and men and women gave both sums. The names listed on this stele reveal family affiliations; individuals donate on behalf of their mothers, sons, brothers, wives, daughters: “Theophilos of Erchia and on behalf of his daughter and his wife, ten drachmae” (lines 317-318). “Menedemos of Kydathenaieus on behalf of his wife Hegeso and his son Archon and his daughter Kleia, ten drachmae” (lines 53-56). No woman’s name appears alone or without a male relative. When the theater of Dionysus underwent renovations in the mid-second century BCE, thirteen women are named as having made contributions (IG II², 2334). But it is clear from the way their names are listed that, again, the sum came from the male in the family – “Hagnousios on behalf of himself and his father Aphrodisios and his mother Euxene and his brother Gorgios, 80 drachmae. Dionysios son of Olympiodoros of Lamptreus on his own behalf and on behalf of his wife Sosibia and his daughter Dionysia, 30 drachmae...” (lines 50-57). Family units contributed to the buildings but the female names are listed only in relation to the male head of household.

Inventories of treasures kept in temples in many cases provide the names of the dedicants. The treasurers of the temples kept inventories and provided the accountability for the democracies [unclear]. Inscribed inventories are the end product of a process of accountability, whereby the treasurers provide a larger public body, in the case of the Athenians, the Boule, with the evidence of having fulfilled their duties without graft or fraud. The process of accounting may be subsumed under the rubric of administration, and as such, is contained within the economic branch of political knowledge. Protagoras, in Plato’s work of the same name, defines his own teaching as such: “What they learn is sound judgment (*euboulia*) about their own affairs – how best to manage (*arista dioikein*) their own households – and about the affairs of the city – how they may be most competent to handle its business both in speech and in action” (318e). The term *dioikein*, “to run a household” is significant here: the Greeks conceived of the temple as the house of the god or goddess and, consequently, the treasurers as housekeepers.

In another Platonic passage, this time from the *Meno*, we see Socrates helping *Meno* with his definition of the term *arête*: “Were you not saying that the *arête* of a man is to administer his city well (*eu dioikein*), the *arête* of a woman to do the same for her household?” (73a6). Aristotle theorized that the *polis* originated on the model of the *oikos* (*Ethics* V, *Politics* I) in which the public *oikonomia* is based on personal estate management – the *polis* being an aggregate of households. Plato, in the *Statesman*, saw little difference between the efficient administration of a household and that of a small sized city. “One science covers all these spheres, be it called royal science, political science, or household management: economics” (259b-c). The *polis* and the *oikos* can be seen as parallel worlds, differing only in scale. Thus the *oikos* (the family economic unit) can be used as a model to describe the temple economy. This is precisely what makes Aristophanes’s comedy *Lysistrata* so funny and at the same time powerful: the Athenians recognize the parallel economies of the *polis* and the *oikos*.

In a private dwelling, precious treasures might be kept in a bedroom or storeroom (*thalamos*). Xenophon (*Oec.* 9.2 ff.) says, "...the rooms are constructed in such a way that they will serve as the most convenient places to contain the things that will be kept in them. So the rooms themselves invited what was suitable for them. Thus the bedroom (*thalamus*), because it was in the safest place, invited the most valuable bedding and furniture..." In the Akropolis inventories, the rooms inside the temple we call the Parthenon were given labels: the Proneos, the Hekatompedon, the Parthenon (proper), and the Opisthodomos. The term Parthenon, meaning "women's chamber or bedroom", may explain the economy of this temple. The Parthenon was imagined to be Athena's bedroom, in which she kept her most precious belongings, assisted by her servants, the *tamiai tes Athenaias*. When Demetrios Poliorketes took over the city at the end of the fourth century, he moved into the Parthenon to live with his "sister" Athena. He felt free to use the treasures and melted down many of the precious metals to pay his mercenary soldiers.

Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* describes the way an *oikos* is managed, and specifically mentions treasurers or housekeepers (*tamiai*) who inventory the family's precious metals and valuables, take them out for feasts and parties, remember to whom they gave them, and return them to their proper places after use. He states specifically (*Oec.* 9.6-10):

After we had gone through these rooms we sorted the contents by type. We first began by putting together the things we used for sacrifices. After that we separated the fancy clothing that women wore at festivals, the men's clothing for festivals and war, bedding for the women's quarters, bedding for the men's quarters, women's shoes, and men's shoes.... And we divided all this equipment into two sets, those that are used daily, and those used only for feasts... When we divided all the contents by types, we carried each thing to its proper place... Whatever we use for festivals or for entertaining guests or at rare intervals we handed over to the housekeeper (*tamias*); and when we had shown her where they belong, and had counted and made an inventory of each thing, we told her to give every member of the household what he or she required, but to remember what she had given to each of them and when she got it back, to return it to the place from which she takes things of that kind.

In a similar process, inventories of the temple treasures on the Akropolis were made after the great Panathenaic festival, to ensure that the valuables removed from the temple were returned to Athena's houses after the ceremonies. The board of ten treasurers served the goddess by keeping her house in order. Annual inventories were kept from 434 to 304 BCE.

Income flowed to temples from similar sources as those for an *oikos* in ancient Greece: land rental, loans with interest, and gifts (dedications). The inventories list items kept inside the temples, and dedicants' names are sometimes attached to objects in

treasury lists, and these do include men and women. Here we observe that the dedicants are agents, actors who offer their gifts to the temple, the passive recipient, who accepts the gift in a reciprocal exchange for good fortune. Women offer gifts here to either give thanks for good fortune, or hoping for good luck in return.

Inventories are preserved for the Athenian Acropolis (the Parthenon, Erechtheion, and the Chalkotheke), at Delos, at Eleusis, at the Asklepieion on the South Slope of the Acropolis, and for the temple of Artemis at Brauron. Items given by individuals come in an extraordinary array of types: musical instruments, golden or silver wreaths, statues made of gold, metal vessels of various shapes and sizes, sacrificial implements, incense-burners, arms and weapons, furniture and boxes of jewelry, and so on. Most items are given by individuals who would otherwise remain anonymous to us; some are by political figures Lysander of Sparta, and even Roxane, wife of Alexander the Great, is mentioned for giving gold necklaces, a gold neckband, and a ritual vessel called a rhyton, appearing in the inventories for 305/4 BCE (IG II², 1492 lines 51-63). We will now review the types and quantities of objects given in these temples by women dedicants.

For the Parthenon, individual donor names began to be listed in the inventories of the early fourth century. Of the 23 named individuals listed in the inventory just for 398 BCE, half are women. All together we have 73 named donors in the fourth century who gave gifts to Athena that were recorded, and most characteristically, they all seem to have been locals: less than ten percent of the names belong to foreigners. In the Erechtheion, of ten silver phialai (cups), eight were dedicated by women.

For the sanctuary of Asklepios on the South Slope, jewelry and small metal vessels were the gifts usually given by women, while the men provided most of the cult ritual items and medical dedications, as well as the wreaths made of precious metals like those found in the Parthenon. Medical dedications include cauterizing implements, probes, lancets, a cupping instrument, and two physicians's writing tablets (see Aleshire 1989, 44). The anatomical votives (*typoi*) are dedicated with almost equal frequency by men and women. None of the categories is confined exclusively to men or women, however (Aleshire 1989, 46). The inventories of the Asklepieion extended from 341/0 to c. 145 BCE, but include gifts which had been dedicated in earlier years (IG II², 1532-1552). Women gave gifts of money, sometimes tied up in a cloth or offered in a small dish, as for example "Klearete: on a plate (*pinax*): 40 drachmae" (IG II², 1533 line 21). Notice that this is actually a fairly large sum of money. Two wine pitchers, three cups and a little tripod were also given by women. Jewelry and clothing were dedicated, including a bronze necklace with an ornament of jasper and gold, and three pairs of women's shoes. Among the *typoi*, women gave a gilded leg and a pair of gold eyes as well as a pair of eyes made of silver (IG II², 1532-1539). The most complete stele, inscribed on both sides during the second half of the third century BCE, includes the greatest variety of anatomical votives given by women, made of silver, gold, or clay (IG II², 1534). These include the entire body (*soma*), or just the trunk and thighs, or the legs, the nipples, a silver hand and a hand made of gold, silver, and marble, the fingers, the throat, face, a pair of gold ears, the mouth, teeth, gold and silver eyes, the jaws, and heads of hair. A mother named Myrrhine offered for herself and her child a representation of the female body and a small anklet (IG II², 1534 line 78). One item reads "Phile, to Asklepios, on behalf of her children", *huper ton teknon* (IG II², 1532 line 79); another

dedication reads, “Philostrate dedicated a molded *typos* (i.e., clay) and a hand on her own behalf (*huper autes*) on a plate” (IG II², 1534 line 65). Aleshire observes that women dedicated 51.39 percent of the objects where dedicants’ names are known (1989, 45).

This brings us to the larger issue: who paid for these items? The kinds of donated objects particular to healing cults need to be assessed in light of the idea of property: presumably no one has on hand at home, such a storehouse of anatomical votives, so they would have been purchased or made shortly before the time of dedication. The male guardian would have given the money and perhaps even made the purchase in the marketplace for his wife, who would then take it to the sanctuary.

Nicole Loraux has rightly observed that weaving and woven products are part of a woman’s economy, to be made and undone, exchanged and hidden, created and destroyed by their own hands (Loraux 1993: 175 ff.). Clothes are useful as weapons of seduction, or modes of competition; they are also the capital for gaining prestige, a method to conceal identity, symbols of purity and filth, and so on. Rites of passage are associated with special fabrics; even the moment of birth is marked, as Hesychius records the custom of announcing the sex of the newborn by hanging on the door an olive branch for a boy, and a tuft of wool for a girl (Loraux 1993: 157). Ribbons, no doubt woven by women, adorned tombstones and athletes’ heads. The range of symbolic functions for woven goods is endless. We shall now turn our attention to examples from elsewhere in Attica and other Greek sanctuaries

The inscriptions from Brauron in northeastern Attica, dating to the fourth century BCE, provide the most abundant evidence of dedications by women (IG II², 1514-31). At Brauron, Artemis served as the goddess of young girls and women. The priestesses were women, and the temple served a constituency of women, so it is in this sanctuary where we might hope to find evidence of women owning the property they dedicated. Numerous marble stelai bearing inventories have been excavated, but not all are published. Those that are available for study include a wealth of information on the range of votives and the names of worshippers. The majority of offerings are personal ornaments and clothing – but can we presume that these items belonged as property to the women who dedicated them? Jewelry and clothing are part of the maternal possessions (*ta metroia*) and thus we might expect that women were free to give these away from their personal possessions. At first glance, the lists from Brauron seem to include mainly women’s clothing, but then there appears this entry: “cloak, male, Argonias dedicated (*himation andreion*, IG II², 1514 line 47) and we are back to wondering if the man at home permitted the woman to bring the garment to the temple. Other items dedicated by women at this sanctuary are less personal, such as miniature silver shields (*aspidiskai*), incense-burners, and small tripods made of bronze, silver, and gold. These might be part of the furnishings of the house, which cannot be strictly said to belong to the maternal property (*ta metroia*). While textiles predominate at this sanctuary, and can be presumed to have been manufactured by women and thus owned by them, the metal objects were given either from the *metroia*, the personal paraphernalia including jewelry and ornaments, or from the dowry perhaps, or else only with her husband or father’s express permission.

These Brauronian inventories provide fascinating descriptions of woven materials used for making chitons or himations, including descriptions of colors (frog-green,

crocus-colored, grey-blue, fabric (hemp, linen), and shape of sleeve (double-winged). One detailed item reads, “a short-cut small dress (*chiton*), Kalippe dedicated, multicolored and embroidered with writing” (IG II², 1515 lines 2-3). Girdles, belts, headbands and a veil are also listed. We are reminded of the literary fragment by Nossis, a Hellenistic female poet, who composed a couplet which has survived as her fragment 6: “It seems that Aphrodite took with joy this hair band, an offering of Samytha – it’s skillfully worked and smells sweetly of nectar, with which the goddess too anoints fair Adonis” (Rayor 1991, 134). Women could manufacture dedications which they could then presumably offer without male permission. Another poem by Nossis (frag. 4) recalls a dedication to Hera of a home-made cloth: “O Honored Hera, who often descending from heaven view your incense-scented Lakinian shrine, take the linen robe that Kleocha’s daughter Theophilis wove for you with her noble child Nossis” (Rayor 1991: 134).

At Olympia, married women were said to have the obligation of weaving a special peplos for Hera. These women, called “the Sixteen,” had a special building for working at the looms, to make this fine garment as a gift to the goddess of matrimony (Pausanias V.16.2). And young Athenian girls between age seven and eleven, selected from noble families, had the privilege of making the great peplos for Athena on the Acropolis for the Panathenaic festival. This work was conducted under supervision of trainers and effectively served as a kind of school in the arts of weaving and embroidery (Pausanias I.27.3). From an inscription of about 100 BCE this custom had expanded to include over one-hundred girls called the *Ergastinai* who received this training and got to see the product of their efforts prominently displayed on the Acropolis in the public eye. Later in life we may presume these women, now highly skilled, could make precious weavings to dedicate to goddesses when appropriate. Pausanias mentions that the women of Patrae in the northern Peloponnese sold garments of fine linen which they made by themselves to support their families, and he specifically mentions headbands and garments made of “*bussos*” (Paus. VII.21.7). Pliny says that the *linum byssinum* served especially for women’s garments and was “worth its weight in gold” (Pliny, Nat. Hist. XIX.1.4). If this was even close to being literally true, we can count women’s garments and cloths dedicated at sanctuaries as comparable in value to men’s dedications.

The Eleusinian inscribed inventories provide fewer individual’s names, but of the few included, some are female (IG II², 1540-1552). For an example, we get mention of “a gold choker and ring, which Xenokleia dedicated, weight of this: six drachmae four and a half obols” (IG II², 1544, lines 14-15).

In the fourth century inventories were made of the Temple of the Athenians on the island of Delos (IG II², 1636-1653). Most items are not attributed to specific individuals, but when they are, they tend to be men. Just two women are named, who give coins: “Aristophile, a woman of Amorgos, gave 11 Attic drachmae. Symmachia of Melos dedicated three Delian obols...” (IG II², 1636 lines 29-30). Incidentally, one item in the Delian inventory reads, “A silver small male statue (*andriskos*), holding in his hand two drachmae made in Athens...” (IG II², 1643 lines 22-23, restored based on a similar entry in a Delian inventory published in BCH 10 (1886) 461). We can imagine a male in a pose such as the Marathon Boy, holding his palm extremely flat, could serve at a sanctuary as a sort of collection plate, allowing visitors to the sanctuary to deposit coins. By extension,

the Korai on the Acropolis, with their offerings in hand or missing, might have also served as such. Aristophile or Symmachia may have deposited their money in just such a hand, which the priests or treasurers then removed and inventoried to allow the next visitors to do the same.

A series of inventories dated to circa 330 BCE are preserved for silver cups given by freed slaves, usually of a standard value of 100 drachmae (IG II², 1553-1578). The cups are listed with the name of the dedicant and the deme where they live. No one can say who paid for these cups, the master or the freed slave, but many are given in the names of women. Sometimes the name of the slave owner is included, which might suggest that they were the ones who paid for the cup. A few examples will suffice: “Demetria living in the deme Melite, freed from Echedemos in Kephissia” (IG II², 1576 lines 29-31); “Phanokleia living in Melite freed from Kallistratos son of Kallisthenes of Acharnai.” (IG II², 1576 lines 65-68). The system of listing is peculiar: the names and dedicated cups appear in no particular order, not organized by deme or owner or date when they entered the treasury. Men’s names and women’s names are intermingled consecutively. We must presume that these silver cups were haphazardly accumulating until the religious reorganization took place under the leadership of Lycurgus the orator, who may have asked that they be inventoried.

The question remains, to what extent were these any of these gifts freely given by women as objects of their own possession? Did they need their guardian’s permission or help in making the dedication? Literary evidence suggests that women were expected to make dedications and did so independently. To cite just two examples, we can begin with *Iliad* 6.87-90, 304-312, an account of Hecuba and the women at Troy who gather to offer a *peplos* to the goddess Athena. The priestess Theano offers the *peplos* on the lap of the goddess’s statue, but she refuses it, boding ill for the Trojans. We note however that the *peplos* is a woven garment manufactured by the women, and thus can be said to belong to them as rightful owners, to give away without express male permission. At the other extreme of the Classical period, in the fourth century Herondas’s *Mimiambus* 4 narrates the visit of two women to the temple of Asklepios, to offer their dedications. They browse and comment on the great array of gifts already present in the sanctuary, then pray that theirs will be accepted favorably by the god. In both passages, no men are present or required.

In supervising the accumulation of wealth in temples, the *tamiai* served as housekeepers, watching over the possessions of gods and goddesses as if they were the owners of the property. In the imaginary world of the divinities, women were able to possess property in both the negative and positive sense: no one else could use the property without divine permission, and the god’s property limits extended to the edge of the *temenos*, a boundary beyond which items belonging to the divinity could only be borrowed, not sold and never permanently removed.

Large numbers of women were able to dedicate items that ranged from a rag of cloth to a golden statue in temples across Greece. Once given they belonged to the divinity and were cherished as possessions. Women were also able to donate money for rebuilding temples and have their own names inscribed on accounts and inventories. Such opportunities for public honor were seized. Women presided over festivals as priestesses, and served in highly respected roles at festivals such as the Greater and Lesser mysteries

of Eleusis and the Panathenaia on the Akropolis. Plato viewed the practice of giving gifts to the gods as a kind of financial transaction. If this is the case, women were certainly involved in such commerce with the gods. But the gifts cannot with any certainty be said to have been solely and exclusively the property of the women. On the contrary, from this review of the epigraphical evidence we must reach one conclusion: from golden vessels to their own handmade tapestries, women did not truly own property in the sense we understand it today.

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