Greek Women, Power and the Body:
From Fieldwork on Cults Connected with the Female Sphere Towards a
Deconstruction of Male Ideologies, Modern and Ancient

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Abstract

Based on studies in ancient Greek sources, mainly produced by men, combined with results from fieldwork carried out on contemporary Greek religious festivals, a comparison is made with similar ancient festivals through an analysis of the fertility-cult, which is important in the festivals. This is a useful way to try to consider the female part of society, since women are the central performers of the actual cult that plays an important role within the official male value-system. This is the value-system, from which the festivals and the society that they reflect, traditionally have been considered. The absence of the female value-system leaves previous analyses onesided and incomplete. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis requires the female point of view to be included. Hence, the paper argues for the importance of changing our approach when working with ancient culture. Taking account of the female sphere, which still exists in Greece, provides us with a basis for considering the female part of society. But, by so doing, the official male perspective, which is similar to the Western male perspective generally applied within Greek studies, has to be deconstructed. So, by arguing for the importance of not using the general male model when presenting Greek women, the article tries to deconstruct the male ideologies “from within”.

Keywords: Modern Greece, Ancient Greece, Women, Gender, Gendered Value-systems, Religious Festivals, Fertility-cult, Rituals

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1. Introduction

Many studies have been occupied with women and the body in ancient Greece. Most researchers claim that women were unfree and dominated by men. The female body was “appropriated” by male philosophers. Further, Ancient Athenian Democracy was based on the appropriation of the female combined with the subjugation of women. The male control of woman was the cornerstone, the social and cultural prerequisite for the construction of civilization, as presented in Aeschylus’, the *Orestia*, a trilogy, which culminated in a “victory of the patriarchal”, according to M. Arthur.1) Even if women were conducting important religious festivals and rituals, most researchers claim that their activities were performed under male dominance, since women were circumscribed and constrained by domesticity. Particularly from the archaic period, their religious rituals were curbed.2)

The following article argues that these statements from Western female scholars need to be nuanced. It is important to change our approach when working with ancient culture. This may be done, by using a comparative anthropological approach. The article demonstrates how this may be concretised by conducting fieldwork on religious festivals in present-day’s Greece. They are compared with similar ancient festivals through an analysis of the fertility-cult, which is important in the festivals. Based on the importance of this cult, the article tries to consider the female part of society, since women are the central performers of the actual cult which is of focal importance within the official and male value-system, a value-system from which the festivals and the society that they reflect, traditionally have been considered and which therefore has to be supplied by a female point of view. By taking account of the so-called female sphere, which still exists in the Mediterranean society generally and in Greece particularly, we may also learn a useful way to try to consider the female part of society. But, by so doing the official male perspective, which is very similar to the Western male perspective generally applied within Greek studies, has to be deconstructed.3)

3) However, the limited space does not permit a detailed demonstration. The following argument is therefore only a very roughly suggestion. The article is based on a paper presented at the conference, *Religion on the Borders: New Challenges in the Academic Study*.