

Polyandry in Spartan Society

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Abstract

This paper reexamines a controversial dimension of gender relations in ancient Greece: the practice of polyandry in Spartan society. In this context, polyandry denotes a social institution that legitimized married women's participation in multiple sexual relationships, both within and beyond marriage. Drawing on sources such as Xenophon, Polybius, and Plutarch, the study argues that this practice was not an anomaly, as often assumed, but a socially sanctioned mechanism serving the State's reproductive and eugenic aims—particularly in unions between younger women and older men. Evidence from textual analysis suggests that the participation of aging men, often past reproductive capacity, was sustained through social and psychological pressure rather than personal choice. Such pressure, it is argued, was exerted within the *syssitia* (common dining groups)—homosocial spaces where men's civic identity took precedence over domestic life. By situating polyandry within broader systems of gender regulation, the paper shows that although Spartan women enjoyed greater autonomy than their counterparts elsewhere in Greece, their sexuality was instrumentalized to meet demographic and political imperatives. Over time, the practice appears to have evolved to serve personal and economic motives as well—from protecting unmarried men (confirmed bachelors) from social sanctions to consolidating property among elites. Methodologically, the study combines historical, philological, and sociological approaches with insights from gender theory and anthropology. Through this lens, it offers a new interpretive synthesis that redefines polyandry not as deviance but as a structured mechanism of State control over familial and sexual life characteristic of Sparta's proto-totalitarian order.

Keywords: eugenics; gender relations; reproductive politics; state control