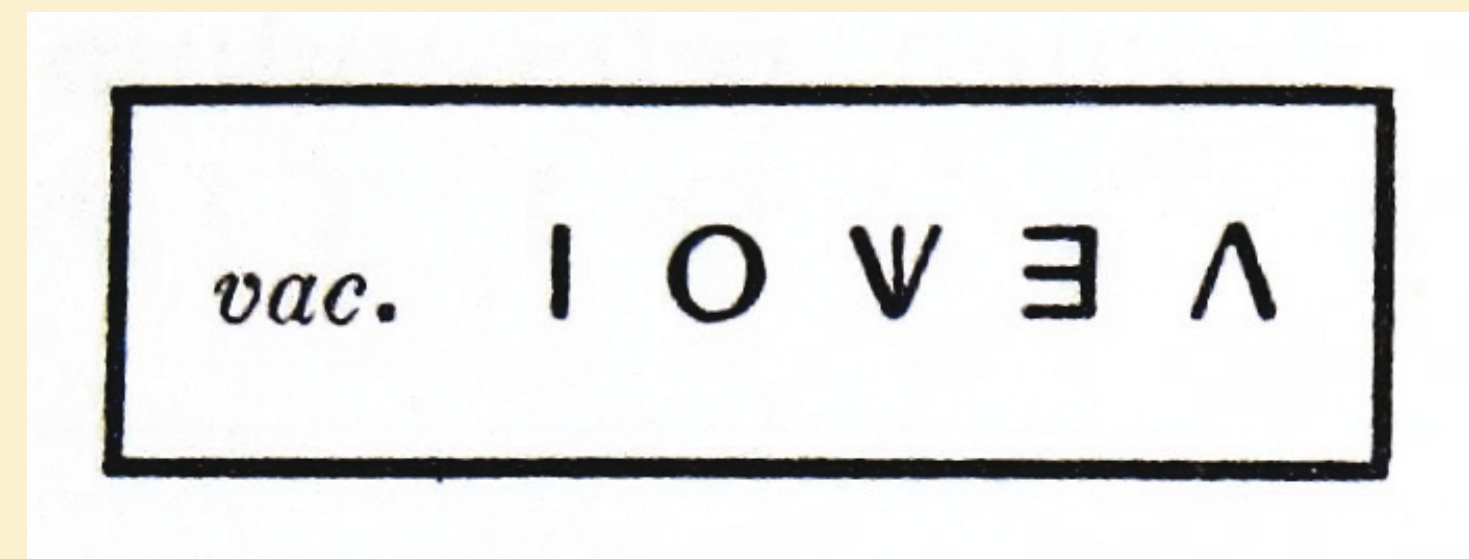




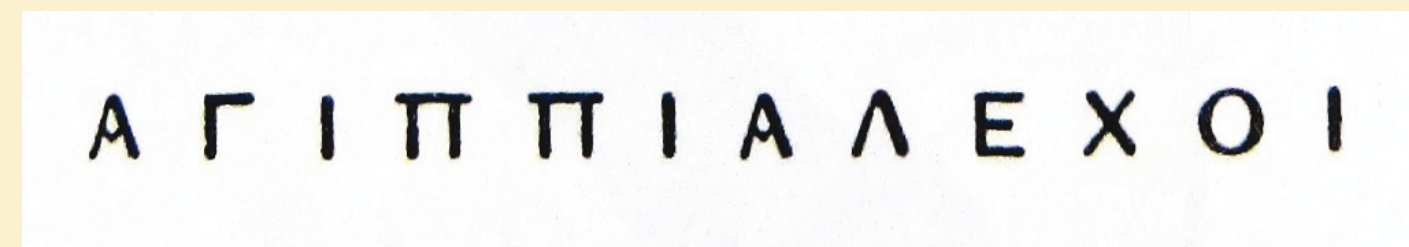
Spartan women who died on labor considered civic heroines: the epigraphical evidence

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[IG V.1 713](#)

[ἡ δέῖνα —] λεχόι. vacat



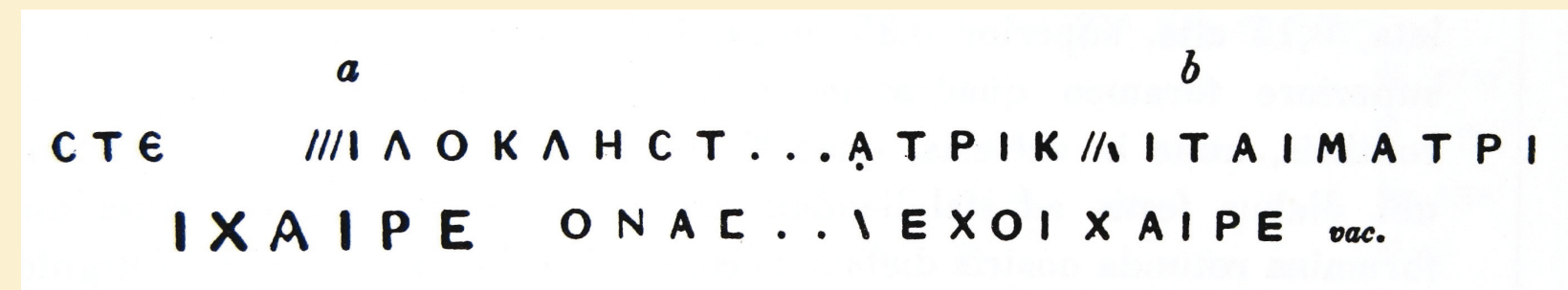
[IG V.1 714](#)

Ἀγυπία λεχόι.



[IG V.1 1277](#)

Λ[.]ΟΙΑΠΕ
[— —]ς. Περύλα λεχόι.
Πραζίων χαίρε.



[IG V.1 1128](#)

col. I.1 [— — χαίρ]ετε.
[— — — —]η χαίρε.
col. II.3 [Φ]ίλοκλης τ[ῶι π]ατρὶ καὶ τῇ μητρὶ
Ὀνασ[ία] λεχόι

Women status

The general social status of women in Ancient Greece is currently under discussion. Few females counted on a tomb, in fact pronouncing their name or writing it publicly was considered as a degradation of their prestige and reputation. But not all the poleis had the same rules and the same concept of Status.

Discussion is even more complex concerning Spartan women, considered to be the most beautiful and liberal of all Greece, since they practiced sport and were educated in order to give birth to Spartan citizens (Ducat 2006: 223–248). In Sparta, women were outside their houses and had properties, which shocked their contemporaries (Cartledge 2002: 149–151) and have a role in politic (Bradford 1986). They could receive a dowry and also a heritage, which permitted them to have more power and influence in political business (Hodkinson 2000)

Spartan mourning costumes related to honor

Plutarch (Lyk. 27.3–4.) tells us that Sparta permitted to have a tomb only to those warriors who had died in battle ... and to those women died in sanctity. Steiris (2009: 755–771) valued the importance of death attitudes in Spartan society because only kings had ritual ceremonies and achieved some recognition, so it must have been a great honor. Royal burials were exceptional and were accompanied by a collective mourning (Petropoulou 2009: 583–612). Some recent Studies (Dillon 2007) have reinterpreted the Plutarch text as “women who died on labor”. A general identification between death in battle with colleagues and death alone on labor was popular in classical sources (Eur. Med., 248–250) as a comparison between male and female duties with society. But this is a general topoi in literature, but not a proved reality. Maybe we cannot affirm what was exactly the meaning of this passage but, like Papapostolou (2009: 495) said, we are in a society where a good death seems more important.

So, the problem is not solved only with Dillon discussion. Vacancies in literary texts are not so simple to solve. Our perception changes substantially if these women were priestess of some cult or simply matouer of Spartan citizens with no other condition. Apparently Dillon’s reconstitution based on other sources is logic,

and must be considered a capital interpretation but must be qualified as well. We also have the narration of Herodotus about the construction of tombs after the battle of Plateia (9.85, 9.71, 9.72, 9.53) in which there are some references to sacred. Authors like Papastolou (2009: 498) think that the text should not be changed because in the civic ideology of Sparta, giving birth is sacred. Sparta called their maidens before marriage Parthenia of Alkman, which has been identified as a linkage between marriage and nurturing as sacred civic values. Pavlides (2009: 569) showed how heroic cult is a way to consolidate social values in a community. When a civic community celebrated a triumph in a common way, social ties strengthened, of which the importance of heroic cult is possibly the best sample in Sparta. Collective burials of warriors and dedications to single soldiers died in battle are understood in this way but, were also women in the same category?

Epigraphical evidence

Sources are not clear and epigraphy shows us scarce evidence. In the XIX century some epigraphs were found.

They were dated in the Hellenistic age and are clearly related to women (IG,V, I, 713, 714, 1128 and IG V,1 1277). Some of them were founded in secondary places (713 in Aghios Nikolaos, a church in a perioecic territory) but were related to the series (IG,V, I, 699–712) dedicated to warriors died in battle. In all of them, there was only a woman’s name written, associated to the verb λεχόι: “on labor”.

Now we have some more information but we should point out some aspects. The three inscriptions we count with do not offer a great deal of information, but we must take two aspects into account. Warriors death on battle do not represent a big figure and Spartan territory has not been excavated in extension. At this moment we only know the agora, in which burning people was prohibited for a superstitious terror (Plut. Lyc. 27. 1–2) and ancient excavations of some temples (Artemis Orthia, Amyklaion, Menelaion and some inner sectors, but mostly roman remainings). Modern city has been prospected but not excavated until nowadays. So we cannot affirm that we know Spartan territory very deeply. So, there is a real possibility for some inscriptions to be currently hidden.

Then we must consider the chronology. Inscriptions date back to the Hellenistic age, coinciding with the moment in which classical sources tells us that Spartan women had richness. Not only in the royal family, the mother and grandmother of Agis (Plut, Agis IV,1) ἀλλὰ σχεδὸν ἅπαντας ὅσοι μετ’ Ἀγησίλαον τὸν μέγαν ἐβασίλευσαν, ὥστε μηδέπω γεγονὼς εἰκοστὸν ἔτος, ἐντεθραμμένος δὲ πλούτοις καὶ τρυφαίς γυναικῶν, τῆς τε μητρὸς Ἀγησιστράτας καὶ τῆς μάμης Ἀρχιδαμίας, αἱ πλείστα χρήματα Λακεδαιμονίων ἐκέκτηντο but also other women of the elite that had power enough to be reticent about the reform. Plutarch says that Spartan richness were in hands of women (Plut, Agis VII, 5) and they did not want to share their luxuries because it was the main reason of their dignity.

ἰεβοῦλετο μὲν οὖν ὁ Λεωνίδας τοῖς πλουσίοις βοηθεῖν, δεδῶς δὲ τὸν δημονέπιθυμοῦντα τῆς μεταβολῆς οὐδὲν ἀντέπραττε φανερώς, λάθρα δὲ τὴν πράξιν ἐξίτηι κακουργεν καὶ διαφθεῖρειν ἐντυγχάνων τοῖς ἄρχουσι καὶ διαβάλλων τὸν ἄγιν ὡς τυραννίδος μισθὸν τοῖς πένησι τὰ τῶν πλουσίων προτείνοντα, καὶ γῆς μεταδόσσει καὶ χρεὼν ἀφέσσει πολλοὺς ὀνούμενον ἑαυτῷ δορυφόρους, οὐτῇ Σπάρτῃ πολίτας.

It is not that we are accepting Plutarch’s view without any comment. Hodkinson (1992: 25–38) studied the evolution of inheritance in women’s hands in some generations with a computer program and determined that it was not the reason of oliganthrophy. We cannot assume that women were the main reason of Spartan decline but it seems logical that they were perceived as rich and powerful women. So, during Hellenistic times they could have money and power enough to have a tomb under some circumstances that were considered heroic for the community.

Conclusions

In conclusion we can accept that there is a link between a male death on battle and a female death on labour and Sparta was a society which emphasised those roles. We cannot completely accept Dillon’s reconstruction but its view is very interesting in the way he points Spartan women related to sacred civic ideals. Apparently, in Hellenistic times Spartans population received a tomb in those situations, but the information is scarce. We could not assume the same situation than classical times, at least not in the same amount, because women

achieved higher wealth. Finally, we can confirm a literacy topic that responded to a reality and learn a bit more about Spartan female status.

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