

Ellen MILLENDER

The "Manly" Women of Hellenistic Sparta: Wealth, Kingship, and Diadochic Influence on Female Political Power

In his account of Plutarch's biographies feature several politically active Spartan women, such as queen Archidamia, grandmother of Agis IV, who spearheaded Spartan women's involvement in the resistance to Pyrrhus's invasion in 272 by opposing the *gerousia's* plan to send the women away to Crete (*Pyrrh.* 27.4, 6-9). Archidamia and her daughter, Agesistrata, the wealthiest of the Lacedaemonians (*Agis* 4.1), later supported Agis IV's reforms financially. Plutarch claims that Agesistrata also marshaled support for her son from among the pool of clients, friends, and debtors that contributed to her influence in public affairs (*Agis* 6.7).

Scholars have attributed these and other Spartan women's political involvement to their wealth (Moss [1991], 148; Powell [1999], 411-12) or to the easing of restrictions on female public activity (Pomeroy [1989]). However, the female political influence described by Plutarch was neither wholly new nor simply the product of Spartan women's growing economic power and freedom in the Hellenistic period. This paper argues that Sparta's royal houses created the context for female political power through their practice of dynastic politics. As early as the mid-sixth century, both houses attempted to increase their status at the expense of one another and other elite families through marriage, inheritance, and political patronage. Dynastic politics enabled female members of the royal families, by virtue of their wealth and birth, to acquire political and economic value that they occasionally translated into active interference in the political realm.

Herodotus provides an early example of this in his portrayal of Gorgo as an informal political advisor to her father, Cleomenes I, and her husband, Leonidas I (5.51, 7.239.4; cf. 7.205.1). Xenophon (*Ages.* 9.6) and Plutarch (*Ages.* 20.1; cf. *Mor.* 212b) reveal that later Agesilaus II encouraged his sister Cynisca's participation in the Olympic four-horse chariot race to undermine other Spartiates' use of equestrian victories to gain prestige and power. Theopompus provides further evidence of royal female influence in his account of the Phocians' success in bribing queen Deinicha to persuade her husband, Archidamus III, to bring them reinforcements (*FGrH* 115 F 312).

Royal Spartan women of the Hellenistic period entered the political arena in greater numbers and to greater effect, partly because of the continuing concentration of landed wealth in the hands of women (cf. Plut. *Agis* 7.5) that shifted the sexual balance of power in their favor, but even more because of the adaptation of the Spartan dyarchy to a political culture shaped by Alexander's Successors. Elements of Hellenistic, autocratic kingship appeared as early as the reign of Areus I, who allied Sparta with Ptolemy II of Egypt and with the Seleucids' subjects in Jerusalem. Later kings edged the traditional dyarchy further toward the Macedonian model, especially the Agiad Cleomenes III, who pursued even closer relations with the Ptolemies and effectively created a monarchy by placing his brother on the Eurypontid throne.

As these kings promoted a new form of kingship, their increased influence over public affairs spread to those in personal contact with them, including their female relations. The Ptolemies and Seleucids also provided examples of female political authority that likely influenced the roles female members of the Spartan royal houses played in public affairs. The possibility of such external influence on Spartan royal women gains force from the Ptolemies' own ideological use of Spartan prototypes to represent and praise their queens, especially Arsinoe II and Berenice II. The influence of external models of royal female power thus reinforced an existing tendency within Sparta's political structure and adds a new dimension to our understanding of Sparta's increasing internationalism in the early Hellenistic period.