Women’s world

The lives of women in ancient Greece were restricted. They were very much under the control of their husbands, fathers, or brothers, and rarely took part in politics or any form of public life. Most women could not inherit property and were allowed very little money. A girl would marry very young, at the age of 13 or 14, and her husband, who was certain to be much older, was chosen for her by her father. The main purpose of marriage was to have a baby, preferably a boy, to carry on the male line.

The status of a woman greatly increased when she had given birth to a boy (pp. 32–33). Some marriages seem to have been happy. A number of tombstones have survived that commemorate women who had died in childbirth. There are tender inscriptions from the grieving husbands. It is possible that, although legally they had very little freedom, some women could make important decisions about family life. Their spinning and weaving work also made an important contribution to the household.

Home Makers
Girls in Greece did not go to school (pp. 32–33). Instead, they stayed at home and were taught by their mothers how to spin and weave and look after the house. Some wealthier women might be taught to read and write. On this vase a woman is reading from a papyrus scroll.

Spinner
On this white-ground jug a woman is spinning with both a distaff and spindle. The distaff was a shaft of wood or metal with a spike at one end and a handle at the other.

Well Women
In Athens there were public fountains where women and slave girls went to fill their water pots. Not many houses had their own private wells. The water spout is in the shape of a lion’s head. The women stand waiting their turn with their water pots balanced on their heads. This was a good opportunity to meet with friends and chat.
This spinetron has a scene of spinning and weaving painted upon it in the black figure technique.

**THIGH PROTECTOR**

Spinning and weaving were regarded as suitable occupations for all Greek women, even those of noble families. In preparing the wool for spinning, a woman fitted a special instrument called an *spinetron* over her knee. She then rolled the wood across the surface of it and drew it out, producing thin skeins of wool.

**SAPPHO**

A woman writer of the late seventh century B.C. called Sappho, lived on the island of Lesvos in the eastern Aegean. Women in this part of Greece seem to have had more freedom than the women of Athens, and Sappho's beautiful poems give us a glimpse of their lives and their feelings.

**BEAUTY AID**

Wealthy women owned many aids to beauty. This bronze mirror has a stand in the form of a goddess, probably Aphrodite, holding a dove. Two little cupid figures fly on either side of her. This mirror would have been highly polished when new, so that it was possible for its owner to see her reflection in it. Caskets, combs, and perfume bottles have also been found in large numbers.

**ENTERTAINERS**

Respectable women were expected to stay at home as much as possible, keeping house, and supervising the slaves. Only women called *hetairai* were allowed to attend the *symposium* (banquets, pp. 36–37), an important part of Greek social life. *Hetairai* can be seen on vases playing the pipes, dancing, and generally entertaining the male banqueters. Many *hetairai* were foreigners, and prisoners taken in wars.
Growing up in Greece

The future of a baby rested entirely in the hands of its father. When a baby was born, the mother handed it to the father who could decide whether or not to let it live. If the baby was a girl or not strong, or if the family could not afford to keep it, the father might decide to abandon it. Then the baby would be left in the open air to die. Some abandoned babies were saved by other families and brought up as slaves. However, once a baby had been formally accepted by its family and named on the tenth day after its birth, he or she was treated kindly. Many toys have been found and writers tell of games like Blind Man's Buff. In Athens, and most other Greek towns, boys went to school from about the age of seven. Girls did not go to school. At about the age of 12 or 13, children were considered to be young adults and would then dedicate their toys to the god Apollo and the goddess Artemis, as a sign that they had reached the end of childhood.

Faster! Faster!
A painting on a tiny wine jug shows two little boys pulling their friend along in a wooden go-cart. Sometimes the carts were pulled by goats. At the Anthestera, the wine festival in Athens, jugs like these were given as presents to boys when they reached three years of age. They were a sign that babyhood had been left behind.

Girl's Grave
This dignified terracotta doll sitting in a high-backed chair, was found in the tomb of a little girl. The doll probably represents the woman the parents of the girl hoped she would grow up to be. With the doll are other miniature clay objects, also signs of maturity.

A pair of boots, a sign of adulthood
Education

When boys went to school at seven, they learned reading, writing, and arithmetic from a teacher called a grammateus. They learned music, including the playing of a musical instrument, from a teacher known as a kitharist. They also had to learn poetry by heart and the art of debating. Older boys might be taught by teachers called Sophists. Sophists travelled from town to town and often taught their students in the gymnasium, or training grounds. Although girls did not go to school, some girls from well-off families had private tutors and they too learned to read and write. Their mothers taught them spinning and weaving, and how to run a home.

WAX SCRATCHER
Wooden tablets covered in wax were used in the classroom. Letters were formed in the softened wax with a stylus, usually made of bone or metal. The blunt end was used for smoothing out mistakes.

MINDER
Boys from wealthy families were taken to school by a slave called a paidagogos, who, on this vase, sits behind the pupil holding a long staff. The boy stands in front of his teacher who reads from a papyrus scroll.

TRAINING FOR WAR
Traditionally, boys needed to be fit and strong so that they would grow up to be good soldiers. Therefore, there were special teachers of physical exercise called paidotribi (paidotribes in the singular). Paidotribi taught their pupils athletics and wrestling in the palaistra. This was a long building with dressing rooms and a colonnaded courtyard covered with sand. Most Greek towns had a palaistra.

CLAY COMPANY
Toys for children were often made of wood or fabric and have not survived. Children also played with clay figurines, perhaps made by potters with left-over clay. These riders were modelled by hand, brightly painted and then placed in the graves of children to keep them company in the afterlife.