

# THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

## EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

### Fact Sheet



Earrings  
G.90-1931

### The Ancient Greeks Women

Most of the information available about Ancient Greek women was written by men so it is important to take this into account when using primary sources.

### Marriage

The chief purpose of the Athenian marriage was to produce legitimate male children, heirs to property. The marriages were arranged. Men married much later in life than women, often well into their thirties. Women could be betrothed at five and the marriage began when a woman moved in with her husband at about the age of fourteen. Dowry money was given with the woman to the new husband.

### The Household

Ancient Athenians lived within an *oikos* (household) rather than a nuclear family. The *oikos* included slaves, animals, tools, land, dwellings and tombs on that land. The male head of the household, the *kurios*, held *kurieia*, power and protection, over all the other members, including male minors and women. He represented them all in legal matters. Women were perpetual legal minors and could not own property.

### Women and the Home

Women generally led secluded lives. Whilst men met friends and business associates in the *ekklesia* (law courts) or *agora* for state business, and spent leisure time in sports grounds and other public areas, the home was the woman's sphere.

Richer women had servants and took on the role of household manager, supervising servants and balancing household income and expenditure. They were also responsible for the health and welfare of the servants and all other members of the household. They supervised all household tasks which included weaving wool to make garments and items for the home, producing food and ensuring supplies did not run out. They were responsible for the important job of bringing up children. Although the wealthier wife was fortunate in having servants to do many of her chores, this meant that she was much more secluded from the outside world than her poorer contemporaries.

Poorer women, of course, did all the household work themselves, whilst also working alongside their husbands. They went shopping and fetched water from public fountains, or might have worked as a wet nurse, midwife or market trader, and so led a far more public life than women from the upper classes.

## **Women in Religion and Ritual**

The role of women was very important in religion and ritual. Festivals were some of the only times when women held an important public role outside the home. In Athens, women held important posts as priestesses in forty major public cults. By observing certain rituals the Athenians strived to maintain a good relationship between themselves and their gods, and this was essential for the continuing good fortune of the polis in all its affairs. Rites of passage provided continuity and were fundamental to the culture as a whole. Women therefore played a vital part in public culture because of their role within the spiritual structure of the polis.