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The Unsung Genius of Classical Greece: Aspasia

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Aspasia of Miletus was one of the most brilliant yet overlooked women in Greek history. She wasn't just the mistress of Pericles, she was a scholar, an orator, and a teacher to some of the greatest minds of the time. Though little is known about her life, her presence in the works of Plato and Plutarch speaks volumes about her influence. This paper explores Aspasia's background, her journey from Miletus to Athens, and her position as a Hetaera through the works of Plato's Menexenus and Plutarch's Life of Pericles. It examines her influence on Pericles, her ability to engage with the Athenian elite, and her reputation among great philosophers and thinkers like Socrates. After Pericles' death, she slowly disappeared from history. Despite this, her presence across various sources makes it clear that she was an essential figure in Greek society. Was she a great woman who supported and helped Pericles through his life using her intelligence, or was she the immoral seductress who misguided him in every decision? This paper aims to highlight Aspasia's remarkable contributions and challenge the way history has remembered her, recognising her not just as Pericles' companion, but as an influential woman who deserves to be celebrated.

Keywords: *aspasia, socrates, menexenus, plato.*

INTRODUCTION

The Aspasia was one of the most overlooked and greatest women in Greek history. The mistress of Pericles, a preeminent scholar and politician, the teacher of the greatest scholars,

thinkers and philosophers of the time and a model for all Greek women besides her for many years. Aspasia was loved by most, known by all. Today, she has the slightest yet impactful presence in several works by philosophers and thinkers like Plato and Plutarch.

Although we know very little about her, neither about her birth nor her death, her mere presence across sources tells us enough to know her great value and presence in Greek society. Aspasia's intelligence and wit made her both admired and controversial. She has been described as the scheming mistress, the loyal wife, the hetaerae, and the magnificent orator, and based on who you ask, she was all and any of those.

Born in Miletus, Aspasia likely came from a wealthy background, allowing her access to education that most Greek women were denied. She later moved to Athens, where she became a Hetaera. Her intelligence and wit captivated Pericles, one of Athens' most powerful figures, and she was said to have played a key role in his political decisions, even influencing his famous speeches. Socrates himself referred to her as a great teacher.

She defied expectations, lived life on her terms, and impacted Athenian society, which deserves more recognition. Though little is known about her birth, background, or even her death, her presence in various historical texts tells us enough to understand her significance in Greek society. Scholar I. M. Plant contributes to this claim while qualifying how much remains unknown of Aspasia's life and work:

Aspasia is one of the most famous women of classical Greece, yet little is known of her life, and most of what was written about her in her day is dubious. As the partner of Pericles, Athens' leading statesman in the mid-fifth century BC, Aspasia moved in the highest aristocratic circles and attracted the attention of comic and serious writers. She inspired literary personae, which in turn led to the creation of pseudonymous works in her name.¹ Her story is a reminder of the many brilliant women whose contributions have been forgotten over time.

¹ Joshua J. Mark, 'Aspasia of Miletus' (*World History Encyclopedia*, 20 May 2021) <https://www.worldhistory.org/Aspasia_of_Miletus/> accessed 05 March 2025

BACKGROUND

Aspasia was born in the Greek city of Miletus between 470 BC and 460 BC.² Education was denied to women and slaves in ancient Greece, but Aspasia was anything but uneducated. The city of Miletus was considerably lax with its rules towards women's education if they could afford it. So, it is assumed that Aspasia came from a wealthy family, giving her the connections required to receive an education.

There are many theories as to how Aspasia ended up in Athens and what her life was like before. She likely came to Athens as a free immigrant around 445 BC at the age of 20.³ Here, she became a Hetaera, a high-end courtesan or escort, typically educated. She was said to be inspired by a Greek woman, Thargelia, who was also a Hetaera.⁴ She was a charming, smart, beautiful woman, fancied by many. Just like her, Aspasia came to be loved by all, men and women alike.

Hetaerae were allowed to be present and engage in symposiums, which were places of political discussion and debate, where other women weren't generally allowed. Aspasia, who would attend these symposiums to accompany men, was especially renowned for her political expertise and discussions among the elite and powerful men of Athens, which was where she also met Pericles.

She was described as a well-spoken and quick-witted woman, smart enough to gather the attention of the Athenian elite. Her mind and charm eventually led her to become well-connected and well-funded enough to own and operate her brothel full of young courtesans. Being a foreigner, she also enjoyed certain social and political benefits that other Athenian women might not have, and was able to live in the public sphere wholeheartedly, with a relatively unbarred life. Although such differences from the rest of the society made her infamous and unpopular in the eyes of many, she also attracted the attention of many men like Pericles.

Pericles was an Athenian general and an orator around the age of 50, and was incredibly influential in Athens. After Pericles and Aspasia met, she began to live with him around 445

² *Ibid*

³ *Ibid*

⁴ *Ibid*

BC. He was said to love her so dearly that he even left his wife for her.⁵ He has been criticised by many for being manipulated by Aspasia in various instances, but has been praised by others who credit Aspasia's influence and contribution.

There is little reliance on primary sources for Aspasia's life, but several accounts of her have been given in various historical sources in books such as *Life of Pericles*⁶ and *Greek Lives*⁷ by Plutarch, *Menexenus*⁸ by Plato and *Memorabilia*⁹ by Xenophon.

LIFE OF PERICLES: PLUTARCH

According to Plutarch,¹⁰ Aspasia was courted by Pericles due to her intellect and expertise in politics. Her knowledge and skill in politics attracted not only Pericles and his acquaintances but also Socrates himself. Although Aspasia's occupation was not entirely credible as she had a house of young courtesans, she was approached by many for instruction on the art of speaking. Consequently, people were so preoccupied with her being a Hetaera, it did not matter how knowledgeable she was or how great her actions were; she became infamous among some groups. Plutarch describes the relationship between Pericles and Aspasia as a very happy one, and Aspasia eventually brought him two sons.

It was uncertain whether the two ever married, due to the existing law that Athenians could not marry outside the city, and Aspasia was a Greek woman while Pericles was an Athenian man. But it is said, he managed to go around the law to marry her anyway. He was said to have loved her so deeply that not only did he leave his wife for her, he could never leave Aspasia without a kiss and always greeted her with a salute and a kiss. While he took Aspasia, whom he loved very much... he used to greet her with a kiss.¹¹

Plutarch about Pericles: Aspasia is first mentioned in Plutarch as being the influence behind Pericles' decision to wage a war against Samos. She was claimed to have held undue

⁵ Pericles, *Life of Pericles: With Introduction, Critical and Explanatory Notes and Indices* (Legare Street Press 2023)

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ Plutarch, *Greek Lives* (Harvard University Press 1926)

⁸ Plato, *Menexenus* (Clarendon Press 2011)

⁹ Xenophon, *Memorabilia* (first published 1876, Harper & Brothers 2009)

¹⁰ Pericles (n 5)

¹¹ *Ibid*

influence over Pericles, manipulated him into going to war, and was the reason behind every decision and mistake that Pericles ever made.¹²

Some believe that the affair between the two was more of a passionate affair than anything else to several historians. She was said to have had extraordinary power and influence over Pericles. She was also blamed for intervening in Pericles' decision to start the Samian and Peloponnesian wars. Regardless of whose decision it was that led to the Peloponnesian War, it not only went on for 27 years, but it also caused the death of thousands of people.¹³

Following this came the plague that left the citizens of Athens weak. It not only left them vulnerable, but the military was also completely devastated and forced them into a much longer war than they expected. A year into the war, and countless deaths had occurred, Pericles gave his funeral oration to the Athenian public to keep them brave in the face of the ongoing conflict. This was the great funeral oration that was attributed to Aspasia by Socrates in Menexenus.¹⁴

Aspasia was often an unfortunate target in several comedies of the time that would describe her influence over Pericles, her sons and her influence and relationship with Pericles in an insulting and disparaging manner by Cratinus and Myronides.¹⁵ Her reputation was said to be so damaged around the Peloponnesian War that she was said to have been even prosecuted for asebeia, or impiety, by the comic poet Hermippus. Luckily, she was later acquitted as Pericles defended her relentlessly. But it is doubtful whether or not this trial took place, as some historians have suggested that it was a mere myth based upon a fictional play by Hermippus. Later, around 429 BC, after the unfortunate series of events including war and plague that killed Pericles's two legitimate sons as well as his dear sister, Pericles himself could no longer be consoled even by Aspasia, and later lost his life to the plague.¹⁶ This left Aspasia alone, by herself.

There is very little known about Aspasia after Pericles's death, as she almost disappears from history. It is said that six months after Pericles' death, she went on to marry Lysicles, who was a poor Sheep dealer before he met Aspasia, but grew under her tutelage to later get

¹² Mark (n 1)

¹³ *Ibid*

¹⁴ Plato (n 8)

¹⁵ Pericles (n 5)

¹⁶ *Ibid*

elected to be a leading figure with prominence, who also supposedly died the year after these events.¹⁷

Menexenus: Plato - There are several mentions by Socrates in Menexenus about Aspasia's intellect. Socrates has also referred to her during the entire conversation on making speeches when asked by Menexenus about Socrates' great speeches. She was said to be behind the making of many known speakers, including Pericles himself.¹⁸

According to Menexenus, she had also composed the Great funeral oration given by Pericles to the Athenian citizens to encourage them in the face of war and plague being faced by the vulnerable citizens of Athens for a year, and to honour the casualties of war. Socrates also mentioned that Aspasia was his teacher, and she was influential not only to him but also to his students, as she had taught them the art of eloquence.¹⁹ The way Aspasia is spoken about in this dialogue between Socrates and Menexenus, it is obvious that she was fairly popular among the general public as well as the elite crowd during those days, simultaneously being a great teacher to many.

CONCLUSION

Like many brilliant women in history, Aspasia's contributions have often been reduced to speculation about her relationships rather than her intellect. Despite the lack of concrete records about her life, the fact that she appears in the works of Plutarch, Plato, and Xenophon tells us that she was known, respected, and even feared by some. She moved in circles that most Greek women could never access, engaging in political debates, teaching oratory, and shaping discussions that helped define an era. While some saw her as a scheming Hetaera, others, including Socrates, acknowledged her as a remarkable orator and teacher. Her influence on Pericles' speeches, her impact on Athenian politics, and her role in shaping great minds are proof of her legacy, even if history has tried to diminish her role.

We'll never really know how many such brilliant, influential and knowledgeable women have come and disappeared in history like Aspasia and Thargelia, considering the constant undermining of women's contributions throughout history, which has unfortunately

¹⁷ Mark (n 1)

¹⁸ Plato (n 8)

¹⁹ Mark (n 1)

continued into the Modern day. Aspasia is proof that intelligence and influence are not confined to the powerful men whose names dominate history books. After Pericles' death, Aspasia seems to have slowly disappeared from history, but her presence in key texts ensures that she is not forgotten. Yet, her influence is important.

Despite the minimal existence of Aspasia's life in literary sources, this paper seeks to share what little of is known of a young woman on the outskirts of society and managed to maintain her influence over the greatest men of the time, whether she was known as a manipulator or seductress, she remains to be known for the best attributes of a knowledgeable woman, great orator, and teacher in the eyes of many today.

She may not have been a ruler, a warrior, or a philosopher in the traditional sense, but she was an exceptional woman who lived on her terms, and for that, she should be remembered. Though her story is often overshadowed, her intellect and impact deserve recognition. She remains an example of a woman who lived boldly and unapologetically, defying expectations and leaving her mark on Greek society. She is an inspiration to many women to this day, and her intellect must be celebrated.