

The Status of Women Among the Ancient Greek Hellenes *Le Statut de la Femme chez les Anciens Hellènes Grecs*

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Orcid :

Received ...19/05./2025

Accepted ...29/10./2025

• Abstract:

The status of women in ancient Greece varied significantly by region. In Crete and Messenia, women enjoyed considerable freedom and social equality, participating actively in community life. Spartan women were particularly privileged, receiving physical training and education from childhood. However, Athenian women faced stark restrictions, especially among the lower classes, who were largely confined to domestic roles under male guardianship. Even aristocratic Athenian women, while granted more mobility, still lived under societal constraints. This contrast reveals how Greek city-states developed differing gender norms, with Sparta and Crete offering women notably greater autonomy than patriarchal Athens.

Key words: Greeks – Status of Women – City-States – Civilization

• Résumé:

Le statut des femmes en Grèce antique variait selon les cités. En Crète et en Messénie, elles jouissaient d'une grande liberté et participaient activement à la vie sociale. Les Spartiates bénéficiaient de privilèges uniques, avec une éducation physique et intellectuelle dès l'enfance. À Athènes, cependant, les femmes, surtout des classes populaires, étaient confinées à la sphère domestique sous tutelle masculine. Même les aristocrates, bien que plus libres, restaient soumises à des contraintes. Ces différences révèlent des normes de genre distinctes, Sparte et la Crète offrant plus d'autonomie que l'Athènes patriarcale.

Mots-clés essentiels : Grèce antique - statut féminin - cités-États - société patriarcale - autonomie

Introduction

Most studies by modern historians on ancient Greek history have focused on political and economic life, with few dedicated to the social aspect. Since the latter has not received its due share of study, we have chosen to address a topic related to the status of women among the ancient Greeks, as their standing varied depending on the society, civilization, laws, religions, and societal perceptions. We believe that caring for women and granting

them an esteemed position within society contributes to the stability and prosperity of nations. It is worth noting that women are considered the cornerstone of building both the family and society. Given their social importance, we find it essential to dedicate an in-depth study and detailed analysis to this topic.

As for the main question of our research, it can be summarized as follows: Initially, we ask, what was the status of women in Crete, Messenia, Sparta, and Athens? Was their status in Athens's inferior to that in other regions of Greece? And if so, what was the reason?

To answer these questions, it seems necessary to first address:

1. The Status of Women in Crete

Cretan women had bodies that tapered at the top and bottom, narrowing sharply at the waist into an extremely tight circle. They were short in stature, slender, with an athletic elegance, and fair-skinned. Their heads were more elongated than wide, with sharp and delicate features, black hair, and black eyes. They styled their hair in various ways—some coiled atop their heads and necks, some in rings over their foreheads, and some in tresses swaying on their shoulders or chests, along with ribbons woven into their locks, they wore garments resembling contemporary clothing and donned large, brightly colored hats. Usually, they went barefoot, except for upper-class women¹, who occasionally wore beautifully embroidered shoes with high heels, made of leather straps. Among the common women—as depicted in some illustrations—they wore short skirts or aprons, sometimes puffed at the front for modesty². Aristocratic women, however, wore long skirts that reached the ground during festivities. Their clothing was tightly fastened at the waist because women took great care to appear slender, using strong corsets to gather their skirts around their hips and lift their bare breasts into the sunlight.

A charming Cretan custom was to leave their chests bare or cover them with sheer blouses. The bodice was tied below the chest, then flared into an imprecise circular opening before elegantly closing around the neck. Sleeves were short and sometimes puffed, while skirts were adorned with pleats and bright colors, flaring widely at the hips, likely reinforced with metal rods or horizontal hoops.

¹ Durant, Will. *Qissat al-Hadarah - Hayat al-Yunan*- [The Story of Civilization - The Life of Greece]. Vol. 1, Part 2. Translated by Muhammad Badran, 2nd ed., Matba'at Lajnat al-Ta'lif wa al-Tarjamah wa al-Nashr, 1959, pp. 20-21.

² Hatzfeld, Jean. *History of Ancient Greece*. Petite bibliothèque Payot, Paris, 1967, p. 20.

The arrangement and style of Cretan (Minoan) women's clothing displayed harmonious colors, beautiful shapes, and refined taste—so much so that archaeologists have dubbed the image of a Cretan woman painted on a palace wall "the Parisienne"³.

These illustrations suggest that the Cretans spared no expense in adorning their women. Excavations have uncovered numerous ornaments, including copper and gold hairpins, intricately designed earrings with gold threads intertwined in the hair, and necklaces.

As for the social and political structures of the Cretans, the information available is scarce. The discovery of communal tombs indicates some form of enduring kinship ties, while the size of village dwellings suggests that the family was a simple unit. It is likely that there was a clan-based organization, with villages composed of groups linked by shared ancestry⁴.

All wall paintings indicate that Cretan women enjoyed a social status equal to, if not higher than, men. Undoubtedly, Cretan women managed household affairs such as weaving cloth, grinding wheat, and baking bread, while also participating alongside men in farming and pottery-making. Some depictions show women hunting, racing chariots, engaging in acrobatics, and bull-leaping. They sat in the front rows at theaters and stadiums and played the role of respected hostesses at gatherings, receiving reverence from all⁵.

Cretan Religion, The Cretans practiced a diverse religion, worshipping natural forces in all their forms, such as the sun and moon, as well as revering animals with exceptional reproductive power, like snakes and bulls. They believed motherhood to be the secret of nature and thus sanctified all aspects of it, worshipping female deities and entrusting their rituals to priestesses in sacred caves⁶. All this leads us to believe that Cretan society was matrilineal, with leadership in the hands of women. But what was the status of women among the Messenians?

2. The Status of Women in Messenia

Women in Messenia enjoyed a high social status and lived freely, embracing nature and the outdoors. The wall paintings in the palace of Tiryns in Argolis show that aristocratic women

³ Durant, Will. *Op. Cit.*, p. 22.

⁴ Linton, Ralph. *Shajarat al-Hadarah* [The Tree of Culture]. Vol. 2. Translated by Ahmad Fakhri, Maktabat al-Anglo al-Masriyah, Cairo, 1955, p. 270.

⁵ Ayyad, Kamil. *Tarikh al-Yunan* [History of Greece]. Vol. 1, 1st ed., n.d, pp. 23

⁶ Al-Abed, Mufid Raif. *Dirasat fi Tarikh al-Igriq* [Studies in Greek History]. Damascus: Al-Matba'a Al-Jadida, 1980, p. 19.

wore fashionable attire like that of Cretan women, though women from lower classes likely wore simpler, more modest clothing. Matrilineal descent was common among the ancient Greeks of this era, and being linked to one's mother was considered a great honor. The wives of kings were treated with respect and had the freedom to mingle with men without restrictions, though they were barred from participating in war, politics, or governance. They managed their households and oversaw estates in their husbands' absence. Even their husbands sought their approval. Their daughters were allowed to roam the city and its outskirts accompanied by attendants. However, the condition of captive women was often poor⁷.

Beyond childbearing and raising children—teaching daughters domestic arts—common women were responsible for grinding grain, combing, spinning, and weaving wool⁸. They did little sewing, as most garments required none. They also engaged in hunting, drove chariots, and performed tasks typically reserved for men, such as cooking⁹. All this suggests that Messenian women enjoyed greater freedom than Greek women in later periods.

Marriage in Messenia typically occurred after the suitor presented his bride with an ox or its equivalent. Sometimes, her father contributed a valuable dowry. The wedding was both a familial and social event, marked by abundant food, dancing, and celebration. The newlyweds were paraded through the city by torchlight amid loud wedding songs. Young men danced in circles to the melodies of flutes and lyres.

Upon marriage, a woman became the mistress of her household and earned respect based on the number of children she bore¹⁰. Noble men were permitted only one wife but could keep concubines—captive women or chosen subjects—who lived with them permanently¹¹. Messenian society did not recognize divorce or polygamy, except in the court of Priam of Troy, where a harem(women)-like system existed¹².

⁷ Ali, Abd al-Latif Ahmad. *Al-Tarikh al-Yunani: Al-Asr al-Hilali* [Greek History: The Hellenistic Period]. Vol. 1, Beirut: Dar al-Nahda al-Arabiya lil-Tiba'a wa al-Nashr, 1976, pp. 51-53.

⁸ Durant, Will. *Op. Cit.*, p. 97.

⁹ Linton, Ralph. *Op. Cit.*, p. 275.

¹⁰ Durant, Will. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹¹ Linton, Ralph. *Op. Cit.*, p. 276.

¹² Ali, Abd al-Latif Ahmad. *Op. Cit.*, p. 56.

In religion, women often served as priestesses, delivering prophecies while wearing long, embroidered robes¹³.

From all this, we conclude that women in Messenia held a favorable position—enjoying freedom, nature, and men's respect. Yet this raises the question: What was the status of their counterparts in Sparta? How did Spartan law view women? Did they have rights in various fields? Were they respected by men?

3- The Status of Women in Sparta:

Historians attribute Spartan law to the legislator Lycurgus. According to this law, healthy children born into Spartan families were placed under state supervision from birth. Healthy infants remained in their mothers' care until age seven, while weak ones were abandoned in nature to die¹⁴. At seven years old, both boys and girls were taken over by the state and raised in communal schools¹⁵ emphasizing absolute obedience.

There they endured harsh physical training, wore identical clothing summer and winter, and received minimal food - all designed to teach endurance¹⁶.

Spartan girls spent long periods outdoors exercising in special gymnasiums under full state supervision, competing in strength and speed contests¹⁷.

Their athletic training included footraces, wrestling, discus throwing, and a dance-like exercise called "bibasis" where girls jumped and touched their heels to their buttocks. They performed these exercises before watching boys while singing and dancing¹⁸.

¹³ Al-Abed, Mufid Raif. *Op. Cit.*, p. 29.

¹⁴ Yahya, Lotfi Abdel Wahab. *Al-Yunan: Muqaddima fi al-Tarikh al-Hadari* [Greece: An Introduction to Civilizational History]. Dar al-Ma'arifa al-Jam'iyya, 1998, p. 138.

¹⁵ Alsheikh, Hussein. *Dirasat fi Tarikh al-Hadarat al-Qadima - al-Yunan* - [Studies in the History of Ancient Civilizations - Greece -]. Vol. 1, Alexandria : Dar al-Ma'arifa al-Jami'iya, 1992, p. 99.

¹⁶ Duruy, Victor. *Histoire grecque* [Greek History]. 11th ed., Librairie Hachette, 1881, p. 35.

¹⁷ Samaan, Wahib Ibrahim. *Al-Thaqafa wa al-Tarbiya fi al-Usur al-Qadima* [Culture and Education in Ancient Times]. Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arifa, 1961, p. 193.

¹⁸ Henri. *Sparte et Spartiates* [Sparta and Spartans]. Payot, 1953, p. 155.

Music and singing were beloved activities. They participated in ceremonial processions, dancing and singing songs praising brave youths while shaming cowards¹⁹.

Free interaction between girls and boys was permitted, even allowing occasional wrestling matches²⁰.

However, girls' education ended at sixteen when they had to master domestic skills while maintaining physical fitness - the government publicly reprimanded overweight women²¹.

Thus, Spartan girls, though raised at home, followed strict state laws requiring athletic training to build strong bodies. They couldn't dance nude in public processions (even when boys were present) so their physical flaws would be visible for correction²².

This rigorous system reveals Spartan society's lack of shame regarding female nudity and its exclusive focus on physical rather than intellectual education.

Marriage among ancient Greeks was considered the first institution created by household religion, passed down through males. Unmarried women participated in their father's religious rites, then transferred to their husband's worship after marriage, offering sacrifices to his household gods. This transition occurred because women couldn't worship two different household religions simultaneously.²³ Sparta set marriage ages at thirty for men and twenty for women²⁴.

From what has been mentioned above, we deduce how religion dominated the Greeks' perspective on married life.

Wedding ceremonies among Spartans and Athenians alike involved three stages: first at the bride's home; second when the veiled, white-robed bride was escorted to her new home by

¹⁹ Marrou, Henri-Irénée. *Histoire de l'éducation dans l'antiquité* [History of Education in Antiquity]. 2nd ed., Éditions du Seuil, 1950, p. 20.

²⁰ Samaan, Wahib Ibrahim. *Op. Cit.*, p. 194.

²¹ Al-Abed, Mufid Raif. *Op. Cit.*, pp. 56-57.

²² Durant, Will. *Op. Cit.*, p. 156.

²³ Fustel de Coulanges. *La Cité antique* [The Ancient City]. 16th ed., Librairie Hachette, 1889, pp. 41-42.

²⁴ Durant, Will. *Op. Cit.*, pp. 157-158.

torch-bearing priests singing hymns; third in front of her husband's house. We will try to explain all that in detail:

The first stage takes place in the home of the bride's father, where the suitor proposes to her in front of all the gathered family members. Then, her father slaughters a sacrifice to the household gods after declaring his consent to her marriage. This acknowledgment is necessary for the girl to renounce the worship of her father's gods.

In the second stage, the girl is escorted to her husband's home. Sometimes, the husband himself accompanies her to his house, or a priest may escort her. The bride would sit on a carriage, wearing a veil over her face, a crown on her head, and a white dress. The procession accompanying her consisted of priests carrying torches and chanting religious hymns. Upon the bride's arrival in front of the husband's house, the groom would seize her, carry her in his arms, and step over the threshold—provided he did not set foot on the threshold itself. Afterward, the sacred religious ceremony would begin inside the house. We wonder about the reason for these rituals—are they a symbol of modesty? We believe this could indeed be the case.

In the third stage, the bride sits inside the house in the presence of the household gods. She is sprinkled with purifying water and presented with the sacred fire, symbolizing the household god. She performs some prayers, after which the couple eats sweets and some fruits. This meal begins and ends with the recitation of prayers²⁵.

It appears to us that the couple's sharing of this meal signified their adherence to the same religion, and that this religion served as the fundamental pillar in building a family among both the ancient Spartans and Athenians alike. Therefore, it was incumbent upon members of society to hold firmly to it and observe its rituals.

Marriage was lifelong unless the wife proved barren, in which case divorce was permitted. An infertile husband would be replaced by a brother or relative to maintain the family line, with any resulting son considered his heir. Spartan and Athenian laws allowed childless widows to marry their husband's relatives, with sons inheriting the deceased husband's name. Daughters couldn't continue the household worship since they adopted their husband's religion upon marriage - only males could maintain the family's religious continuity through sacrifices and funeral rites²⁶.

²⁵ Fustel de Coulanges. *Op. Cit.*, pp. 43-45.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

Thus, marriage was compulsory in Sparta and Athens, not for personal happiness but to produce male heirs who would preserve household worship. Generally, Spartan women enjoyed higher status than other Greek women, retaining privileges from earlier matrilineal societies. According to Plutarch, Spartan women were bold, domineering over their husbands, and spoke frankly on important matters. They could own, inherit, and trade property - eventually controlling half of Sparta's land through their influence over men.

Living in luxury and freedom while men endured military hardships (as Spartan law required all men aged 30-60 to eat daily meals in communal mess halls)²⁷, Spartan women developed a unique character in Greek society. Respected as men's equals and influential over children and husbands, their ideal was to be mothers of warriors. The state prioritized women's health for bearing strong children, exempting them from spinning/weaving (slaves' work)²⁸. Their simple, unchanging clothing and masculine demeanor prohibited displays of emotion - mothers famously told sons going to war: "Return with your shield or on it."²⁹

This reveals how Spartan law denied human nature, forbidding mothers from showing grief for lost husbands or sons. Such was the Spartan woman's condition - but did their Athenian counterparts share this status? Or was it different, and why?

4. The Status of Women in Athens

It is evident that the status of women in Greece varied according to time and place, undergoing changes after the Mycenaean period. We have little information about Hellenic society during the Dark Ages (1150-750 BCE), but poets like Archilochus and Simonides from the 7th century BCE suggest that rural women held low status in some Greek communities. Archilochus equated a wife with a house, plow, and ox when listing essentials for a Boeotian farmer, indicating men viewed women as property - though recognizing their importance in household management. This raises the question: why did the notion that Athenian women lived in social isolation, subjected to humiliating treatment without rights, become prevalent?

Literary texts portray women as inherently inferior to men in capability and status - means rather than ends. Marriage stemmed from material interest rather than love, aimed at producing

²⁷ Durant, Will. *Op. Cit.*, pp. 158-159.

²⁸ Samaan, Wahib Ibrahim. *Op. Cit.*, p. 194.

²⁹ Giannakoulis, Theodor. *Al-Yunan: Sha 'buhā wa-arḍuhā* [Greece: Its People and Land]. Translated by Mohamed Amin Rostom and Ezz El-Din Farid, Maktabat al-Nahda al-Masriya, Cairo, 1952.

children to maintain the state and family continuity. These texts emphasize a woman's "natural place" being the home: raising children, cooking, and spinning wool. When venturing to the bustling marketplace, they were accompanied by maids (if available), while men spoke freely on any topic. Women didn't attend male gatherings or mingle with their husbands' guests. Athenian homes had separate women's quarters (gynaeceum) where only the householder and male relatives could enter. Girls received no formal schooling, and Athenian women lacked political rights, legal standing inferior to men - legally incompetent to manage business, testify in court, or enter contracts, remaining lifelong wards of husbands or male relatives³⁰.

During the classical period under Solon, Cleisthenes, and Pericles, the Athenian constitution denied citizenship to women of non-Attic origin, even if Greek, labeling them "residents" without full citizen rights³¹.

While Athens criticized Sparta's harsh system and boasted its democratic model as the pinnacle of social justice, this very system deprived women of legitimate rights.

Regarding inheritance, Athenian law allowed disinherited daughters to marry their father's heir. For instance, if a deceased left both son and daughter, they could marry unless sharing the same mother. A father with only one daughter could adopt a son to marry her. If he died leaving one unmarried daughter, a male relative could inherit provided he married her - even permitting uncles to marry nieces. Married daughters had to leave their husbands to marry their father's heir (even if the heir had to divorce). Without descendants, inheritance passed to brothers rather than sisters, or nephews rather than nieces, then to paternal male relatives³².

This reveals how ancient law derived from religious beliefs ignored human nature, reflecting neglect of women and weak family bonds lacking warmth. Despite women's domestic responsibilities (baking, cooking, weaving), religious tolerance confirmed that daughters couldn't inherit fathers - though Athenians believed family continuity depended on daughters transmitting religious rites and inheritance.

Despite all these negative aspects that characterized Athenian legislation and society's view of women, aristocratic women enjoyed a degree of freedom. They would go out on many occasions without their reputations being subject to gossip. They also performed certain duties or sought recreation outside the home, visiting neighbors and spending part of the day with their

³⁰ Ali, Abd al-Latif Ahmad. *Op. Cit.*, pp. 56-59.

³¹ Al-Abed, Mufid Raif. *Op. Cit.*, p. 76.

³² Fustel de Coulanges. *Op. Cit.*, pp. 82-83.

friends. According to some depictions on pottery, they even practiced sports—such as racing in the Olympic Games—bathed in swimming pools or walked alongside men and boys in the procession of the Panathenaic festival in honor of the goddess Athena. However, they were not allowed to participate in men's gatherings. Instead, they had their own festivals and celebrations, such as the Thesmophoria, the festival of Demeter, the goddess of grain. They attended wedding parties without supervision, fulfilled their duty of offering condolences at funerals, and visited graves. Perhaps they even found room for activity in some religious associations, if they did not occasionally practice the profession of priesthood³³. In fact, Athens had a significant number of female prophets who claimed to be either recipients of divine revelation or those whose eyes had been unveiled³⁴.

They would also frequent the theater to watch tragic plays, and perhaps comedies as well. As for women of the poorer classes, some engaged in trade and industry—though most were freed slaves. Some would spin wool or make shoes, while others owned livestock or sold incense, sesame, and ropes. The impoverished women of Athens and rural peasant women lived side by side with men³⁵. Regarding marriage, according to the philosophers' advice, girls were to wed between the ages of sixteen and twenty, while men married between thirty and thirty-seven³⁶.

As for their dowries, Solon regulated them so that mutual love between spouses and the desire for offspring and raising children would be the primary motives for marriage. He forbade women from owning more than three garments. Divorce was permitted only in cases of failing to produce male heirs, prompting the husband to adopt sons instead. Solon also established specific laws concerning morals and conduct: he legalized prostitution, imposed taxes on it, and created state-regulated brothels. He set a fine of one hundred drachmas for anyone assaulting the honor of a free woman yet permitted any individual who caught an adulterer in the act to kill him on the spot³⁷.

Athenian society also permitted men to have relationships with women outside of marriage, who had arrived in Athens from Ionia during the fifth century BC. Some of these

³³ Ali, Abd al-Latif Ahmad. *Op. Cit.*, p. 61.

³⁴ Durant, Will. *Op. Cit.*, p. 358.

³⁵ Ali, Abd al-Latif Ahmad. *Op. Cit.*, p. 61.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

³⁷ Durant, Will. *Op. Cit.*, p. 216.

women were wealthy, while others earned their living through trade or other professions. The lowest class among them consisted of prostitutes, who were mostly slaves³⁸.

From all the above, we can conclude that the Athenians' persistent view of women as inferior beings inevitably led to two other aspects of their lives: their continuous seclusion within the home, and their inability to choose a suitable husband. We believe the reasons behind this imposed isolation (in this male-dominated society) were that the Athenian man was not a family man—he spent most of his time outside his home. With the legal permission to engage in relationships with foreign women, men recognized the dangers of women participating in public life with its unrestrained social interactions whose consequences with men were deemed unsafe.

Additionally, women's young age made them submissive to their older and wiser husbands, who could guide them as they pleased. The neglect of women's status, the belittling of their affairs, and the deprivation of their political rights diminished their worth, effectively rendering them devoid of free will.

As for their legal status, the legislator's intent in subjecting them to the guardianship of their father, husband, or a male relative was to protect both inheritance and family. This law contained an element of arbitrariness, but concerning the wife's dowry, it aimed to keep these properties within her family to prevent its extinction and ensure the continuation of religious rites.

All this stems from the fact that Athenian society was fundamentally masculine, as the prevailing belief of that era considered struggle to be life's primary purpose. Heroism was upheld as an ideal, demanding that men exert their utmost to utilize their physical and mental talents. In other words, men were expected to pursue honor and glory through hard work or war.

Conclusion

Women in Cretan, Mycenaean, and Spartan societies enjoyed high status according to ancient and modern historians, as they managed household affairs while exercising various rights like appearing in public, receiving education, and commanding men's respect. In Athens, however—aristocratic women excepted—women held lower status than their Greek counterparts, spending most time on domestic tasks and only venturing outside with a maid if available. Regarding education, literate mothers taught their daughters reading and writing, while illiterate mothers passed on their ignorance. They were also denied political rights. Legally, women remained under guardianship—fathers, husbands, or male relatives—due to religious principles

³⁸ Ali, Abd al-Latif Ahmad. *Op. Cit.*, p. 72.

embedding in society the belief that family and state continuity depended solely on males. This demonstrates the law's inherent arbitrariness and disregard for human nature.

In marriage, legislation permitted men relations with foreign women, but adulterous wives faced divorce—highlighting the law's gender bias. Women remained excluded from Athenian public life, politics, and state affairs. Ultimately, Athenian society was fundamentally male dominated.

Summary:

Most contemporary historians' studies on ancient Greek history have focused on political, economic, and artistic life, with few dedicated to the social aspect. Since this latter aspect has not received its full share of study, we have deemed it appropriate to address the subject of women and attempt to understand their status among the ancient Greeks according to what has been reported in the writings of both ancient and contemporary historians.

To achieve this, the following questions came to mind: What was the status of women in Crete, Messenia, Sparta, and Athens according to historians' writings? Was their status in Athens inferior to that in other regions of Greece? And if so, to what can this be attributed? To answer these questions, we followed these steps in our research:

We begin by examining the role of women in Cretan civilization, highlighting their elevated status. This is evident from the beautiful garments they wore, as ancient texts reveal that the Cretans did not withhold from their women the means to enhance their beauty. Moreover, Cretan women enjoyed a social status equal to men.

As for Mycenaean women, they likewise held a lofty social position and lived freely, embracing nature and the outdoors while commanding men's respect. In Sparta, women had the right to education from the age of seven, along with physical training, and typically married at twenty. Overall, Spartan women held a higher status than in any other Greek society, maintaining their privileged position.

In contrast, Athenian women of the general populace—according to ancient laws—were confined to the domestic sphere, with a legal standing inferior to men. They were barred from managing businesses or testifying in courts, remaining under the guardianship of their husbands or male relatives until death. However, aristocratic women enjoyed relative freedom: they frequently left their homes, engaged in physical exercise, and attended theaters to watch both tragic and comic plays.

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