

**A Woman of Substance:
Epikteta of Thera**

by S.L. Ager

In the world of ancient Greece women were generally second-class citizens; or perhaps we should say they weren't even citizens at all, since they didn't have voting rights. The role of women was to manage a husband's household and bear his children. Beyond these eternally female tasks there was little that was expected of her (though it was always nice if she could bring a dowry into the marriage). Women did not have careers, they did not engage in politics or the running of the state, and in the days of Classical Athens at least, they were expected to stay indoors unless they had a very good reason for going out.

But ancient Greek society was not stagnant. Things changed over the hundreds of years of Greek history, and some of those changes affected women. The career of Alexander the Great in particular was a watershed, affecting all aspects of society. His conquests, and the subsequent rise of the Hellenistic kingdoms broke down all the old patterns, the entrenched self-sufficiency and complacency of the Classical city-states, which had long been dominated by their male citizens. New patterns emerged, ones which gave greater freedom than ever before to some of the previously disadvantaged groups in society, among them women. It would be misleading to claim that women in the ancient world ever gained truly equal status with men - but the Hellenistic Age, with its powerful queens and its wealthy benefactresses, was a time when *some* women, at any rate, succeeded in making their mark.

One of the women who managed to leave behind a name to posterity was Epikteta, who lived on the island of Thera around 200 BC. We know of her only through her will, a document of almost 300 lines, inscribed on marble as a public record. It formed part of a monument to Epikteta herself and the members of her immediate family, all of whom were also commemorated with statues. Epikteta and her family were certainly wealthy, and they were probably among the oldest and most aristocratic families on Thera. The terms of Epikteta's will emphasize that wealth, as we'll see.

The first few lines of the will inform us of the recent history of Epikteta's family. Although the tale is told dispassionately, and is only recorded for the sake of explaining why Epikteta is going to make the dispositions as she does, we can read between the lines and see family tragedy written

there. Epikteta and her husband Phoinix had had two sons, Kratesilochos and Andragoras, and a daughter, by the name of Epiteleia. But one son, Kratesilochos, had died, predeceasing both his parents. The wealthy Epikteta and Phoinix assuaged their grief by making plans to set up a shrine with statues of the Muses and of their dead son, and to institute rites in remembrance of him. But it seems that Phoinix outlived his son only for a short time; before his death, he asked Epikteta to fulfill these plans, and to include her husband in the rituals. Two years later, Epikteta was stricken again: her other son, Andragoras, died, making the same request as his father.

These religious rites form the substance of Epikteta's will. Her intention was to see to the furnishing of the shrine, the erection of the statues of her family and the institution of the rites in remembrance of them: her male relatives, and herself too when she should die. The rites were of the so-called "heroic" type. What this means is that Epikteta, Phoinix, Andragoras and Kratesilochos were all to be considered "heroes" in the Greek sense of the term. That is, they were, after their deaths, to be paid religious rites of the type offered to the legendary heroes of Greek myth, such as Herakles and Theseus. Religious worship of such beings, who were generally perceived as human beings who had died, but who nevertheless retained some kind of extraordinary powers after death, was beneficial to the community. Local heroes were often homier and more personal than the great Olympian gods.

Now, perhaps Epikteta and her family didn't see themselves as being quite in the same class as heroes like Theseus and Co. Nevertheless, what Epikteta did by the terms of her will was inaugurate a cult of herself and her family. The worship of human beings, before or after death, was another phenomenon of the Hellenistic Age. We can see it most clearly in the cults that were set up to honour the great Hellenistic rulers.

Naturally, cults like this were less likely to inspire spontaneous devotion among the population at large than worship of the Olympian gods or the legendary heroes from hundreds of years in the past. That meant that a little boost usually had to be given to the cult, in order that its rites would be carried out through the years. So Epikteta's will not only called for her heroic cult to be established, it also provided for its financial support. Not surprisingly, for a family cult, it was to be administered by a group of kinsmen, a family association. Epikteta left a sum of 3000 drachmai, half a talent, to the association; and from the property which she bequeathed to her daughter Epiteleia, a further sum of 210 drachmai a year was to be given to the association. Every year in the month Delphinion this extended family group was to convene at the Mouseion (the Muses' shrine) and carry

out the prescribed sacrifices: for the Muses on the 19th of the month, for Phoinix and Epikteta on the 20th and for Kratesilochos and Andragoras on the 21st.

How was Epikteta able to act with so much independence in the formulation of her last wishes? One reason might be the increasing freedom of women in the Hellenistic Age generally. Some of Epikteta's property was her own in a way that no Athenian woman ever seems to have owned property; it was land she had purchased herself and held in her own name. But it must be admitted that a very good reason can also be found in Epikteta's family circumstances. It seems that both she and her daughter Epiteleia were what is known as *epikleroi*. A Greek *epikleros* was a woman who inherited her father's estate; the word is often translated as "heiress". But the rules of Greek inheritance were quite singular, and nowhere were they more peculiar than when it came to *epikleroi*. An *epikleros* did not inherit her father's property just because he wanted her to; she only inherited because she had no living brothers. In other words, a man's property only went to his daughter if he had no sons. And when an *epikleros* inherited her father's estate, she did not inherit for her own use and enjoyment. It was her duty, just as she was preserving the material wealth of her father's house, also to preserve his bloodline. Her inheritance was to be passed along to her own son, and *epikleroi*, even more than other Greek women, would be under pressure to bear male children. Those male children would in turn inherit their maternal grandfather's estate, and they would be seen as carrying on his family name, rather than their own father's. But just to keep it all in the family, and maintain the dead man's bloodline as nearly as possible, it was customary for an *epikleros* to marry a man who was very closely related to her dead father. It was not unusual for an *epikleros* to marry her cousin, or even her own uncle.

It looks as though Epikteta herself was an *epikleros*; and Epiteleia, with her father and both her brothers dead, certainly was. Since both these women, in default of male blood relatives, were responsible for the preservation of the family estates, we can see why such a significant thing as the establishment of a family cult would be up to them. But as I said, even under these circumstances, where women were responsible for wealth and property, their status was never that of a man. For instance, Epikteta was evidently under some requirement to consult with her son-in-law, Epiteleia's husband Hypereides, before finalizing the terms of her will (though we don't know how much input Hypereides really had). And the property of both women was not theirs in the sense that they could dispose of it as they wished; it was intended to pass on to Epiteleia's own son, Andragoras (named after his dead uncle). That this male child was the focus of all the future hopes of the family is clear from the fact that he was to be the first priest of the new family cult.