

THE ATHENIAN HAREM: ORIENTALISM AND THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF ATHENIAN WOMEN IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

ABSTRACT

The 'harem' has been a powerful image in the minds of westerners for centuries, and appears as a conceptual tool in nineteenth-century texts discussing the social history of classical Athens. Trying to uncover the reality of Athenian women's lives, classicists refer to the Athenian woman's home as more or less like a harem, and more or less 'modern' and 'Christian.' In this paper, I analyse the use of harem imagery in handbooks on Greek social history written in the Victorian period, using recent feminist and postcolonial theory to investigate the texts. I argue that terms such as 'oriental' and the image of the oriental harem were used by classicists in two main ways: either to draw attention to the oppressiveness of Athenians who had houses akin to harems, or to describe the extremes of misogyny of which Athenians could not be accused. The authors utilise an 'index of female oppression' with the oriental harem standing in for the most extreme oppression, while the modern Christian woman appears as the most liberated. The Athenians are placed between these two poles on the continuum. Finally, I note that in this discourse, similarities between modern home, oriental harem and Athenian *gunaikonitis* are revealed implicitly, with their commonalities allowing for the comparison.