



Equality in Ancient Greece - Did it Exist?

A Historical, Gender-Critical Analysis of a Popular Concept and Ideal

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Abstract

What do we mean when we speak of «democracy» in Ancient Athens, for example, or “Society of Equals” in Early Christianity? When and why did it become possible to think of equality as equity, juxtaposition?

Scholars often point out that by modern standards, even the short-lived, full democracy of ancient Athens was one of radical inequality. The criteria for being allowed into the community of full citizens, who were equals, were rather strictly regulated, and most Athenians did not qualify. More generally, scholars on ancient notions of gender and sexuality have pointed out that ancient Greeks found it impossible to think of two persons without immediately conceptualizing them as a hierarchy in some sense. The same was applied even to parts, fluids, etc., in/on the same human body. Yet terms often translated as “equality” in modern English did exist, and one of them is ‘isotes’. The lecture will present the ancient conceptual history of this term, laying out alternatives, such as various notions of hierarchy, keeping gender implications in constant view.

The lecture will argue that it is important to specify what exactly we mean by «equality» if we apply the concept to ancient texts and societies. Not least, any notion of «equality» will look different from the bottom of the hierarchy and from above.