



Equality in Ancient Greece - Did it Exist?

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

by Prof. **Jorunn Økland** (Professor - Centre for Gender Research; Adjunct Professor - Faculty of Theology, University of Oslo, Norway)



The Justice by Antonio Canova (Wikipedia: distributed under a CC BY-SA 3.0)

Prof. Jorunn Økland, educated in Classics and Religion, is a former Director at the Norwegian Institute at Athens (through 2021) and is currently a Professor at the University of Oslo. Affiliated with the Faculty of Theology and the Centre for Gender Research, her teaching revolves around ancient religious and philosophical texts, especially those relevant to the history and theories of gender and sexuality, an area from which also the current paper is drawn. She is also working on a larger project on notions of (gender) hierarchy and equality in the ancient world. Her latest publication is on the 19th-century French explorer, excavator of Susa, writer, and ethnographer Jane Dieulafoy.



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.