

Lecture 12: *oikos* and *polis*:
Gender and Society in Classical Athens



HIST 225 Fall 2011

Highly Patriarchal Society

Ancient Greece (Rome) founded on *patriarchy*
– control of the father

Women had:

- great social responsibility
- little social mobility
- absolutely no political power or authority

The Greek Family

- Traditionally monogamous and nuclear
- Greek writers equate *oikos* as an economic unit
- Athenian citizenship = offspring of legally recognized marriage between two Athenian citizens
- Vital in the inheritance of property

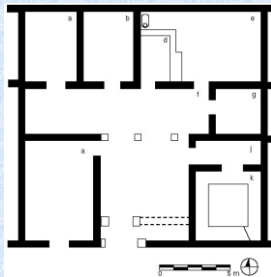
The Life of Women in Ancient Greece

- children (boys and girls) grew up in the care of a nurse
 - kept in the *gynaikon* with other women until older



The Greek House

- Specific Rooms for men and women:
- *andron*
- *gynaikon*
 - located on upper floor



“Women’s Work”

- women had several tasks Greeks considered appropriate for their gender:
 - wool-working
 - fetching water

– <http://homepage.usa:workslides.html>



Women carting wool
Berlin F 2289
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

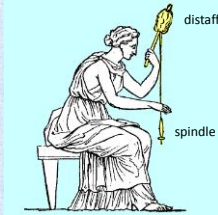
woman spinning wool



women spinning with kalathos
Tampa 86.97a, b



seated woman with wool-basket
Boston 13.189



distaff (*colus*, ἡλακάτη)

spindle (*fusus*, ἄτρακτος)

The wool, flax, or other material, having been prepared for spinning, and having sometimes been dyed was rolled into a ball which was, however, sufficiently loose to allow the fibers to be easily drawn out by the hand of the spinner.

Labor of spinning/weaving central to identity of Greek women

- Penelope in Odyssey

Lekythos, ca. 550–530 BCE
black-figure attributed to the Amasis Painter
Attic: Terracotta





women at a fountain house
Toledo 1961.23

Terracotta hydria (water jar), ca. 510–500 BCE
black-figure Greek, Attic
H. 14 3/4 in. (37.5 cm)
Rogers Fund, 1906 (06.1021.77)

Women pouring water



Standing woman with oinochoe
Photograph by Maria Daniels, courtesy of the
Tampa Museum of Art, October 1991
Tampa 86.81



Main panel: women and herons
Harvard 1960.340

“My Big, Fat (Ancient) Greek Wedding”

- Men were considerably older
 - men ~ 30 years old
 - women ~ 15 years old
- Duty was to provide her husband with offspring
- “Women who have intercourse are healthier than those who abstain. For the womb is moistened by intercourse and ceases to be dry.”
 - Hippocrates, *Seed 4*
- Dryness = contractions and pain
- Became impossible for Athenians to marry foreigners

An Attic Wedding

Day of the wedding:

- Athenian bride took a ritual bath
- poured from a special vase (*loutraphoros*)
- prepared her for a new life

Ceremony took place at night

- The bridal couple and the best man seated in the foremost cart
 - drawn by two donkeys
- two women and a man walk in the procession
 - lead woman holds two torches
- The bride holds a wreath and pulls her veil forward in a gesture associated with marriage in Greek art
 - bridegroom holding the reins





Sociological phenomena of weddings

Comparison between wedding and funeral

- both ceremonies symbolically represent rites of passage:
 - virginal status of young girl at an end
 - life at end of corpse
 - both represented similarly in Greek art
- exchange of “property”
 - dowry paid to husband by father of bride
 - patriarchal power now in hands of husband

Homeric Hymn to Demeter

- Persephone, abducted by Hades
 - daughter of Demeter
- trauma experienced by the mother
- wedding = death
- most popular time to be married was the Winter
- *Gamelion* (winter month) literally means “time of the wedding”

Women in Funerary Art

- women usually depicted with animals
- sacrificial offerings at graves of girls
- change between objects in burial contexts
 - girls (*kore*) have spindles and distaffs
 - young women (*nymphe*) have combs
 - married women (*gyne*) have loom weights



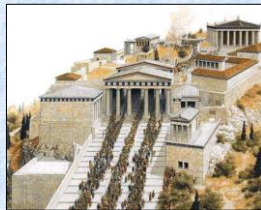
Women in Religious Rituals

Religious festivals restricted TO women:

- the Eleusinian Mysteries
 - honored Demeter and Persephone
 - ecstatic dancing
 - psychotropic drugs
- Thesmophoria
 - correlated a woman's generative capabilities with the renewal of vegetation
 - survival of society
- Brauron
 - young girls between ages of five and puberty
 - selected to serve the goddess Artemis
 - acted as "little bears" –untamed animals that would be domesticated through marriage

The Panathenaia

- Civic festival sponsored by city of Athens
 - dedicated to Pallas Athena
- entire city participated
- women held prominent role in ceremony
- walked through the entire city to the Acropolis









Woman's Role on the Farm

Xenophon (430-354 BCE)

- conservative Athenian general who supported Sparta
- wrote numerous educational handbooks

Oeconomicus "On Estate Management" (360s?)

- Ischomachus explains to his wife how best to keep a house
 - practices in ruling and training slaves
 - technology used in farming
 - dialogue form with Socrates as a primary speaker

Role of Women in Greek society

Does the work inform us as to gender relationships and roles?

Most see the work to be an expression of Greek ***ideology of power***

- how well one controls wife, slaves and political subordinates
 - Some see it as misogynistic and patriarchal
 - others as a proto-form of Women's Lib.

What is Xenophon's work really about

- Scholars are at odds to explain this text.
- Most see Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* as an metaphorical allegory to running the Athenian state
- the polis is Athens was built on the foundation of the *oikos* (household.)
