



Historically Speaking

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Oikos, Polis and Community



Goddess of the Home

Hestia, in Greek religion is goddess of the hearth. She is a daughter of Cronus and Rhea, and one of the 12 Olympian deities. When the gods Apollo and Poseidon became suitors for her hand she swore to remain a maiden forever, whereupon Zeus, the king of the gods, bestowed upon her the honour of presiding over all sacrifices.

Hestia maintained the hearth (fireplace) of the home. This fire was important because it was used for cooking and for keeping the home warm. Hestia also helped to keep peace in the family and taught people how to build their homes.

The ancient Greek word 'oikos' refers to three related but distinct concepts: the family, the family's property, and the house. The oikos was the basic unit of society in most Greek city-states (polis). In normal usage the oikos referred to a line of descent from father to son from generation to generation. The head of the oikos, along with his immediate family and his slaves, would all be included, and large oikoi also had farms that were usually tended by the slaves. Those were the basic agricultural unit of the ancient greek economy.

A community could grow around an oikos. That is, a family that had sons, could deal with a large farm. Surrounding couples with no children or at least no sons, could not maintain enough farming to survive. At some point those with little property might enter into an agreement with a larger family, wherein the man would offer to handle some skill or trade (ie. metalworking, herdsman, etc.) and surrender his land in exchange for he and his family being brought into the oikos. As this central family gained more land and could afford more slaves and indentured servants, the need eventually arose for that family to 'govern' this oikos or community. That governance would be passed down from generation to generation within the original family. Eventually this oikos could be considered a city-state or polis.

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THE HOME

The Traditional Approach

The traditional family home was assumed to be divided into two distinct areas. One, called the gynaikon, was the area associated with women's activities (cooking, sewing, weaving, etc.) and where the children were raised. Men were not restricted from this area as they were the head of the household, but the area for men, called the andron was restricted to men and those attending the symposium (drinking party). The symposium might, however, include hatairai; women who were educated and raised to be artists, entertainers and conversationalists, and high class prostitutes.

A More Recent Approach

Recent scholarship from historians such as Lisa Nevett and Lin Fowhall has argued for a more flexible approach to household space, with rooms not simply having a single fixed function, and gendering of space not being as simple as some rooms being for men and others for women. It has been argued that instead of dividing the household space into "male" and "female" areas, it is more accurate to look at areas as being private or public. In this model, access to the private areas were restricted to the family, while public areas accommodated visitors.



Part of the excavation at Olynthos. The grid layout, with regularly sized rectangular houses, can be seen.

FAMILY

Men

A man was the head (Kyrios) of the household. The kyrios was responsible for representing the interests of his oikos to the wider community and providing legal protection to the women and minors with whom he shared his household. Initially the kyrios of an oikos would have been the husband and father of offspring. However, when any legitimate sons reached adulthood the role of kyrios could, in many instances, be transferred from the father to the next male generation.

Women

Although men were part of both the polis and oikos, women had a role only in the oikos. In Athens, women of citizen status did not have many of the rights citizen men had. They had no political rights and could take no part in governing. They could conduct only limited business and hold and inherit limited property. All business was conducted on a woman's behalf by her husband or father.

Athenian inheritance laws prioritised men over equally closely related women, and daughters in the absence of sons did not inherit at all, but came along with the estate as 'epikleroi'. Instead of automatic inheritance rights, daughters were given dowries as support.

Children

Childbirth took place at home. A female midwife may have been present, and a male doctor called in if complications arose. At birth the guardian (usually the father) had to decide whether to keep the child or expose it. An exposed child was left in the wilderness to die. Many myths deal with such children who, in the myths, were always found and raised by animals such as bears or wolves or by hunters or herdsman. Atalanta is one such child.