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Source Paper Two

When reading ancient sources such as Plutarch's, *Greek Lives*, dominating figures are always important men. However, ancient author's attention to detail allows Ancient Historians to make claims on other aspects of Greek society as well. One such aspect is the Greek household. Questions like how did the household look, how did it function, and who lived in it, are essential in reconstructing Greek society. This paper will argue that it is possible to reconstruct a Greek household using Plutarch's, *Greek Lives*, Thucydides, and Aristophanes', *Lysistrata*.

Before providing evidence for the claim above, it is important to define what a Greek household is. For the sake of this paper, a Greek household includes: All family members who live in the same house, slaves, animals, dimensions of the house, furniture, and décor. Recreation of the household also includes relations that take place within the household. Examples include, hierarchy amongst family members, and relations with neighbors and guests.

Following the criteria stated above, the first aspect of the household that can be addressed is the role of women. By looking at Aristophanes', *Lysistrata*, a number of claims can be made about how women functioned in the Greek household. Women played an important role because they acted as primary caretakers of the household. Evidence for this is seen when Lysistrata and her friend, Calonice, talk about a women's workload. They often compare women to beasts of burden, and even choose a white horse for their sacrificial symbol.¹ Furthermore, numerous daily chores like stripping flax and stretching wool are mentioned later in the play, which are performed by women as well.² It is safe to assume that women took care of the house on a day to day basis, unless they were wealthy enough to own slaves.

¹ Arist. *Lys.*

² Arist. *Lys.*

Not only did women take care of the household, but they were also encouraged to stay within the confines of the house. For example, in “Pericles’ Funeral Oration,” Pericles is thought to have said, “Your greatest glory of a woman is not to be inferior to what God has made you, and the greatest glory of a woman is to be least talked about by men, whether they are praising you or criticizing you.”³ By staying inside the home, women cannot be talked about by other men because they are away from public life.

Moreover if women are confined to their homes, then there is no opportunity for their children’s legitimacy to be questioned. Women seen outside to home could be accused of sleeping with other men. As a result, women were not permitted to move out of the household, unless they were married. Even Cimon’s sister was refrained from leaving because she was not married.⁴ Legitimacy was the way in which women maintained power in the household. Consequently, if a child was accused of being illegitimate, it could have harsh consequences, especially if the child was a noble. For example, Agesilaus’ brother, Leotychidas, was banished from Greece due to his illegitimacy.⁵ Although women did not have direct power like men, they did have power when it came to their children.

Similar to women, children also spent of their time in the household. The life of Alcibiades provides an excellent account on how children spent their time in the household. During his childhood, Alcibiades is said to have played the lyre with his friends, as well as played games with dice.⁶ Also mentioned is a wrestling match, but it came off more as a competition rather than playful match with friends. Plutarch’s account leaves the reader with a

³ Thuc.

⁴ Plut. *Cimon*, 4.

⁵ Plut. *Agesilaus*, 4.

⁶ Plut. *Alcibiades*, 2.

sense that wealthier children in Ancient Greece played with toys and musical instruments in their free time.

In additionally to playing, children performed daily chores around the house. In *Lysistrata*, the group women reflect back on their childhood and mention how they were in charge of pounding barley at the age of ten.⁷ Whether playing with toys, or performing chores, children were actively involved in household activities.

While the ancient sources provide a good description on immediate family members, they also give descriptions of slaves in the household. Since slaves were a vital part of Ancient Greece, it should make sense that they belonged to household too. Although subtle, the *Life of Pericles* proves that slaves often lived in the same house as their master. As Pericles was walking home on night, an “outrageous fellow” followed him home. After returning home, Pericles calls for his slave and tells him to escort the man home.⁸ Pericles’ slave had to be living in the same household since it was late at night, and the slave was close enough to greet Pericles upon arrival.

Conversely the sources provide substantial evidence that Greek’s allowed pets in their households. A story is told of a dog who belonged to an Athenian named Xanthippus. Before leaving to fight Xerxes, Xanthippus’ dog followed him to the docks and swam alongside the trireme until it reached Salamis. The dog then died of exhaustion.⁹ Although there are many references to dogs in Plutarch’s, *Greek Lives*, the story of Xanthippus’ dog is the most convincing. Even though the story is probably exaggerated, it shows that dogs became attached

⁷ Arist. *Lys*.

⁸ Plut. *Pericles*, 5.

⁹ Plut. *Themistocles*, 10.

to their owners. The only way for that to happen would be if dog lived with its owner. Also Plutarch states that the dog belonged to Xanthippus, so it must have lived in the same household.

Subsequently, the sources recreate more than just who lived in the Greek household, but also give the reader a sense of what kind of items could be found inside a house. In the *Life of Nicias*, Nicias is said to have liked taking bathes while dealing with political affairs, or while discussing pressing issues with friends.¹⁰ Nicias had to have a bathroom on his property to be able to do this. While this claim only applies to wealthy Athenians, it still helps recreate how a wealthy household would look like.

Even more example of common household items can be seen in the *Life of Solon*. After issuing a new law, Solon required all women outside to be covered by no more than three pieces of clothing. In addition to this, women were forbidden to go outside at night unless escorted in a cart with a lamp in the front.¹¹ Hence it would be expected to see a cart parked alongside a typical Athenian household.

Although much has been said about Athenian households, Plutarch's, *Life of Lycurgus*, provides an incredibly detailed account on Spartan households. Many of Lycurgus' reforms dealt with Spartan's personal life, and as a result, Spartan households looked quite different from the rest of Greece. Since money was outlawed in Sparta, households became less extravagant. To compensate, "essential daily utensils such as beds, chairs and tables began to be made to a high degree of excellence."¹² So Spartan households looked bare compared to Athenian's homes, but still contained signs of status. Furthermore, Spartan households differed from the rest of Greece

¹⁰ Plut. *Nicias*, 3.

¹¹ Plut. *Solon*, 21.

¹² Plut. *Lycurgus*, 9.

due to how they were built. Spartiates could only build a roof with an axe, and a door with a saw.¹³ Spartan households were most likely simpler in design as well.

Considering the evidence, the recreation of a Greek household is possible using only the mentioned sources. The questions of who lives in Greek households, what roles did they perform, and what did a household look like have all been answered using only the work of Plutarch, Thucydides, and Aristophanes. Although the recreation is not perfect, it still gives readers a sense of what it would be like to live in Ancient Greece.

¹³ Plut. *Lycurgus*, 13.