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Life and Society in Classical Greece

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Society

BY the classical period of the fifth and fourth centuries BC there were hundre of communities of Greeks living scattered around the shores of the Mediterrane 'like frogs around a pond', as Plato put it. From the central sea of the Aege with its island communities, and the coastal towns of Turkey and eastern a southern Greece, they had spread to north Greece, the Black Sea coast a southern Russia, to Sicily and south Italy, and as far as Provence, Spain, a north Africa. These communities regarded themselves as basically similar, living in a *polis*, the only form of truly civilized life. Of course many aspects their social and economic life were different: some cities possessed large agric tural territories or serf populations, others were heavily engaged in trade in r materials such as corn, olive oil, dried fish, wine, metals, timber, slaves, or manufactured goods, whether made on the spot or imported from eastern a other cultures; there was also a huge outflow of Greek goods in certain are and of skilled labour such as doctors, stonemasons, and professional mercenari The economy of the cities varied enormously, and so did their functions: so were essentially fortresses, others based on a religious shrine; but most had por and all had some land and constituted an administrative centre. In principle should be possible to reconstruct the social and economic life of a typical Gre city, much as Plato in the *Laws* and Aristotle in the last two books of the *Poli* believed it possible to discover an ideal city behind the unsatisfactory mul fariousness of real cities.

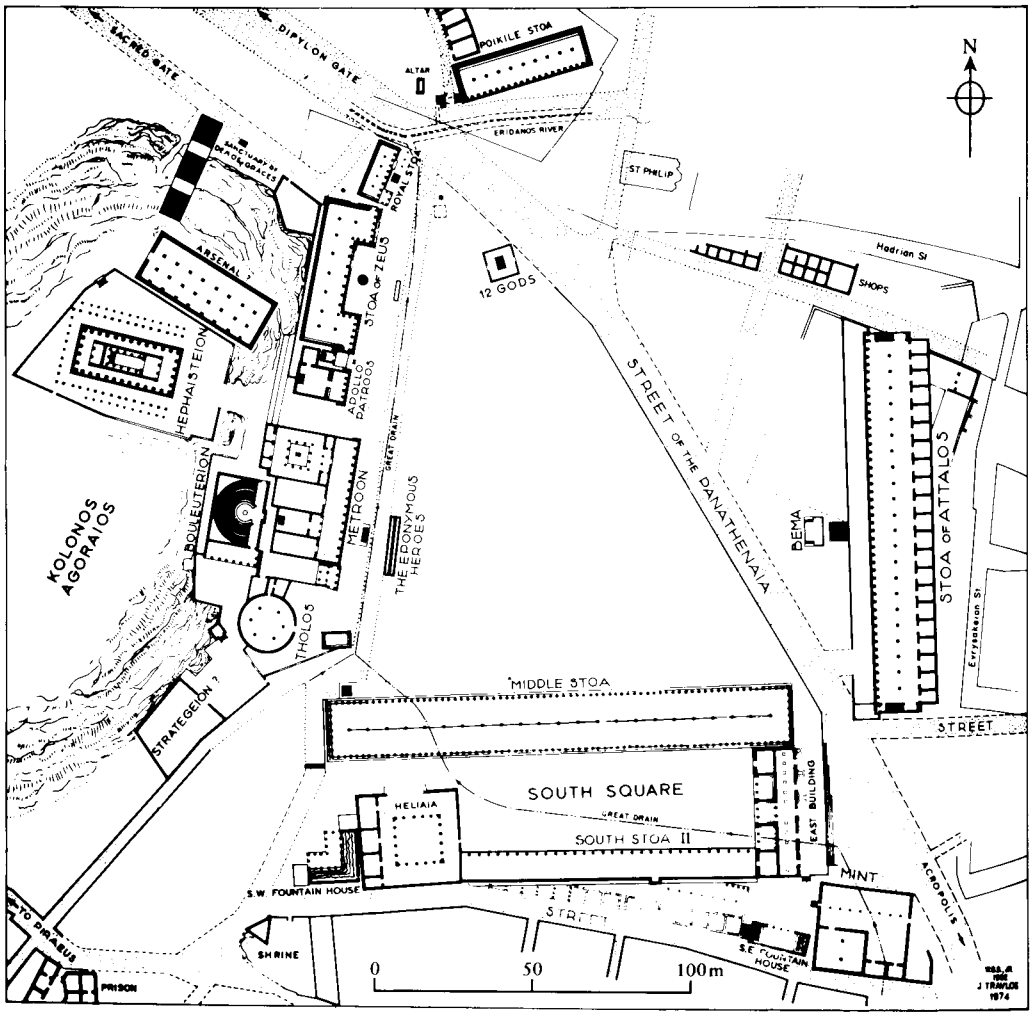
The reason that we cannot do this satisfactorily is not so much the absence evidence as its concentration on two unrepresentative examples. Only Athe offers a sufficient variety of material for us to be able to understand in detail t way people lived; and from that evidence we see that Athens was fundamental untypical, in being more varied, and yet more systematic in its interrelations,

fact more advanced than most, if not all other, Greek cities. In contrast Sparta is described for us by Athenian writers as the opposite of Athens, so that we see only those parts of it which are different from Athenian institutions. Order and obedience are contrasted with anarchy and freedom, the agricultural economy with trade and manufacture, the freedom of women with Athenian restrictions. Where there is no opposition the sources fall silent: our main writer, Xenophon, in his little book on Sparta, forgets to mention the Spartan helot serfs, because slavery was universal; and we hear nothing of the massive armaments industry which must have provided the standardized weapons of the Spartan military caste. Outside these two cities we have only scattered information or chance finds, such as the great law-code of the small city of Gortyn in inland Crete.

So Athens must be the focus, in the knowledge that we are describing life in other cities only in so far as they resembled Athens, and in the belief that at least the basic social and economic relationships of Greek cities are more similar to each other than to the tribal and non-Greek areas which surrounded them. Yet even for a single society we must recognize that there is no one viewpoint: each individual witness will describe his world differently. Plato's dialogues portray Athens in vivid detail, as a world of young and godlike intellectuals meeting in private houses for conversation or social drinking, strolling in suburban parks or walking down to the Piraeus for a festival, listening to famous visitors skilled in rhetoric or philosophy from all over Greece. Even when Socrates is in prison under sentence of execution, the authorities allow large groups of his friends to visit him and discuss with him such questions as whether he should escape, and the nature of life after death. Finally Socrates drinks the hemlock, and his limbs slowly lose sensation as he converses peacefully and rationally.

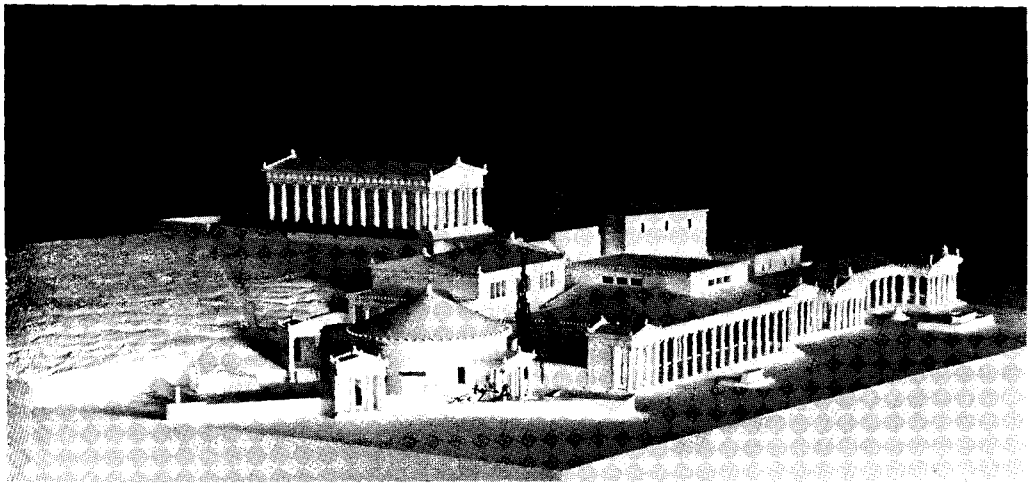
Yet for most of the time which Plato describes, Athens was fighting a long and bloody war in which at least half the population died, many of them from a particularly horrifying plague which scarred even those who survived it, and which was partly the consequence of the unsanitary conditions in which vast numbers of citizens were camped, at first in the heat of the summer, and later all year, on every available space of open or sacred land within the city walls. In reality travel was dangerous and very much restricted; and the way down to the Piraeus must have been as filthy, as stinking, and as crowded as the slums of Calcutta. Nor were Athenian prison conditions as humane or as clean as Plato suggests; and the medical effects of hemlock are not mere numbness of the limbs—they include choking, slurring of speech, convulsions, and uncontrollable vomiting.

Plato's Athens is an ideal vision which reflects reality as much as the naked figures of the Parthenon reflect the pock-marked and poorly dressed peasants who stared up at them; yet we need to know the ideals which a society sets for itself. Attic comedy for its own purposes seized on certain aspects of daily life, to exaggerate them for comic effect; yet once again we may wonder whether the obscenities and the constant references to bodily functions are typical of a society



PLAN OF THE *AGORA* (MARKET-PLACE) IN ATHENS IN THE HELLENISTIC PERIOD. The square had been cleared early in the sixth century, then supplied with public buildings along its west side, behind which there later stood the temple of Hephaestus. Among the early buildings are the Royal Stoa, office of the royal archon (*archon basileus*) who saw to religious matters. There was also a council house (*bouleutērion*), archive (in the *metrōon*), and magistrate's club house (*tholos*), shown here in their Classical form. The Painted Stoa at the north held the early Classical paintings of Polygnotus and Micon. Across the square ran the Panathenaic Way which passed from a city gate (Dipylon Gate) to the Acropolis. At the south are sixth-century fountain houses and the state mint. The stoae—shops and offices—which close the square are comparatively late additions, the Stoa of Attalus, a gift of the Pergamene king, being now rebuilt to serve as museum and workrooms for the Agora excavations.

which kept its women in strict seclusion, rather than a form of ritual release reserved for the theatre: how regular was father-bashing or female drunkenness off the stage? Did women ever really dream of taking over the state? Again law-codes tell us only of the boundary areas where crime and punishment are thinkable, not of what is either normal or tabu. Then the speeches of Athenian lawyers concern a special group of the rich, and situations where there is an inherit-



MODEL OF THE WEST SIDE OF THE ATHENIAN AGORA IN THE LATE CLASSICAL PERIOD, seen from the south. Compare the plan, opposite.

ance to be disputed or a business interest to conflict; hidden behind them is a world of normal activity. For all the vividness of our evidence we are dealing with a set of stereotypes and partial views which inform us only indirectly of what it was like to be an Athenian.

The *polis* was essentially a male association: citizens who were men joined together in making and carrying out decisions affecting the community. The origin of this activity doubtless lay in the military sphere and the right of warriors to approve or reject the decisions of their leaders; the development of the *polis* is the extension of this practice to all aspects of social life, with the partial exception of religion. Politics, direct participation in the making of rational choices after discussion, was therefore central to all Greek cities. In Athens and Sparta all male citizens participated at least in principle equally; elsewhere particular rights could be confined to certain groups, richer or better born, thereby necessarily creating conflicts and a hierarchy of rights within the citizen body. Nevertheless the forms of political life, mass citizen assembly, smaller council, and annual executive magistrates were general, though the powers and attributes of the different elements varied widely.

It is already obvious that such a developed type of organization must relate itself to other more 'natural' and presumably earlier forms of association, of the kind generally described by modern anthropologists as kinship groups. Most Greek cities divided their citizens into hereditary 'tribes': Dorian cities traditionally possessed three, Ionian cities four, but political reformers were given to tampering with the organization, and Cleisthenes at Athens had changed the number there from four to ten (about 507 BC; above, p. 35). The lack of any organic connection between these city tribes and a real tribal past is shown by the fact that they only existed as social divisions in the *polis* communities, and are absent from the genuinely tribal areas of north Greece; they were in fact ways of dividing the citizen body for military and political purposes, sanctioned by tradition and reinforced by specially organized state religious cults.

In Athens the reforms of Cleisthenes had also reorganized the associations based on locality. The village or deme had become an administrative unit, with a local official and a local assembly to control all aspects of local government, and most importantly to maintain the citizen lists; there was a complex procedure for ensuring enrolment on the citizen list, and a legal machinery for appeal in the case of exclusion. Because of this connection with citizenship, membership of the deme remained hereditary, regardless of actual domicile, and every Athenian citizen was required to state his deme in any official transaction: so Socrates' official designation was 'Socrates son of Sophroniscus of the deme of Alopeke'. But however great the population movements, the deme remained a geographical focus for most Athenians because they lived there. Even more important to the ordinary Athenian than these central and local government organizations was the phratry (*phratria*), the group of *phrateres*. This is the sole context in Greek of the important linguistic root common to most Indo-European languages, found for instance in the Celtic *brathir*, German *Bruder*, English *brother*, Latin *frater*, or French *frère*; in Greek it designates the non-familial type of 'brotherhood' (there was a quite different word for the blood relationship of brother). These brotherhoods were originally perhaps aristocratic warrior bands, but once again the democratic state had reorganized them to make them open to all: every male Athenian belonged to a phratry, and it was his phratry which dominated his social life. Each phratry worshipped a male and a female god, Zeus Phratrios and Athena Phratria, at a general annual festival held in traditional localities and under local phratry control: the mixture of uniformity with a spurious diversity suggests strongly a remoulding of older institutions at a particular date. The various rites of passage of the young male Athenian were connected with this festival. At an early age he was presented to the *phrateres* by his father and relatives at the altar of his Zeus Phratrios, and the acceptance of his first sacrifice signified his acceptance into the community. In adolescence he was again presented and dedicated to the god his shorn hair; the *phrateres* then voted to admit him as a phratry member and inscribed his name on the phratry list. It was also the *phrateres* who witnessed the solemn betrothal ceremony which was the central public act of the Athenian marriage, and who celebrated with a feast paid for by the bridegroom its final consummation. Thus the phratry was involved in all the main stages of a man's life and was the focus of his social and religious activity; when in difficulties, for instance needing witnesses at law, he turned first to his *phrateres*. The only area in which the Athenian phratry was not concerned was death, though elsewhere this too was part of their functions.

This type of association was common in the Greek world, and had developed for different ends in different cities. Sparta is the most striking example: the male citizen body was divided into *syssitia* or mess groups on which the entire social and military organization of the state depended. Here the normal practices of the Greek world had been transformed to create a military élite. From the age of seven, boys were given a state-organized upbringing, and brigaded into age

groups. They lived communally from the age of twelve, taught all sorts of skills useful to self-reliance and survival, and provided with inadequate clothing and food to toughen them. At twenty they joined the *syssitia* where they must live until the age of thirty, and even thereafter they were required to eat daily those common meals to which they had to contribute from the land allotted to them and farmed by state-owned slaves, who were in fact the enslaved descendants of neighbouring communities, constantly rebelling and requiring suppression. The theoretical elegance of this solution (soldiers make slaves, slaves make soldiers, slaves need soldiers to suppress them), and the way it built on traditional Greek social customs, much impressed ancient political thinkers, and offered a counter-ideal to the Athenian democracy. The two examples show how differently similar institutions could develop in different states, and produce societies with utterly opposed characteristics.

The need to belong remains, and in an open society like Athens it led to a multiplicity of social groups more or less integrated into the state. There were aristocratic religious groups called *gennētai* who claimed descent from a common ancestor and monopolized the priesthoods of the more important city cults. Lower down the social scale there were other religious groups centred on the worship of lesser gods and heroes, but with a strong social purpose in feasting and mutual help. There were aristocratic drinking groups, which might even on occasion be mobilized for political ends, but which were more often to be found indulging in mindless post-prandial destruction and the molesting of innocent passers-by; in the daytime the same young men would be found in other but overlapping groups associated with the various sporting complexes or *gymnasia* of the city. There were benefit clubs and burial clubs, and clubs associated with individual trades and activities. There were religious or mystical sects, and intellectual organizations such as the philosophical schools of Plato and Aristotle. Characteristic of these organizations are a cult focus, the ownership of property for the common benefit, the existence of a formal constitution with officers and a means of taking formal decisions, often recorded on stone, and a strong element of common feasting and drinking; characteristic too is the fact that these are all-male groups engaging in all-male activities. Occasionally we hear of equally exclusive female organizations, usually connected with specific cults confined to women, but these tend to be or to be seen as mere extensions of the male world. The range of such associations is shown by the Athenian law relating to them; 'If a deme or *phrateres* or worshippers of heroes or *gennētai* or drinking groups or funerary clubs or religious guilds or pirates or traders make rules amongst themselves, these shall be valid unless they are in conflict with public law.'

The developed Greek city was a network of associations: as Aristotle saw, it was such associations which created the sense of community, of belonging, which was an essential feature of the *polis*: the ties of kinship by blood were matched with multiple forms of political and religious and social groupings, and of companionship for a purpose, whether it be voyaging or drinking or burial. This

conception of citizenship could even be invoked in time of civil war: when the democrats and the oligarchs of Athens were fighting in 404 BC, a priest of the Eleusinian mysteries, a man of noble family on the democratic side, made this appeal:

> Fellow citizens, why are you driving us out of the city? Why do you want to kill us? We have never done you any harm. We have shared with you in the most holy rites, in sacrifices, and in splendid festivals; we have danced in choruses with you and gone to school with you and fought in the army with you, braving together with you the dangers of land and sea in defence of our common safety and freedom. In the name of the gods of our fathers and mothers, of the bonds of kinship and marriage and companionship, which are shared by so many of us on either side, I beg you to feel shame before gods and men and cease to harm our fatherland. (Xenophon, *Hell.* 2. 4. 20-2)

In such a world it might be argued that multiple ties limited the freedom of the individual, and there is certainly an important sense in which the conception of the autonomy of the individual apart from the community is absent from Greek thought: the freedom of the Greeks is public, externalized in speech and action. This freedom derives precisely from the fact that the same man belongs to a deme, a phratry, a family, a group of relatives, a religious association; and, living in this complex world of conflicting groups and social duties, he possesses the freedom to choose between their demands, and so to escape any particular dominant form of social patterning. It is this which explains the coexistence of the group mentality with the amazing creativity and freedom of thought of classical Athens: the freedom which results from belonging in many places is no less a freedom than that which results from belonging nowhere, and which creates a society united only in its neuroses.

Family

The Greek family was monogamous and nuclear, being composed in essence of husband and wife with their children; but Greek writers tend to equate it with the household as an economic unit, and therefore to regard other dependent relatives and slaves as part of it. The family fulfilled a number of social functions apart from the economic. It was the source of new citizens; in the classical period the state intervened to establish increasingly stringent rules for citizenship and so for legitimacy: ultimately a citizen must be the offspring of a legally recognized marriage between two Athenian citizens, whose parents must also be citizens; this increasingly sharp definition tended to exclude the more flexible unions of an earlier period. It became impossible for an Athenian to marry a foreigner or to obtain recognition for the children of any other type of liaison: the development is essentially democratic, the imposition of the social norms of the peasant majority on an aristocracy which had previously behaved very differently; for the aristocracy had often married outside the community and thereby determined its own criteria for legitimacy. Indeed Pericles, the author of the first of these

EDDING PROCESSION on an Athenian vase by the Amasis Painter, about 540 BC. Bride and groom sit a mule cart, accompanied by relatives and guests, on their way to their new home. The bride's mother ds them carrying torches, and in the house the groom's mother is also seen with a torch. The preparation the bride, the procession, and special occasions for the receiving of gifts, were the main ceremonies of a eek wedding, apart from the contract about property.

izenship laws, demonstrates the painfulness of the process of adaptation; for, hen his legitimate children died of the plague, he was forced to seek from the sembly permission for his children by Aspasia, his Milesian mistress, to be clared legitimate Athenian citizens. Other individuals, often of aristocratic rth, found themselves reclassified in this process as bastards, without either izenship or rights of inheritance.

For a second function of the family, intimately connected with citizenship, was e inheritance of property. Greek society in general did not practise primogen-ıre, the right of the eldest son to inherit; rather the property was divided ually by lot between all surviving sons, so that the traditional word for an heritance was a man's *klēros* or lot. This is one important reason for the insta-lity of the Athenian family, for each family survived only as long as its head, d its property was redistributed on his death. There were of course counter-iling tendencies. The common practice of burial in family plots gave a focus r a group of families over several generations, at least among those able to ford the considerable expense of the land and the impressive monuments which ere a feature of these group burials: the phenomenon is perhaps a case of the ealthier citizens imitating aristocratic practices. Marriage, even at the highest vels, was endogamous, within a close circle of relatives, in order to preserve nily property from fragmentation. More generally, for the same reason, it was mmon to limit family size; and that could often lead to the absence of male

heirs through death, and the redistribution of the property among the wider group of relatives, who also had duties to prosecute a man's murderer. But in general there is little evidence for extended family groups being important in the classical age.

Another function of the family raises one of the central problems in our understanding of Athenian social values: the family clearly served as the means of protecting and enclosing women. Women were citizens, with certain cults reserved to them and not allowed to foreign women, and they were citizens for the purposes of marriage and procreation; but otherwise they lacked all independent status. They could not enter into any transaction worth more than one *medimnos* of barley; they could not own any property, with the conventional exception of their clothes, their personal jewellery and personal slaves. At all times they had to be under the protection of a *kyrios*, a guardian; if they were unmarried, their father or closest male relative, if they were married their husband, if widowed their son or other male relative by marriage or birth. At all times the woman belonged to a family and was under the legal protection of its head.

The two types of occasion when a woman could be involved in property transactions illustrate the nature of this protection. The first concerns the dowry: it was the duty of a *kyrios* to provide a dowry for all women in his family: the lack of a dowry demonstrated extreme poverty, and might even lead people to suspect that no legal marriage had in fact taken place. The formula in the betrothal ceremony was:

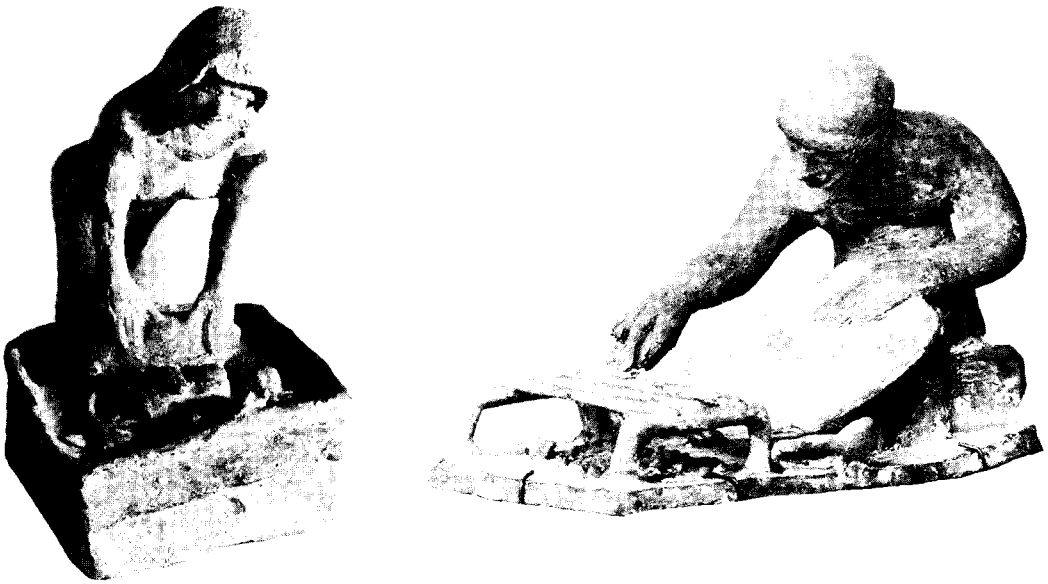
> I give this woman for the procreation of legitimate children.
> I accept.
> And (e. g.) 3 talents dowry.
> I am content.

Marriage was deemed to have taken place on receipt of the dowry. The dowry accompanied the woman, but did not belong to her: it was in the complete control of her husband; but in the case of divorce or the death of the husband it could be reclaimed along with the woman, and was only really transferred once the woman had a male heir to inherit, and to be her *kyrios*.

A woman could also be the carrier of property in the absence of a will and of male heirs in the appropriate degree. In this case the woman became an *epiklēros*, or heiress: her name was publicly proclaimed in the assembly, and she and the property were adjudged to the closest male relative of the deceased who was prepared to marry her, often her paternal uncle. This was a well-established procedure: soldiers were given special leave to press their claims; a claimant was entitled to divorce his wife in order to marry the heiress, and could even take the heiress from her husband if she were already married, provided the marriage was childless: 'many who were married have had their wives taken from them', says one orator in a speech in which he explains that his father did not claim an

inheritance belonging to his mother, for fear that one of her relatives would then seize her in marriage.

A system of law and private property reflects the prejudices of the society which creates it; the Athenian system was unusual in ancient Greece merely in being more systematic; but it was possible for other cities to develop differently. In Sparta, for instance, the freedom of women was notorious, and much disapproved of by those very philosophers who idealized Sparta otherwise; in Sparta too women could inherit land in their own right, until by the third century the fact that two-fifths of the land was in their hands provoked a political revolution. The status of women in Athens does perhaps require explanation.



CLAY FIGURES OF A WOMAN KNEADING BREAD AND A COOK WORKING AT A GRILL. Fifth century BC. There are several of these Classical studies of work in the kitchen, mainly from Boeotia.

There are two different strands in the Athenian attitude to women. The first is the effect of democracy on the status of women. Aristocratic women at least had been freer in earlier times, but the coming of democracy meant the imposition of the social norms of the majority. Many peasant societies combine a high value placed on women with mistrust of them. Semonides of Amorgos in the sixth century described the appalling varieties of women that the gods had made to be a burden on men, in terms of their animal characteristics; only one type is any good, and she is like the bee: 'She causes his property to grow and increase, and she grows old with a husband whom she loves and who loves her, the mother of a handsome and reputable family. She stands out among all women, and a godlike beauty plays around her. She takes no pleasure in sitting among