
The inescapable problem of all who work on sociological topics in antiquity is the nature of the evidence. Professor Cox (C) is aware of this, but tends to forget when considering the relationships between oikos, deme and polis. The arguments of the orators, whether true or not—and very often we have no means of judging this—are designed to win the votes of the very large juries and therefore to enlist their sympathies rather than their intelligent assessment of the evidence.

Jurors knew that (excluding shrines) every square metre of Attica belonged to an oikos, which belonged to a deme; and the demesmen decided collectively who was admitted to the roll, and was therefore a citizen. Moreover each deme had to finance a predetermined share of the expenses of the polis, so that the demesmen had a collective interest in ensuring that the wealthy oikoi, which had the ability to finance liturgies, trierarchies etc., were not rendered unable to play their parts. Hence the many pleas not to allow an oikos to become impoverished on the one hand, and not to be amalgamated on the other, with the consequent loss of numerical strength. These considerations must often have influenced the choice of a marriage partner, children for adoption, and in material terms the care of landed properties in an age when boundaries were not so easily determined as they are in an age of post and wire fences. We also have to remember that the inheritance speeches we have are all, essentially, the consequence of an oikos not having an heir with an indisputable claim to the property, and we have no idea what proportion of the estates which were the subject of litigation are represented by our sources.
Which said, C is a very thorough worker, and her computer misses very little. Chapters 1 and 2 cover the formation of families by marriage in the orators (1) and on the inscriptions (2). The former reveal more about the individuals, as inscriptions hardly ever reveal whether a marriage, even between demesmen, was between kinsfolk. Where links are traceable, they are usually patrilineal. Equally unsurprisingly ch. 2 shows more marriages between members of the same or adjacent demes in rural families, and the graves tend to be in the husband’s deme; in the city, most of the stones belong probably or certainly to immigrants to the deme. Chapters 3 and 4 are about relationships, ‘Harmony and Conflict’, within families. Again unsurprisingly, conflict appears most often between individuals who both have, or can manufacture, claims to the same piece of property, and when siblings have equal claims to an equal share in an oikos which can not, or can barely, sustain a division. Here I think C underestimates how often one son may leave the oikos and go off as a sailor or merchant or mercenary, or the oikos may remain undivided in part or in whole.

In ‘What was an oikos?’ (ch. 5) C discusses all the variations found to the archetypal form of a citizen owning land which supported him, his spouse and children, and the almost invariable slave(s). He had inherited it and would hand it on to his son(s) under well-known rules. The vagaries of fortune however often intervened: life was short, punishment, military service, childbirth and disease produced casualties, so that the archetype had to be modified. C discusses how it was modified but never, in the classical period, to the extent that non-citizens obtained ownership of the land.

Oikoi also included outsiders (ch. 6), at least to the extent of contributors to the assets and the sexual needs of the males, and oikoi could be managed by a friend, a neighbour, even a slave. Some were honest, some were not. Deme rolls could be tampered with, even lost, but the point of having witnesses at neonatal celebrations was to get support for the (later) claim of an ephebe
to a place on the roll, and of a girl to be legitimate. Collusion and cheating were possible, and as the oikoi belonged to a deme there were incentives for demesmen and demarchs to cheat. Moreover, in the 200 years or so between 600 and 400 BC the city sometimes had an excess of citizens, sometimes a shortage. So the rules were applied strictly or laxly—there was even the law after the Sicilian disaster whereby men could have a wife and also procreate legitimate children for the oikos of another woman. The situation, and the law, was fluid.

Women-not-wives are extensively discussed, but one such relationship in which the facts are indisputable—that of Pericles and Aspasia—is not much discussed. Yet it sheds a lot of light: when Pericles’ sons died, the citizens allowed Aspasia’s son to be enrolled as a citizen because of Pericles’ services to the city. They did not want his oikos to become *eremos* (heirless). This case must be more important than orators’ allegations.

Slaves covered the whole spectrum of relationships, from chattels to trusted agents, manumitted and even given citizenship, and so able to procreate citizens and inherit property. But this grant was the prerogative of the citizens, not the individual, and created a new oikos.

Friends, neighbours and xenoi varied also in status; some resided with a citizen in his oikia, in commercial or sexual relationships, but they were not part of an oikos or deme members. Xenoi in particular show how private citizens in Athens performed functions now in the public domain—for example, entertaining ambassadors.

There is a conclusion and an appendix on the Political Families. C’s final plaintive query ‘When we use the term oikos, what do we mean?’ can be echoed by all who work on Greek society. The Greeks just did not have a technical vocabulary. That is one of the delights of Greek literature. But some distinctions are clear and not all terms are interchangeable; oikos
and oikia for example. It is also important to remember at all times that the civic context controlled the citizen’s life to a far greater extent than in our ‘free, democratic’ societies.

This book is a mine of information, but the context of the family is underexplored, and the relentless sociological language makes for hard reading. The publisher’s work is exemplary.

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There was a time when modern commentators saw the public ceremonies of Roman religion as formal, cold and uninspiring. As a result, it was thought, most Romans sought emotional fulfilment in a multiplicity of family deities and foreign cults. Roman religion was a pale imitation of Greek religion (and, implicitly, Christianity) and Romans seemed to contradict themselves in expressions of belief. Scholars felt compelled to deal with these ‘contradictions’ in Roman religion by eliminating other possibilities in favour of a single, ‘true’ belief. More recently, ‘ambivalence’ has come into focus, the idea being that the kind of definitive resolution practised by modern scholars was not so much a priority in the ancient world. In this book, Denis Feeney advances the interpretive method a stage further: there was positive and deliberate ‘dialogue’ taking place between competing ideas and contexts, at a pace and intensity which sustained the vitality of the Roman religious system.