The Greek house and the ideology of citizenship

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between the egalitarian ideology of the Greek polis and the development of the complex, self-contained courtyard house. The polis was a 'corporate' state in which power was shared among a body of nominally equal citizens, rather than being centralized in the hands of an individual or small group. Elevating the citizen male to the status of head of an independent household, free from outside interference or ties of patronage, was one of the ways in which this equality was fostered; the enclosed form of the courtyard house advertised its owner’s autonomy and adherence to shared moral codes, and thus his eligibility for access to power. The preference for new housing to be arranged in regular grid-plans also suggests a desire to avoid kin-based patterns of residence, replacing them with a new kind of solidarity based on membership of the citizen group.

Keywords

Greece; polis; house; courtyard; citizenship; equality.

Aristotle regarded the household as the basic unit of the polis (Politics 1253b), and the characteristic form of the Greek courtyard house has often been linked to the development of the state and its ideals of citizenship and equality. The appearance in the Greek world of multi-roomed houses centred around a courtyard, first attested at Zagora on Andros in the late eighth century BC (Figs 1 and 2), has been identified by Ian Morris (1998: 24–9, 1999: esp. 311, 2000: 145–50, 280–6) as one of many changes in material culture related to the emerging idea of the polis as a community of citizens. Morris links the new type of house to the rise of a ‘middling ideology’ which promoted equality between men partly by excluding women, rejecting the aristocratic emphasis on birth as the primary determinant of status. In contrast, Alexandra Coucouzeli (2004, in press) sees the earliest courtyard houses as the residences of aristocratic families formed by the fragmentation of larger kin groups (gene), and attributes their design to an aristocratic ethos of male honour which
was imitated by upwardly mobile non-aristocrats. Both see the appearance of courtyard houses as the first manifestation of ideas about gendered domestic space that are familiar from the literary sources of the Classical period. The developed, Classical form of the courtyard house (Fig. 3) has been linked by Lisa Nevett (1999: esp. 167–8) to the concept of citizenship associated with the polis, specifically to the need to ensure female chastity and the legitimate transmission of citizen status, while Hoepfner and Schwandner (1994) have interpreted the grid plans of some Classical cities, with their repetitive rows of equal-sized houses, as an expression of the democratic ideal of isonomia (equality before the law: Fig. 4).

This paper aims to clarify some of the ways in which Greek domestic architecture was shaped by the development of the concept of citizenship, and in particular by the ideal that access to power should be shared equally between the male members of the citizen body (Aristotle, Politics 1259b.1–10, 1261a.30–6, 1279a.9–13, 1287a.16–20). The argument will make use of the model of ‘corporate political economy’ proposed by Richard Blanton (1998) as a way of bridging the gap between neo-evolutionary theories of state formation based on systems analysis, which assume increasing central control by a ruler or narrow elite (Flannery 1972), and political communities like the Greek polis, where power is less centralized. It has often been observed that the polis does not fit neatly into conventional definitions of the state (e.g. Jameson 1990a: 109; Morris 1991, 1997), and some archaeologists and historians would deny that it qualifies as a state at all (e.g. Marcus 1998: 89–93; Berent 2000). Blanton (1998, esp. 152; cf. also Morris 1991: 43–5) argues that egalitarian communities like the polis are states because they have a formal authority structure, but that Flannery’s model of centralization is of only limited use for understanding them. To understand how such decentralized states work, he distinguishes various different modes of power and identifies a range of strategies associated with each (Blanton 1998: 141–8, tables 5.1–5.4). He draws a basic distinction between ‘intermember exclusionary domination’, in which power is wielded by individuals on the basis of their personal social connections, and ‘systemic power’, in which formal institutions such as laws and bureaucracies limit the possibility of exercising intermember power. The systemic mode of power is further divided into two types, ‘exclusionary’, where the system is designed to ensure the domination of a single ruler or ruling group, and ‘corporate’, in which access to power is more widely distributed and there are measures to limit the potential for any individual or group to monopolize it. These modes of power may operate simultaneously in the same society to varying degrees, either coexisting or in competition with each other. By observing how the balance between them shifts over time and how the different power strategies are deployed, we can gain a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of political structures than the conventional neo-evolutionary typology allows.

Blanton (1998: 154–70, table 5.4) identifies five principal strategies used to promote the corporate mode of power, all of which can be recognized in Archaic and Classical poleis. The first, assembly government, is a common feature of Greek poleis, though the constitution and powers of the assembly varied from place to place. The second strategy is corporate regulation of sources of power, which may take many forms, both material and symbolic: in the Greek context, examples include the accountability of state office-holders through the system of euthuna; the practice of liturgies, which redirected the patronage of
the wealthy towards the community; the decentralization of access to prestige goods by means of a market economy; and the elimination of exclusionary control over religious ritual by bringing it out of the ruler’s house into communal space (Mazarakis Ainian 1997). Another common means of spreading access to power is to base it on exemplary moral or ritual behaviour, rather than on wealth or status, thus opening up political office to a wider section of society: in Classical Athens – the state we know most about – those appointed to public office had to undergo vetting (dokimasia), which required them to prove that they had met their public and private obligations ([Aristotle], Constitution of Athens 55.2–4), and certain types of immoral behaviour could be punished by exclusion from public space and political activity (atimia, literally 'loss of honour': Aischines, Against Timarchos 18–31). In order to ensure proper observation of such moral codes, a third strategy is required, namely reflexive communication, which enables the community to monitor and regulate the behaviour of those in power. Blanton suggests that the moral order in Greek society was monitored by the philosophers, but gossip and drama, especially comedy with its public lampooning of prominent figures, were probably more important in ensuring that individuals involved in public life met expected standards (Hunter 1990; Morris 2000: 134–8). The fourth strategy is ritual sanctification of the moral code and ritualization of political procedures: Blanton cites the oaths sworn by magistrates entering office in Classical Athens, and one might add the prayers and offerings that opened meetings of political bodies such as the assembly, council and law courts (Parker 2005: 99–104, 403–8), and the development of cults honouring appropriate political concepts such as Demos (the people), Demokratia, Themis (Law) and her daughters Dike (Justice) and Eunomia (Good Order). Blanton’s fifth strategy is the decentralization of power by the promotion of semi-autonomy in lower-order sub-systems: an obvious example is Kleisthenes’ creation in Attica of demes (villages) with their own political and religious institutions. This is not to say that the corporate mode of power was the only one that operated in the Greek poleis: even in democratic Athens, the strategies of intermember power were never entirely eliminated from political life (Davies 1981: 88–131; Millett 1989).

The development of Greek houses from the eighth to the fourth century BC can be understood in the light of these corporate power strategies (Hoepfner and Schwandner 1994; Lang 1996; Mazarakis Ainian 1997; Morris 1998; Hoepfner 1999; Nevett 1999). In the Early Iron Age (tenth to eighth centuries BC), most houses consisted of a single room, sometimes with a porch, and all domestic activities must have taken place either in this room or in the open space outside the house (as at Zagora: Fig. 1a). But from the late eighth century onwards, the household seems to turn inwards and withdraw from public space. At Zagora, the one-room houses of the mid-eighth century were converted into courtyard-centred houses within a generation or so (Fig. 1b; Cambitoglou et al. 1971, 1988), and from 700 onwards simple courtyard houses were built at sites all around the Aegean (Fig. 2), although the one-room type remains the most common throughout the Archaic period (Nevett 2003: 18, fig. 3). The courtyard would have provided a private outdoor area for domestic tasks, eliminating the need for members of the household to use communal space. The new-style houses had more than one room, usually two or three, which seem to have been used for different ranges of functions: in some cases the extra rooms provided increased storage space (e.g. at Zagora, and perhaps also at Vroulia:
Cambitoglu et al. 1988: 154–8; Kinch 1914: 112–62, esp. 123), and they also made it possible for formal eating and drinking to be kept separate from service activities (as at Zagora and Thorikos: Fusaro 1982; Westgate in prep.).
The appearance of the self-contained courtyard house can be seen as evidence for one of the strategies associated with the corporate mode of power, namely the promotion of the household as a semi-autonomous sub-system. It seems likely that Early Iron Age communities were dominated by powerful aristocratic individuals, variously imagined as
kings, chiefs or ‘Big Men’ (Morris 1987, 2000; Whitley 1991; Mazarakis Ainian 1997). In
the late eighth century, a sharp increase in the number of burials has been interpreted as
reflecting the breakdown of an elite monopoly on formal burial, which might indicate the
emergence of the idea that power should be shared more widely and equally within a group
of male citizens (Morris 1987, 2000). The appearance of courtyard houses at around the
same time may be another indication of this shift in values: rather than being a powerful
man’s dependant, each man was elevated to the status of head of an independent
household in his own right. The enclosed form of the courtyard house suggests a more
strongly defined conception of the private sphere and a desire to assert control over the
space used by the household, while the increased provision of space for storage may
reflect a greater emphasis on the ideal of self-sufficiency as a way of avoiding depend-
dence. The household’s food supply was often displayed in jars with elaborate relief
decoration, which also appear in the late eighth century and are aptly described by
Ebbinghaus (2005) as ‘conspicuous storage’; and Hesiod, writing around 700, repeatedly
stresses the need to store enough produce to ensure the security of the household (Works
and Days 361–7, 391–400, 473–8): the ‘houseless’ man must work for another (aoikos thes,
600–2).

Each man’s newly empowered status as head of an independent household was
bolstered by a sharpening of the distinctions between men and women and free and
slave, which cut across the traditional divide between aristocrats and commoners
(Morris 2000: 185). The household was the most important arena in which these distinctions were articulated: the more enclosed and compartmentalized plans of Archaic courtyard houses probably reflect a greater degree of control over women (Fusaro 1982; Morris 1999; Coucouzeli in press), even if the seclusion of the house interior was not yet as pronounced as it was to become in the Classical period (Nevett 2003: 17–18), and the subdivision of the house would also have facilitated differentiation between free and slave members of the household (Westgate in prep.). Michael Jameson (1990a: 108–9, 1990b: 195; cf. also Pesando 1987: 148–9) has suggested that the independent aristocratic household, both real and as represented in the Homeric poems, was the model for the ideal citizen house of the Classical period; in these early courtyard houses we can perhaps see the beginning of a process by which each man became, as it were, an Odysseus in his own domain.

Certainly the idea that the household was like a state in miniature, with the citizen male as its ruler, is reflected in later literary sources. The analogy between household and state runs through the first book of Aristotle’s Politics, and in his analysis of different types of power relations in human communities he repeatedly compares the authority of the head of a household to that of the ruler of a state. In general he characterizes the power of the senior man in the household as similar to that of a king over his subjects (1252b.20, 1255b.20, 1285b.30–5), though he differentiates the authority of a husband over his wife, which, he argues, is more like the shared power exercised in the government of the polis (1259a.40–1259b.17). Aristotle’s criticism of the view that all types of power are essentially the same implies that the analogy between household and state was widely accepted (Politics 1252a.7–17; Nagle 2006: 15–18), and in accordance with this analogy the term oikonomia – literally ‘household management’ – came to refer to the economic management of the state: thus, although two of the three books of Oikonomika attributed to Aristotle’s followers are concerned with domestic life, one is devoted to state finance, which is carefully distinguished from ‘private’ oikonomia (II.2). The state was also used more loosely as a metaphor for the household. Xenophon’s Ischomachos, instructing his young wife in domestic management, helps her to organize the household goods ‘by tribes’ (Oikonomikos IX.6–8), and compares the successful household to a well-run polis, with the wife as nomophylax (‘guardian of the laws’, IX.14–15). Comedy, predictably, turns the metaphor on its head and reduces the state to the domestic scale: in the Knights, Aristophanes depicts Athens as a household headed by the old man Demos (‘the people’), who is initially bullied and flattered by his slaves (modelled on leading political figures of the day), but is eventually rejuvenated and restored to his proper authority; and in Wasps (lines 764–1002) Philokleon establishes a law court in his house, with himself as juror, to settle a dispute between his dogs (who also represent contemporary politicians).

Even in real life, there were occasions when a man was entitled to take the law into his own hands within his household. It is significant that in this area the state relinquished its monopoly over force: a man was permitted to kill someone who violated his house in adultery and, under certain circumstances, theft (Lysias 1.30, 36; Demosthenes 14.113; Cohen 1983: 72–9). Simply entering another man’s house without his permission could be regarded as an act of hybris against him, which diminished his honour, as the betrayed husband Euphiletos insists (Lysias 1.4, 25; for the definition of hybris, Fisher
1992: esp. 1); likewise the speaker in Demosthenes 47 emphasizes the outrageous behavior of Euergos and his companions, who twice entered his house while he was not there (53, 56, 63), contrasting the propriety of Hagnophilos, who ‘did not think it right [to enter] in the absence of the master’, even to help (60). There was a strong ideal, in Athens at least, that the community should not intervene in how the household lived (Thucydides II.37.2–3; cf. Herodotus III.83.2–3), although in practice this sometimes conflicted with the expectation of exemplary morality on the part of those involved in public life. The enclosing walls of the courtyard house guarded the household’s freedom from interference and patronage, which underpinned the political authority of its male head.

Some responsibility for religious rituals also devolved to the household and its head, which represents another common corporate power strategy, limiting the potential for any individual or group to monopolize the supernatural sphere (Blanton 1998: 160–1). According to literary evidence, each Classical household had its own cults, which included, significantly, one in honour of Zeus Ktesios (‘Zeus of Property’), who protected the contents of the storeroom, the guarantee of the household’s independence (Parker 2005: 9–36; Brulé 2005; archaeological traces of domestic cult are difficult to recognize, though altars are fairly common: Morgan 2004). The head of the household was also responsible for performing rites in honour of his family’s dead ancestors: every citizen, not just the aristocracy, had a lineage worthy of commemoration.

On a more symbolic level, the courtyard house may have served to advertise the occupants’ adherence to collective moral codes, in accordance with another of the strategies associated with the corporate mode of power, in which exemplary moral behaviour rather than social status determines access to power (Blanton 1998: 159–60). The Greek word oikos meant both ‘house’ and ‘household’, and the physical house could stand for the reputation of its owner and his family, as is clear from the practice of razing the house of a disgraced citizen (Connor 1985). By the late fifth century BC, if not before, houses were hidden behind high walls, usually pierced only by a single entrance and perhaps some small, high windows (Figs 3 and 4; Nevett 1999: 158–61, 2003; Morris 1999 and Coucouzeli in press see this as an earlier development). These features were probably intended to keep the women of the household out of the sight of unrelated males (Nevett 1999: 68–74), and, although it is unlikely that women were as strictly confined as some literary sources imply (Cohen 1989), the blank facade of the house, with its small number of openings, would have been a clear statement of the propriety of the occupant’s domestic arrangements, which ensured the chastity of his female relatives and his children’s legitimacy and entitlement to citizen status.

The blank public facade presented by Classical houses may also have indicated the owner’s willingness to conform to an ethos of egalitarianism. Although from the late fifth century onwards there is evidence for an increasing amount of decoration inside houses, in the form of wall paintings, mosaics and columns (Walter-Karydi 1994; Westgate 1997–8), there is little or no evidence for decoration of the frontage – no columns or pediments framing doorways like those adorning grand Roman houses, no fancy window-frames or painted or moulded stucco (Walter-Karydi 1994: 27–31). Even in the richest surviving Classical houses, at Eretria, embellishments like lion-head gutter-spouts and miniature columns framing windows were apparently confined to the interior (Ducrey et al. 1993: 68;
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Figure 3 Classical courtyard houses. a: Athens, Houses C and D near the Great Drain, fifth century bc (American School of Classical Studies at Athens: Agora Excavations); b: Athens, houses on the north slope of the Areiopagos, conjectural restoration of late fourth-century state (American School of Classical Studies at Athens: Agora Excavations); c: Halieis, House 7, fourth century bc (after Ault 2005: fig. 7); d: Halieis, House A, fourth century bc (after Ault 2005: fig. 10).
Figure 3 (Continued).
Figure 4 Olynthos, grid-planned houses on the North Hill, late fifth or early fourth century BC (courtesy N. Cahill).

Reber 1998: 125). From the outside, there was little to distinguish a wealthy house from a poor one, and it seems likely that this was the result of a prejudice against projecting economic distinctions between households, which is apparent in repeated rhetorical appeals to the great men of the past, whose houses were 'no more splendid than those of their neighbours' (Demosthenes 3.25–6, 13.29–30, 23.206–8). The interior, however, was a different matter, and some households may have found a subtle way round the pressure against external display: it is generally thought that the elaborately decorated dining
rooms found in some Classical houses are located adjacent to the street so that they could be lit by windows in the outside wall (e.g. Fig. 3c: Fig. 4, houses A1, A6, A.viii.1, A.vii.4 and several in block A.vi; Robinson and Graham 1938: 177–9), but dinner parties went on into the night, and it is tempting to wonder whether it was just as important to make the light and noise obvious to passers-by.

The way in which the house advertised the occupants’ subscription to corporate ideals may be usefully understood in terms of Hillier and Hanson’s (1984: 144–5, 158–63) concept of ‘transpatial solidarity’, in which membership of a class is expressed by the reproduction of a standard spatial pattern inside the house, combined with strong enforcement of the boundary between the house and the exterior, which limits the potential for casual interaction with people nearby; in contrast, ‘spatial solidarity’ is based on proximity, and is fostered by weaker boundary controls and a relatively unstructured interior, which permit free interaction between inhabitants and neighbours. Hillier and Hanson cite as a example of spatial solidarity the traditional British working-class house, with the front door standing open, while transpatial solidarity is represented by the middle-class house, whose interior, revealed at night like a stage set through uncurtained windows, is accessible only to invited visitors. In the light of this, the development of the courtyard house in Greece might be seen as reflecting a shift from spatial to transpatial solidarity as the basis of society. The unstructured interiors and weak boundaries of Early Iron Age houses are likely to have fostered spatial solidarity between neighbouring households, which may have complemented personal connections such as kinship or patronage: in the Cretan village of Vronda, for instance, each cluster of houses evolved from a single original house, and Kevin Glowacki (in press) suggests that they were occupied by families descended from the same household; similarly, there have been attempts to recognize kin groups in the arrangement of the houses at Zagora (Cambitoglou et al. 1971: 29–30; Coucouzeli 2004: 473–6). On the other hand, the compartmentalized interiors and strongly controlled boundaries of Classical houses proclaim the occupants’ adherence to the ideals of propriety and independence associated with citizenship, and thus their claim to membership of the citizen class. The grid plans adopted in some Classical cities (such as Olynthos: Fig. 4) could be seen as taking transpatial solidarity to an extreme, subordinating households to an entirely abstract pattern in which each is theoretically interchangeable, in order to demonstrate the rejection of personal ties between households which might threaten the solidarity and equality of the citizen group – though this doubtless represents the ideal of the planners rather than the reality, as the presence of clusters of similar houses at Olynthos suggests that it was still possible for households to organize themselves into groups of some sort (Cahill 2002: 209–22).

Conclusions

It would be problematic to suggest that courtyard houses can be interpreted as evidence for egalitarian ideals wherever they occur, although Blanton (1998: 168) cites similar examples from Mexico and China. There are other possible reasons for the choice of this type of house, which are not mutually exclusive. Climate is an important factor, though not a determining one, as Rapoport (1969: esp. 18–24) has demonstrated, and the
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courtyard allows houses to be packed efficiently into limited space without depriving them of light and air (Mazarakis Ainian 2001). Fletcher (1995: 135) has identified courtyard houses as a common feature of early urban communities because they insulate the household from the outside world, restricting the flow of visual and auditory information in order to reduce the stress of living in a densely populated settlement. All of these factors are likely to have encouraged the adoption of the courtyard house in the growing towns of Archaic Greece, but the development of domestic architecture is shaped by the interplay between such universal practical needs and particular symbolic or ideological requirements, and thus similar architectural forms may have different meanings in different societies. In the case of Archaic and Classical Greece, literary evidence provides the context for an interpretation of the courtyard house as the architectural manifestation of a ‘corporate’ power strategy which promoted equality of access to political power by investing each man with authority as head of an independent household. Both the internal layout of the house and its outward appearance reflected his proper observation of moral codes, which determined his suitability to participate in the political community.

Associating the courtyard house with the ideal of equal access to power within a bounded citizen group – of whatever size – overcomes one of the major criticisms levelled at Hoepfner and Schwandner’s (1994) theory that the equal size and repetitive plans of houses in Classical grid-planned cities were the expression of democratic ideology, namely that not all planned cities were democracies, and conversely that there is no evidence for an egalitarian housing policy in the most radical democracy of all, Athens: the houses in Figure 3a and 3b show considerable variation in size and elaboration, and the smaller ones are by no means the smallest known (Ferrucci 1996; Cahill 2002: 194–222; Shipley 2005: 368–73). Moreover, if the plan and appearance of the house were intended to advertise the occupants’ adherence to shared moral and political values and thus their claim to a share of power, the basic similarity of house plans both within and between cities can be explained as the product of individual choice on the part of the owners, without resorting to the assumption that the internal layout of houses was somehow dictated by a central authority.

This is not to suggest, however, that only citizens lived in courtyard houses: resident foreigners (metics), many of whom were citizens of other poleis, may well have subscribed to the same ideals as the citizens and lived in the same type of house (the Syracusan immigrant Kephalos, for instance, lived in a courtyard house in Piraeus: Plato, Republic 328c). Conversely, no doubt many citizens had to make do with houses that diverged from the ideal, which may often go undetected in the archaeological record because they do not correspond to the ‘normal’ courtyard pattern. But it is striking that the courtyard house is less prevalent in Crete, where the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the household were compromised by communal provision of food and education. Classical and early Hellenistic houses at some Cretan sites, such as Lato, resemble the more open and unstructured houses of the Early Iron Age (Westgate forthcoming), and the political authority of the head of the household seems to have been more limited: controls on the exercise of intermember power in Cretan poleis were notoriously weak (Aristotle, Politics 1272b.2–15). In contrast, in other parts of Greece, the enclosed, self-contained courtyard house can be seen as the embodiment of the ideal of the household as a semi-autonomous,
self-sufficient unit under the control of the citizen male, who thus gained the authority to participate as an equal in the political community.

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