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Oikos and Oikonomia:
Greek houses, households and the
domestic economy

Bradley A. Ault

Taking at the outset the literal meaning of ‘economy’ as *household management*, I would like to explore what I see as the foundations of the Greek macro- or regional economy of antiquity in the domestic microeconomy. The degree to which the ancient household actually contributed to anything approximating our contemporary understanding of ‘economic’ has been repeatedly questioned and the debate is ongoing, its origins going back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the so-called ‘Bücher–Meyer controversy’ (relevant texts having been collected in Finley 1979*b*). I believe that even in the most humble circumstances in the Archaic and Classical periods, households engaged in a range of activities from textile production and other craftwork, to agricultural production and processing, which had the potential for going beyond mere subsistence. Ultimately our time-honoured notions of domestic self-sufficiency are in need of revision, if not of being recognised as myths and discarded altogether. Rather, the orientation of the household would tend, in stressed and favourable circumstances alike, towards market exchange, and hence local and regional economic involvement. The stigma against non-agrarian, banausic activities or mercantile involvement so often cited in the primary sources (for these, see below) similarly needs to be dismissed as elitist and moralising in tone rather than being reflective of reality. In short and in fact, the ancient Greek domestic economy was to a large extent coterminous with the macroeconomy.

As stated by Aristotle, ‘The economic art is rule over children, wife, and household generally’ (*Politics* 1278*b* 37–8). And while Xenophon’s *Oikonomikos* provided the basic framework for treatises on household management for centuries to come, M. I. Finley noted that it contained ‘not one sentence that expresses an economic principle’ (Finley 1999, 19). He went on to make the point that since all ancient advice on the matter came closer to folk wisdom than scientific economic theory, it should be discredited as ‘economic’ altogether (Finley 1999, 20). This, of course, did not stop Finley from assuming his rightful place as among the greatest economic historians of the ancient world. He did so,

however, by focusing on aspects of the ancient economy that to our minds are more representative of the macro- or political economy, through studies in land credit, shipping, the grain and slave trades, and the like.

Finley could be quite critical of what archaeology had to offer, especially in the realm of interpretation, and particularly down into the historical periods. ‘If it is often the case that the usefulness of archaeology to history increases with an increase in documentation, it is also the case that certain kinds of documentation render archaeology more or less unnecessary’ (Finley 1975, 101). He decried the ‘number fetishism’ with which many of us, myself included, are to a certain extent obsessed (Finley 1999, 25), and claimed: ‘We are too often victims of that great curse of archaeology, the indestructibility of pots’ (Finley 1981*b*, 190).

The long shadow cast by Finley, and other economic historians, has largely precluded systematic consideration of the ancient Greek household as constituting a viable economic enterprise. In essence, Finley and the substantivist school of economic thought are correct. The ancient economy was ‘embedded’ in social institutions.¹ Since it is therefore not distinct from them, its consideration has been subsumed into the study of society generally. Now we all know that it is the political and religious aspects of institutions which have received most attention from historians, even where they also have important economic or other aspects. And because the Greek household has until recently merited so little concern, the domestic economy has been more a subject for neglect than anything else. Here, then, *oikonomia* is a subject area that archaeology can drive to the fore, well suited as it is to extract the maximum amount of evidence from an institution comparatively less well documented than others in the primary written sources.

In what follows, I would like to explore briefly both quantitative and qualitative indications of the domestic

1 See Granovetter (1985) for an important consideration of the ‘embeddedness’ of ‘economic action’.

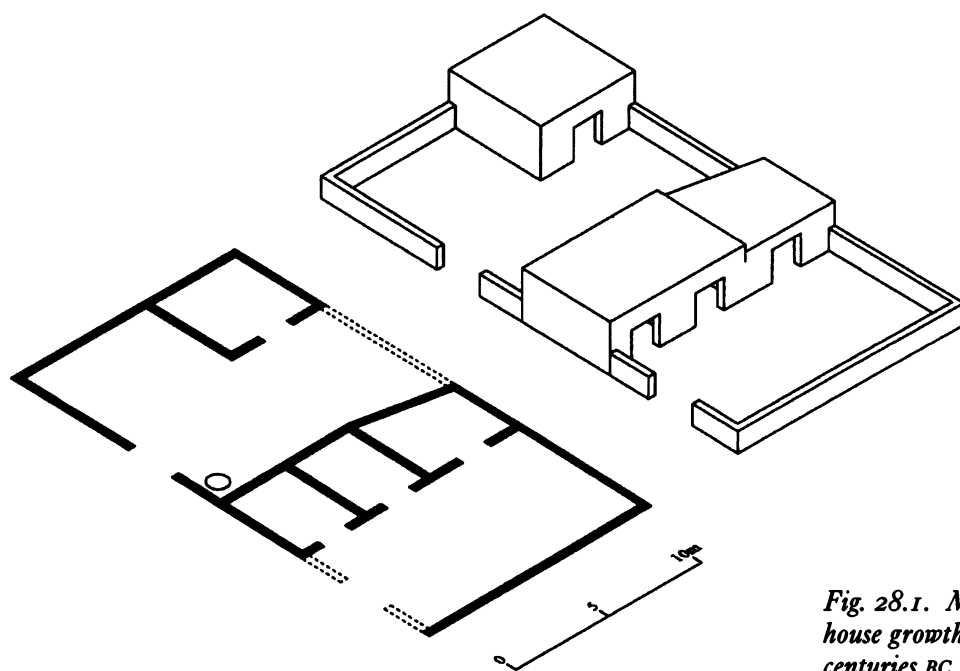


Fig. 28.1. Megara Hyblaia, sequence of house growth between the eighth and sixth centuries BC.

economy. These include house size and value, numismatic evidence from domestic contexts, household luxury, slavery, industry, and evidence for home-based agricultural-related activities.

HOUSE SIZE AND VALUE

Work is currently being undertaken by Ian Morris to re-evaluate 'the ancient economy' generally, and as formulated by Finley (Morris 2005; forthcoming).² A central feature of his analysis is to point out the dramatic growth in house size between the eighth and fourth centuries. He calculates this as averaging on the order of a fivefold increase in the area occupied by houses, from *c.* 55 to 230 m².³ He also notes the rise in certain amenities of construction, roof tiles being common from the sixth century on, and second storeys by the end of the fifth.

For example, at Zagora, on Andros, the sequence of domestic growth between 775 and 700 BC is best documented across two housing units, H24-25-32 and H26-27 (Cambitoglou *et al.* 1988, 107-28, 154-8; see the discussions of Coucouzeli and Lang in this volume, and Parisinou, FIG. 24.4 *a, b*). Initially erected as single-room dwellings, they become, in the last quarter of the eighth century, not only internally subdivided but extended across another two or three rooms (H40-41-42). Moreover, the central space that lies between the expanded built units, is itself partitioned with a wall and appears to have been unroofed. H33 and H43 can therefore be identified as nascent courtyards.

A similar scenario is attested within the setting of the earliest well-documented orthogonally planned Greek city, at Megara Hyblaia in Sicily, between the

eighth and sixth centuries (FIG. 28.1; cf. Vallet 1973, 89-91). In both cases it is worth pointing out that the expansion of the houses may reflect a change in the composition of the family, from nuclear to more extended groupings, but there is no evidence for this, whereas increasing the available storage space appears consistently to have been a prime concern.⁴ What is also evident from the growth seen here is an ongoing tendency towards specialisation of domestic space, and, arguably, an intensification of the domestic economy along with it.

By the latter fifth and certainly the fourth centuries we encounter the fully developed Greek courtyard house, or 'single entrance courtyard house' (following Nevett 1999, esp. 83-103; FIG. 28.2). Within the *insulae* of regularly planned cities, house-plots are not only of roughly equivalent sizes, but much larger than they had

2 See the recent piece by Davies (1998), which also suggests an ambitious new approach to the ancient economy.

3 The whole argument is presented in detail in Morris 2005. In fact, the average dimensions of houses from the eighth to sixth centuries vary dramatically, but a trend in growth is perceptible. Cf. the tables of area measures provided by Lang 1996, 81, text fig. 18 (for apsidal *Profanbauten*); and 89, text fig. 20 (for quadrangular structures).

4 De Angelis (2002) has pointed out the existence of underground silos, very probably intended for the storage of grain, associated with several of the early houses at Megara Hyblaia. He sees these as likely indications of the storage of surpluses, not merely for subsistence but for market exchange. This goes a long way towards supporting the argument advanced throughout this paper.

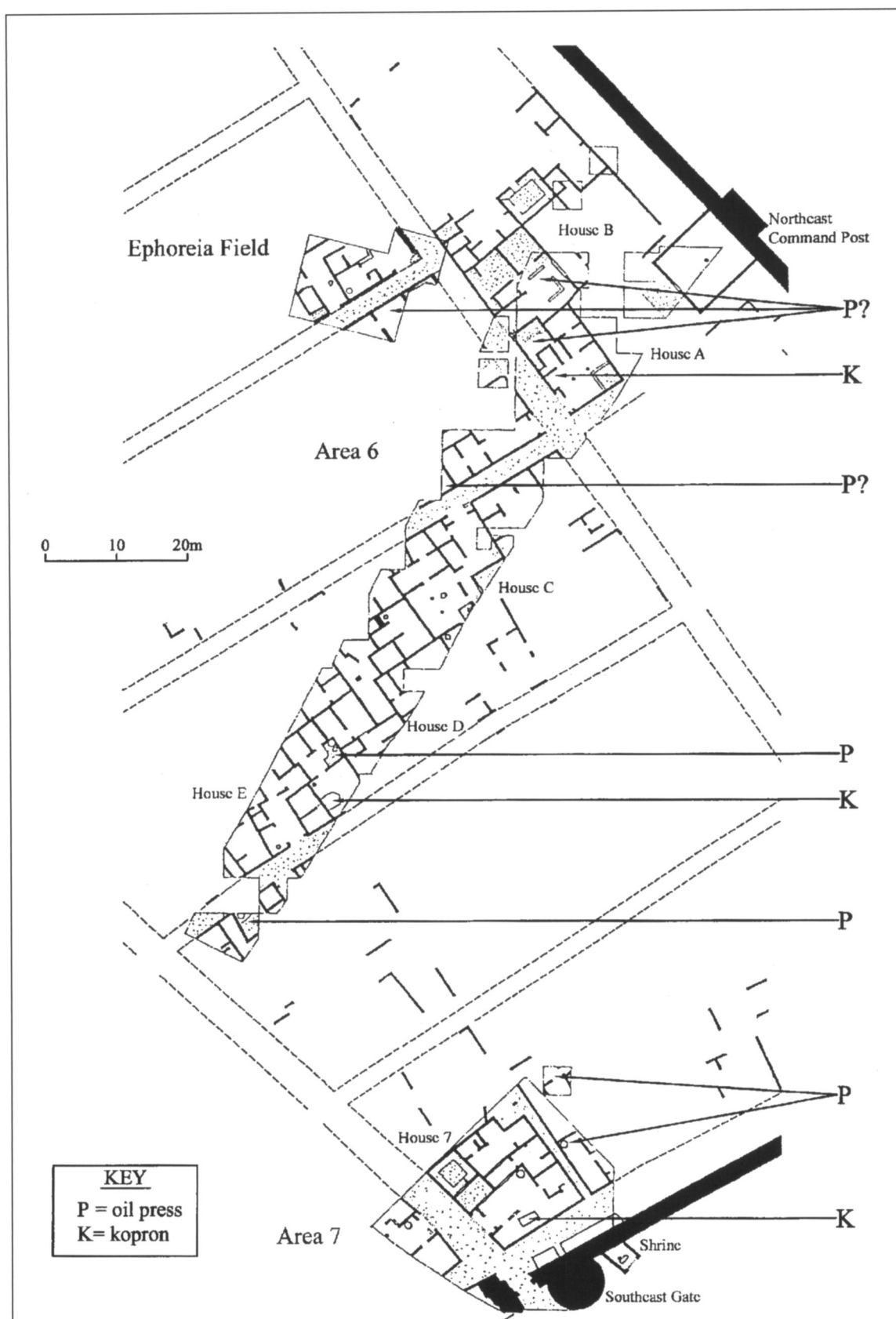


Fig. 28.2. Halieis, eastern quarter of the lower town, showing the distribution of koprones (K) and oil presses (P) in excavated areas.

been in the Dark Age and Archaic period. Those at Olynthos, for example, average 294 m². In addition to the important implications for social organisation that I believe this ostensibly *isonomic* housing shows, domestic space has become increasingly segmented, with specific areas being given over to living, working and storage.

Recent studies by Nicholas Cahill and Lisa Nevett of the series of sales inscriptions recovered from Olynthos have shown that those houses nearest the agora sold for substantially higher prices than those further away; some 2000–2700 drachmas more than those elsewhere (Cahill 1991, 377–84, with fig. 74; 2000, 508–9, with fig. 7; 2002, esp. 276–81, with fig. 62, 293–9; Nevett 2000). These prices certainly relate to the profitability of households being located adjacent to the agora, and may well also attest to the status attached to residence in the ‘high rent’ district of the city.⁵ (Indeed, it seems that these inscriptions were publicly displayed along the house frontage.)

NUMISMATIC EVIDENCE FROM DOMESTIC CONTEXTS

Similarly, the distribution of coins from the houses at Olynthos is markedly higher around the agora (Cahill 1991, 368–72, with fig. 73; 2000, 503; 2002, 266–73, with fig. 60). And while their overall numbers do not stand as an absolute index of the wealth of individual households, they do attest to the existence of a monetary economy in which the *oikoi* of the city actively participated both at home and abroad. For not only were there issues of Olynthos and the Chalcidic League, but 25% to 30% of the coins recovered from the site were struck by foreign mints.

This situation is interesting when compared with the city of Halieis, in the southern Argolid, which also minted its own coinage. While Olynthos yielded more than 4400 Greek coins, the intramural areas explored at Halieis yielded only around 240.⁶ Of these, it should be noted, nearly 40% were foreign issues. To what should we attribute these differences? First is simply the scale of the projects that led to the recovery of these two sites. Olynthos was a much more extensive excavation than Halieis, with more than 100 houses being revealed, a great many in their entirety. By way of contrast, at Halieis, only six houses were exposed in anything approximating their full plan (out of portions of 20 or so which were brought to light by excavations in the lower town; FIG. 28.2). But it is also worth reminding ourselves of the destruction of Olynthos in 348 BC by Philip II of Macedon. Indeed, many of the 4400+ coins recovered come from hoards. Halieis appears to have been subject to a more systematic, considerably less violent abandonment around or just after 300 BC. And while there certainly is a difference in wealth between the two cities, with Olynthos being the more upscale, the overall similarity of involvement of the households in moneyed

exchange systems provides further confirmation of robust domestic economies (cf. Kim 2002).

LUXUS

A further indicator here is that of domestic luxury. By the fourth century we see a marked rise in such amenities at the household level (Walter-Karydi 1994). The domestic *andron* had become commonplace. Mosaics become more frequent, as does the evidence for stucco-work and painted plaster walls. Small waterproofed rooms set aside for washing or bathing are often identifiable. And the elaboration of courtyards with columns and even peristyles speaks for the incorporation of elements of public sphere architecture into the private realm. Morris concludes (pers. comm., autumn 2000) that ‘economic output *per capita* probably doubled between 800 and 300 BC’; and that ‘Such sustained growth may be unique in the pre-industrial world, and requires a new approach to Greek economic history’.

In this regard I think it appropriate to acknowledge David Small’s recent argument that the economic strategies of aristocratic Greek households, the ‘regional elite economy’ as he terms it, stood in contradistinction to that of the *polis* itself (Small 1994; 1997, esp. 222–3). While Small sees the latter as short-sighted and never realising its potential, he notes that a network of wealthy domestic economies was brought together on a regular basis at the pan-Hellenic festivals. There, he argues, heads of aristocratic households conducted major business transactions in the form of redistributing agricultural surpluses to regions where there had been production shortfalls.⁷ Such a position has, I believe, a number of attractive features, and is not necessarily mutually exclusive with my earlier proposition that the domestic economy is very much coextensive with the political economy. Indeed, to return to a fundamental concept from the substantivist model, the two are embedded in one another.

SLAVERY

With information like this, we have already come a long way from Finley. Yet, his discourse continues to structure the dialogue, especially when we turn to the topic of slavery. I quote here from his piece, ‘Was Greek civilization based on slave labour?’, with regard to the

5 See also Hoepfner and Schwandner 1994, 317–18, for a general discussion of house values relative to other costs of living in ancient Greece.

6 For discussion of the coins from Halieis, see Dengate 2005.

7 See also the rebuttal of Small (1997) by Morris (1997), in the same volume. At the same time, it cannot be denied that markets and periodic fairs were one of the primary venues at which intra- and even interregional household exchange took place, on a variety of economic levels (see Andreau 2002).

agricultural workforce: 'Some proportion of these smallholders owned a slave, or even two, but we cannot possibly determine what the proportion was, and in this sector the whole issue is clearly not of the greatest importance' (Finley 1981*b*, 100). I think that we would disagree, particularly as regards the matter at hand. The general consensus now is that, and here I quote from Michael Jameson, 'all who could afford to made use of them, at home and at work' (Jameson 1990*a*, 104).⁸

Domestic and agricultural slavery, then, was widespread. But in spite of its ubiquity, it is interesting, and a commentary on the degree to which the institution was integrated into the *oikos*, that we are essentially unable to identify slaves in the archaeological record of the houses themselves (Ault 2005*b*). For example, a recent study by Ian Morris, appropriately entitled 'Remaining invisible', was unable to distinguish the mining slaves of Thorikos on the basis of either architecture or pottery that might have associated them with their attested Thracian and Anatolian homelands (Morris 1998*b*). At the same time, however, the buildings at the site are riddled with small cubicles that are more likely to have housed slaves than mine owners and their families or overseers left in charge (see Jones, this volume). The prices fetched for slaves, as well as their varied occupations, attest to the strength and diversity of the domestic economy. To cite only the best-known example, the average cost of the 25 slaves sold in the Attic Stelai was 174 drachmas each (Pritchett 1956, 276–81).

DOMESTIC INDUSTRY

That such 'help' was commonplace is indicative of the degree to which the household was oriented towards production. And this is not merely subsistence, but surplus production. Such is the case made also by Tobias Fischer-Hansen in his recent survey of *ergasteria* in Magna Graecia and Sicily (Fischer-Hansen 2000, esp. 91–4), as well as by Karen Stears, in a paper presented at this conference, with regard to the home textile industry. Various manufacturing and craftwork activities are attested from households at Olynthos and Athens, which provide the best-studied examples from Greece itself (Cahill 1991, 347–68, with fig. 72; 2000, 504–5, with fig. 6; 2002, 236–65; 2005; Harris 2002; Tsakirgis 2005). Thus, in spite of the elitist and moralising condemnations of Xenophon (*Oikonomikos* iv 2–3), Plato (e.g. *Republic* 495 d–e, 522 b, 590 c) and Aristotle (e.g. *Politics* 1278 a 8), the material evidence shows how prevalent such work actually was. Everything from large-scale weaving, to stonemasons and sculptors, cobblers, coroplasts, metalworkers, bakers and shop-owners is archaeologically documented. Clearly the entrepreneurial spirit was alive and well in the Greek *polis*. Moreover, that it was home-based is to be expected in a pre-industrial society, even if the long-term growth of productivity exceeds expectations (as noted previously by Morris).

AGRICULTURE IN THE OIKOS

The one index of *oikonomia* that I would like to turn to in rather more detail, and which was deliberately excluded from the foregoing list of economic activities engaged in by the ancient household, is that connected with agriculture, agricultural processing and storage of produce. This was the most common and basic feature of the ancient Greek domestic economy, and the ancient economy generally, as reiterated by the title of a recent edited collection, *Economies beyond Agriculture in the Classical World* (Mattingly and Salmon 2001). It is one that is prominent in the remains of houses, in the field of landscape and settlement archaeology, and in the literary testimonia.

Some of the most dramatic archaeological evidence for the involvement of Greek households in agriculture comes from Halieis. This includes several examples of the features known as *koprone*s (FIG. 28.2). These stone-lined pits sunk into courtyards served to collect household waste, *kopros*, of all varieties, both organic and inorganic (Ault 1999, esp. 550–9).⁹ From literary sources we know that in Athens, at least, the state oversaw the collection of garbage in conjunction with private entrepreneurs (the *koprologoi*) who were able to turn a profit by recycling and selling waste materials as fertiliser. In the relatively infertile region of the southern Argolid around Halieis, application of such soil enrichments would have been especially welcome.

In addition to *koprone*s as many as 11 olive oil press installations can be recognised in the houses at Halieis (several of which are indicated in FIG. 28.2; Ault 1999, 559–64).¹⁰ Up to 20 more examples of press furniture have been noted on Classical to Hellenistic sites

8 See also Jameson 1977–78; 1990*b*, 191; 1992; 2002; Burford 1993, 208–22; Cox 1998, 190–4; Morris 1998*b*; Cahill 2002, 261–4. Actually, Finley was more willing to admit the presence of domestic slaves than agricultural ones, but even then his viewpoint could be considered somewhat parochial (e.g. Finley 1981*b*, 101–2).

9 In addition to the domestic *koprone*s already identified (Ault 1999, 555–6, with notes 15–20), Karl Reber informs me that two examples can now be identified at Eretria, in House IV, in the West Quarter, south-west of Room K (Reber 1998, 68, fig. 91); and in the street south of the House with the Mosaics (Ducrey *et al.* 1993, 48, fig. 48; also visible on the folding state plan at the end), where it was related to the bathroom, room 16. The putative *kopron* in a late Classical house at Stymphalos (Ault 1999, 556, with note 20) was explored by excavation in the summer of 2000 and proved not to be such a feature after all (Hector Williams, pers. comm., September 2000).

10 This figure updates that which appeared in Ault 1999, 559, following a recent reanalysis of the domestic architecture in the lower town at Halieis (Ault 2005*a*). Since the present section is heavily based on Ault 1999, the reader is referred there for fuller discussion, documentation and illustration of various points.

identified by the Southern Argolid Exploration Project within the territory of Halieis and its neighbours. The oil-presses complemented the domestic *koproneis*, which, as I have just suggested, represent deliberate efforts to increase agricultural productivity through providing components for fertiliser (Ault 1999, 564–6). These presses served as a means for processing the yield of the land. However — and this needs to be stressed — the houses in question were clearly not laid out with press installations in mind. These are later features added in the fourth century, when the processing amply attested in the contemporary *chora* was for whatever reason deemed insufficient (compare the evidence for a similar phenomenon at Eretria presented by Reber, this volume, p. 285).

While the precise reasons behind an intensification of olive cultivation and oil processing at Halieis remain uncertain, Tjeerd van Andel, Michael Jameson and Curtis Runnels observe that the highest-quality cultivable soils in the territory, the so-called ‘deep soils’, were of fairly limited extent and lay about 2 km away from the city proper (Runnels and van Andel 1987; van Andel and Runnels 1987, 105–9, maps 20, 21; Jameson *et al.* 1994, 383–94, figs. 6.17, 6.18, back-pocket map 8). Nearer and more abundant were alluvial deposits on hillsides and in valley bottoms. Although these soils were less well suited to grain cultivation, they were ideal for olives. It has been further suggested that it may have been Halieis’ ability to supply olive oil to new markets that accounts for the degree of prosperity attained in its final, fourth-century phase. Potential customers could initially have been found in Attica and its commercial dependants which had been deprived of oil and other staples as a result of the annual ravaging of crops during the Peloponnesian Wars. Subsequently, in the fourth century, there was rapid growth in the territories of Thebes, Megalopolis and other *poleis* located in regions which were poorly suited to olive cultivation. And, finally, with the conquests of Alexander the Great, whole new regions were opened up to Hellenic tastes and traders, offering themselves as markets for exchange.

Assessing the impact of oleiculture upon the economy of ancient Greece depends largely on projecting backwards the evidence for subsequent large-scale Roman and more contemporary agribusiness (Mattingly 1996). Hamish Forbes, in particular, has made cautionary observations about overestimating the role played by olive cultivation in the southern Argolid (Forbes 1992; 1993), and by extension elsewhere. Still, from fourth-century Attica comes the estimate based on [Demosthenes] xlii (*Against Phainippos*) that land planted with olive trees was worth three times the same area sown with wheat (Pritchett 1956, 183–4, citing Jardé 1925, 187). Also from the fourth century, there is evidence for a great deal of fluctuation in the price of oil, where a *metretes* (39.4 litres) went for 12 drachmas at Athens, 36 drachmas at Lampsakos, and 55 drachmas

at Delos (Pritchett 1956, 184). We can combine these prices with what has been offered as a ‘highly speculative’ but ‘conservative’ estimate that in the every-other-year cycle of olive fruiting, a family might obtain 250–300 litres of oil from its trees (Forbes and Foxhall 1978, 46–7).¹¹ So the potential value of a household’s olive harvest could itself fluctuate between 76.14 and 418.55 drachmas. But did the domestic (micro) economies of the inhabitants of Halieis, let alone the *polis* (macro) economy, turn on such transactions?

Some have argued that olive cultivation and oil production in antiquity were so ubiquitous in regions that supported them that it was neither very profitable nor dependable as a source of income (Finley 1973, 133; Sallares 1991, 304–9; Foxhall 1997, esp. 261–2). Thus, the apparent late Classical and Hellenistic boom in olive cultivation in the *chora* of Halieis could be seen as being of primarily local significance. That is, it was the result of an attempt to supply the burgeoning population of the Halieis peninsula (Acheson 1997). But Halieis must have benefited from its situation at the mouth of the Argolic Gulf. It possessed one of the finest naturally sheltered bays and harbours in the Greek world. As such, the *polis* must have lent itself to more than serving as a pawn in the military aspirations of others, which is how it winds up being mentioned in almost all of the limited references to the city in the primary sources (cf. the historical overview in Jameson *et al.* forthcoming; Dengate *et al.* 1994, 57–148). The enormous quantities of Attic, Corinthian, Argive and other fineware pottery present in all houses and across the entire site indicate ongoing commercial activity with the wider Greek world. In addition, much, if not most, of the plain and coarseware pottery from Halieis may also have been acquired via market exchange. To cite only rough figures, from the latest habitation phases of the five most completely excavated houses, more than 24,000 sherds were recovered.¹² From these, a minimum number of nearly 3000 vessels can be accounted for. There is ultimately no reason why local surplus production of olive oil or any other commodity (such as salt, to take a toponymically appropriate example) would not have found its way onto trading vessels passing through, or even sent out by, Halieis. And while we should not overemphasise the role of the olive in linking the local economy to wider networks, everything about the domestic architecture and other evidence that we can muster to reconstruct household organisation at Halieis attests to its full integration within the *koine* of Hellenic culture.

11 And this is not counting the periodic ‘bumper crop’ years, when yields could be four to five times that of a normal year (see Forbes 1992).

12 All artefacts recovered and recorded from the latest habitation phases of these five houses are presented with discussion, and in tabular, quantified fashion in Ault 2005a.

Facilitating this integration will have been the ability not only to store agricultural surpluses but also to market them in a timely fashion. While we cannot look at the specific mechanisms of the latter, we can get some insights about the domestic economy by considering the former. As in the examples of house(-hold) growth at Zagora and Megara Hyblaia, domestic storage was a prime concern (De Angelis 2002; and n. 4, above). Indeed, the terms *'tamieion'* and *'pitheon'* recur in the primary sources with reference to household storage areas. To be sure, we will continue to lack material evidence for the quantities of clothing, bedding and many other perishable items that would have been stored in the household.¹³ Agricultural produce should be another matter, however, since certain varieties would have been held in ceramic containers.

At Halieis, there is evidence for between 16 and 65 amphoras, and 2 to 14 pithoi per house. While these vessels are all fragmentarily preserved and do not represent any sort of synchronous assemblage, I believe that, again, they underscore the household as a centre of production as well as a repository of wealth. And let us keep in mind the high cost of pithoi. Five that were recovered from room j in the Villa of Good Fortune at Olynthos had prices inscribed on their rims, making their total value between 210 and 215 drachmas (Robinson and Graham 1938, 214–16). Examples mended with lead clamps are frequent in the archaeological record, and even cracked pithoi were sold in the Attic Stelai (Amyx 1958, 168).

And so it is in the 'shadow of the Acropolis' that I would like to close. For a version of what I have been interpreting on the basis of the material record is summarised in the actual practice of Athens' first citizen.¹⁴ According to Plutarch's *Life of Perikles* (16),

As for the wealth he had legally inherited, he adopted what seemed to him the simplest and most exact method of dealing with it, to ensure that his fortune should not be dissipated by neglect nor yet cause him much trouble or loss of time when his mind was occupied with higher things. His practice was to dispose of each year's produce in a single sale and then to buy in the market each item as it was needed for his daily life and his household.

Pseudo-Aristotle, too, mentions this strategy, in his *Oikonomika* (i 1344 b 31–3):

The Attic system of economy is also useful; for they sell their produce and buy what they want, and thus there is not the need of a storehouse in the smaller establishments.

I think we would have to disagree with Finley here, that this is not the kind of documentation that renders 'archaeology more or less unnecessary'; quite the contrary. What is more, it shows that the domestic economy of the Greeks was anything but underdeveloped, for it fed into and directly fuelled the market economy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the organising committee of the conference for the opportunity to participate in the auspicious gathering that brought us all together, as well as all the individuals, aspects of whose work I have appropriated in the process of preparing my original presentation as well as this text. Nick Cahill, Ian Morris and Lisa Nevett, in particular, deserve special acknowledgement for sharing their data as well as their thoughts with me. I remain solely responsible for any misrepresentation of either in what follows. Special thanks are also due to James McCaw for assisting with my illustrations.

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- 13 Although admittedly representing aristocratic households, see the range of material assembled from domestic inventories offered for sale in the Attic Stelai (Pritchett 1953; 1956; Amyx 1958) and Ischomachos' discussion of storage in his *oikos* (Xenophon, *Oikonomikos*, esp. viii 18–ix 10). I suspect that second-storey rooms were ideal for many of these sorts of items.
- 14 It is this strategy that Cahill proposes, to account for what he sees as the lack of large-scale domestic storage in the North Hill district at Olynthos, versus greater attention paid to it in the Villa District to the east (Cahill 1991, 336–41, 376–7; 2000, 510; 2002, 281–8). I am grateful to him for having brought these passages to my attention.