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WOMEN AND HOUSING IN CLASSICAL GREECE:  
THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

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Many houses of classical date have now been excavated in Athens and Attica. The finds have been meticulously examined (Jones, 1975), but the evidence from archaeological sites has not yet been incorporated into that body of knowledge from written sources made familiar in recent work on Athenian women and family life (e.g. Lacey, 1980; Gould, 1980). Despite the poor state of preservation of most excavated houses, it is possible to interpret certain features of their remains and associated finds as responses on the part of the occupants to contemporary customs and social aspirations. It is the purpose of this paper to suggest ways of assimilating the archaeological evidence about women and housing in classical Greece to that acquired from other sources. It has been argued recently (not for the first time) that women of 'respectable' families were deliberately secluded from public life (Gould, 1980). Evidence of this is particularly apparent at Athens, though impressions may be distorted by the large body of surviving evidence from varied sources, not matched in any other Greek city. Here as in other societies practising *purdah* it appears that 'keeping women in seclusion may be something that most people in a given area desire, but it may entail expenses which the very poor cannot meet' (Jeffrey, 1979, p. 24).

The seclusion of women may thus become a status symbol, indulged in by those who can afford it, and emulated by others striving for respectability. Lacey (p. 170) sees an example of the latter in Euphiletos, charged with the murder of his wife's lover, whose description of the division of his humble household is recorded in *Lysias I, 9*: 'My dwelling is on two floors, the upper equal in area to the lower, comprising the women's apartments and the men's apartments.' The trierarch involved in a fracas over security for missing ship's gear (*Demosthenes, xlvii, 35-42*), a story well used by Gould (p. 47) to illustrate the reluctance of respectable men to intrude upon women secluded at home, is a member of a class whose wealth has been extensively documented (Davies, 1971). Indeed, many of the individuals who provide us with evidence of the dependent and secluded status of women in classical Athens are

known to us through their quarrels over the inheritance of family property, quarrels so serious that they had to be brought to court. It was perhaps the maintenance of family wealth, sometimes quite substantial, and the transfer of that wealth with the right to citizenship from one generation of men to the next, that led the Athenians to place such a high value on legitimate childbirth, and thus to seclude women of the wealthy families who played so prominent a part in Athenian public life.

We may learn much from a discourse of Xenophon (*Oeconomicus*, 7-10), in which the Athenian gentleman Ischomachos recounts to his friend Socrates the guided tour he offered to his unnamed wife on her arrival in her new home. The house was portrayed as a shelter for moveable property, arranged in orderly fashion. The home was considered a miniature centre of production in which clothes and food were made from wool and crops. It was a nursery for the children who would care for their parents in their old age, and who would (in their own right, if they were male) inherit both the family property and the coveted right to Athenian citizenship (Schaps, 1979). The home, a sanctuary protected by household gods, was managed by the Athenian gentleman's wife, brought up to this task but preferably otherwise uneducated (*Oec.*, 7). She was expected to guard against the dangers of indolence, ill-health and self-indulgence by participating with the servants in household jobs such as shaking out blankets and clothes and moistening and kneading bread (*Oec.*, 10), an interesting instance of ancient awareness of problems encountered in other societies in which wealthy women are secluded (Jeffrey, 1979, p. 130).

Condemning the luxury of his own time, Demosthenes commended the poverty of private houses in fifth-century Athens and praised the consequent lack of distinction between the homes of its most illustrious citizens and those of the poor (*Ol.* 3 iii, 25-6; *On Organisation* xiii, 29; *Against Aristocrates* xxiii, 207). Even in the Roman Empire the old and illustrious city was considered synonymous with twisted streets and cramped quarters (Philostratos, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, II, 23). No disparagement of Athenian architects was intended; domestic poverty seems to have been a matter of deliberate choice. According to Xenophon (*Oec.*, 8) 'it is more shameful for the man [of a married couple] to stay indoors than to busy himself with outdoor affairs.' Many Athenians passed their time among those public buildings whose remains still astound and delight us, while their wives were confined to cramped and dreary quarters, unless they were of families sufficiently wealthy to own property in the suburbs or in the countryside. Even

that was not accessible in wartime, and for much of the later fifth-century Athens was at war (see below).

The apparent reluctance to spend money on comfortable housing is confirmed by archaeological evidence. It has been observed in reports of excavations of fifth-century Athenian houses that the finds of pottery and metalware indicated a greater wealth than their architectural context might suggest (Thompson, 1959, p. 103). Failure to invest in good housing may well have been a result of attempts to move towards egalitarianism, but the divided nature of Athenian society in the fifth century is obvious from the unequal distribution of land and property (Davies, 1971). Poor housing may have been an expression of the modesty that surrounded an Athenian family, modesty required of the wives and daughters of Athenian citizens in their behaviour and in their dress, on which legal controls were occasionally imposed (Plutarch, *Solon* 21,4; Humphreys, 1980, p. 100).

Modesty in scale and appointments may be easily assessed in excavated houses. Other characteristics revealing social customs and contemporary attitudes towards women may also be observed in the archaeological record and evaluated in the course of excavation. The known functions of an Athenian house — seclusion, shelter and the production of goods for consumption by the household — demand a measure of self-sufficiency, traces of which may be sought in the surviving remains.

Is there access between the house and neighbouring properties? Does the house have its own water supply, at least for washing? — Euphiletos' wife moved downstairs to wash her baby, presumably in water drawn from a well in the courtyard (Isaeus, I,9). Does the house have cooking and storage facilities? Is there a place for a loom? If in the country, is the house surrounded by productive land?

How are the least secure parts of the house treated, areas such as the entrance from the street and the *andron* (men's dining-room) where it was considered essential to prevent unsupervised meetings between women and men who were not their kinsmen (Demosthenes, *Against Euergos*, xlvii, 38, 60)? Does the *andron* have a separate entrance from the street? Or is it located so close to the street that it is possible to reach it without crossing the rest of the house? Is it further isolated from the other apartments by an anteroom? How many rooms of the house are visible from a point just inside the entrance, through which a man would have to pass in order to reach the *andron*? Is the entrance itself controlled by a porter's lodge?

If we accept the view suggested in the case of Euphiletos, that the women's apartments were located upstairs, then we must accept the

fact that none has survived in houses excavated in Athens and Attica, where the form of the upper storey is a matter for conjecture. However, storerooms, rooms with hearths and 'workrooms' where loom-weights have been found are known at a number of sites, and the association of women with such rooms is well-documented in contemporary and earlier Greek literature (Homer, *Iliad*, 22, 440; Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 520ff; Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 95; see also Gould, 1980, p. 48). How are these rooms located in relation to the entrance of the house and to the *andron*? Is there evidence of direct access from them to the upper storey?

Many of these features may be observed in surviving remains. I shall consider here four houses, one of which was excavated in Athens, and one in Attica. For comparison I have included a well-preserved stone-built house in Euboea and a modern house in an Islamic tribal community in northern Nigeria. Each house is illustrated in two plans. The first, prepared by the excavator or architect for publication, shows the surviving remains as interpreted at the time of excavation or survey. The second plan distinguishes areas of the house frequented by men and those designated as working or sleeping quarters for women. Evidence for self-sufficiency is also noted. The first house was excavated in the 1950s by Dorothy Thompson. It lies at the foot of the northern slope of the Areopagus Hill, just above the Athenian Agora. In the plan drawn by John Travlos (tidier, I fear, than the occupational history might suggest), the relationship of this block of houses to the public dining-rooms of the South Stoa is clear (Fig. 6.1).

The block of houses was built in the fifth century after the Persian Wars. Like all houses so far known from Athens and Attica, these were built of mud-brick laid on a stone socle. In the south-west house, it is possible that the *andron* was set totally apart from the domestic units and was approached from a separate entrance. When the house was subdivided to form two discrete dwellings some time after 300 BC, the division was made along the wall that had formerly separated public from private areas (Fig. 6.2a and b).

This is an unusual solution to the problem of isolating the *andron* from the household; the more conventional arrangement, in which the *andron* is located next to the street entrance to the house, may be seen in the block of houses of fourth-century date excavated at Olynthus in northern Greece.

The second house illustrates the point made earlier in this paper that seclusion was largely the prerogative of the rich. The so-called Dema House at Ano Liossia to the north of Athens is apparently a non-

functional country house. No evidence of farming or of any other productive activity was found in or near it. The household equipment was found to include a *lebes gamikos*, a vessel used in marriage ritual, and a *krater* (wine bowl) decorated with scenes suggestive of festivities in the *andron*, along with standard household utensils. The finds suggest that the house was occupied by a well-to-do family. Here the *andron* was apparently located at the back of the courtyard, far from the entrance (Fig. 6.3a). However, the room with a hearth and the area identified as the workroom were located as far as possible from the *andron*, and traces of a staircase to an upper storey were found in the workroom, suggesting that the women of the household could move freely from storey to storey without leaving their designated area (Fig. 6.3b). Moreover the entrance to this house was controlled by a porter's lodge. Water was probably brought by conduit, traces of which were found nearby. The house seems to have been occupied after the Archidamian War (probably after the Peace of Nicias in 421) and was abandoned before the attack on Dekeleia in 413. This may represent a short-lived attempt to reoccupy family land after enforced evacuation to Athens in wartime.

Built of stone, the house at Dystos in Euboea is better preserved than the Attic examples, some walls of the upper storey standing to a considerable height. It was surveyed in the late nineteenth century (Wiegand, 1899) and was recently re-examined by J.V. Luce (Luce, 1971; see also Lawrence, 1967). The house has yet to be excavated and few of the rooms are securely identified. Large and well-built, it is located close to the fort and is thought to have belonged to a senior officer. The style of the masonry suggests a date in the fifth century BC.

The very strictly controlled narrow entrance is striking (Fig. 6.4a). The room identified as the *andron* is well separated from the working area by an open court. The entrances to rooms are staggered, making it difficult to see into more than one room at a time. As in the Dema House, there may have been a stair from the workrooms to the upper storey (Fig. 6.4b).

For comparison I include a house of the Hausa tribe, an Islamic community living in northern Nigeria. The published plan (Fig. 6.5a) was made about 1950 (reproduced in Denyer, 1978). Here the wives of the householder have extensive quarters at the back of the house, well supplied with water, sunlight, shade and access to latrines and storerooms. The street frontage of this house is in contrast narrow. As in many Athenian houses, there is only one entrance and a separate

shop. The courtyards in the men's part of the house are much smaller than those used by the women; one served as a stable. No visitors were admitted beyond the 'vestibule', and there was no access from this room to the women's quarters, which could not be seen from the public part of the house (Fig. 6.5b).

**Figure 6.1: Block of Houses Excavated on the North Slope of the Areopagus, Athens (after Travlos, 1971)**

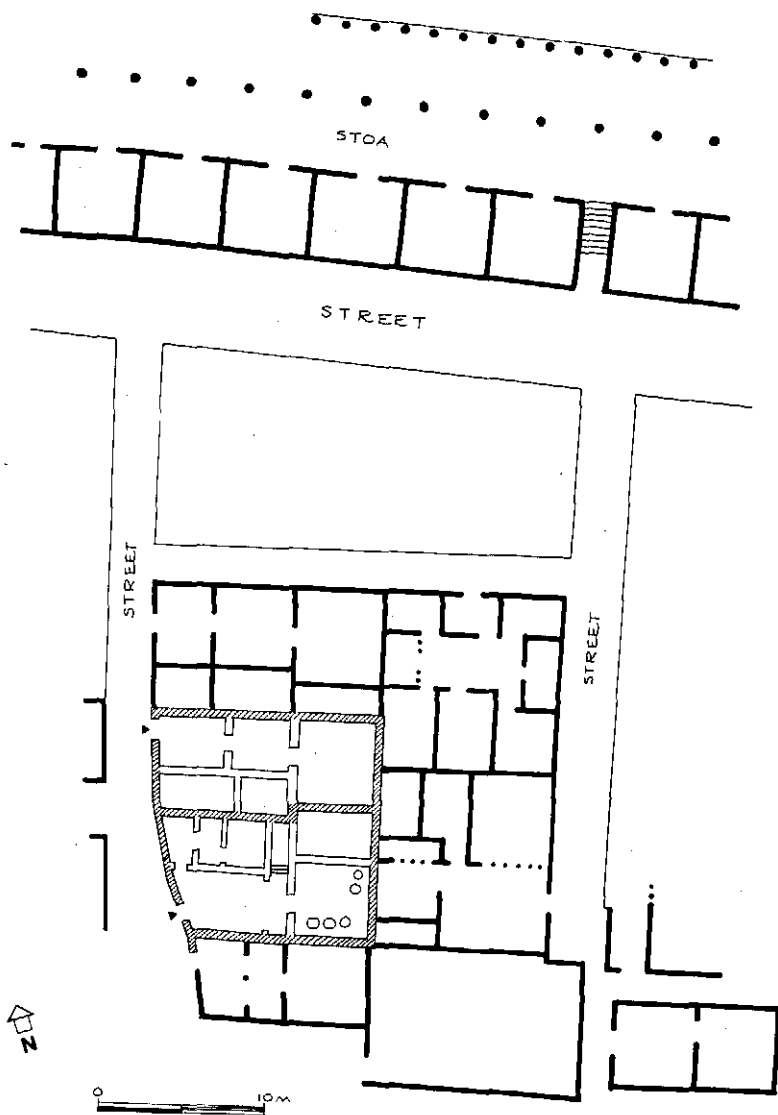


Figure 6.2a: House on the North Slope of the Areopagus: probable functions of rooms

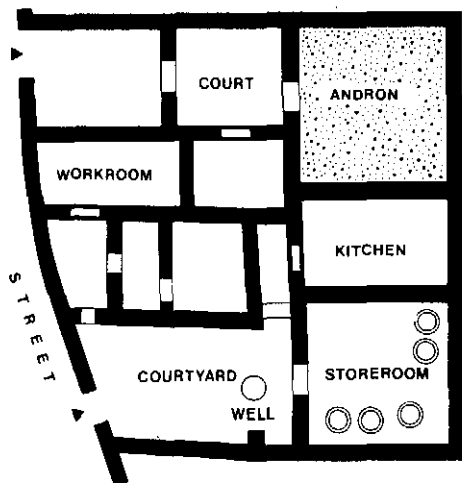
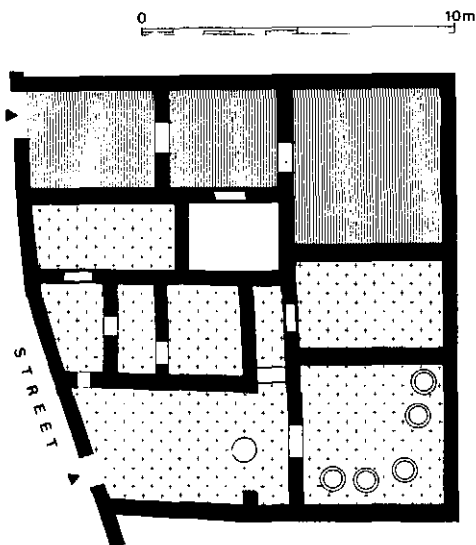
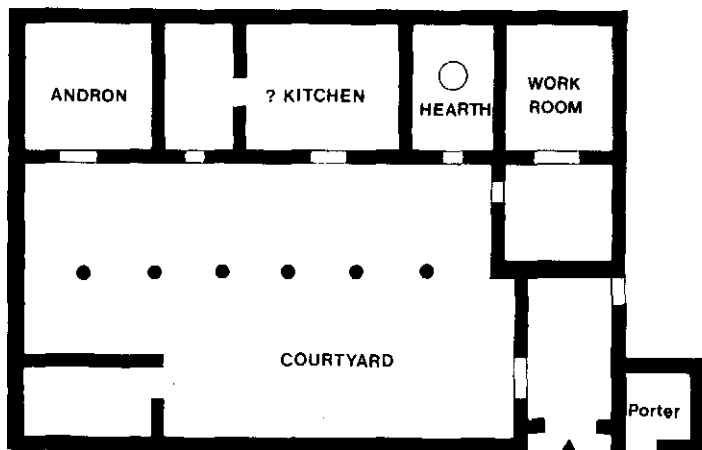


Figure 6.2b: House on the North Slope of the Areopagus: use of rooms by men and by women

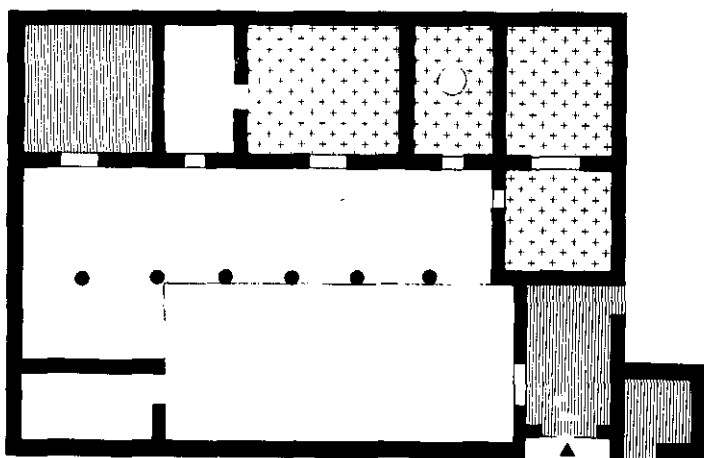


Areas used by women are marked +; those used by men are shaded. Entrances to houses from the street are marked with arrows.

**Figure 6.3a: The Dema House at Ano Liossia: probable functions of rooms (after Jones, 1962)**



**Figure 6.3b: The Dema House at Ano Liossia: use of rooms by men and by women**



Areas used by women are marked +; those used by men are shaded. Entrances to houses from the street are marked with arrows.



Figure 6.4a: House at Dystos, Euboea: probable functions of rooms (after Lawrence, 1967)

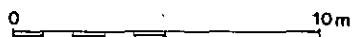
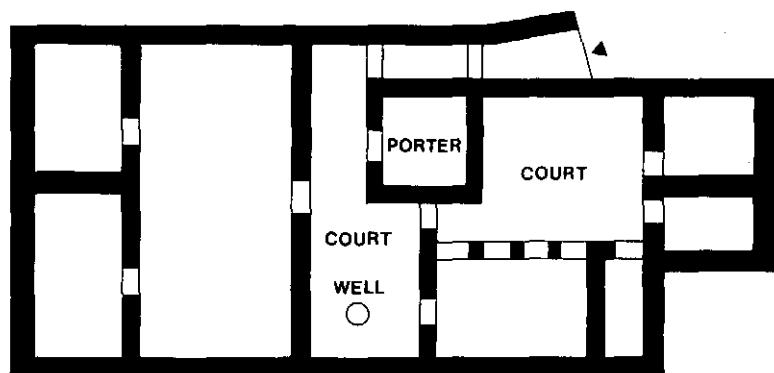
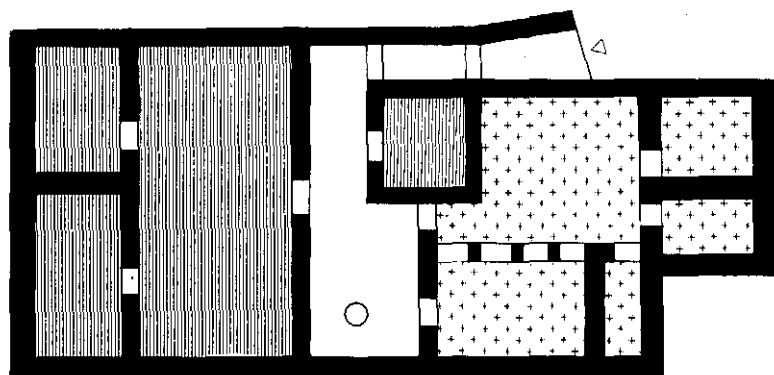
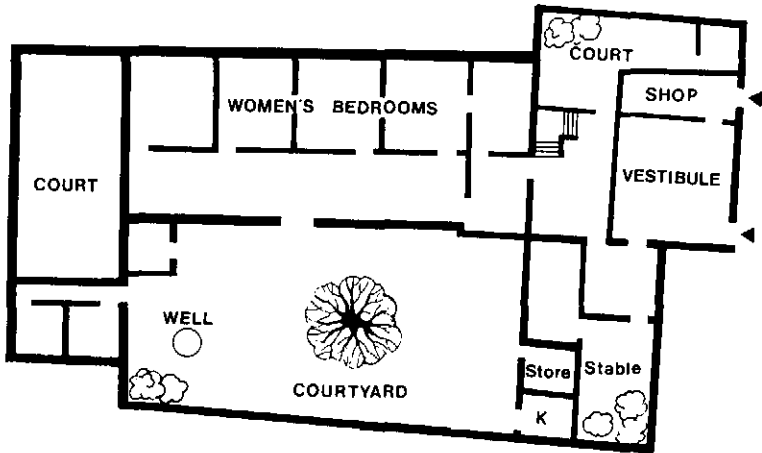


Figure 6.4b: House at Dystos, Euboea: use of rooms by men and by women



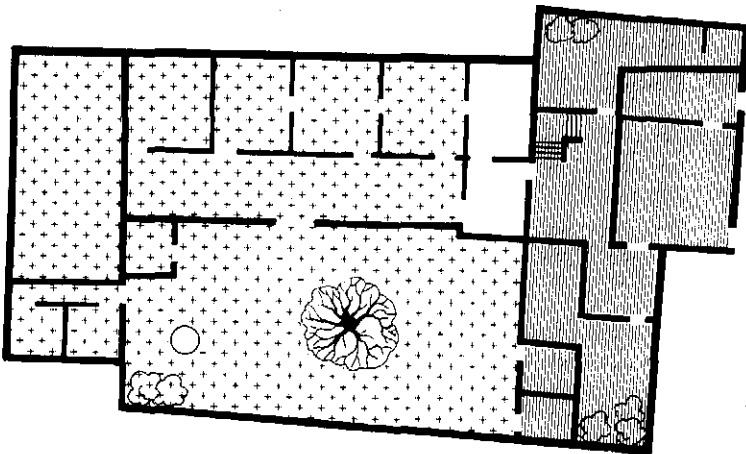
Areas used by women are marked +; those used by men are shaded. Entrances to houses from the street are marked with arrows.

Figure 6.5a: House of the Hausa Tribe at Kano, Nigeria: probable functions of rooms (after Denyer, 1978)



0 10m

Figure 6.5b: House at Kano, Nigeria: use of rooms by men and by women



Areas used by women are marked +; those used by men are shaded. Entrances to houses from the street are marked with arrows.

For archaeologists there are many problems in interpreting such evidence. Much depends on the secure identification of rooms. The *andron* was usually the largest room in the house and in many cases has been recognised from its superior flooring (such as pebble mosaic in place of beaten earth), sometimes surrounded by the foundations of the platforms on which wooden dining-couches were set. The doorway was usually built off-centre to accommodate the requisite number of couches. Entrances to houses normally present no problem of identification. The same may be said of courtyards, water supplies and store-rooms. Other areas are difficult to interpret, especially in houses occupied for centuries, where drastic modifications may have obscured the elements of the original design. The difficulty of establishing the existence, let alone the form, of an upper storey of an ancient mud-brick house has already been noted. But though the women's quarters themselves are lost, many vestiges of the history of their inhabitants may be recovered.

### Further Reading

- Denyer, S. (1978), *African Tribal Architecture*, London  
Jones, J.E. (1975), 'Town and country houses of Attica in classical times', *Thorikos and the Laurion in Archaic and Classical Times, Miscellanea Graeca* 1, Ghent  
Lawrence, A.W. (1967), *Greek Architecture*, Pelican History of Art, Harmondsworth, p. 241 and fig. 135  
Luce, J.V. (1971), 'The large house at Dystos in Euboea', *Greece and Rome*, 2nd ser., 18, 143-9  
Wiegand, T. (1899), 'Dystos', *Athenische Mitteilungen* 24, 465-6, pl. 6.

### Acknowledgements

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