Individual and the Family in Athenian Society

Today, individuals are considered to be independent, often only superficially connected to their families. In classical Athens, however, individuals were considered to be part of the larger oikos, causing the rights and needs of the family to be more important than those of one particular individual. The individual was a unit of the oikos just as, according to Aristotle, the oikos was the basic social unit of the polis (Roy,1). As a result, the individual “belonged” to an oikos, and, as Beringer says in the collection of speeches The Craft of the Historian, “a man who was a citizen belonged to a group [the oikos or family] and was as much protected by it as he himself was bound to maintain, support, and defend it” (Beringer, 41). A common, modern definition of oikosis three-fold, meaning either a building such as a house, property in the form of an “estate,” or a household and family, or sometimes even a combination of all three (MacDowell, 1), and this is the definition that I will use. Additionally, for majority of my analysis, the individuals I refer to are men since women were not full citizens and were never treated as independent individuals, and so cannot be included in a discussion on the role of the individual in Athenian society.

A manifestation of this system in which family reigned supreme over the individual is the kurios, or guardian that woman and minors always had. The patriarch of the oikos, and thus the kurios of its minors, held the ultimate authority and frequently made decisions on behalf on their charges that contributed to general family well-being even if at the cost of the individual family
member. For example, a father could legally “expose” a child for the first ten days of its life, essentially giving the head of the family permission to kill the child. Presumably this was legalized as a form of population control (Roy, 8) and family planning, indicating that the needs of the family superseded the life and rights of the baby. Similarly, fathers could decide whether their children were legitimate or not (Wolff, 95), suggesting that kurioi could even determine the identity of an individual.

Women are an example of the perennial presence of kurioi and, by extension, the oikos in an individual’s life. From birth women were always under the guardianship of others, born into their paternal oikos, given to their husband’s oikos upon marriage, and transferred back to their paternal oikos if the marriage ended by death or divorce. As semi-citizens and perpetual minors, women in particular were not considered so much as individuals but more as subsets of their oikos.

Men were both similar and different; although they technically became independent at 17 or 18 and thus come into all of their rights as individuals and citizens, their responsibilities and duties to the family remained, as outlined by Beringer earlier. For instance, a man was legally obligated to properly care for his parents when they became old (Lacey, 25), and in return he received his inheritance (Pomeroy, 141). A common prosecution technique was to allege that the defendant did not treat his parents well (Lacey, 117), illustrating how providing for one’s parents was both a moral and legal obligation in Athenian society. Other “duties” involved contributing to their oikos financially, presumably by making a living, and rearing future citizens that in turn were required to be willing and virtuous (Nagle, 225).

The legal manifestation for the mentality in which the individual is primarily a subset of the oikos can be found in classical Athenian inheritance law. In ancient Athens, wills were not the
norm, and intestate succession was mandated by the law. This was because continuing the paternal line was a top priority and allowing individuals to pass their property on to outsiders could result in a dilution of family assets, and thus the possibility of not being able to provide for the *oikos*. In fact, maintaining the property within the family was so essential that there were even laws against refusing one’s inheritance or selling inherited land to outsiders, let alone bequeathing it to non-members of the *oikos*. Hence, the family was protected from the possibility of an individual’s rash behavior, another instance in which the *oikos* took precedence over the individual. The law even allowed the *oikos* to cut off the legal powers of an insane *kurios* to prevent him from harming the family’s finances (which included his own assets). The word *oikos* referred to the familial estate as well as the household itself (Pomeroy, 20), and as the definition suggests, the *oikos* as a family could only exist with its financial estate. Thus, maintaining these assets within the male bloodline was an ultimate priority for Athenian society. One way to do so was to necessitate the marriage of *epikleroi*, or daughters of deceased men with no male heirs, to a close male of relative of the deceased to keep property within the *oikos*. Such policies indicate the importance of the family over the individual; if the *epikleros* was already married, the law and needs of the *oikos* overrode the desires of the *epikleros*, her previous husband, and potentially her new husband.

The continuation of the family line outweighed the rights of the individual ostensibly because of the permanence of the *oikos* versus the impermanence of the individual, or as Pomeroy says in the context of extended family, “the life span of the *anchisteia* was unlimited, although the life span of the individual was short” (Pomeroy, 19). Athenians worried that an *oikos* might be “deserted” or “left empty,” meaning that the last male member died without a male heir (MacDowell, 15). Part of this worry stemmed from religious concerns: descendants
were needed to perform burial rights, and such religious concerns were so powerful that even the
state was concerned with the “preservation of existing family units” (Wolff, 93), mandating
intestate succession so that descendants would always receive familial property and the religious
rights that came with it. “An oikos was a living organism which was required to be renewed
every generation to remain alive; it supported its living members’ needs for food, and its
deceased members’ needs for the performance of cult rituals” (Lacey, 16).

Moreover, individuals were considered to be subsets of their oikostos such an extent that
they were acknowledged first as a member of their family and then as an individual when
considering citizenship (Pomeroy, 67). Family was the primary form of identity and thus was the
most important form of self: individuals often introduced themselves by stating their deme, or “a
local unit within Attica…used to maintain the register of its citizens” (Lacey, 12). Fathers or
guardians sponsored his son’s candidacy at the local deme assembly at age eighteen” (Nagle,
229) as a part of the rite of passage that involved obtaining citizenship. Even first names reflected
membership of a family, with names for both women and men often constructed from the same
stem, repeated in the family over generations (Pomeroy, 73).

This phenomenon of the family defining the individual extends to the Greek political
sphere as well, where “family and kin groupings were fundamental to [Greek] political
structure…citizens became members of a classical polis not as individuals…rather, they first had
to be accepted as members of a family” (Pomeroy, 75). Colloquially, the individual was a
“piece” of the larger family “pie,” and was recognized as such in society. As multiple classicists
such as W.K. Lacey put it, “all the Athenian law was framed with this membership of the oikosin
view; a man’s oikos provided both his place in the citizen body and what measure of social
security there was” (Lacey, 118). “The household was the economic, emotional, social, and moral
institution that enabled the husband to take his place in the political community as an individual citizen” (Nagle, 303). Aristotle believed that the “polis is a partnership of households” (Nagle, 20), and that individuals were members of a polis simply by being members of an identifiable and authentic oikos (Nagle, 19).

This view of an individual simply as a unit of the larger family is not uncommon, and is found in collectivist societies even today. Many Asian countries emphasize the importance of family and its role in individual identity in much the same way as classical Athens did. For example, Indian society expects children to care for their parents in their old age, taking them into their home and creating what are known as “extended families”, comprised of members beyond the nuclear family. Familial structures in Athenian society were very similar, most often consisting of three generations: paternal grandparents, a married couple, and their children (Pomeroy, 25). Both Athens and collectivism considered family to be very important, and a reflection of that is respect for parental authority. Traditional Confucianism, for instance, believes in filial obedience and obligation in the father-son relationship. The individualism that characterizes Western cultures, however, sees this as an odd practice that does not foster the independence that is so crucial to individuality in Western eyes, but as Beringer discusses in his essay, there is a duality of care to this mentality. Although descendants are required to maintain and contribute to their families, in return they are given protection and support.

The oikos supported the individual, from the most basic need of sustenance by providing food grown on family property, to the complex, suing on behalf of its members in the case of murder or other offenses. To Athenians, “the oikos that could not support its members…was no oikos at all” (Lacey, 15). The individual has to sustain the system in order to benefit from it. They system is comparable to Social Security and the like in the United States today. The individual is
often vulnerable alone, and in societies in which families do not always offer support, the state often has to step in and do so in the forms of programs like Social Security.

It is for these very reasons that such an order of needs exists. Families were given priority because the well-being of the family meant well-being for the individual. Although individuals were often required to compromise their rights or needs, in return they received financial and emotional support or protection from their families in times of crisis. For example, in the United States today, a significant portion of people on the streets are homeless because of mental illness. However, in collectivist societies such as India or China, those suffering from mental illness are still supported and protected by their families, despite the hardship they can bring. Similarly, in Ancient Athens, an oikos protected its members, providing financial support through its estate, or serving as a reliable home for its descendants. As such, a strong, successful oikos entailed success for each of its members as well. One can look at the system as a series of concentric, overlapping circles consisting of the individual, oikos, and then the polis. The households of a polis were its “essential constituent units”, and, as a result, “all members of the household…possessed a heightened moral standing just because the oikos was an integral and essential part of the state” (Nagle, 300-301). A strong oikos meant greater benefits for the individual within its circle, but also strengthened the polis, for a whole cannot be healthy unless its parts are. As Aristotle believed, “the better the state, the better the household,” and vice versa (Nagle, 300). Oikoi with economic success created offspring within the family that continued the same profession (Pomeroy, 156), maintaining both the demographic and economic stability of the polis. If
were weak financially, they would end up draining the state’s resources instead of paying the taxes that supported the state. Additionally, the oikos was essential to the polis because it provided its children with the moral and social education that created future citizens. Both institutions combined to “bring the other to virtue,” (Nagle, 126) and successful oikoi freed their citizens to fulfill their “civic, military, and cultural responsibilities” (Nagle, 129). In the ideal polis, art, music, dancing or gymnastics were learnt during childhood and then maintained and performed as adults (Nagle, 131), training and performance of which the oikos made possible. Essentially, “the oikos was the economic, moral, and demographic foundation of the polis” (Nagle, 155), in addition to its role in creating the polis’ future citizens, jurors, and holders of political office.

The relationship between oikos and individual extended further up the circle to the polis as well; just as the overall needs of the family were more important than the individual, the overall well-being of Athenian society was more important than one oikos or individual. For instance, the prosecution of high profile individuals such as the defendant in the sixth speech of Antiphon, Against the Chorus Boy¹ was not considered as controversial or problematic in Athenian society as it would be today. As a choregos given an important liturgy, the defendant was probably an extremely wealthy, politically active member of Athenian society, and thus the type of individual who would seldom find themselves fully prosecuted today. However, the needs of general society overrode the power of one individual in the same fashion as the oikos and its members and so there was no hesitation to find the person responsible for the chorus boy’s death.

The family in ancient Athens dominated over the individual; its needs took priority and laws like those mandating intestate succession affirmed the concentric, circular relationship

between the polis-oikos-individual. In classical Athenian society, being an individual meant being a “free” citizen that participated in society, politically, legally, and culturally. This definition of individualism though is somewhat different from the modern concept, instead entailing that “to be free means to “belong to a community”… to be protected, to be entitled,” (Beringer) rather than the total independence we value today. This “freedom” of individualism seems to be paradoxically constrained to the group of a family, but it includes the support of a kin group as discussed earlier. An individual was independent, but was still connected very intimately to its origins, tied into a system that exchanged support and protection for duty and responsibility to the family’s needs and overall well-being. Today we might look at the system and see one that compromised and sacrificed the needs of the individual, but another perspective is that it was a symbiotic system in which good fortune for one part of the system meant good fortune for all.

Works Cited


