

WOMEN AT HOME

Under one roof

Many Greek households contained three generations: grandparents, a married son and his wife, and their children. The married son's unmarried brothers and sisters might live there too, along with any single female relatives to whom the head of the house was guardian. A man was always head of the household, even if he was not the oldest person living there.

A husband's home

When girls married, they moved to their husband's family home. If their husband's mother was still alive, a bride was expected to obey her. Because women married so young, a wife might become a mother-in-law or even a grandmother before she was 30. Greek grandmothers may also have helped to care for grandchildren, giving them extra love and attention.

Here a family is shown worshipping together. Worshipping in this way probably strengthened family feeling. Leading worship strengthened a husband's traditional role as head of the household.



It's no joke, to plunge into a family dinner-party, where First papa leads off the speeches, cup in hand, and gives them all Pointed good advice; mama comes second; then a grandmother Rambles on a little; then great-uncle, in a growling bass; Then comes some old lady who calls you dearest boy. All the time you nod your head and beam at them...

PART OF A POEM BY MENANDER, WHO LIVED ABOUT 340-290 BC

Widows

Because of the difference in age between many married couples, a wife was often widowed while she was still young. Widows of child-bearing age were likely to marry again. Poor or old widows usually needed family help to survive. If a widow had sons, she might continue to live with them. If not she would move back to her parents' home. Wherever she lived, she was not legally independent.



Many tombstones show dead women with their families mourning them – death in childbirth was quite common.

Birth and death

A Greek woman might have five or six pregnancies, but probably at least one of her children would die. Possibly 30 per cent of babies died in their first year. Other babies were abandoned (see page 14), and there are records of poor women giving up their babies for adoption, because they could not afford to care for them. Many women's lives were marked by times of loss and grief. Poems, plays, tombstones, and temple offerings (asking gods to cure sick children) show that Greek mothers loved their children dearly – perhaps more than they loved their husbands.

This vase shows a slave standing in the hot summer sun holding an umbrella to shade a mother, who watches her son play with a pet bird.

SLAVERY

*I remember the tears pouring down my face
The shattered towers and the walls smashed down
And the oars and spears of our enemies
And ships that carried us so far away
To be sold for gold.*

SPEECH BY A WOMAN SLAVE, CAPTURED IN WAR, FROM A PLAY BY EURIPIDES, WHO LIVED ABOUT 485-406 BC

Greek households included slaves. These were men and women bought from slave traders, sold into slavery as punishment, or captured in war. Some families might own up to ten slaves, but most owned only one or two. Farming families had male slaves to help farm their land, but most household slaves were women, who carried out housework and childcare. Slaves had few civil rights. Most slave women could not marry or have children, and could be bought and sold as their owner pleased. To most Greeks, a slave was a thing rather than a person.

