

## **Marriage, the First-Born Child and its Significance in the Social Status of Women in Classical Athens**

### **Abstract**

Athenian society which had no old age security schemes, life or health insurance policies or health care assurances depended solely on its next generation in their old age. This forced the Athenians to have legitimate children through marriage. In such a context, the role of wife and mother were closely connected at all times. A woman could bear her first child prior to or after her marriage. But the significance of such a birth and the value it gave the woman varied despite the value attached to the first-born child. According to the accepted norms of the Athenian society, a child born before or outside marriage could degrade a woman's social position and condition while the latter (a child born after marriage) undoubtedly improved it. With such emphasis laid on marriage and the first child born into it in ancient Greece, the concern here is to review from literary and iconographical evidence the status that the first-born child brought to its mother and then to its family in classical Athens. Closely connected with this issue are the problems of conception and the grave physical risks that accompanied childbirth. In this study I argue that despite all risks and difficulties, the birth of the first child was considered vital to establish a couple's position in their respective communities and to ensure a bride's marital status in the husband's family. In this regard, the family and their well-wishers would surely have expected the bride to bear a child soon after the marriage. This expectation could well have been enhanced by the social and political expectation of the community.

**Keywords:** *Athenian women, First-born child, Marriage, Childbirth, Greece, Society*

“The child is the father of the man” wrote Wordsworth and for most of the Greeks of antiquity this seemed to have been obvious enough. A society which had no old age security schemes, life or health insurance policies or health care assurances depended solely on its next generation in their old age. This was the case with the Athenians and they undoubtedly therefore needed children. But these children had to be legitimate. Marriage was the institution which legitimized conjugal love, sex and childbearing. In such a context, for women the role of wife and mother were closely connected at all times. Being married, carried the risk of being pregnant and childbirth was expected to follow relatively soon afterwards (Teachman 379). A woman could bear her first child prior to or after her marriage. But their significance varied despite the value attached to the first born child. According to the accepted norms of the Athenian society, the former (a child born before or outside marriage) may denigrate a woman's social position and condition<sup>1</sup> while the latter (a child born after marriage) undoubtedly improved it.

With such emphasis laid on marriage and the first child born into it in ancient Greece, our concern here is to review from literary and iconographical evidence the status that the first born child brought to its mother and then to its family in classical Athens. One may of course question as to why this study was undertaken when the scholarship on ancient Greek children and women has been so comprehensive.<sup>2</sup> I believe the existing scholarship has not given due attention to the value a first born child brought to its mother in ancient Greece and to the social significance a woman gained through her fertility and motherhood and its effect on their social position.

Closely connected with this issue are the problems of conception and the grave physical risks that accompanied childbirth. In this study I argue that despite all risks and difficulties, the birth of the first child was considered necessary to establish a couple's position in their respective community and to ensure a bride's marital status in the husband's family. In this regard, the family and their well-wishers would surely have expected the bride to bear a child soon after the marriage. This expectation could well have been enhanced by the social and political expectation of the community.

The Athenians being a nation who were constantly obliged to fight for their freedom doubtlessly valued their children just as the other Greeks. They needed to see their community perpetuated with a fresh line of offspring. Politically, at least after 451/0 BC when Pericles limited the Athenian citizenship to the children who had Athenian citizens as both parents, it would have been vital for all Athenian citizens to have legitimate children through marriage. Moreover, this political requirement is closely linked with the custom of introducing a new-born son to its father's *phratry* or tribe, which again would require the scrutiny of its parents' social positions. Besides these politically motivated obligations, ancestors in a family, not to mention parents, would require a legitimate child, preferably a son, to perpetuate its family line, to be the conveyor of its inheritance, to be the agent providing security for aged parents and the performer of family obligations after the death of the parents. These socio-political and personal requirements, therefore, would have obliged each father to beget a legitimate son and, failing that, at least a daughter. In this light, a marital union of an Athenian citizen may have appeared to be a union made to create

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<sup>1</sup> According to Plutarch's account on Solon (23), a free Athenian father could punish his lecherous daughters for their disgraceful conduct by selling them to slavery. Accordingly, bearing a child outside marriage may have risked their social position even if this was not due to the woman's lecherousness, as in the case of Creusa (Euripides' *Ion*) and that of Philoumina (in Terence's *Hecyra*).

<sup>2</sup> Numerous studies on children in Classical Athens are available since Mark Golden's research resulting in many articles (1979, 1981, 1982, 1985, 1986, 1988a and b, 2003) and a book (1990). Many other studies on children have preceded (Lee 1919; Klein 1932), paralleled (Rühfel 1984a and b) and followed (Neils and Oakely 2003; Pache 2004) those of Golden. Moreover, studies on Greek family (Lacey 1968; Garland 1990; Pomeroy 1998; Patterson 1998) and Greek women (Demand 1994; Blundell 1995, 1998; Lewis 2002; Ferrari 2002) also have received a wide range of scholarship which also inevitably deals with the subject of children. Oakely 2000 provides more bibliographical information on this.

legitimate offspring for the betterment of the state, community and the family. In such circumstances, the birth of the first child would have been the proof of the mother's fertility. Moreover, it may also appear as a fulfilment of the couple's expected duty to its family and community as well as the state.

In a forensic speech the orator Lysias provides us with valuable information in this regard. Though forensic speeches incline to detective work, of which half is in the finding and the other half in the interpreting of clues, we can still distil valuable social, political and historical information with care as the speeches are designed to persuade the jurors to give a favourable verdict to the speaker. Also we must remember that as these were delivered in public the content must appear plausible to the male audience and to the jury to effect persuasion, although exaggerations and understatements too may occur. In the present context, Lysias' client, Euphiletus, informs us about his newly wedded wife: when he married and brought her home, he "kept a watch on her as far as possible, with such observation of her as was reasonable" and continues, "but when a child was born to me, thenceforward I began to trust her, and placed all my affairs in her hands, presuming that we are now in perfect intimacy".<sup>3</sup>

Obviously Euphiletus is here referring to the first child born as a result of their marital union. But we must remember here that this husband, Euphiletus, is on trial for murdering his wife's paramour and the prime concern of Euphiletus here is to impress the jury to acquit him. Euphiletus may be exaggerating his gentle nature as a husband to show that his wife has misused that mildness and was unfaithful to him. Nonetheless, despite this tensed and critical situation and possible exaggerations, this part of the speech can be used as an important and intriguing statement as to how the birth of the first child changed their relationship. Accordingly, we could see here that Euphiletus' disposition towards his new wife was different before and after she bore their first child. Also this information hints that a wife could expect a positive change in her position in the household of her husband subsequent to bearing the first child. That change may include proper integration into the new family together with other privileges. In other words, the birth of the first child was vital for a bride to establish her position in her new family since that raised her status to *gyne*, woman-wife, (Vernant 404; Cole 243, note 62; Demand 17) thus completing the cycle of transition from *parthene* to *nymphe* and then to *gyne*.

From the above example from a forensic scene, we move to a few pieces of iconographical evidence from Greek Black and Red figure vase paintings. In the case of archaeological evidence of this nature, one must note that the scenes depicted on vases may vary according to the taste of the painters and according to the requests of the customers in addition to the shape of the vase and the use to which it was put.<sup>4</sup> Apart from this, we must also be aware that the painters had to depict their intentions on the limited surface of the vase using the least amount of detail to transmit several ideas. Interestingly, the wedding scenes shown on Attic vases provide manifold allusions to the fertility of the couple which reveal that the couple is expected to produce their first child not too late after their marriage. These illustrations range from showing an *amphithales* (a boy with both parents alive) as a live example of the prime motive of the marriage (i.e., to bear a legitimate child, preferably a son) to post nuptial scenes which show the fulfilment of that expected duty. For instance, a *lekythos* vase (ancient Greek earthen ware used as oil flasks), decorated by the Amasis

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<sup>3</sup> Lys 1.6-7. Apparently his marriage and both the due supervision of the new wife and the termination of such surveillance at the birth of their son happened when his mother was still alive because his problems begin when the wife attended the funeral of his mother. *Ibid* Lys. 1. 8.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, the clay ware generally used by women such as hydria vases (water pitchers), *loutrophoros* vases (water basin), *lebes gamikos* (wedding vases) and *pyxides* (jewellery boxes) may have shown scenes that appealed mostly to women. Similarly, drinking cups and related ware used mostly by men depict scenes that would have appealed mostly to men. Also, for daily use, most Greeks seemed to have used unpainted ware while the rich perhaps used painted ware. Some painted ware may have been used as souvenirs and gifts given to brides and grooms.

painter, illustrates a wedding procession<sup>5</sup> where an *amphithales* is shown accompanying the newly wedded couple as they leave the *oikos* of the bride and enter that of the groom. The *amphithales* shown in this vase may have been used as an auspicious omen hinting at the healthy boy this newly wedded couple shall bear.<sup>6</sup> Receiving a vase with such a drawing may have been considered a good omen through which the painter tried to give an assurance to the bride that her position in the new family shall be safe.

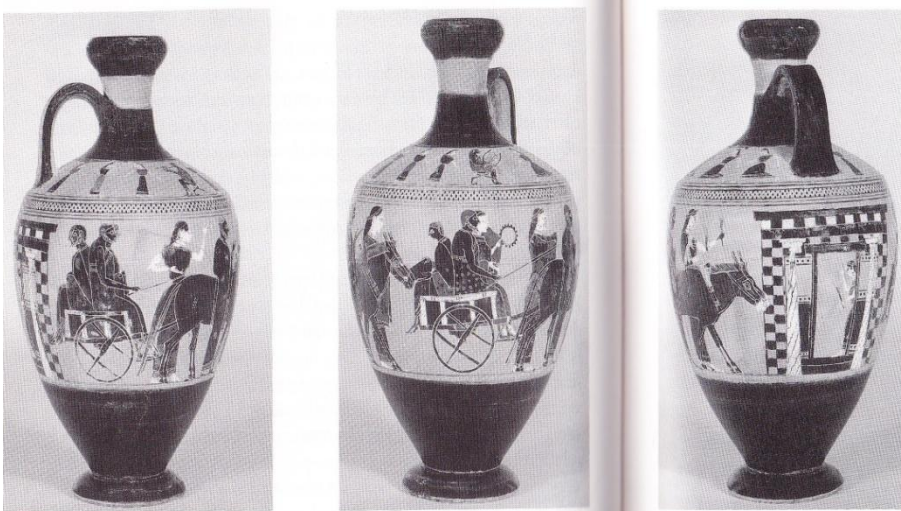


Fig. 1: A Vase Painting with Amphithales (Boardman fig. 38)

Another red-figure *lebes gamikos* (Greek earthenware used to carry water for nuptial baths before a wedding) by the Marsyas Painter [360 BC] (see Fig. 2) depicts an elaborate domestic (*epaulia*) scene on the occasion of a wedding. It alludes to fertility in a fascinating manner showing a busy indoor scene - the women's quarters (*gynaikonitis*) of a house where the relatives of the bride are assisting to deck the bride, positioned in the centre of the vase. She is seated, flanked by two large *erotes* who dress her. At the same time she cuddles another smaller *eros* as if it were a child. Notably, however, the maternal appearance of the bride in this vase is not unique and it may perhaps have been auspicious for the male progeny for which the newly wedded couple wished. By highlighting the skin of the bride and those of the *erotes* in this scene by using an added white colour, the painter seems to be emphasizing the wish of the bride (and of her family) and the purpose of the marital union, i.e., to bear a child (children), preferably male (s).

<sup>5</sup> The wedding procession is drawn here as a continuous frieze round the vase and the scene is shown as it appears in three different directions. The first image shown indicates that the couple is leaving the bride's house, the middle image shows that they travel with the *amphithales* (modern page boy in weddings) and the last image indicates that they reached the groom's house.

<sup>6</sup> By showing a growing boy the painter may be using his artistic license to signal that the boy the bride shall bear may reach adulthood unharmed, the most obvious wish of a parent.



Fig. 2: A bride Cuddling an Eros in an Attic Red-Figure *Lebes Gamikos* (Oakely and Sinos 40, Figs. 124-127)<sup>7</sup>

Another attic red-figured *lebes-gamikos* vase by the Washing Painter datable to mid fourth century (Fig.3) also illustrates a similar wedding scene.<sup>8</sup> Here, too, the seated woman with an auspicious matronly look, as in Fig. 2, seems to be the bride and is handing over an infant to another woman standing in front of her. Once again the intention of the painter in including an *eros* in the form of an infant on the hand of the bride-to-be is to suggest that bearing a child is the goal of the marital union. In both these cases the bride is the centre of focus and her value is determined by her fertility.



Fig.3: Attic Red-Figure *Lebes Gamikos* by the Washing Painter, mid fourth century (?)

<sup>7</sup> Now in St. Petersburg, Hermitage 15592.

<sup>8</sup> A hanging hair net (*sakkos*) and the laurel wreath on the wall indicate that it is a women's quarters where the ladies are preparing for a wedding. The standing women in the scene are bringing gifts to the bride and the one standing behind the seated figure is dressing up for the wedding.

As in the two vases mentioned above, other Greek vases, whether they be *lebes gamikos*, *hydria*, *lekythos* or *pyxides* vases,<sup>9</sup> which depict scenes from weddings, show one or more *erotes* in the company of the bride and as her assistants. For instance, a scene on an Attic red figured squat *lekythos* shows a (comparatively) life-sized *eros* in the presence of a new bride offering sacrifices to Aphrodite with her mother (Oakely and Sinos Figs. 3-5). Also a miniature *eros* is depicted in a scene on an Attic *loutrophoros* vase (used as a water basin) showing a procession that brings water for the bride's ritual bath (Oakely and Sinos Figs.14-15). An Attic *pyxis* vase (ladies used this as a toiletry box) depicts a bride attended by many *erotes* as she bathes ritually and as she decks herself for her wedding (Oakely and Sinos Figs. 20-21). Moreover, an Attic red-figured *lebes gamikos* shows an *eros* assisting the bride as she ties her hair (Oakely and Sinos Fig. 23). A similar scene adorns the body of another Attic *pyxis* vase and shows an *eros* assisting the seated bride to tie her hair while two other *erotes* wrestle in front of the bride (Oakely and Sinos Fig. 24-27). A red-figured *lebes gamikos* vase shows a bride being assisted by an *eros* as she dresses up (Oakely and Sinos Fig. 28-29). Furthermore, an attic acorn *lekythos* vase shows an *eros* tying the sandals of the bride (Oakely and Sinos Fig. 30) while the same action is also depicted in an Attic *hydria* vase - a vessel used as a water pitcher (Oakely and Sinos Fig. 31). All these illustrations of the bride in the company of the *erotes* on clay vases signify the value the Athenians attached to the bearing of the first child (and perhaps also many more) after the marriage.

Furthermore, the vases showing mythological spouses Peleus and Thetis who produced Achilles, the prime example of Greek male offspring, and scenes from their wedding may also allude to the same Greek expectation of giving birth to a son as the ultimate goal of the marriage (Oakely and Sinos 1993 Fig108-111). It is probable that the vases with such mythological scenes may also have received great attention and that they also may have been used as wedding presents due to the significance attached to such scenes.

Besides decorating vases with genre scenes of weddings, wedding preparations and scenes from mythological weddings, Greek painters have also used genre scenes depicting the fulfilment of a marriage expectation (i.e., bearing of the first child) to decorate the surfaces of the vases.

A look at the Attic Red-Figure hydria (ht. 34.5cm., dim. 24.6cm.)<sup>10</sup> attributed to a follower of Polygnotos supports this interpretation. Positive interpretations on this vase too drive home the value attached to the first born child in the classical Athenian family and society.

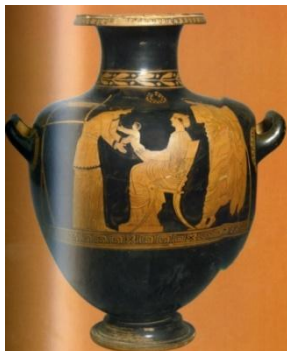


Fig. 4: Photo from CVA Robinson ii pl 43

<sup>9</sup> For details on various Greek vase shapes, see Clark. For a detailed study of archaic vase shapes and their uses, see Wickramasinghe Appendix 1.

<sup>10</sup> This vase was unearthed from a cemetery near Vari in Attica and is datable to a time around 440 and 430BC. This is now displayed in the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Collection.

In this domestic scene from a *gynaikonitis*<sup>11</sup> (Robinson 32) the central figure is a woman with matronly appearance (compare with Figs. 2 and 3) seated on a high-backed chair (*klismos*). She is handing over a child, who wears an amulet fastened on a cord, to another woman who is bending forward with extended arms to pick the child up and is recognized as a slave from her dress (Robinson 31-32, fig. 43). According to Athenian customs, the significance of the wreath hanging in the background almost in the centre of the vase above the space between the heads of the mother and the child is twofold: i.e., while it indicates a marriage celebration, it also signals the birth of a son. Accordingly, the wreath in this scene may indicate that the child shown here is the son born to this newly wedded couple.<sup>12</sup>

The owner of this particular vase may have received it, originally, as a wedding present<sup>13</sup> with a sign of the family she was expected to create soon.<sup>14</sup> The scene in the vase may perhaps have been intended to gloss over the risks of childbirth in order to alleviate any fears<sup>15</sup> the bride may be harbouring in her mind. To some others, especially to the mother of the bride, who is concerned about the risks of child-birth that her daughter is facing through marriage and its expectations, the scene with a new healthy mother and a son will appear as a good omen. All these practices and traditions suggest that the goal of the marriage was to bear a healthy male offspring, which marks the fulfilment of the Athenian bride's role, during the first and crucial stage of the married life. It marked the beginning of the Athenian wife's duty to her husband's *genos* and to the community, on a wider scale, by demonstrating her potential to produce legitimate children.

Accordingly, all eyes were set upon the bride in the early days of marriage. This further reminds us of a scene from a new comedy, the *Mother-in-law*, of Terence. But here we must be aware that although New Comedy contains a great deal of the soap-opera, we can nonetheless, with caution, extract assumptions regarding the relationships between men and women in the Athenian household and society. Also noteworthy is the fact that despite the difficulty in drawing and understanding evidence from comedies when taken out of their context, the setting in the *Mother-in-Law* of Terence draws our attention to a common social issue. Terence [185-159 BC], (who prefers to borrow his themes from Classical Athenian society), presents us a family in which the wife was accused by the husband for trying to break the marriage of their daughter, legitimately wedded to the neighbour's son, by concealing the birth of her first child (lines 531-534). Despite the complicated situation and the presence of the theme of "mistaken identity" in the play and the caution required in drawing evidence from comedy, this incident suggests clearly that the birth of the first child was crucial in the preliminary stage of a marriage for its continuation and to secure the position of the woman within this institution. This same notion is reflected in the case of Menecles who probably was conscious of his advanced age and relates his wife's

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<sup>11</sup> It was considered customary for Greek women to engage in weaving and carding wool in their homes and it was one of the prime domestic tasks performed by them.

<sup>12</sup> For a scholarly dispute on the identification of this young male figure in the vase: Robinson (32), Massar (23-38), Neils and Oakley (230), Beaumont (72) and Sutton Jr. (Dissertation, 'Family Portraits') confidently identify the young man in the scene as the father of the child. But Williams (94) and Sparks (138-139) think otherwise (an older child of the woman). Clairmont (25) too does not believe that this man is the father of the child. The negative views are based on the restrained thoughts of Hesiod (*WD* 698 [bride 18, groom 30]), Plato (*Laws* 721b, 772d; *Rep.* 460eff. [groom 25 or over]); Aristotle (*Pol.* 1335a13-23 [groom 37 or little before, bride at 18]); Xenophon (*Oec.* 3.13, 7. 5-6 [bride 15], *Mem.* II. 2,4 [groom 30]) who describe the husband or the groom as twice as old as the bride. Yet we must note that not everyone is ready to consider Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* which is in close contact with the Athenian society, as a reflective text: see Pomeroy *The Families*; Kronenberg.

<sup>13</sup> For instance, *supra* Fig. 3 (Oakley and Sinos 40, Figs. 124-127) shows a *lebes gamikos* with a painting of a wedding scene depicting many participants carrying presents to the bride and some of the presents are decorated vases.

<sup>14</sup> When the recipient of the vase died, it may have been buried with her as it was unearthed from a cemetery near Varii. The half-finished work in the loom may, in the second context - grave-, signify her early death. In the same way as the textile in the loom is half finished, her life may have ended half way through.

<sup>15</sup> The fear is connected to her fertility and the ability to bear a healthy male child in order to get accepted in her new home. Also the prevailing risks of child birth may have intensified her fear.

childlessness to it when he apparently considers giving her in marriage to another, or to divorce her so that her relatives would do so (Isaeus II, 7-9) to save her from the social stigma of being barren. Once again, it goes without saying that one needs to be aware of limitations when drawing information from forensic speeches as the speaker may gloss over his errors and misconduct while highlighting those of his opponent to convince the jury to believe him. But, subject to those limitations, this incident tells us that bearing a child was considered vital for a woman during the early stage of her marriage. Thus, the social position of an Athenian woman was linked with her fertility and her biological or physical contribution to her community.

Euripides too testifies to fathers' desire to have a child (*Suppliant Women* lines 1087-1088; see also Dover 1980, 1). Being childless, Xuthus and Temenus visit the oracles of Apollo and Zeus, respectively, because of their passionate desire for children.<sup>16</sup> Both these characters do not seem to have thought that they were responsible for the childlessness they experience. In the case of Xuthus, his wife Creusa could not prove her fertility although she, in fact, had given birth to a son (by Apollo) as it had happened outside her marriage to Xuthus. A wife, therefore, needs to produce a child within her marriage union to secure her position in the society. Although tragedians may represent the ideal expectation of society through their plays, since Euripides is regarded as a revolutionary - depicting the real not the ideal incidences in the Athenian society<sup>17</sup> - we could believe that the Euripidean information here reflects the value the Athenians attached to the status of children. Moreover, Aristophanes also provides a quick view of a new father's joy, which is so intense that it makes him easy to deceive (*Thesmophoriazusaë* lines 502-519, also *Birds* lines 1439-1445). Despite the exaggerated caricature in Aristophanes' plays, this information may mirror a parallel social behaviour in Athens in connection with the birth of the first child during the relatively early stage of a couple's married life.

But, if all brides succeeded in the mission of bearing a child, *ipso facto*, it may not have been necessary to give so much emphasis to having to do so during the early years of a marriage, as shown in wedding scenes (by showing the bride often with *erotes*), and also for Xuthus and Temenus who must journey to divine oracles in their longing for children. Thus, the intense pressure on a bride to bear a child as early as she could may perhaps have provoked some desperate brides to use deception. This could have induced some Athenian husbands to suspect their wives of such a ruse. This fear that Athenian males have had has induced Aristophanes to caricature it in his comedy. Allowing for the exaggerations in the comedies of Aristophanes and others, feigned pregnancy may have been used by some Athenian women who would then smuggle a child into an *oikos*<sup>18</sup> because they were unable to conceive (see Lacey 170). The obligation for the brides to bear a child, male or female, may have been further intensified due to the prevalent Athenian belief that the women alone were responsible for bearing female children.

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<sup>16</sup> Eur. *Ion* (erōtī paidōn) (cf. 1227 [paidōn ...eis eron] [Creusa]), *Archel.* Fr. 2.19-21 Austin ( teknon erōtī); cf. Eur. *Med.* 714-715 (Aegeus).

<sup>17</sup> Euripides is attacked by Aeschylus in the *poetic Agon* in Aristophanes' *Wasps* (1240-1255) for not presenting the ideal and for presenting the real incidents that occur in the society; he further says that a poet should know what needs to be said on stage and what need not be said. Though comedies are marked for exaggerations, this information appears to be far from hyperbolic.

<sup>18</sup> In Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusaë* [502-516], the women condemn servants who expose wives that try to introduce supposititious infants into the household. We further hear from the same comedian, "I knew a woman who said she was ten days in childbirth, until she brought a child. Her husband ran all over buying help to hasten the birth, but the old woman brought in a child in a pot, with its mouth stuffed with honeycomb so it would not cry. And when she signalled, straightaway the wife cried out, 'Go away, go away, husband, I'm about to give birth,' for the child kicked at the belly of the pot. And he delighted, rushed out, while she drew the honeycomb out of the mouth of the child and it cried out. Then the miserable old woman, the very same one who brought in the child, ran smiling to the husband and said, 'A lion, a lion for you! Your very image in every way, even his little prick is like yours, crooked like a little pine cone.' See also Henderson *s.v.* "kuttaron" ; Demand 68-70. See Powell 354-57 for a skeptical view on this idea.



All this information piles up in favour of the value attached to the birth of a baby during the early stage of a couple's marriage and its impact in determining the status of a woman in the family and in the community. Obviously the first-born baby may have been treasured by all Athenian women irrespective of their social status, as the live evidence of their fulfilment of the role of wife and mother. The psychological condition of a woman who was unable to bear a child can be understood through the distress of Hermonia. She was the daughter of Helen and Menelaus and could not produce a child by her husband Neoptolemus (Euripides *Andromache* lines 155-158) and, as a result, risks losing her attraction to her husband and perhaps also her position in the family (Papadamitriopoulos 147-158). But Andromache thrives (despite being reduced to servitude by this time) by being a successful wife who produces sons for her husband, Hector (Euripides *Andromache* lines 185-198). As noted above, unlike the other Greek tragedians, information derived from Euripides seems to be reliable, as here he is inculcating the real behaviour of a contemporary female to a mythical character in a similar condition to alleviate the remoteness of the mythical character and to bring it closer to the lives of the audience.

Such problems and the emphasis laid on bearing a child by a bride in her early period of marriage indicate that some Greek women went to great lengths to secure their positions by producing a child, and thus not all Greek women were able to meet the demand of their respective families and the community. This brings us to the available statistics on fertility of ancient Greek women. According to Corvisier, ten percent of Greek women (and three percent of men) had fertility problems. He also calculates that, at Epidaurus, appeals for cures of sterility count up to 15.38% of all requests and were only second to the requests for cures of eye troubles and blindness, which was 17.94% (Corvisier 121, 161-165). Early marriage of girls, which occurred shortly after *menarche*, may also have added to this high rate of supposed sterility of young brides, since many girls experience a period of post-pubertal sub-fertility (Petersen 440; Gray 221-227). The Greek misconception of fertility, which was believed to occur just before or just after menstruation, may also have affected this adverse condition (Hippocrates *Diseases of Women* 1. 17 (8.56.16-17 Li). Such high infertility rates may have led to suspicions, if the bride delayed conceiving, and this may have led her to be tested for fertility,<sup>19</sup> unless she was thus tested as a part of the marriage negotiations (Demand 17). If fertility tests were performed as part of the marriage negotiations, that itself indicates the focus on the bride until she bore her first child, the *de facto* proof of her fertility. Such information reminds us of the Greek concept implicit in many remedies for female sterility in gynaecological treatises, which suggest that the sterility affected only women (Hanson 327; see also Demand 64 note 73).

Since the respectability of Athenian wives depended on their fertility, more attention is required for this concern. Thus, if the girl passed the fertility tests, a number of quack treatments, ranging from very simple to the most odious and dangerous that may have even risked her life, were available to foster conception.<sup>20</sup> If the young bride survived these treatments to be pregnant, she had to experience further perils before she became a mother of a living child. Early child bearing<sup>21</sup> and the years of undernourishment (Demand 18-19; Blundell 132) underestimated by the ideological views that prevailed in the Athenian society of the time, contributed to the risks a woman encountered in bearing a healthy child. Such

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<sup>19</sup> Such tests figure prominently in the gynaecological treatises; some involved sympathetic magic (give a fasting woman butter and the milk of a woman who is nursing a boy; if she belches, she will conceive), others employ the anatomical model of a woman's reproductive system as a tube extending from the mouth to the vagina (apply a pessary of a little bitter almond wrapped in wool to the vagina; if the odour of almond comes out of her mouth, the woman will conceive): Hipp. *Ster.* 214 (8.414.18-22 Li.]. Also see Demand 18.

<sup>20</sup> One of the more innocuous of these involved eating a sea polypus cooked over the fire until it was half-burnt, and then applying patties of ground Egyptian soda (nitron), coriander, and cumin to the genitals: Hipp. *Epid.* II 6.29 (5.138.6-9Li). for more on this see Demand 18.

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle explicitly warns that early childbearing produces small and weak infants, in addition to causing difficult and dangerous labour for the mother : Arist. *Pol.*1335a 13-23.

undernourishment may have made her more susceptible to the illnesses frequent among the general population and may have posed special risks to her because of the suppression of cell-mediated immunity during pregnancy (see Weinberg 1984; Demand 18-19, chapter 4).<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, even conception may have been a problem for many women and there was no guarantee that all pregnant women would end their pregnancy happily. This doubt mixed with the fear for life may have directed the pregnant women and their relatives to make offerings to many deities requesting their assistance in this life and death struggle.

Mirrors, female garments and many items used by women unearthed within the precincts of Greek temples during excavations were recognized by archaeologists and historians as votive offerings made by women to deities in return for their blessings from conception to child birth (Dillon *Girls and Women* 14-22). The universal nature of the fear women experienced in this regard induces us to consider instances from a few other Greek localities in addition to Athens. Information on the treatment women received to induce conception and fertility at the temple of Asclepius<sup>23</sup> is indicated in the votive inscriptions set up by the women who received such treatments (Dillon *Girls and Women* 24-29). One such inscription states as follows:

Andromeda of Epirus about children: When she was sleeping in the temple she dreamt that a beautiful boy embraced her and that the god touched her. As a result of this Andromeda bore a son to her husband Aribbas.<sup>24</sup>

Another inscription of this sort provides us further information in this regard.

Agameda of Chios about children: She saw a dream while sleeping in the temple. According to that, she saw a snake lying on her stomach. As a result of this she bore five children<sup>25</sup>

Although the above evidence is of women from Epirus and Chios the desire to bear a child would have induced Athenian women too to seek such divine assistance. It was not only the conception that proved problematic but also the completion of a pregnancy due to the under-developed nature of medical science to meet all challenges of pregnancy-related complications. Thus the Athenian and all other Greek women may have sought divine intervention to ensure that they complete a pregnancy successfully by bearing a healthy child. Here we must also note that the nature of the votive offerings and inscriptions do not leave space for exaggeration or unreliable information as these were offered and inscribed to show gratitude to a deity for heeding their supplication by saving them at a moment of danger.

The childbirth cases mentioned in the existing medical treatises popularly known as Hippocratic corpus<sup>26</sup> (and more precisely in the section on *Epidemics*) stand out as the most promising form of evidence for assessing childbirth risks in Greece.<sup>27</sup> Risks of childbirth may also have increased due to the ignorance and superstitions regarding childbirth and delivery.<sup>28</sup> White ground *lekythoi* and funerary stele that illustrate women dying at child

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<sup>22</sup> Among the diseases whose effects are enhanced are malaria, tuberculosis, influenza and polio.

<sup>23</sup> Asclepius was the Greek God of healing and his temple in Epidaurus became one of the important centres of healing.

<sup>24</sup> *Inscriptiones Graecae*, iv<sup>2</sup> 1.121. iama 31; Dillon *Girls and Women* 25-26. For information on God Asclepius and Greek women, see Dillon 'Didactic nature' 239-260, *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage* 189-192 and 270, note 26. Also see King 99-113.

<sup>25</sup> *Inscriptiones Graecae*, iv<sup>2</sup> 1.121. iama (treatment) 39; Dillon *Girls and Women* 29.

<sup>26</sup> The Hippocratic corpus is a body of about 70 medical texts written between the sixth and fourth centuries, B.C., but mostly, between 450 and 350, by several authors.

<sup>27</sup> Epitaphs are not very helpful in assessing deaths at childbirth since they seldom give age at death (Demand 73).

<sup>28</sup> Hipp. *Nat. Child* 30.1-9 (7.531.20-532.13 Li.); *Dis. Wom.* I 1(8.10.10-11 Li), trans. Lonie *Ars medica* vol.7. Demand 19, notes 98 and 99. Also see Demand 71-86 for a detailed discussion on the risks of childbirth.

labour provide further testimony for such risks.<sup>29</sup> Despite such risks as pregnancy entailed, the Athenians, just as other Greeks, perceived it as the optimum condition for women.<sup>30</sup> Numerous offerings that Athenian women offered to various deities<sup>31</sup> before and after having children further testify to their perception that the ability to bear a child was vital in the life of an Athenian woman. Appeals for divine help for safe delivery<sup>32</sup> are an indication of women's fear of risks involved in child bearing and perhaps also regarding doubts of having a healthy baby.<sup>33</sup>

A wooden plaque, which appears to be a votive offering found from a cave in Pitsa in the Peloponnese, shows a pregnant woman in the company of other women taking offerings to the nymphs (Dillon *Girls and Women* 229). Although this is a case reported from Peloponnese, it attests to the high probability that even Athenian women would have adopted similar practices driven by social pressure to bear a child.



Fig: 5, A Pregnant Woman Taking Offerings to Nymphs with Others (Dillon *Girls and Women* 229 fig. 73)<sup>34</sup>

Numerous factors thus seem to have impeded a bride from achieving this special status which would have had a serious impact on her regard for herself and the respect that others had for her.

Representation of male off-spring with mothers and that of *Eros* accompanying Greek brides, as noted above, could be interpreted as a materialization of this value-laden Greek concept of producing a male child as the out-come of marriage. The Greeks perceived male children as the agents who brought continuation to their family lines, assurance to a secure old age,<sup>35</sup> and who could perform burial and funeral rites after death (Xen. *Oeconomicus* 7.12, 19). Thus, sons were naturally regarded with much respect.

<sup>29</sup> Demand 123-126 lists much iconographical evidence that shows women dying at childbirth; grave stele mentions the name of the deceased. All belonged to various dates in the fourth century BC. And all do not necessarily bear evidence for Athens. Also see Demand plates 2-12.

<sup>30</sup> Demand 18-19. Also see the concepts stored in Hippocratic treatises which mentioned childbearing as the cure for most diseases of women. The author of *Diseases of Women* 1 explains: 'Many problems arise, especially in women who have not borne children, but they also often happen to those who have had children...' (Hipp. *Diss.Wom.* I. 62 [8.126.5-154]).

<sup>31</sup> Phila offered a mirror to Eileithia, the goddess of birth pangs at the Athenian Acropolis: *Inscriptiones Graecae*, xii 5.i. 216. Also see Dillon *Girls and Women* 13. Besides her, Athenian women also sacrificed to Hera, the goddess of marriage, to Demeter, the goddess of fertility, to Artemis, the goddess of child-birth: Dillon *Girls and Women* 14-21.

<sup>32</sup> Dillon *Girls and Women* 228-234 for women dedicating to deities and perhaps fulfilling the promises after delivery. See Demand 87-102 on appeals to gods for safe delivery.

<sup>33</sup> Demand plate1, shows a votive relief showing a woman who has just given birth to a child.

<sup>34</sup> This is a polychrome wooden plaque of 30cm in length and 15 cm in height and belongs to 540-520 BC.

<sup>35</sup> A law sometimes ascribed to Solon (and therefore regarded as old and venerable) required Athenians to provide food and lodging for their parents when they were alive and proper burial when they died [n.58: Arist. *AthPol* 56.6, cf. Xen.

The affection and care that the Athenians showered upon their children (Hoorn figs. 274, 277-279; Hamilton 66; Dillon *Girls and Women* 21, fig. 1.3 and fig. 7.4; also see Thompson 501; Golden 93 note 64) doubtlessly suggest that the affection for the first-born may certainly have been far greater, irrespective of gender, at least prior to the births of the other children because the first-born child symbolized both the fertility and the bond between the spouses. Also, in the absence of a male child, a family could turn to a female child as the last resort through the institution of *epikleros*<sup>36</sup>, which enabled them to raise her son by the nearest kin of the father to perpetuate his family line and as the heir of the household (Lacey 139-146; Demand 3-4; Blundell 117-118; Pomeroy 25).

At this point Golden's remark (94 note 65) that, some mothers resented the father's prerogative, especially when exercised against their first born (Plato *Tht.* 151c; Terence *Haut.* 633-643, 664-665; Schmidt 136-137; Dover 342) deserve attention as it raises the dilemma whether no value was associated with baby girls even when born as the first child of a family in empowering its mother with her wifely privileges in the husbands' family.

Here, I maintain that the exposure of the first-born child may have happened very rarely,<sup>37</sup> even if it was a girl, since the birth of the first child, as noted above, was very much longed for, not only by the bride but also by the parents and relatives of both spouses (Pears 132). This further may have been taken as a sign that the bride would be able to produce sons later and she may have received recognition in the sphere of women. Moreover, the high infant mortality rate and the risks involved in child-birth may have persuaded most husbands to raise the first child, regardless of gender, in order to evade childlessness.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, as noted above, there is numerous evidence that testifies to the desperate desire the Greeks felt to have a child and the value they attached to their children, let alone to the first born, which tells us that the desire the Athenian parents felt for children was not regulated only by necessity [*anagkē*] (Stanford 39).

Having noted the impact of the first-born child in determining the social position of its mother and seeing that they were desired not only due to necessity, it remains, thus, to observe whether the Athenians attached any value to the first-born child, irrespective of its gender, by introducing it into its father's tribe [*phratry*] at least after 451/0 BC.<sup>39</sup> Apollodorus' remark for the jury in his prosecution against Neaera seems relevant in this regard. He mentions that, "we introduce sons to our *phrateres* and fellow demes-men," and says, "we give daughters to husbands" ([Dem.] 59. 122). In court, when defending his citizenship against the allegation that his mother was not a citizen,<sup>40</sup> although it would have been beneficial and essential for the defendant to call upon the tribesmen or *phrateres* of the mother (had that existed) as witnesses that mode of validation was not adopted. Instead, it was the *phrateres* of the male kin of his mother that was called as witnesses (Ps.-Dem. 57. 67-9). Plato mentions of the enrolment of daughters to *phrateres*, not as a practice in Athens, but

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*Mem.* 2.2.13, *Lys.* 13. 91, *Isae.* 8.32, *Aeschin.* 1.13 (cf. 28), *Dem.* 10.40, 24. 105-107, *Hyper. Euxen.* 6, *harpoc. S. kakōseōs*. Solon: *Dem.* 24.103, *Aeschin.* 1.6, 13, *plut. Sol.* 22.1, 4, *Diog. Laert.* 1.55, cf. *Ar. Av.* 1353-1357. Legally, at least, this responsibility fell to sons; cf. *Hdt.* 2. 35. 4). It was open to anyone to bring a prosecution under this law, and those who did so were exempt from the usual penalties imposed on plaintiffs who withdrew their case or failed to win one-fifth of the votes and from the usual limitation on speaking to time. Law has a greater claim to represent popular attitudes in a direct democracy like Athens than in most societies; the impression that care of parents was of special importance to the community is confirmed by the inclusion of a question on the treatment of parents in the scrutiny that those selected as archons had to undergo. (n. 59; *Arist. AthPol* 55. 3-4; cf. *Xen. Mem.* 2.2.13; *Dem.* 57. 70; *Din. Aristog.* 17-18; Golden 92-93).

<sup>36</sup> The eldest or the only girl in a family without male siblings/heirs was called by this name.

<sup>37</sup> This was the case unless the child was physically not capable due to birth deficiencies or other such serious problems.

<sup>38</sup> Inability of all children to survive to maturity due to high infant mortality rate (some children were still-born or died soon after birth: *Ar. Thesm.* 502-516, 564-565) further allows us to propose that even a second-born daughter had a greater chance of admittance into the father's *oikos*, as in the case of Polyuctis who had two daughters and no sons (*Demosthenes* 41; 59.55-56).

<sup>39</sup> It was after 451/0 BC that the citizenship of both parents became essential for one to become an Athenian citizen (*Arist. Ath. Pol.* 26.4; see eg. *Pol.* 1275b21-2).

<sup>40</sup> According to the citizenship law of Athens introduced by Pericles in 451/0 BC, for one to be an Athenian citizen both of his/her parents needed to be Athenian citizens.

in his description of the ideal state where he proposes to use all human resources in the city-state [*polis*] (Plato *Laws* 785a). All this information suggests that in Athens, even after 451/0 BC, only sons were introduced to the *phratry* of the father.

Some assume that a girl was introduced to her husband's *phratry* at *gamelia* (Golden 'Donatus' 13, note 26; Lambert 237). But Pomeroy (*The Families* 79 note 44) rightly argues that if the father did not introduce his daughter to his *phratry*, it is less likely that a husband would introduce his wife to his (Pomeroy *The Families* 80-81 also presents a contrary view point). Also, if such a custom existed, the identity of Neaera and that of Phrastor's wife would have been revealed at the point of their marriage (Dem. 59. 122; Dem 59. 55-56, tr. Murray [Loeb]) since their husbands would have been obliged by the custom of the community to introduce their wives to the respective *phratry* at the *gamelia*. Herodotus' information (V, 48) that Cleomenes died childless, although he had a daughter ("he died childless leaving an only daughter called Gorgo") provides an important clue. The fact of excluding the only daughter when counting the number of his children further implies that girls were not introduced into the father's *phratry* under any circumstance. Although it is dangerous to draw conclusions from an isolated case, this, along with the attitude of the Athenians that the women must be less seen, spoken, and heard of (Xen. *Oeconomicus* 7. 5), implies that being the first born or being the only child did not qualify daughters to be introduced to the *phratry* of the father<sup>41</sup> and also that they were not given any political rights or extra social privileges. Yet, such a child was a blessing to its mother to prove her fertility and to ensure her position in her husband's family.

Summing up, it is clear that the first-born child was associated with great value to its mother. Although such sons would have been the most desirable outcome, the first-born daughters were also lucky, at least, not to be candidates for exposure. Yet, their value did not remain static as it faded away with the birth of other children to the family. The way to regain the lost or faded value in case of a first-born girl (or any girl for that matter) was to produce a legitimate child herself relatively soon after her marriage. Bearing a child, relatively not too later after the marriage, therefore, was an indication of her fertility and that may mark her as a prospective bearer of many sons to her family and then to the community. Numerous fertility treatments, prayers and vows to deities in this regard signify the value the Athenians (and also the other Greeks) attached to the ability to bear a child and also to it as a determining factor in an Athenian woman's life and prestige as it seemed to have been used as a criterion of social elevation of Athenian (and other Greek) women from *nymphe* to *gyne*, and from *gyne* to *tokos* (mother - a bearer of legitimate children by her husband). The emphasis given in wedding vases too tells us that this was expected in the early years of a woman's marriage.

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<sup>41</sup> We must note here that in Miletus, where the double citizenship parentage law of Athens was imitated, though at a date later (Hellenistic period) than that of this study, fathers have taken precautions to record the citizenship status of their daughters. Cf. Pomeroy 'Infanticide' 212.

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