

## **The Household as the Foundation of Aristotle's Polis**

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This work examines the demographics of Greek households and cities as Aristotle would have known them with a view to showing that there was a distinctively close relation between them in Aristotle's thought. For Nagle, the household was both the economic foundation of the city and also, "in some way, its moral basis" (155). This has important implications, in Nagle's view, for the understanding of citizen education, slavery and the place of women in Aristotle's political theory.

Drawing on the work of Ruschenbush and others, Nagle argues that Athens is quite misleading as an example of the cities considered by Aristotle. Of the roughly 1500 Greek cities, the average city would have been 25 to 100 kilometres square with 230 to 910 male citizens, whereas Athens was 2580 square kilometres with 25,000 to 40,000 citizens. On this basis Nagle argues that Aristotle's ideal city was only 2 per cent to 3 per cent the size of Athens and that this smaller size would have facilitated a substantially higher degree of citizen familiarity and civic participation.

In these cities, the citizen's material needs were produced almost entirely within his (sic) household. Again culling the work of others, Nagle suggests that the typical household would have been a small agricultural unit of roughly 0.2 hectares. This was much too small to support the leisure required for citizenship but also too small to support the inclusion of slaves in the household. A citizen would require a minimum householding of 12 hectares; this would support one or two slaves, provide the basic needs of life for everyone in the unit and release the householder for civic duties. This, in Nagle's view, is how we should understand Aristotle's account of the polis and household. Athens again, with its greater wealth and larger number of slaves, was anomalous.

On this basis, Nagle argues that the household played a distinctive role in the city. In the first place, it educated young men for their lives as citizens. But this raises a problem. The household is the domain of women. How could they educate young men for citizens when they lacked this education themselves? In Nagle's view, this shows that women must also have been educated within the household and perhaps more broadly. On his account, the household didn't just "develop" required virtues in young men. Rather, it constituted a space in which all the qualities for a fulfilled life—friendship and the virtues of character and intellect—could flourish in exercise by everyone, women as well as men. Nagle then argues that women's education and presence in public space would have been further advanced by their important roles in religious rites, theatre and public festivals.

In short, the work invites us to question some received views on the place of the household (and of the women and slaves in it) in the cities of Aristotle's time and in his own political theory. In particular, the strong "public-private" distinction advanced by Hannah Arendt might require some revision. Thus I recommend Nagle's account of the demographics of the polis and the household to anyone with an interest in the political theory of the period.

But it is rather different with Nagle's interpretation of the demographic data and their extrapolation into Aristotle. In fairness, the issues here are too complex to develop in a short review. My respect for Nagle's scholarship precludes any summary rejection of his reading. But I have two persistent reservations about this part of the work. The first is methodological. Large claims are frequently asserted without qualification and without considering simpler (if less exciting) alternatives. This may simply reflect the fact that the work is written by an historian, and being reviewed here by a political philosopher. But to cite just one example of this, Nagle takes pains to show that women attended dramatic and religious festivals, but then infers that this brought them close to the kinds of public experiences that males enjoyed (308) and that this was an education in philosophy that came close to Socratic *elenchus* (296). Well, perhaps.

My second reservation concerns Nagle's reading of excellence and virtue. Nagle appreciates the complexity of these concepts in Aristotle but his argument focuses narrowly on the virtues of citizenship to the relative exclusion of the other ways in which the virtues of character and intellect could be exercised and, surprisingly, to the complete exclusion of contemplation, Aristotle's highest form of flourishing. But these other forms are important. For example, with its size and diversity Athens might well—like some very large cities today—have offered opportunities

for non-civic flourishing that couldn't obtain in the smaller cities prized by Nagle; an individual might have a better life as a free non-citizen in Athens than as a citizen in his native polis. The fact that Athens was anomalous, then, doesn't show that it was irrelevant (or even marginal) in Aristotle's thinking about human well being.

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