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0521849349 - The Household as the Foundation of Aristotle's Polis

D. Brendan Nagle

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THE HOUSEHOLD AS THE FOUNDATION  
OF ARISTOTLE'S *POLIS*

Among ancient writers, Aristotle offers the most profound analysis of the *polis* household and its relationship to the state. The household was not the family in the modern sense of the term, but a much more powerful entity with significant economic, political, social, and educational resources. The success of the *polis* in all its forms lay in the reliability of households to provide it with the kinds of citizens it needed to ensure its functioning. In turn, the state offered the members of its households a unique opportunity for them to flourish. This book explains how Aristotle thought household and state interacted within the *polis*.

D. Brendan Nagle is professor of history, emeritus, at the University of Southern California.

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## PREFACE

The aim of this study is to contextualize historically what Aristotle had to say in the *Politics* and *Ethics* about household and city-state, *oikos* and *polis*. Neither was for him a theoretical abstraction. When Aristotle spoke of *the* city-state and *the* household, he was not basing his generalizations on a single city such as Athens, but on the actual universe of *poleis*, all 1500 of them, stretching, as Plato said, from Phasis in Georgia to the Pillars of Heracles at the western end of the Mediterranean. Most of these *poleis* were small, as we now know, in the range of just 300 to 700 households. Belbina, an island *polis*, for example, was just 8 km<sup>2</sup>. There were about sixty *poleis* on the Chalcidic Peninsula alone. Athens, Syracuse, and a few other cities of similar size were huge by comparison and far from typical.

The size of the ordinary city, or *Normalpolis* (Eberhard Ruschenbush's term), is important to our understanding of what Aristotle took to be the normative *polis* and its constituent *oikoi*. Our mental image of the average *polis* as consisting of a few hundred households rather than thousands or tens of thousands of households must surely have an impact on what we think Aristotle had in mind when he used the term *polis*. Our presuppositions in this regard need to be brought in line with what Aristotle's actual experience and knowledge told him was a *Normalpolis*. The same will apply to the term *oikos*. It would be hard for us not to think that families interacted and political systems worked differently in small towns (or mere villages) rather than in *poleis* presumed to be made up of large urban centers.

For the same reason that the size of Aristotle's *polis* is important to our thinking about his theory of politics, our assumptions about the

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size of the household and its possessions are relevant to our thinking about his theory of domestic relations, the functions of the household, and how citizen formation (*paideia*) took place in both *oikos* and *polis*. The size of household properties (primarily the amount of land owned by *oikoi*) is significant for another reason, namely, the degree to which we think slavery was part of the life of the *polis* and precisely what kind of slavery, household, industrial, or plantation this was. Whether we consider Aristotle's *oikos* to have consisted of hundreds of hectares of land staffed by hundreds of slaves rather than a few hectares and a few slaves where the slaves were part of the family or, more commonly, where there were no slaves at all is important. In Chapter 3, I attempt to suggest orders of magnitude for the size of the household's land-holdings in Aristotle's ideal state, as well as the number of slaves that we might expect to find in it. Significant distinctions are to be made as well in regard to the different types of dependent labor to be found in the ancient Mediterranean world, and why hired labor could not have been used as a substitute in Aristotle's thought for the slave labor of the *oikos*. This, too, is an important issue relating to Aristotle's discussion of slavery because it brings into focus the distinctions between the labor of a free citizenry, chattel slavery, and dependent labor of some kind. The correlation of slavery with certain types of households is the subject of Chapter 4.

Of importance for my overall argument is the distinction between *polis* and non-*polis* households developed in Chapter 5. There I make the case that these types of households differed from each other because of the nature of the different states in which they were embedded. Precisely because the *polis* household was located in the *polis*, it possessed a fundamentally different nature than did its counterpart in the non-*polis* world. *Polis* households were politicized ideologically and in practice. This high level of politicization (varying with the type of constitution on a spectrum from extreme oligarchy to extreme democracy) gave them their high standing in Greek eyes and underlies Aristotle's moral evaluation of the *polis* as the only institution in which true human flourishing could take place. For Aristotle, the exercise of virtue correlated more exactly with the *polis* than with any other kind of polity. The more "perfect" the *polis* (i.e., the closer it came to the ideal), the more virtuous its component parts, its households, and its citizens. In making

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this claim for the primacy of the *polis qua polis*, Aristotle was not arguing on the basis of either conscious or unconscious ethnocentrism.

In trying to reconstruct Aristotle's theory of moral development and especially how or whether women could enter "the ranks of the decent and wise" (Nancy Sherman's phrase), it must surely be of significance how we evaluate the role of religion in the *polis*. If, as some scholars believe, religion was central to the functioning of the *polis* and women had a central role in religion, then the assumption that women were excluded entirely from the public realm and confined to the household needs to be reevaluated. Mothers' roles in the education of their young children should be looked at in the broader setting of the communitarian life of Greek *poleis*. The paideutic impact of the intermediary institutions of the *polis* on its constituent households needs to be taken into account more forthrightly. These considerations will not remove the problem of Aristotle's deficient females, but they might help put the subject in a new light. The education of males is more easily understood when there is an appreciation of the role expected of fathers in the education of their children. Plato's important contribution to Aristotle's reflections on the household brings light to bear not just on the household but on the nature of *paideia*, both in its domestic and public forms. These matters are the subjects of Chapters 8 and 9.

From the many studies of the historical workings of *polis* governments, we have a much clearer picture now than in the past of the way assemblies and courts functioned; how many citizens may or (as was frequently the case) may not have attended assemblies and courts; the relationship of mass and elite; of urban center and rural periphery. The assumption that Greek males spent vast amounts of time away from their homes in civic and military undertakings needs to be revised. Our new knowledge of where Greeks lived in urban centers, in villages and hamlets, or scattered over the landscape of the *chora* in individual dwellings contributes to our appreciation of the nature and the level of citizen participation in the social, cultural, and political life of *poleis*.

The understanding of the nature of the "state" as it is now emerging from various studies of the *polis* also helps to situate Aristotle's *oikos* in its historical setting. Unlike the modern household, the *oikos*, as I argue in Chapter 1, was a far more powerful institution with far greater



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resources and correspondingly greater responsibilities than its modern counterpart. Just as modern citizenship is a weak reflection of *polis* citizenship, the modern household is but a shadow of the powerful institution that was the ancient *polis* household. This understanding may help throw into relief Aristotle's assertion that the household, and not some intermediary association or the individual, was the fundamental building block of the *polis*. I would argue that Aristotle was not asserting a theoretical postulate here, but was rather reflecting the reality of the *polis* as he knew it. The fact that the *oikos* was also regarded as the foundation of the state in Greek popular tradition, however, led to the tendency to conflate state and household. One of Aristotle's achievements was to make clear the distinction, blurred by Plato, between *polis* and *oikos*. Although advocating an ideal, Aristotle also recognized that human flourishing could take place to some extent even under deviant constitutions, that is, in those *poleis* that fell short of the ideal. Even in these deficient states the household had its share of moral worth.

This book builds on the labors of historians in many fields, literary and gender specialists, archaeologists, political scientists, philosophers, and philologists, and is a limited attempt to cull and synthesize their findings. In particular, I wish to thank the following scholars who read the manuscript either in whole or in part, and at different stages in its development: Stanley M. Burstein, David J. Depew, Tom Kelly, David Konstan, John K. Evans, Richard I. Frank, Thornton Lockwood, and Vincent Rosivach. Their suggestions helped me frequently and saved me from many errors. They are not to be held responsible for mistakes of fact or interpretation made by me. Beatrice Rehl, senior editor of Cambridge University Press, helped this project forward at every stage. Tony Preus' hosting of the annual meetings of the Society for Greek Philosophy provided a stimulating and friendly environment for me to try out many of my ideas. Parts of the chapters of this book were originally given as papers at meetings of the American Philological Association. I am grateful to the staffs of the American School of Classical Studies in Athens and the Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington, DC, for their generous help during the writing of this book. My deepest debt is to my wife, Pat, from whom and with whom over many years I learned what truly constitutes a household.