

# 1 | Introducing Ancient Greek Housing

This chapter sketches out the nature and scope of the evidence available for Greek housing during the first millennium BCE. Drawing on textual sources, the significance of the house in ancient Greek (mainly Classical Athenian) culture is investigated. Some of the processes (both human and natural) which have shaped the material remains of the houses themselves are outlined.

## The Idea of a House

A house is more than simply a building. In modern western culture it is a deeply symbolic structure: ownership of a house or home is a dream to be striven for even (if the economic crisis of the early twenty-first century is any guide) where attaining that goal requires unsustainable sacrifices in other aspects of life. At the same time, a house is also a vehicle for self-expression. Its location, style and decoration often proclaim its occupants' membership of specific social, economic, ethnic or other groups (either consciously or subconsciously); somewhat paradoxically, its decoration also often simultaneously demonstrates their individuality. These two conflicting messages can often be in tension with each other within the context of a single building.

In the ancient Greek world, too, housing carried strong symbolic associations. Archaeology and texts both show that we should be careful not to assume that these associations were the same as our own. The words for 'house' (*oikia*) and 'household' (*oikos*) are closely related and in some ways the house seems to have embodied the survival and continuity of the household, transcending individual generations of human lives. Relevant written sources offering an insight into the symbolic aspects of Greek houses derive mainly from the context of fifth- and fourth-century BCE Athens. These texts must be read with a critical awareness of their context: they present the personal perspectives of their writers (with all the geographical, social, gender and other biases those may entail) and they are constrained by the conventions of the various genres in which they are

composed. It is important to remember that attitudes are likely to have changed through time and space. Indeed, some of those changes are explored through the material record in the later chapters of this book. But the written sources do, nevertheless, offer a sense of some of the range of associations houses may have evoked, at least in Classical Athenian culture. They, therefore, represent a helpful starting point for thinking about some of the parallels and contrasts between ancient Greek and modern western attitudes towards housing.

A superficial reading of the Classical Attic texts suggests that, as in many cultures, elite, male Athenians (the authors of these accounts) construed the house as a female domain, in contrast with the public sphere, which is often portrayed as male. But as we shall see, a closer look reveals that this is a rhetorical trope which does not, in fact, convey the full range of associations carried by a house. The physical building itself was also articulated as being central to the (male) householder's identity and to the well-being of the household. A particular form of punishment, known as 'kataskaphe', was carried out in Athens and elsewhere. This involved (among other things) the complete destruction of a convict's entire house and presumably also the dispersal of its contents. The material significance of this act of punishment will become increasingly clear as we explore the symbolism of the house through Athenian texts and look at the character of the Greek domestic environment using archaeological evidence. Broadly speaking, however, kataskaphe dismantled the household by removing its living space. This meant eliminating both stored foodstuffs and the durable goods which might have been used to produce, or been exchanged for, further supplies. Kataskaphe was also a deeply symbolic act. It must have erased a man's social identity by depriving him of the location in which he could be found by, and entertain, his friends and associates. It would also have destroyed the paraphernalia of domestic cult, which may have included both apotropaic Herms (stone markers with sculpted heads sacred to the god Hermes) at the house entrance and altars located in and around the central courtyard. It may also have dispersed his household.

Housing was not only important spiritually and materially, but it also carried symbolic weight, and in a variety of textual sources it is taken as emblematic of an owner's character and personal conduct. At Classical Athens, a degree of moderation and self-restraint is articulated as the expected norm in this, as in other aspects of life. For example, the orator Demosthenes, speaking during the mid fourth century BCE, comments repeatedly that the prominent statesmen of earlier generations – Aristeides, Miltiades, Themistokles and Kimon – lived modestly in houses which were

no different from those of their less illustrious fellow citizens (Text Extract 1). We do not, of course, have any way of knowing whether Demosthenes was right, and his comments are made for comparative purposes, contrasting the modest houses with the magnificent religious buildings of the Periklean Akropolis and with the opulent buildings of the Macedonian king, Philip II. Nonetheless, the fact that Demosthenes is able to use such claims to rhetorical effect suggests that there was probably at least some degree of contemporary public support for restraint of ostentation and expenditure on houses but that, at the same time, there may have been citizens beginning to indulge themselves in precisely this manner. (As we shall see in Chapter 7, this interpretation is supported by the archaeological evidence for the housing of this period more broadly.)

Demosthenes' perspective is shared by other authors: a similar point is made by Xenophon, also writing in the fourth century BCE, who suggests that it is much better to spend money on beautifying the city as a whole than on decorating one's own private house (Text Extract 2). Restraint over the lavishness of housing is also mentioned by Plutarch, writing four centuries later, when discussing the fourth century BCE Athenian tyrant Lykourgos, one of whose actions was said to have been to introduce a law preventing individual houses from becoming too extravagant (Text Extract 3). But the level of decoration in housing at Athens was perhaps viewed as unrepresentative of that in the Greek world more generally, even at a later date, if the comments of Herakleides Kritikos are to be believed: writing in the mid third century BCE, he claimed that there were still few lavish houses in Athens (Text Extract 4). (His description of this city contrasts with his picture of Tanagra, in Boiotia, which he says is most beautifully built, the houses having fine porches.)

At the same time as being a public symbol, an individual's house also seems to have been regarded as very much his own domain. The act of crossing the threshold placed an obligation on a visitor to act according to specific social codes. Writing in the first century CE, Plutarch comments that a visitor should give a warning of his approach so as not to catch a glimpse of some domestic activity which should not be witnessed by an outsider (Text Extract 5). In the context of Classical Athens, major transgressions by would-be callers come to the fore. Plato and Xenophon offer several descriptions of situations in which visitors did not follow the normal protocols, instead arriving drunk and demanding to see the owner of the house even if he was busy (for example, Alkibiades arriving at Agathon's house in Plato's *Symposium*, 212 C-D: Text Extract 6). In Athenian legal speeches, episodes in which a man enters another man's

house without permission are portrayed by the prosecution as outrageous. The transgression is often compounded by the fact that such uninvited guests are said to have burst in on female members of the household. (See Text Extract 7; the gender dynamics represent part of a wider sensitivity about social contact between women and unrelated men, a theme taken up again in Chapters 4 and 7.)

A number of sources imply that as well as these kinds of social rules covering the behaviour of visitors, there were also expectations about appropriate domestic behaviour which applied to the residents of a house. In Athenian drama some disapproval is displayed towards wives who leave their houses too frequently or without proper reason. (For instance, in a very fragmentary text, the comic playwright, Menander, writing in the late fourth to early third century BCE, portrays a man chastising his wife for going into the street outside: Fragment 546 K). Passing over the threshold thus seems to have been a symbolic act for both visitors and residents, and its significance is perhaps confirmed by numerous references to doorkeepers. In theory, their job seems to have been to control who came into the house, although they are sometimes depicted as failing to keep out unwanted guests, as was the case with Alkibiades in Plato's *Symposium*, mentioned above (Text Extract 6). At the other extreme, the doorkeepers themselves are portrayed as capable of ignoring normal social rules, as in Plato's description of Kallias' doorman, who tries to exclude even callers who observe the social etiquette and have genuine reason to enter (Text Extract 8). A house also played a more pragmatic role – as an economic asset. Inscriptions from a range of locations including Athens and also the city of Olynthos in northern Greece (discussed in detail in Chapter 4), attest to the mortgaging and sale of urban houses (Text Extract 9).

Even taken together this textual information offers only partial coverage of a narrow range of topics and is limited in its geographical scope. It also draws on sources ranging over several centuries in time. The authors, nevertheless, reveal glimpses of what appears to be a durable and deeply entrenched system of beliefs surrounding domestic life. The fact that a number of texts of different genres describe incidents (real or fictitious) in which there was a failure to observe apparent norms, suggests that such norms were widespread and that there may have been some degree of ambivalence about them, such that they may not always have been followed in the course of day-to-day life. The house, therefore, seems to have constituted something of a contested space – a context in which social rules and boundaries were negotiated through the behaviour of, and interaction between, different social groups (male: female; resident:

non-resident; younger: older; higher status: lower status, etc.). Study of ancient Greek housing thus potentially enables us to explore some of these tensions and boundaries.

The model sketched above offers a few strands of information about some aspects of the symbolism attached to housing by specific individuals, during particular periods and in certain locations, pointing up some major differences between ancient Greek and modern western conceptions of the house as a social and symbolic space. But the cultural significance of housing is likely to have changed through time and space within the Greek world. Our textual sources are too few, and too limited in their chronological, geographical and social coverage, to provide a full and nuanced picture. Instead, it is necessary to turn to the archaeological evidence, which is the main subject of this book. The remainder of this chapter explores the nature of the evidence itself, laying out some of the general characteristics of Greek houses during the first millennium BCE. The history of research on this material is sketched, including some of the main issues which have been discussed. These sections serve as a background for the more detailed chapters that follow, which ask what the evidence of housing can tell us about Greek domestic life and about Greek society more generally, highlighting patterns of continuity and change across time and space.

## **The Nature of the Archaeological Evidence for Ancient Greek Housing**

Houses have survived at large numbers of sites of different dates from across the ancient Greek world. There are many characteristics they have in common: on the Greek mainland the most widely used building technique was to form a low stone wall or socle on which was erected a superstructure composed of sun-dried mud bricks. Mudbrick is easy to obtain, relatively straightforward to work with, and has good insulating properties. In fact, this building method was used in Greece into the twentieth century, and still continues in use in some other parts of the world. Its disadvantage, though, is that the mud is very vulnerable to damage by water, which dissolves the bricks, turning them back into mud. The stone socle raised the bricks above ground level, preventing rainwater from pooling against exterior walls and dissolving them. There is some evidence to show that, as with much more recent buildings constructed in this way, the exterior walls were sometimes provided with a coating of lime plaster which would



**Figure 1.1** Exterior wall showing the remains of a plaster coating. Delos, Lake House. (Author's photograph, courtesy of the Ephorate of Antiquities of the Cyclades. The rights to the monument shown belong to the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports (Law 3028/2002). Delos is under the supervision of the Ephorate of Antiquities of the Cyclades, Ministry of Culture and Sports.)

have guarded against rain splashes. On Delos, where the exterior walls are constructed entirely of stone and therefore survive better than mudbrick, evidence survives of several coats of plaster including an outer layer coloured white (Figure 1.1). These structures and evidence from other stone-built houses at Ammotopos suggest that such houses would have presented the passerby with a relatively blank façade, pierced only by a single street door with perhaps a few openings for ventilation high in the wall. A small number of other features may have provided hints about the identity and status of the occupants within, however: in a few cases the use of large blocks of well-cut ashlar masonry in the socle of the façade may have served to differentiate a particular house from those around it. The financial inscriptions mentioned above seem likely to have been set into the façades of the houses to which they applied, where they would have warned any prospective purchasers that a particular property was encumbered, or attested to the house changing hands. Presumably, they might also have conveyed information about the identities of the owners, their wealth and who their associates were, since guarantors and witnesses to the transactions are listed (Text Extract 9).

Pitched roofs with deeply overhanging eaves are also likely to have been used to keep rain away from the exterior walls (as has been suggested for

the heröon building at Lefkandi: see Chapter 2). Evidence for the exact design rarely survives archaeologically although in large interior spaces it was sometimes supported by internal posts, as indicated by post-holes or stone bases. During the Early Iron Age, such roofs were normally thatched, but by the fifth and fourth centuries BCE terracotta roof tiles were widespread on domestic buildings. They would have been supported on wooden beams and sometimes seem to have been removed when the houses were abandoned, since they are not always found in large numbers during excavation. It is frequently assumed that at least part of the roof would have been pitched inwards towards the courtyard (as shown in Figure 3.4), enabling the household to collect rainwater from the roof in a cistern for household use. Among the various types of pan- and cover-tile, other designs are occasionally found. For instance, a few examples resemble the *opaion* mentioned in textual sources – a tile with an opening to vent the smoke from a hearth. More substantial ‘chimney pots’ were also used, and an example has been found on a Classical house near the Agora at Athens. Elaborate, decorative, exterior fixtures include painted and moulded terracotta tiles and antefixes designed to decorate the roof, painted terracotta simas (panels which ran along the tops of walls beneath the eaves) and carved stone column capitals: examples of all these elements have been found in the large and ostentatious House of Dionysos at Pella (discussed in Chapter 7). Flat, clay roofs may also sometimes have been used for certain parts of the house or in particular building styles, especially for some of the smaller rooms or more modest structures. The main alternative to this kind of mudbrick construction was to build walls entirely of stone, a method particularly common in Crete and the Aegean islands. Stone is obviously a more durable material than mudbrick, although more, and more specialised, labour was required for quarrying, transportation and construction. In stone buildings, the roof was probably often flat, composed of wooden cross-beams and stone slabs with weatherproofing of compressed clay, as in the Geometric-period houses of Zagora on Andros.

Both mudbrick and stone houses frequently had open courtyards which were sometimes paved or cobbled. Floors were commonly composed of compacted earth which was sometimes topped with rolled clay. From the Classical period onwards more durable surfaces began to be provided, at first in only one or two rooms, and then more widely throughout the house. These consisted of cement, sometimes with inlaid pottery sherds or small pebbles. The earliest mosaic floors, introduced around 400 BCE, consisted of black and white pebbles placed in geometric or figural patterns; later they were composed of specially cut stone tesserae (small cubes) in a range of different colours. The decorative effect of mosaic floors was

increasingly enhanced by plaster walls with designs in both true fresco and fresco secco techniques (that is to say, painted either before or after the plaster had dried). At first, simple panels were created in different colours, but by the Hellenistic period figural designs were being used as well as painted architectural features which were enhanced by moulded plaster (the so-called masonry style, a forerunner of Roman wall painting).

The transitions between the interior and exterior of the house, and between different rooms, were sometimes marked by thresholds. In earlier houses these were normally composed of small stones, but by the Classical period they were sometimes made from a single large, stone block, normally with cuttings where wooden doors would have been set. In stone-built houses door lintels and jambs were sometimes monoliths – single large blocks of stone, which retain the cuttings for bars and bolts. Doorways seem to have been one of the main routes through which light entered the interiors of these buildings. To some extent they were supplemented by windows, but window glass was not used until the Roman period and then only rarely. This meant that openings to the outside let in not only light, but also potentially rain, heat, cold or drafts. If there had been large openings to the exterior, passersby in the street would have been able to look in. In the later houses at Delos, which were built of stone and preserved to a considerable height, there are only a handful of window openings to the exterior: these have cuttings in their stone sills suggesting the placement of bars for security, and shutters which could presumably have been closed, making up for the lack of window glass. As we shall see in Chapter 3, by the Classical period, most houses had an internal courtyard which acted, among other things, as a lightwell, enabling daylight and fresh air to ventilate the interior through doorways and probably also through adjacent inward-facing windows. The remains of stone window mullions, carved in the decorative Doric or Ionic architectural orders (styles) occasionally survive. These are no longer in situ because the mudbrick walls into which they were set have long since collapsed, but they seem to have belonged to windows oriented inwards into the courtyard (as in the House of the Mosaics and House II at Eretria: see Chapter 6). Artificial light was provided by torches, oil lamps, hearths and braziers, but the amount and quality of such light must have been relatively poor, making daylight a valuable asset and one worth taking account of in house design.

In comparison with the houses of modern, western society, those of the ancient Greek world had relatively few amenities. In addition to acting as a lightwell, the courtyard provided a bright and well-ventilated space for a



range of economic activities such as processing crops or practising crafts including metallurgy, manufacture of ceramics or sculpting. Built-in features were limited in number and range. Raised stone ledges or benches against the walls provided seating or, in some houses of the early first millennium, supported storage vessels. Storage for smaller items was sometimes also provided by shelves or niches in walls. Another major fixed feature of some houses was a hearth consisting of an ash-filled area, sometimes demarcated by stone slabs (Figure 4.6). This was used for cooking, heating and lighting. Water was supplied by a well or cistern, normally located in the courtyard, although not every house had its own water source. From the Classical period onwards, some urban dwellings were provided with terracotta drains to carry waste water out to the street, and there were fixed toilets in some. Archaeological evidence dating to the late fifth and early fourth centuries BCE reveals ceramic vessels used for this purpose, as at Olynthos, where a urinal was found in situ in an exterior wall. A number of houses at Delos, which date to the second to first centuries BCE, are provided with small rooms enclosing multiple-seat toilets. This type of installation consisted of a wooden or stone seat with holes cut into it, above a channel along which water could be directed to carry away the waste. Archaeologically, it is this channel which typically survives (Figure 1.2). More often, though, terracotta chamber pots would have been used, and at least one terracotta object identified as a child's 'potty' survives from the ancient Agora in Athens. From the sixth century BCE onwards, bathing sometimes took place in a terracotta bathtub (Figure 1.3). Such vessels had fixed locations but were not plumbed in; instead, they relied on water being poured in from smaller containers. The bather had only sufficient space to sit (with knees bent) on a raised bench at one end, rather than stretching out flat as in a modern, western tub. Water would have collected around the foot end and could have been scooped up again in order to wash the upper body. By the end of our period, bathing facilities in some locations were becoming more elaborate: in Sicily, for instance, a larger, cement bathing installation was sometimes fed with water heated by a furnace in a neighbouring room. Finally, from the fifth century BCE, if not earlier, some houses possessed upper storey rooms over at least part of the lower storey. These were supported on wooden beams set into the walls and were accessed via a stairway. In some cases flights of stairs may also have led from the ground floor up to exterior workspaces on flat roofs.

The processes involved in planning and constructing these houses are difficult to investigate. Local resources and the environment must have



**Figure 1.2** Toilet showing the paved floor with the water channel behind. Delos, Hermes House.

(Author's photograph, courtesy of the Ephorate of Antiquities of the Cyclades. The rights to the monument shown belong to the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports (Law 3028/2002). Delos is under the supervision of the Ephorate of Antiquities of the Cyclades, Ministry of Culture and Sports.)

played a role alongside social factors (as shown in Chapter 5). In many of the regions discussed in this volume the climate is warm and dry for much of the year, making it possible, and even desirable, to carry out domestic activities outdoors or in a roofed but well-ventilated space. In a few places where the climate is cooler or damper, such as the mountains of Epiros, courtyards were sometimes diminished in size. Further afield in culturally