

History of Place:

Odysseus's house, 8th Century B.C.

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In Homer's time, in the 9th century before Christ, a *polis* was not a city but the household of a noble man. The word stems from the Indoeuropean root *pûr* and means originally a mound or a hill. The German word *Burg* derives from the same root. To designate the city, there was another word, *asty*, which did not mean the physical city within its limit, but a broad domain of civility, of people who could be called *asteoi*, urban in the sense of civilized, polite, handy. Odysseus was the prototype of such a man. Instead of speaking of politics, for those times, it would be better to speak of "asteism." The word could stand for the maintenance of relations of civility between houses, equal if they were in the same town or not. The *Odyssey* is thus a first "geography of asteism" that should inspire the Greeks to expand their sphere, particularly in the still half unknown Western part of the Mediterranean.

One good half of Odysseus's house was dedicated to the inter-domestic relations of "asteic" hospitality. It consisted mainly in a huge room, with a hearth and small tables for festive meals. It was Hermes's domain, and the type of hospitality that was practiced there was no longer the "hestian" hospitality, in which the guest was integrated into the domestic hierarchy, but the "equalitarian," "hermetic" hospitality characterized by the *xenos* relationship. In later time, this place, much reduced in size, was called *andronitis*, and opposed to the *gynaikonitis*, the space of women.

In Homer's time, the part of the house dedicated to inter-domestic "politics" or better "asteism" was still called the *megaron*. The *asteoi* gathered in the *megaron*, ate and drank, listened to the rhapsod or *aiodos*, and weaved intrigues. Homer was such an *aiodos*. In absence of any supra-domestic institution, of well-maintained roads and hotels, hospitality in the web of "asteism" was the only possible means of traveling and the only way to know about the world.

The *megaron* opened the house to the world. Though it was men's domain, the *Odyssey* reports over regions where women had entrance into the *megaron*. In the 8th song for instance, Odysseus, whose ship had wrecked on the shore of *Phaiakia*, is told by Athena to ask the queen, and not the king for hospitality. The other part of the house was dedicated to household activities. It is the domain of Hestia, to which men are not allowed.

Euphiletos' House, 5th Century B.C.

Euphiletos lived in Athens at the end of the 5th century before Christ. One day, while he was in the fields, his wife let her lover into the house. When her husband came back earlier than usual, she convinced him that he should take a nap. She enclosed him in his room and went back to her lover to help him escape. In order to cover the noise, she ordered the servant to pinch the child, so he would cry. Nonetheless, Euphiletos heard the noise of the door and discovered the plot. He murdered his wife's lover and had to stand for the judge for that reason. Since he was a poor speaker, he asked a *logographos* and *rhetor* to take care of his defense. This *logographos* was Lysias. Here is how Lysias let Euphiletos describe his house to the judge:

I have a small, two story house, whose second floor is installed like the first. It is so divided into a *gynaikonitis* on the upper floor and an *andronitis* downstairs. (...) When my wife got the child, we interchanged rooms, so that she would not be exposed to dangers when she

goes to the bath. So it became a habit, that my wife went away from me and slept downstairs near the child (...) so that he would not cry.¹

Lysias's text shows us at least two things about a small house in Athens in the 5th century.

1. Since the house has two stories, there is no hearth in the middle of the men's quarter:
it
is no longer a *megaron*.
2. Men's and women's quarters have become interchangeable: they are alike.

Louis Gernet, the founder of the "French School" of Hellenism, related the disappearance—or at least the reduction—of the hearth with the rise of democracy in Clisthenes's time:

When the position of the hearth becomes arbitrary, the territory can be ordered mathematically, that is, reorganized around an arbitrary and theoretical center: every hearth can be displaced at will.²

He so associates the rise of the classical *polis*, be it democratic, oligarchic or plutocratic, with changes in the relations between gendered spaces, and this is a powerful insight.

Not only the hearth, but the parts of the house, and the house itself had become mobile, as if Hestia had been uprooted. This can be compared with Xenophon's admiration for a "mobile house" which is a ship. In *Oikonomikos*, he lets the perfect householder Ischomachos tell Socrates:

But the most beautiful and best calculated order of furniture, o Socrates, I have observed during a visit of the great Phoenician ship.³

And Ischomachos goes on to explain how the organization of this ship should be the model of all well-ordered houses.

¹ Lysias, edited and translated by W.R.M. Lamb, Cambridge, Mass., London, 1976, I 6:14.

² Louis Gernet, "Sur le symbolisme olitique en Grèce ancienne: le Foyer Commun," in *Cahier Internationaux de Sociologie*, 1951, pp. 21 - 43.

³ Xenophon, *Ökonomische Schriften*, edited by Gert Audring, Berlin, 1992.

Xenophon is the author of one of the first known “doctrines about the house.” Such doctrines do not speak of the vernacular tracing of limits between gendered domains, but of the domination of the house father over wife, children, slaves and dependants. I have, I believe, identified a moment in which domination is instituted over the asymmetrical complementarities of gendered spaces. This moment implies the alphabet.