

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

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