



CENTER FOR
HELLENIC
STUDIES
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Women and Property

conference organized by and
collection edited by:

Deborah Lyons
Raymond Westbrook

Female inheritance in Athenian law

Lin Foxhall
University of Leicester

Introduction

In classical Athens and other Greek cities, the most important means of acquiring wealth and property was probably the transfer of property from one generation to the next via the linked institutions of inheritance and dowry. For women, the legal capacity to inherit, their relative shares in the patrimony, and the kinds of wealth they received, were circumscribed by both law and custom. Though specific practices differed from one city to another, many of the general principles and social structures were similar across the Greek world and over time.

For classical Athens we are well endowed with certain kinds of source material. Inscriptions provide occasional, fragmentary insights, and other kinds of literary and philosophical texts sometimes present important information. However, the main source is the surviving body of “published” speeches from the law courts of the fourth century BCE. These provide many interesting and valuable representations of female “inheritance,” but these texts cannot be read at face value, nor understood as examples of “real” practice. Some scholarly accounts (e.g. Schaps 1979; Sealey 1990) have attempted to use this material to present a normative picture of the operation of marriage, dowry and inheritance, but, useful as such syntheses are, I am not convinced that such normative perspectives can always tackle the complexities of social practice (cf. the plea for understanding the Athenian desire of flexibility in inheritance by Todd 1993: 227). Clearly there was much variation in practice in individual families, and though we can glean a reasonable sense of some normative ideals, the rhetorical and polemic courtroom context inevitably filters out too many nuances for the situations portrayed to be overlaid directly onto any concept of Athenian reality. Hence, despite this rich evidence, it remains difficult to distinguish legal regulation from customary practice, nor is it always clear how Athenians or other Greeks drew a precise or fixed boundary between them.

This paper will explore the interface of law and practice in relation to female access to patrimonial wealth via inheritance and dowry in classical Athens. Women were included in the patrimony, but to a lesser degree than their brothers. I will argue that the ambiguity enveloping the claims of women to patrimonial wealth in Greek culture, and more specifically in Athens, is a significant factor in the operation of the institution of the *epikleros*, the woman with no living father or brother, manifest in other forms in other Greek states (cf. papers by van Wees and Link in this Colloquium). In contrast, the customary significance and legal status of dotal property offers an important example of the methodological and theoretical issues surrounding women and property in classical Athens. Fundamentally, women could receive,

acquire and own property. However, they were largely excluded from, or fitted only uncomfortably alongside, the ideals surrounding the transmission of property from one generation to another and from one *oikos* to the recreated *oikoi* which sprang from it.

Inheritance in Athens: men, women and property

For Athenians, relationships between men and property over time were very important. The proper operation of these relationships enabled the continued stability of the social, political and economic institutions of Athens by ensuring that households (*oikoi*, *oikia*) headed by men were continually recreated (Foxhall 1994: 139; 1995: 134). Ideally, every adult male eventually became the head of a household (even if it consisted only of himself) which was associated with specific pieces of property, and correspondingly, no property was left unattached to a household. However, because of the way Athenian kinship worked, with relationships reckoned bilaterally through both maternal and paternal lines, households and lineages had very little real time depth - the number of people to whom an individual was related within two or three generations could be enormous. This is why households had to be *recreated* and did not in themselves last for many (or even more than one) generation). In the absence of formal written records of births and marriages it could be extremely difficult to keep track of these kinship relationships, as the numerous court cases where relatedness was at issue testify. Moreover, bilateral kinship meant that women also became part, sometimes a crucial part, of the network of relationships through which property was transferred from one generation to another.

Even the few wealthy families which managed to maintain some kinship coherency over a number of generations generally acted on short term motives. Cox (1998: 10) has observed that the Bouselidae appear to marry both within the lineage and develop alliance outside the kin group via marriage, “balancing endogamy and exogamy as families extend and consolidate ties.” Cox’s observed pattern is not a strategy developed at the level of the extended kin group, but the aggregate of individual strategies and decisions at the level of household. The surviving law court speeches make it clear that members of this family had little in the way of long-term strategies or shared goals. On the contrary, they were generally competing with each other for family wealth (Cox 1998: 4).

For Athenians, relationships between women and property were problematic. Because property ideally passed from one household to another over time through men (even when those men might be related to each other via women), women were often represented (especially by men in courtroom settings) as if their only relationships to property were constructed through their relationships to men. In fact, women’s relationships to property were far more complicated. Their relationships to different categories of property, notably real estate, may have been quite different from those of men. They are certainly difficult to perceive and to understand through our surviving sources.

For Athenians, therefore, when property had to be transferred from one generation to another in the absence of a direct male descendant, the “natural” order of the recreation of households was disrupted. Athenian law and custom provided formal rules for determining relative proximity of relatedness, and thus the order of succession to property in such cases (Harrison 1968: 144-7; Todd 1993: 218-21).

These rules included both patrilineal and matrilineal kin, with the former generally taking precedence over the latter. Although the principles appear to be straightforward, in practice succession could be disputed when there were ambiguities and complex relationships. An extreme example is offered by the lineage of the Bouselidae, notorious for deploying endogamous marriage and adoption in pursuit of their individual disputes over the estate of one very rich family member, Hagnias (II), over several generations (Dem. 43; Isaios 11). In this case, one group of claimants consisted of the male relatives of Phylomache (I), the paternal aunt of Hagnias II, and her granddaughter, Phylomache (II), who would have been the first cousin once removed of Hagnias (II). The other major group of claimants consisted of the homometric half-brothers of Hagnias II, Glaukos and Glaukon. These relationships were complicated by adoption, wills and allegations of illegitimacy. However, both parties depended on establishing their claims to the property through women who were closely related to Hagnias (II), his father's sister and his mother.

Another example appears in Isaios 8, where the brother's son of the deceased contended with the daughter's son of the deceased Kiron for the possession of the inheritance. Here, the case of the former depended upon demonstrating the illegitimacy of latter, the daughter of the deceased Kiron, the mother of one of the claimants. According to the formal rules of inheritance, the grandson of Kiron should have inherited without question, as his mother should have been declared an *epikleros*. The reason there was any room for doubt or ambiguity in the first place arose simply because the property was not transmitted directly between two adult men along a line of direct descent, but because the female link provided the potential for an alternative claimant to introduce an element of ambivalence.

The fact the absence of a direct male heir (preferably adult) was perceived as "abberant" does not, however, mean that it did not often happen. Situations in which a man was not succeeded by his son or sons must have occurred regularly, when men were childless, if only daughters were born, or if a son died before his father (see below, on Isaios 10). The Athenians developed a number of practices and laws to "correct" such situations which did not match the ideal of succession by a direct male descendant. Several of these had a direct impact on the relationships between women and property, and how property was transmitted to and through them down the generations.

Epikleroi

A daughter or daughters left with no father or brothers became an *epikleros* (pl. *epikleroi*). The term *epikleros* is often translated as "heiress," but the implication that she inherits directly is misleading.

The word *kleros* means "lot, inheritance, estate." *Epi* is a protean preposition with a wide range of locative, temporal and causal meanings. Generally it has been interpreted as "in relation to, pertaining to" in the word *epikleros*, so that the term would mean "one to whom the estate pertains" or "one who pertains to the estate" (in Todd's view, 1993: 221, the latter interpretation is far more likely). However, the word *epi* frequently carries the meaning "to be in charge of, have authority over." In light of the terms *patroikos* or *patrouchos* used for a daughter in the same position in Sparta and Gortyn (see papers by Hodkinson and Link, this Colloquium), meaning something like "holding the patrimony," the interpretation of *epikleros* as "in charge

of the inheritance/estate” seems most likely. In fact, though she may briefly have been in charge of the estate, it stayed with her only until the ideal of male to male transfer of property was once again established, when correct line of descent was restored, ideally with the birth and then the coming of age of her son.

Unlike a straightforward inheritance transferred between father and adult son, in which the state did not interfere, an *epikleros*, as soon as she was identified as such, instantly came under the scrutiny of the law and the archon, the chief magistrate of Athens, who had to approve formally the family’s decision about her (Harrison 1968: 132-33; Todd 1993: 229-9). In the case of an undisputed succession the agreement of the family was simply ratified by the archon in a procedure called *epidikasia*. If the succession were disputed and the case ended up in court it was decided by a jury as a *diadikasia*.

However, a girl’s status as an *epikleros* might not be always have been clear cut. The case outlined in Isaios 10 is a good example of some of the potential ambiguities. In this case the speaker is the daughter of a woman whom he claims was left an *epikleros* and through whom, therefore he should have inherited the estate of his maternal grandfather, Aristarchos (I). He has challenged his first cousin, Xenainetos (II) for possession of this property. According to the speaker (whose name we do not know), Aristarchos (I) had two sons, Kyronides and Demochares and two daughters (one of whom was the mother of the speaker. Kyronides was adopted by his maternal grandfather, Xenainetos (I) and inherited his estate, so Aristarchos (I) must himself have married an *epikleros*. Demochares remained as the heir to the estate of Aristarchos (I), and had things gone according to plan, the two daughters would simply have received dowries from the patrimony. However, Aristarchos (I) died, according to the speaker, when Demochares was still a minor. The estate was therefore managed by Aristomenes, the brother of Aristarchos (I), who himself had a son, Apollodoros, and a daughter. This daughter he gave in marriage to Kyronides, and the couple eventually had two sons, Xenainetos (II), the speaker’s opponent, and Aristarchos (II). At some point after the marriage of Kyronides, according to the speaker, the surviving daughter (mother of the speaker) was married with a dowry to an unspecified and unrelated husband (Isaios 10.6, 19). And, at some point, Demochares and one of the sisters both died before reaching adulthood. According to the speaker, the siblings died before his mother, the surviving daughter, was married. Thus, he argues, his mother should have been adjudicated an *epikleros* and married to either Aristomenes or his son Apollodoros.

However, the story told by the speaker does not altogether add up. This case came to court many years after the events related, and by this time Kyronides and Aristarchos II were both dead. The speaker was forced to admit that another court had accepted that Aristarchos (II) was the posthumously adopted son of Aristarchos (I) (Isaios 10.2, 15), though he also disputed the legality of that adoption. The names of Kyronides’ children suggest strongly that he named one son after the maternal grandfather who had adopted him. Then, after he had left a son to inherit Xenainetos’ estate, Kyronides returned or intended to return to his natal family. Had he done so, his sister would not have been an *epikleros*. Also we do not know the relative ages of the children of Aristarchos (II). It may have been that Kyronides and the speaker’s mother were considerably older than the other two siblings. In any case, girls were generally married soon after puberty, while men married much later. Had the speaker’s mother

been of marriagable age when her father Aristarchos (I) died, her relatives and guardians would probably have arranged for her to be married as soon as possible, especially since there may have been a debt to the state owed by Aristarchos (I) at the time of his death, which was eventually paid by Kyronides (Isaios 10.15). Moreover, although her surviving brother had technically left the family, she still *had* a brother, who might at some point in the future opt to return to the family (cf. Harrison 1968: 133, n. 1). Ideally an adult male should stand at each end of an inheritance transaction. Hence, the status of the speaker's mother as an *epikleros* was not secure. The preference of Athenians (and Athenian courts) for male to male inheritance might mitigate against a woman being declared an *epikleros* unless there was no alternative. It might also explain why a court accepted the posthumous adoption of Aristarchos (II) into the *oikos* of Aristarchos (I). Whatever the "truth" of this case, it is clear that a situation such as that represented in Isaios 10 leaves room for dispute and ambiguity, and this could be exploited by relatives.

What precisely happened to an *epikleros* depended on her age, wealth, marital status, personal circumstances and on what surviving relatives she had. The most desirable course of action was that she marry her closest patrilineal male relative, if possible her father's brother or father's brother's son, as the speaker in Isaios 10 claims should have happened in the case of his mother. But, as at Gortyn (see Link, this volume) a set order of closeness of relationships was established, and in Athens this followed the same pattern as for claiming any inheritance (Todd 1993: 218-20). At each degree of relatedness the eldest took precedence and the male line was preferred over the female line, but closer relatives through female lines took precedence over more distant relations through male lines (Todd 1993: 218). So, for example, the son of a girl's father's sister (her first cousin via a paternal aunt) would have taken precedence over both her mother's brother (her maternal uncle) and her father's paternal uncle's son (her father's first cousin, her first cousin once removed). If her father's sister had more than one son, she would marry the eldest. However, as with inheritance, in practice this succession was not as straightforward as it appears to have been in theory. But, it is interesting that we have no mention in the corpus of forensic speeches of more than one close relative attempting to claim the same *epikleros* in marriage. Rather, we have several instances of men claiming property through a closely related woman who might or might not have been an *epikleros*, i.e., whose status was disputed, often along with her paternity (e.g. Isaios 3, 6, 8).

Desirable as it might be to marry a wealthy *epikleros*, the status of property stayed in limbo until she had children. Neither she nor her husband "owned" it, though they obviously made use of it, until the *epikleros* bore a legitimate son, who inherited the property of his maternal grandfather soon after puberty (Isaios fr. 25), about the age at which he might be expected to be put forward for deme membership or introduced into a phratry. If the *epikleros* did not have a son, the property reverted to closest male relative (who ought to be married to her), although if there were other claimants, the process of dispute could start all over again (Harrison 1968: Todd 1993: 228-30). It is interesting that the speaker of Isaios 10 always referred to the disputed estate as belonging to his mother, not as belonging to him. It is hard to know whether this reflects some kind of reality – that *epikleroi* were felt to "own" their patrimonial estates in some sense - or whether it is simply a rhetorical maneuver to make himself appear more altruistic and less grasping.

How much control did an *epikleros* have over the property she “inherited”? It is hard to be certain and there must have been considerable variation depending on the circumstances and personality of the woman herself. Some *epikleroi*, such as the mother of Demosthenes (Dem. 27-29) or the wife of Spoudias (Dem. 41), appear to have exerted a considerable amount of control over their patrimonial property, and in the former case, the property of her husband as well. Others appear to have been much more dominated by the men in their lives. However, it still seems dangerous to me to assume that all *epikleroi* had little or no control over their patrimony, or took no interest in its management.

There has been considerable debate over the function(s) of the institution of the epiklerate (Todd 1993: 230). It has often been argued that its main purpose was to ensure the continuity of the *oikos* (Harrison 1968: 136). The difficulty I see with this view is that Athenian *oikoi* did not continue through time in any significant way. Though very occasionally lineages might go on for several generations, as in the case of the Bouselidai, such a pattern was exceptional. Athenian *oikoi*, based on broad networks of bilateral kindred who transferred property from one generation to another via partible inheritance, was not like English aristocratic families or Scottish clans, which with institutions such as entail and primogeniture, could ensure that a property would stay in the family over many generations, traveling through time down a single male line.

Another common view is that the epiklerate ensured that girls were married properly and their rights protected by the state, even when they had no close male relatives, a father or brothers, to protect them (Schaps 1979: 32-3). Although such concerns may well have played a part, in the sense that the Athenian community clearly worried about the well-being of women with no close male kin to look after them, the problem could have been solved simply by ensuring that such girls had dowries in proportion to the estate. In effect, this sometimes happened, in cases where an *epikleros* was already married and had children by an unrelated husband. In such a circumstance, if she wanted to give up her claim on the estate and remain with her husband, her nearest male relative inherited the property outright.

I wonder if much of the anxiety about *epikleroi*, however, was less related to concern about the well-being of the girls themselves, and was perhaps more a result of culturally deep-seated feelings about the importance of re-establishing a direct line of male links for the “proper” transfer of property. This is not the same as “the continuity of the *oikos*.” Rather it is focused on ensuring that future *oikoi* will be recreated in the proper way, through a regular line of succession, with the correct relationships to property (especially land and houses) going through the right kinds of male links.

Ideally men spent their lives in one *oikos*, women in two, moving from the household of their parents to that of their husband. In contrast, *epikleroi* were women who spent their lives in one *oikos*, while adopted sons became men who lived in two *oikoi*. The absence of sons as direct male heirs disrupted the “correct” pattern of inheritance and succession, interfering with the “normal” recreation of *oikoi*. In both cases, the lack of direct male heirs resulted in an alternative pattern of succession which was the direct opposite of the ideal gendered life pattern.

Adoption

Generally, adoption served as a vehicle for setting up proper male links along which property could travel down the generations in the absence of direct male heirs, or in circumstances where there was doubt about whether there would be adult male heirs in place. If it was clear that men had no direct male descendants they often chose to adopt a son during their lifetime, generally a male who was already adult, the point being to set up the appropriate links for the transfer of property and the recreation of a household. Often adoption was linked to a potential *epikleros*, so that a man might adopt a son to marry a biological daughter with no brothers (Lysias 32; Dem. 41). Adopted sons were often, but not always, close male relatives. Adoptions via both both matrilineal and patrilineal links are well documented. In only one case that we know of was a girl adopted (Isaios 11), and that was in the unusual case of the estate of Hagnias (II), where a large estate had been disputed for several generations. The Athenian custom of posthumous adoption - where the son of an *epikleros* could be adopted as his maternal grandfather's son and heir - seems redundant to some modern commentators (Todd 1993: 2225), but makes more sense if the restoration of a proper pattern of descent was a serious consideration. Also, the son of an *epikleros* might receive his maternal grandfather's name, but enter the deme and phratry of his father unless adopted before or after his maternal grandfather's death (Patterson 1998: 100).

Wills and descent

Wills were redundant for men with adult direct male descendants because under Athenian inheritance law and custom the "natural" order always took precedence (Foxhall 1989: 29). Even when men left wills, if they were disputed in court, juries were notoriously prone to adjudicate in favor of the closest relatives, on a kind of "natural order" principle. In effect, no one could leave their money to the home for retired donkeys, or even bequeath large legacies to their friends as Romans customarily did. Adoption was often testamentary, and therefore potential rather than actual, so that it only came into effect if the testator died with no living sons.

When men with direct descendants did make wills, often it was because their children were minors. Regularly wills were used to arrange for the guardianship of children and sometimes the dowering and remarriage of a wife, as in the case of the family of Demosthenes (Dem. 27-9).. This could function as an alternative to returning a dowry and a woman to her natal family. However, as in the case of the orator Demosthenes' family, a father's will addressed the problem of surviving minor children and a wife who had no father or brothers, so that as a widow Demosthenes' mother would also have been technically an *epikleros*. Sometimes men also appear to have used wills as a vehicle for leaving property to their wives, perhaps the closest thing to a legacy that existed in Athens (Lys. 32; alleged in Dem 27-29).

Women did not usually make wills, though occasionally they appear to do so, as in the case of Polyuctos' wife (Dem. 41). I do not think this was because women could not own property, and I do not think it would have occurred to Athenians to legislate against women making wills (cf. Harrison 1968: 151 and n. 1), because the proper pattern of descent had a male at each end. Transmission of dotal property is the one exception, and even this category of property conformed to the "natural order" of Athenian transmission of property in the sense that although it followed the woman

with whom it belonged, it was inherited by her children (sons) and had originated from her patrimonial wealth, handed over to her by her father.

Dotal property

In Athens, dowry (*proix*) property was generally moveable property or cash (“invisible” as opposed to “visible” property according to the Athenian category system). However, dowries were often secured by real property, suggesting that view that women could not legally own land is probably wrong. A dowry ideally went with a woman at marriage from her patrimonial home and was derived from her patrimonial estate. In reality, fathers did not always pay out the entire value of the dowry at the time of the marriage, and if they did not eventually pay up, the daughter would have received the real property securing the dowry as a replacement (Foxhall 1989).

The dowry was bestowed by her father, or if he were no longer alive, by his heirs, her brothers. Dotal property always followed a woman, and her own children always inherited it. If she died childless, or left her husband as a result of divorce, without children, the dowry went back to her natal family. If she had children before her death or divorce and her husband remarried and had children by a second wife, the dowry of the first wife was inherited only by her own children, not by the children of the second wife. Hence, a woman’s dowry did not belong to her husband. The “ownership” of dowries has been much debated, but in so far as a dowry could be deemed to “belong” to any individual, I think women thought they “owned” their own dowries.

Dowries could be seen at the female equivalent of male inheritance, with the important qualification that, unlike the latter, in all but a few exceptional circumstances it was a customary, not a legal, institution. It clear that in Athens there were laws about male inheritance which reinforced long-established custom, but the only known legislation about dowries seems to be attempts to eliminate them (always unsuccessful) or attempts to limit their size (equally unsuccessful), or to ensure that they were paid at a minimum level for the daughters of the poorest citizens (*thetes*) left as *epikleroi* (Dem. 43.54).

The forensic speeches also suggest that it would have been socially unacceptable, at least among wealthier families, not to dower a daughter in proportion with the patrimonial estate. A woman who cohabited with a man, but went into the relationship without a patrimonial dowry, laid herself open to the suspicion that the union was not a legitimate marriage, or even that she herself or her husband were not Athenian citizens. There are a number of examples in the corpus of law court speeches where the lack of a dowry was used as an argument for the illegitimacy of a union, or the existence of one was used to demonstrate the legitimacy of a marriage (Dem. 30.19). Generally sisters seem to have received equal shares as dowries, just as brothers get equal shares of inheritance, though daughters’ dowries constituted smaller shares of the patrimony than sons’ inheritances (at least among the kinds of families who make it to the historical sources) (Foxhall 1989: 32). Hence, the existence of one sister’s dowry, and its amount, was used to argue that another sister had a dowry of identical value (Lysias 19.15).

However, dowries were also not what we would consider to be personal property: many different people had an interest (or a veto) on how the dowry was used. Another category which went with women on marriage, the *pherne*, often translated as “trousseau,” is more like what we would recognize as personal property. In the court room speeches *pherne* is often called “clothing and jewelry.” In some cases it is clear that the *pherne* consisted of property of considerable value (Dem. 41).

Conclusions: women, men and property

Even the Athenians themselves (or at least the author of the Aristotelian “Constitution of the Athenians”) thought that their laws about inheritance and *epikleroi* were complex and ambiguous ([Arist.] *Ath.Pol.*9.2. (I think this passage refers not to the laws on *epikleroi* and inheritance of Solon’s time, but to the laws on these institutions current at the time of the writer, who is using them as an example of the overall complexity and ambiguity of Solon’s laws.) Certainly the one of their purposes was likely to have been to allow flexibility for families to achieve the most desirable outcome for inheritance and succession under a wide range of circumstances, as Todd (1993: 227) suggests. The principles and aims were simple. Ideally an adult male should stand at each end of an inheritance transaction. Transmission of property from a father to his adult sons exemplified the correct order of life stages and the proper succession of generations. This, in turn, maintained the right relationships between people and property for the recreation of *oikoi* when the paternal *oikos* dissolved, usually upon the death of the father (although it is clear that brothers did not always divide the property immediately, e.g. Lysias 32). One could perceive the development of all other laws, devices and institutions surrounding inheritance in classical Athens, e.g. wills, adoption, and the regulations covering the guardianship of orphans and the institution of the *epiklerate*, as aimed to facilitate the fulfillment of this ideal in circumstances where it was unlikely to happen “naturally,” that is when there were no adult sons to succeed a father. It follows that their purpose was to replicate, reinstate or reconstitute the ideal order of succession from man to man.

Plainly this ideal, and the impact it had on the evolution of custom and law had a profound effect upon women’s relationships to property. It goes without saying that women’s relationships to property were different from those of men, especially when we see it moving from one generation to another as is so often the case in our main sources, the forensic speeches. This is partly because property that belonged to women during their lifetime still had to be transferred from one man to another - even their dowries.

Perhaps the most important implication was that an Athenian woman’s relationship to property was ephemeral. Her property was “hers” only during her lifetime and its transmission to a future generation was formally determined by the men in her life: her father, brother, sons, and sometimes (though not always) her husband. Even as an *epikleros*, holding a status where she might well have been formally “in charge of” the patrimonial property, its transmission and ultimate ownership was beyond her control, or that of her husband.

I wonder if the strong association in Athens between women and moveable property – the “invisible” property of which the dowries of wealthy women were formed, and the “clothing and jewelry” of the *pherne* - does not reflect this wider cultural

connection between women and the realm of the impermanent and ephemeral (Foxhall 1995). It is clear that in fourth century Athens this association appears in other spheres as well. For example in the votive dedications of clothing at Brauron consisted of ephemeral, though often very costly, items given to the immortal goddess Artemis entirely by women, never men (Foxhall and Stears 2000; Harris-Cline this volume). In this regard, it is also interesting that sumptuary legislation in so far as it is documented in ancient Athens, focused almost entirely on the relationships between women and moveable property such as clothing and jewelry. The other side of this was the trend from the later fifth century in Athens for men to eschew personal elegance and display of wealth in line with democratic ideals (Geddes 1987), while at exactly the same time images of women in vase painting and sculpture indicate increasing levels of adornment of women, showing more, and more expensive, clothing and jewelry. Did attaching moveable wealth to women detach it from men?

Whatever the answers, it is clear that property and households were intertwined and had no “life” independently of each other. Women and men had different relationships to this property because of the different roles they played in the recreation and reproduction of households over time.

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