DEMOGRAPHY AND DOWRIES: PERSPECTIVES ON FEMALE INFANTICIDE IN CLASSICAL GREECE

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IN TWO RECENT PUBLICATIONS, Sarah Pomeroy, who has justly won praise for her pioneering work on women in antiquity, has reiterated her views that selective female infanticide was practiced in Greece and that the need to provide a dowry was an important cause.[1] These views were first expressed in her groundbreaking *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* and have been repeated in several subsequent publications.[2] Of the variety of arguments that she has advanced in support of selective female infanticide, most have been challenged, but the burden of providing a dowry is one major reason often given and never questioned.[3] The purpose of this essay is to review some demographic realities in ancient Greece that militate against infanticide in general and daughters in particular and to examine the dowry in an effort to uncover any evidence that might suggest that it was a factor in decisions to expose daughters.

Greek families tended to be small. But family size was not determined by parental choice; it was the result of high rates of infant and child mortality. Until the discovery of the germ theory of disease at the end of the nineteenth century and the advent of modern medicine, child mortality rates everywhere were extremely high.[4] In early modern Europe, for example, where good records of births and deaths were kept, it generally took two live births to produce one adult; in other words, every other child died.[5]

There is no reason to believe that the mortality rate was any different in ancient Greece. Ancient authors allude to the high mortality rate of children and young people. Demosthenes (57.28), for example, provides a glimpse of this reality when Euxitheos states that his father had four παῖδες (usually translated as "sons," but who could have been daughters), born of the same mother as himself, who died and were buried in the ancestral tomb. According to Solon, Tellos was the happiest man in the world because he had children who were καλοί τε κἀγαθοί and because he saw them all produce offspring who survived σφι εἴδε ἅπασι τέκνα ἐκγενήμενα καὶ πάντα παραμείναντα (Hdt. 1.30.4; cf. Plut. *Sol.*

[1] Pomeroy 1997: 116–121; Pomeroy *et al.* 1999: 234.

[2] Pomeroy 1983; 1984: 44–45; 1986: 158–162.

[3] Oldenziel (1987) has neatly summarized the debate. For more recent discussions of both issues, see Isager 1981–82: 88–89; Patterson 1985; Brulé 1990 and 1992; Sallares 1991: 129–160; Gallant 1991: 21; Huys 1995: 13–14; Edwards 1996; Dasen 1997.

[4] Golden (1992: 327–328) notes that death rates in Europe began to decline before the advent of better sanitation and modern medical practice, but that decline was less significant than that found at the end of the nineteenth century.

[5] Gottlieb (1993: 133) describes the situation of European families from the Black Death to the Industrial Age. See also Laslett 1984: 111; Burch 1970: 61–69; De Vries 1976: 11; Stone 1981: 59; Kriedte 1983: 20.

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27.4). Isocrates (9.72), commenting on Evagoras, says: "It is a very rare and very difficult (σπανώτατον εἶναι καὶ χαλεπώτατον) thing to have both fine children and many children."[6]

Modern scholars who have attempted to estimate the rates of infant and child mortality in antiquity reach similar conclusions. From osteological remains Angel (1975: 175–176 Table) calculated an infant mortality rate of 500 per 1000 in the classical period and 700 per 1000 in the Hellenistic period. Using Hippocrates' statements about the limited viability of premature infants, the almost certain fatality of breech and other non-standard presentations, and the large number of full term babies who died (*Sept.* 2, 4, 6 and *Oct.* 10), Corvisier (1985: 164–165) estimates an infant mortality rate of 50 per cent. Analysis of the census data from Roman Egypt, "usually conceded to be the most credible demographic evidence from the Greco-Roman world" (Bagnall and Frier 1994: 110), yields similar results.[7] Of a female cohort of 100,000 newborns, 66,601 survive to their first birthday, 50,776 reach age five, 47,396 reach age ten, 44,930 reach fifteen and 41,899 make it to twenty. For a male cohort of 100,000 newborns, 67,743 survive their first year, 54,517 make it to their fifth birthday, 51,517 reach age 10, 49,803 reach 15 and 47,304 reach 20. While male children have a slightly higher rate of survival, these statistics are grim by modern standards. By adulthood more than 50 per cent of the original newborns have died. There is little reason to think that the numbers would be any better in ancient Greece.

Given this high rate of child mortality, if parents wanted children, they are unlikely to have practiced infanticide except under the most exceptional circumstances such as deformity, illegitimacy, or extreme poverty.[8] Indeed, Pomeroy admits as much, when she states: "The natural mortality of infants in

[6] For other references to the precariousness of life, see Aesch. *Eum.* 657 and *Supp.* 684; Eur. *Med.* 1110–11; Arist. *Hist. an.* 12.1–2.

[7] There are, of course, enormous difficulties in using the census data to obtain accurate numbers for infants. Bagnall and Frier (1994) note both a failure to register newborns who die in their first year and the under-registration of girls in the metropolitan centres (81–82) as well as the odd sex ratios. Nevertheless, after performing a number of demographic tests and procedures on the data, the authors believe that the Coale-Demeny Model West Level 2 Female and Model West Level 4 Male are the best fit. Their work is not without critics: Richard Saller (1994: 12–25) provides a good analysis of the debate. He prefers the Coale-Demeny Model West Level 3 "Because it provides a general purpose table that is unlikely to be grossly misleading" (23). Whatever table is chosen, the basic fact remains that infant and child mortality rates were extremely high in ancient Greece.

[8] See Patterson 1985 for the categories of children most at risk. Edwards (1996) has raised doubts about the routine exposure of deformed children, while Dasen (1997) thinks that twin girls or the girl in a pair of twins of mixed sex might well have been exposed. Alter (1992: 15) observes that in Europe "historical cases of infanticide can almost always be traced to unwed mothers." The issue of poverty is more complex. Gallant (1991: 60–110) argues that the average peasant in ancient Greece was vulnerable to food shortages, particularly during certain phases in the family life cycle. One possible response was to sell some dependent children. However abhorrent the practice may seem to us, Aristophanes (*Ach.* 729–735), Herodotus (8.104–106), and Isocrates (*Pan.* 68) refer to it. In Thebes, Aelian (*VH* 2.7) reports a law forbidding exposure and requiring that the father bring the child to the magistrates who arrange for its sale into slavery. This law, as well as one reported by Plutarch (*Mor.* 497e) in Ephesus forbidding exposure unless the father's feet were swollen with hunger, suggest that

Classical Athens was so high as to preclude the wholesale practice of infanticide" (1975: 69). The Athenians certainly wanted children. Raepsaet (1971) has conveniently collected the reasons they gave. Children were seen as guarantors of happiness and prosperity, as supporters providing both nourishment and defence in old age, as the instruments for the transmission of property, as performers of religious rites associated with the dead, as the means to carry on the household and family, and as the mechanism for supplying the state with future citizens. As Lacey (1968: 16) notes: "An *oikos* was . . . a living organism which required to be renewed every generation . . . . A childless *oikos* was visibly dying—no man's life span is all that long—so we may well appreciate the joy with which a child . . . was received." In addition, the sources reflect major concerns about infertility. In Hesiod (*Op.* 240–245), for example, sterility is a punishment from Zeus on a community for the immorality of one of its members. Herodotus (6.139.1) tells how the wives of the Pelasgians were made barren because their husbands killed Athenian women and children, and Sophocles bases the plot of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* on the idea that an undiscovered murderer could bring infertility upon the community. It is also noteworthy that the inability to conceive is one of the most frequent topics in Hippocrates' gynaecological works, with one complete treatise devoted to the subject (Preus 1975; Garland 1990: 36–41).[9] There can be no question that the Greeks wanted children, and as Golden (1988 and 1990: 82–100) has shown, they grieved their loss when they died. Thus, in view of this desire for children, the difficulties keeping them alive, and the loss felt at their deaths, it would seem highly unlikely that the practice of infanticide would be widespread.

There is evidence, moreover, that Athenians wanted girls as well as boys. Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* includes in the components of happiness the blessing of good children (εὐτεκνία) and numerous children (πολυτεκνία), which for the individual means "many children of his own, both male and female" (1361a). According to Charlier and Raepsaet (1971: 606), the idea that the principal motivation for procreation is to produce a male heir "n'est pas du tout attestée dans les sources de l'époque classique. La valorization sociale de l'enfant y est présente aussi bien pour le garçon que pour la fille, tant au v^{e} qu'au iv^{e} siècle."[10] In addition, it should be remembered that even if a man had sons, there was no guarantee that they would not predecease him. In this event, his daughter as an *epikleros* would provide an heir. This fact is too often overlooked.[11] When

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infanticide might occur in the face of extreme poverty, but contrary to the frequently expressed notion that there were no sanctions against infanticide, laws governing the practice were in place at least in some communities.

[9] Simon Byl (1989: 55) calculates that roughly one quarter of the Hippocratic corpus deals with diseases of women.

[10] Eur. *Dan.* fr. 316 (Nauck^{2}); *Suppl.* 1101–03; Ar. *Thesm.* 502.

[11] As Patterson (1998: 93) notes: "although (the *epikleros*) was distinctive, she was not rare." Indeed, Isaios (2.64) remarks upon the large number of husbands who lose their wives to relatives

sons are lacking, the *oikos* could continue through the adoption of the daughter's husband or through the epiklerate. When life was as uncertain as it was in ancient Greece, it was necessary to adopt a variety of strategies to ensure an heir. Daughters could provide a way to avoid having one's estate pass to more distant relatives.

There is, moreover, considerable evidence of daughters in Greek families. In his analysis of Davies's record of wealthy Athenian families from 600 to 300 B.C., Casson (1976: 49) found eighty-four families with more than two children. Of these, thirty-four had at least one daughter, twelve had two daughters, three had three daughters, and one had four, i.e., fifty of these families had daughters.[12] Davies's record also includes numerous families with two children, which in several cases means two daughters.[13] Moreover, in her analysis of families in Isaios, Isager (1981–82) notes that where the speaker intends to mention all the children in a family (some nineteen cases) the sex ratio is roughly even (twenty-three daughters and nineteen sons). Obviously, there were many families with daughters.[14]

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claiming an *epikleros*. This concern shows that the number of *epikleroi* was not small. Golden (1985: 10, n. 8) estimates that 14.5 per cent of fathers would die with no surviving sons. Saller (1994: 43–66) has produced a set of simulations of the number of kin an individual in the Roman world might have had based on three sets of data: Table 3.1: the Coale-Demeny West Level 3 life table with an age of marriage of 30 for men; Table 3.2: the same table with an age of first marriage at 25 for men of the senatorial elite; and Table 3.3: West Table 6 again with an age of marriage of 25 for the senatorial elite. One table for each simulation gives the proportion of men at five-year intervals with surviving children, sons, and daughters. For example, according to Table 3.1.e 86 per cent of men 40 years old would have surviving children, 65 per cent would have sons, and 63 per cent would have daughters. From these figures, I have calculated the proportion of men having only surviving daughters by subtracting the proportion of men with no children (14 per cent) from the proportion with no sons (35 per cent) to give the proportion with only daughters (21 per cent). For table 3.1.e the range is from a low of 18 per cent for 60-year-olds to a high of 21 per cent for 40- and 45-year-olds. For table 3.2.e the range is from a low of 20 per cent for 40- to 55-year-olds to a high of 22 per cent for 70 year olds. For table 3.3.e the range is from a low of 20 per cent for 60-year-olds to a high of 22 per cent for the rest. Although this material is based on Roman populations, there is little reason to believe that the Greek population would be vastly different. These figures suggest that in one in five cases the epiklerate could have been brought into play had the deceased not adopted an heir. A daughter's role in the transmission of property was obviously not insignificant.

[12] These figures exclude the family of Euktemon of Cephisia, who had three sons and two daughters (Davies 1971: 562–566), that of Miltiades and Hegesipyle with one son and three daughters (Davies 1971: 302–304), and that of Hippias who had two and possibly three daughters (Davies 1971: 451–452).

[13] Demosthenes' mother, Kleoboule and her sister, Philia, were the daughters of Gylon (Davies 1971: 121–122, 141). Polyeuktos had no sons, but two daughters (Dem. 41.4). Epilykos died in Sicily leaving two daughters (Davies 1971: 297–298). Andokides married the sister of the wife of Kallaischros, i.e., they are two daughters of a family otherwise unknown (30, 325). Kiron married his mother's sister's daughter, another family of two daughters (315). Themistocles' youngest daughter, Asia, had two daughters, Italia and Sybaris (217). Isocrates' mother Hedyto had a sister Nako from a family otherwise unknown (246). Apollodoros and the daughter of Deinias had two daughters (437).

[14] Patterson (1998: 93) remarks how the idea that it was unusual for an Athenian family to have only a daughter or daughters bedevils much discussion of Athenian law. She states: "Demographic

As already noted, Pomeroy thinks that the Greeks practiced female infanticide because fathers would be reluctant to raise an infant who would require a dowry when she reached marriageable age.[15] But is there evidence of fathers expressing this reluctance? The dowry, of course, represented the daughter's share of the estate, and in order to understand the question of the dowry, it is important to understand its threefold purpose.[16] First, it was used to attract a husband. A dowerless woman risked remaining unmarried all her life (Dem. 59.8; cf. 112–113; 40.4; 28.21). Isaios implies that it would be unusual for a wealthy man to accept a dowerless wife or one with a small dowry (3.25, 29; 11.40).[17] Since finding a husband for a girl without a dowry was difficult, the members of the *anchisteia* were obligated to provide dowries for needy relatives and *epikleroi* whom they refused to marry themselves (Dem. 43.54; Harrison 1968: 48–49, 143–149). As a result, fathers would want to give their daughters a good dowry in order to attract a desirable husband who could support his wife and family and be an ally and help to their own families. Second, the dowry represented the wife's contribution to the wealth of the new *oikos* being established (Xen. *Oec.* 7.13). Third, the dowry provided a woman with protection in the event of either death or divorce. In the case of divorce, the husband was required to return the dowry or pay a substantial amount of interest (Isaios 3.35; Dem. 27.17; 59.52). If the husband died, the widow could return to her family with the dowry (Dem. 40.2). To serve all three purposes, most fathers would want to provide as large a dowry as they could.

In deciding how much to dower their daughters, fathers followed two principles. First, according to Theopompus in Isaios' speech on his behalf, a father should endow his daughter well (καλάς) without diminishing his son's wealth as a result (11.39). Second, every effort was made to treat daughters equitably.[18] But how generous were fathers? To answer this question, we need to know how large dowries were. This issue has been vigorously debated, given the uneven nature of the evidence found in the orators, inscriptions, and New Comedy and its Roman copies. Casson thinks fathers were generous, and the dowry was a means to display their wealth (1976: 53–59). Golden thinks that dowries were modest

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probability . . . suggests that a significant share of Greek families 'perhaps 20%' would have had only daughters . . . ."

[15] See above, n. 2. Earlier writers also saw the dowry as the cause of female infanticide. Commenting on the alleged prevalence of female infanticide, Zimmern (1931: 330), for example, states: "the provision of a dowry weighed heavily on a Greek father's mind."

[16] See Goody 1976: 6–7. For earlier discussions of the dowry, see Erdmann 1934; Wolff 1944; 1957; Finley 1952; Harrison 1968: 44–60; Lacey 1968: 109–110; Casson 1976: 53–59; Schaps 1979: 74–88, 99–107; Cox 1988: 382–384; Foxhall 1989; Golden 1990: 132–134, 169–180.

[17] Nevertheless, it would appear that women did marry without a dowry, according to Isaios (2.5; 3.8–9, 28–29, 35–39, 78), Lysias (19.14–15), and Demosthenes (40.25).

[18] Dem. 40.24: 1 talent to each of two daughters; Dem. 41.3, 29: 40 minae to each of two daughters; Isaios 2.3.5: 20 minae to each of two sisters; Lysias 16.10: 30 minae to each of two sisters. As Casson (1976: 54, n. 60) observes, Lysias (19.16–17) implies that both daughters received 40 minae.

relative to the total estate. After a thorough analysis of the size of dowries, he concludes: "Girls were dowered with much less of the family estate than their brothers inherited, but with enough to support a socially acceptable standard of living for themselves and their children" (1990: 174). In fact, Golden and Casson are really in agreement. In order to provide for their daughters in the event of divorce or death, fathers needed to be fairly generous; but at the same time, it should be remembered that their daughters were entering marriages in which the husband was expected to provide most of the support. If the marriages were dissolved by death or divorce, the women normally remarried. Since daughters would normally be married to a husband who would provide the bulk of their support, sons naturally received a significantly larger portion of the estate.

There are indications that fathers tended to be generous. Isaios is scornful of a man who gave his daughter less than 10 per cent of his estate (3.51). Moreover, brothers, who stood to lose from dowering their sisters too well after their fathers' death, appear to have regarded ensuring that their fatherless sisters married well as an important obligation.[19] In fact, large dowries were such symbols of wealth and status that Solon is credited with an attempt to limit their size (Plut. *Sol.* 20.4). Furthermore, it appears that fathers were constantly borrowing and mortgaging property to raise money for large expenses like dowries (Finley 1952: 81–87). One of Aristotle's criticisms of the Spartan constitution was that nearly two-fifths of the land was owned by women "because of the number of *epikleroi* and the practice of giving large dowries" (*Pol.* 1270a23–27). For his part, Plato banned dowries and limited expenses related to weddings in the *Laws* (774c–d and 775a–b). For both these philosophers, as well as for Solon, large dowries were seen as a problem which existed in the Greece they knew and which they attempted to eradicate in their ideal constitutions. Finally, large dowries were also a problem for some husbands who complain about the power they afforded their wives (Alexis fr. 150 Kassel and Austin; Pl. *Laws* 774c). In addition, many Athenian girls married their uncles and cousins so that in some sense the dowry remained in the family.[20] In none of this, however, do we have any evidence of fathers expressing an unwillingness to dower their daughters. On the contrary, fathers appear to have undertaken this obligation with pleasure. After all, it was far easier for a father to dower a daughter than to share his estate among several sons, and a dowry provided an opportunity to display wealth and status.[21] Hence, the supposition that fathers worried about the cost when deciding whether or not to rear a daughter rests on no firm evidence.

[19] Demosthenes states: "Anyone would choose to borrow rather than fail to pay the dowry to a sister's husband" (30.12) and "It is unlikely that a rich man would defraud his sister of her dowry" (40.25).

[20] Thompson 1967; Cox 1988.

[21] Lacey (1968: 165) states: "a girl might have a stronger claim to be reared than a boy, since she might be found a husband with only a small portion, whereas a boy would be able to claim his full share in the family *oikos*, a claim the *oikos* might not be able to stand."

It seems then that there is no evidence to support the notion that fathers exposed their daughters in order to avoid the financial burden of providing a dowry. No doubt some Greeks practiced exposure or infanticide under certain extreme circumstances: illegitimacy, deformity, and poverty; it happens today. But there is no good evidence that the practice was widespread. On the contrary, given the high infant and child mortality rates and the strong desire which the Greeks expressed for children and the grief they expressed at their loss, infanticide would have been infrequent. Nor does a thorough analysis of the evidence support Pomeroy's contention that girls were at greater risk of exposure than boys.[22]

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