

CHAPTER 10

“ ARISTOTLE,
PLATO, AND AN
EPITAPH FOR A
LITTLE GIRL

GROWING UP GREEK

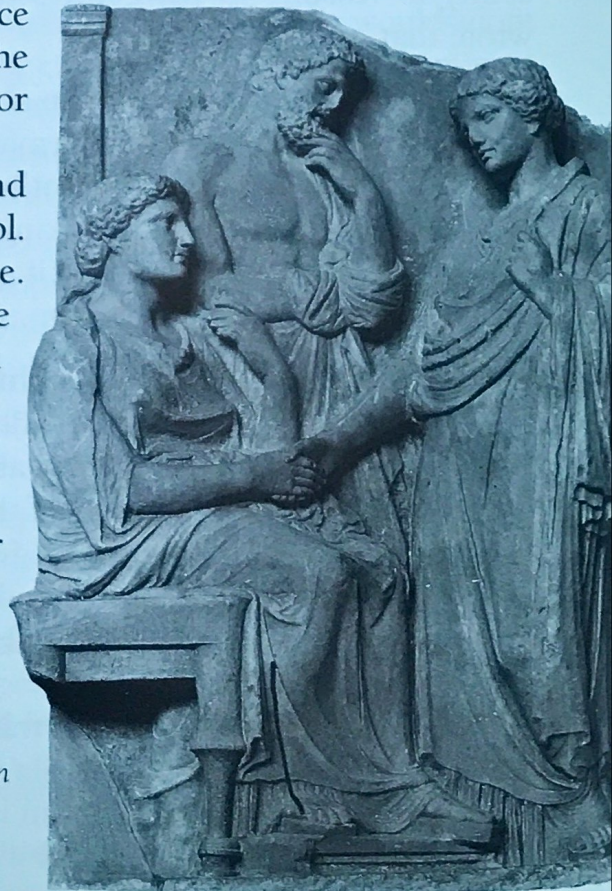
GREEK CHILDHOOD

Being young in ancient Greece was a risky proposition. Some historians think that about one-third of all babies died before their first birthday, and some parents must have tried hard not to get too attached to their children until it looked like they were going to survive. Once they seemed reasonably sure of living to grow up, children started going to school, playing, and learning how to be good citizens.

School, play, citizenship—growing up in Greece, once the dangers of babyhood were past—might sound similar to growing up today. Actually, a lot has changed since then, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse.

You probably spend most of your day at school. That's one big change. Many fewer young people in ancient Greece went to school and the ones who did were mostly boys. They came from the better-off families. Some girls were taught to read and write, but that was unusual.

In the relief sculpture on this grave monument, parents mourn the death of their daughter, who is clasping her mother's hand in farewell.



If you weren't one of the lucky few to get an education, you probably spent most of your waking hours at work. The most common work in ancient Greece was farming, and even very small children were useful on a farm.

If the family business was to make cooking pots, or shoes, or bricks, boys probably had to start helping out as soon as they were old enough to understand what to do and were strong enough to do it. Girls learned to spin and weave very early.

Historians don't know much about the lives of ordinary Greek people like farmers and brick-makers, and even less about the lives of their children. This means that it's almost impossible to find out anything about children except a few from the best-educated and wealthiest families. We can get an idea, though, that even for them it wasn't all rosy. The philosopher Aristotle, who was from one of those wealthy families, says in his *Eudemian Ethics*, "the kind of life people lead when they're still children is not desirable; as a matter of fact, nobody in his right mind could bear to return to that time of life."

“” Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*,
mid-fourth century BCE

Another difficulty in learning about family life in ancient Greece is that a lot of our information comes from people who are writing about what life *should* be like. That's not the best place to find out about their reality.

However, if everyone is leading their lives exactly the way they're supposed to, it is a waste of time to tell them how they should act. So if you find a lot of advice about how to behave, you can bet that at least some people aren't doing what the writers think they ought to do, or they would have found something else to write about.

Take relationships between husbands and wives, for example. In most Greek marriages, the husband was much older than his wife. Many Athenian girls got married when they were the same age as the average ninth grader today. But a man had to be able to support a family, so unless he inherited a fortune from his family, he was likely to be 30 years old or so by the time he had enough money to get married. A teenage girl could suddenly go from being the daughter of the house one day to being the person running

This fourth-century BCE doll was found at the sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone, mother and daughter goddesses, in the city of Corinth. It may have been an offering or toy.

“ Plato, *Meno*, early fourth century BCE

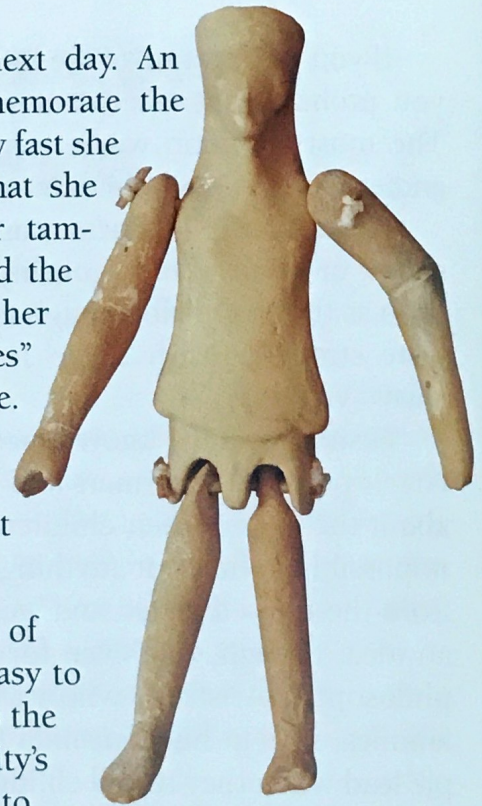
an entire household the next day. An inscription made to commemorate the marriage of a girl shows how fast she had to grow up. It says that she dedicated to Artemis “her tambourine, her pretty ball and the net that upheld her hair, her dolls too, and their dresses” right before becoming a wife. Wives’ roles were clearly defined. The philosopher Plato wrote in the *Meno* that a friend of Socrates said,

If you want a definition of virtue in a man, that’s easy to find: virtue for a man is the ability to conduct the city’s affairs in such a way as to help his friends, hurt his enemies, and see to it that he avoids being hurt himself. If you want a definition of virtue in a woman, that’s not hard to describe: she must run the household well, looking after everything that it contains, and obey her husband.

There were of course some families where the wife and husband didn’t behave exactly in that way. If everyone acted the same, male and female roles would have been so obvious that Plato wouldn’t have had to define them. The real and the ideal most likely weren’t always the same.

Another aspect of the ideal family was that the women and children spent their days in a separate part of the house from the men, usually with servants or slaves. They even took their meals separately, especially when the men invited friends to dinner. Women were so hidden, in fact, that in upper-class homes they weren’t even supposed to go outside. Instead, the men and the slaves did the shopping and the other errands.

This means that the ideal family was also rich—not many average people could afford a large staff of slaves and



separate living quarters for them. And not many families could survive if only the man supported it financially.

People who wrote about the ideal family hardly ever mention disease and death. But the cold, hard facts tell us that many Greek children died young. Without modern medicines, vaccinations, and sanitation, illnesses that hardly make you sick today, or that people don't even get any more, could wipe out whole families at once. Babies were especially vulnerable.

If the parents were too poor to raise a child, or if a newborn had a handicap, sometimes a decision would be made to expose the baby. This meant leaving the child somewhere outside away from home, all alone. Historians know this wasn't against the law, but they don't know if it was a common practice. Surely some parents hoped that the baby would be found and raised by another family, but they must have known that the child would probably die. Sometimes exposed babies would be found and raised as slaves.

If the parents took this drastic step, they could either try again for a healthy child or might be better able to support their children who had already survived the most difficult part of life—the first few months after birth. After living past infancy, a child was a part of the family. Children who died were mourned as much as adults were. An epitaph for one little girl reads:

Often in lamentation upon this girl's tomb her mother
Cleina
Bewails her beloved child who dies before her time.

Poor diet might have had a lot to do with early deaths. Not all mothers breast-fed their babies. Baby bottles had not been invented yet, so some wealthy families hired a woman to breast-feed the baby. Sometimes this nurse wasn't well nourished and couldn't provide enough milk. And when the surviving children were old enough to eat food, it was sometimes difficult to get the right kind of nutrition from the foods that were available.

Greece is a warm country, and it was hard to preserve food. Protein was hard to come by. You'd think that in a

NASTY, BRUTISH, AND SHORT

The life expectancy of an ancient Greek who made it past childhood illnesses was about 36 years for women and 45 years for men. The difference is explained by the better nutrition boys received and by the fact that child-birth was very dangerous for both mother and infant in those days.

“ Epitaph for a little girl,
about 200 BCE

country surrounded by the sea, the Greeks would have eaten a lot of fish, but for some reason they didn't. Meat was expensive and many times people were limited to eating the leftovers of animals sacrificed to the gods. Rich and poor, they lived mostly on vegetables, cheese, grains, and olives. During the winter or when the harvest was bad, famines would kill great numbers of people. Many of the survivors would be so weakened that they would later die of an illness that normally wasn't dangerous.

Everybody drank wine mixed with water, even the children. If they had dessert, it probably would be fruit (when they could afford it or grow it themselves) or grain sweetened with honey.

But there were many good things about growing up Greek. In most of Greece, you can expect good weather much of the time. Playing outdoors must have been fun, with warm water to wade and swim in and lots of hills and valleys to explore. Greek children could play ball games and had simple toys like yo-yos and clay animals on wheels that could be pulled with a string. There were some board games, mostly played with dice and counters.

On many religious holidays there would be parties and special food. Some people wouldn't have to work (but farmers never really get a day off) and families would get together to celebrate.

Was Aristotle right about the misery of a Greek childhood? Or were there enough good times to make up for the problems? Unfortunately, if any Greek child wrote a diary or any other record of his or her life, it hasn't survived, so all we can do is guess.

Although the game depicted on this statue-base looks very similar to hockey, no descriptions of how it was played have survived.

