

## **The Household as the Foundation of Aristotle's Polis**

D. Brendan Nagle

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, xii, 352.

DOI: 10.1017/S0008423907071272

This work examines the demographics of Greek households and cities as Aristotle would have known them with a view to showing that there was a distinctively close relation between them in Aristotle's thought. For Nagle, the household was both the economic foundation of the city and also, "in some way, its moral basis" (155). This has important implications, in Nagle's view, for the understanding of citizen education, slavery and the place of women in Aristotle's political theory.

Drawing on the work of Ruschenbush and others, Nagle argues that Athens is quite misleading as an example of the cities considered by Aristotle. Of the roughly 1500 Greek cities, the average city would have been 25 to 100 kilometres square with 230 to 910 male citizens, whereas Athens was 2580 square kilometres with 25,000 to 40,000 citizens. On this basis Nagle argues that Aristotle's ideal city was only 2 per cent to 3 per cent the size of Athens and that this smaller size would have facilitated a substantially higher degree of citizen familiarity and civic participation.

In these cities, the citizen's material needs were produced almost entirely within his (sic) household. Again culling the work of others, Nagle suggests that the typical household would have been a small agricultural unit of roughly 0.2 hectares. This was much too small to support the leisure required for citizenship but also too small to support the inclusion of slaves in the household. A citizen would require a minimum householding of 12 hectares; this would support one or two slaves, provide the basic needs of life for everyone in the unit and release the householder for civic duties. This, in Nagle's view, is how we should understand Aristotle's account of the polis and household. Athens again, with its greater wealth and larger number of slaves, was anomalous.

On this basis, Nagle argues that the household played a distinctive role in the city. In the first place, it educated young men for their lives as citizens. But this raises a problem. The household is the domain of women. How could they educate young men for citizens when they lacked this education themselves? In Nagle's view, this shows that women must also have been educated within the household and perhaps more broadly. On his account, the household didn't just "develop" required virtues in young men. Rather, it constituted a space in which all the qualities for a fulfilled life—friendship and the virtues of character and intellect—could flourish in exercise by everyone, women as well as men. Nagle then argues that women's education and presence in public space would have been further advanced by their important roles in religious rites, theatre and public festivals.

In short, the work invites us to question some received views on the place of the household (and of the women and slaves in it) in the cities of Aristotle's time and in his own political theory. In particular, the strong "public-private" distinction advanced by Hannah Arendt might require some revision. Thus I recommend Nagle's account of the demographics of the polis and the household to anyone with an interest in the political theory of the period.

But it is rather different with Nagle's interpretation of the demographic data and their extrapolation into Aristotle. In fairness, the issues here are too complex to develop in a short review. My respect for Nagle's scholarship precludes any summary rejection of his reading. But I have two persistent reservations about this part of the work. The first is methodological. Large claims are frequently asserted without qualification and without considering simpler (if less exciting) alternatives. This may simply reflect the fact that the work is written by an historian, and being reviewed here by a political philosopher. But to cite just one example of this, Nagle takes pains to show that women attended dramatic and religious festivals, but then infers that this brought them close to the kinds of public experiences that males enjoyed (308) and that this was an education in philosophy that came close to Socratic *elenchus* (296). Well, perhaps.

My second reservation concerns Nagle's reading of excellence and virtue. Nagle appreciates the complexity of these concepts in Aristotle but his argument focuses narrowly on the virtues of citizenship to the relative exclusion of the other ways in which the virtues of character and intellect could be exercised and, surprisingly, to the complete exclusion of contemplation, Aristotle's highest form of flourishing. But these other forms are important. For example, with its size and diversity Athens might well—like some very large cities today—have offered opportunities

for non-civic flourishing that couldn't obtain in the smaller cities prized by Nagle; an individual might have a better life as a free non-citizen in Athens than as a citizen in his native polis. The fact that Athens was anomalous, then, doesn't show that it was irrelevant (or even marginal) in Aristotle's thinking about human well being.

DON CARMICHAEL *University of Alberta*

Review. "...this book is an invaluable compedium of information from multiple sources that will deepen any reader's understanding of the material conditions of the ancient household and the nature of the local and city-wide institutions that inculcated the values of the community." Cathal Woods, Virginia Wesleyan College, Bryn Mawr Classical Review. "I recommend Nagle's account of the demographics of the polis and the household to anyone with an interest in political theory of the period." -Don Carmichael, University of Alberta, Canadian Journal of Political Science...Â This 2006 book explains how Aristotle thought household and state interacted within the polis. About the Author. Aristotle was born in Stagira in northern Greece, and his father was a court physician to the king of Macedon. As a young man he studied in Plato's Academy in Athens. After Plato's death he left Athens to conduct philosophical and biological research in Asia Minor and Lesbos, and he was then invited by King Philip II of Macedon to tutor his young son, Alexander the Great. Soon after Alexander succeeded his father, consolidated the conquest of the Greek city-states, and launched the invasion of the Persian Empire. Aristotle returned as a resident alien to Athens, and was a close friend Aristotle was a Greek philosopher and polymath during the Classical period in Ancient Greece. Taught by Plato, he was the founder of the Lyceum, the Peripatetic school of philosophy, and the Aristotelian tradition. His writings cover many subjects including physics, biology, zoology, metaphysics, logic, ethics, aesthetics, poetry, theatre, music, rhetoric, psychology, linguistics, economics, politics, and government. Aristotle provided a complex synthesis of the various philosophies existing prior to For Nagle, the household was both the economic foundation of the city and also, "in some way, its moral basis" (155). This has important implications, in Nagle's view, for the understanding of citizen education, slavery and the place of women in Aristotle's political theory. Type. REVIEWS / RECENSIONS. Information. Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique , Volume 40 , Issue 4 , December 2007 , pp. 1061 - 1063.Â Access options. Get access to the full version of this content by using one of the access options below. If you should have access and can't see this content please contact technical support. Full text views. This 2006 book explains how Aristotle thought household and state interacted within the polis. Technical information. ISBN. 9781107403673. Published: 2011. Language.Â Buy. Reviews (0). To submit a review, please log in. Reviews from social networks. Literary news. Special lists. Your special offers. Book Recommendations. Blog.