

In Athens during the democracy and especially after a restrictive citizenship law of 451 B.C., Athenian male citizens married only Athenian women citizens. Marriage with women of other cities or with women living in Athens who did not have citizenship (resident aliens or slaves) was almost unheard of. The aspects of normal marriage were as follows:

A) The Betrothal (Engué)

Sometime after Solon (594 B.C.) it became general practice for a girl's guardian (her kurios, a father, brother, uncle etc.) to promise his ward in marriage to a suitable suitor, and agree to hand over when the marriage took place a dowry (ekdosis) of stipulated size. The couple would not, of course, have met. These were arranged marriages to serve the family's (oikos) needs rather than fulfill individual expectations. The girl would be ready for marriage at about age 14, the man in his late twenties.

B) The Marriage (Gamos)

1. On the marriage day the girl's father after due ritual gave his daughter officially away to her new master, her husband. This phase took place in the girl's home.
2. Transportation to the new home
Veiled and in white, riding in a chariot and preceded by torch bearers the bride was escorted to her new home amid appropriate hymns. The groom carried her over her new threshold.
3. The ritual
In the new home the bride was introduced to her new household gods and after appropriate ritual, prayer and sacrifice the couple shared a special cake of grain, their first meal together. Eventually the bride was taken to her new marriage bed to complete the affair.

Strangely enough the entire B) part of the marriage could be omitted and even the dowry was not absolutely necessary. It appears that the essence of legitimate marriage was 1) Athenian citizenship 2) the fact that the bride was bestowed by her male guardian (usually father) 3) living together with the intention of raising new citizen children (sunoikesis).

Divorce for the husband was simple, and the bride need only be returned without court action to her father's house complete with dowry. Thus the richer the dowry the more hesitant the dissatisfied husband would be in sending the lady home.

During this same time period in Sparta rather old-fashioned marriage practices were in vogue based on simulated rape-abduction. Young Spartan brides were said to have dressed like boys on their wedding night and to have stayed in their father's houses for some time thereafter since a Spartan warrior was allowed to marry at 20 but was not permitted to set up a house and openly cohabit with his wife until he was 30. Visits to his wife were made secretly at night, as if the husband were on a raid. As with Athenians Spartans of the elite warrior class only married endogamously within their own narrow group. In both cities one wife was the norm though a man could have instead of a wife a sort of second-class wife or concubine (pallaké).

Rather different were the marriage practices of the archaic or aristocratic age (8th - 7th century B.C.) which are in a mixed way revealed in Homer. The Homeric male could get a wife (alochos) in various ways, the most common being to offer a girl's father a bountiful bride-price (hedna). To us this appears as though he has bought a girl. The higher the family's status, the greater the gifts, usually cattle, needed to secure the maiden. To them it was probably conceived of as an interchange of valuable presents between two houses binding them together in reciprocal gift giving. One family gets a fine bride, the other gets some nice cows.

Another method of getting a wife in the Heroic age was to go on a raid and steal one (compare the Spartan practice). Once again it depended on the status of the girl's family as to how she would be treated as a wife, or even whether the spear-won lass would be categorized as a wife at all. It was all rather vague at times and even the Greeks had trouble with these different types of marriages. Indeed as Greek myths sometimes indicate a father could even let his daughter decide on her own choice of husband or hold an international contest for those eager to win her hand. Such a marriage actually took place when the daughter of Cleisthenes, tyrant of Sicyon, was given to Megacles the Athenian after extensive testing of suitors from far and wide. Be it noted this was before the rise of democracy when such international matches among aristocrats were quite common. The descendant of this famous marriage was Pericles, the greatest Athenian democratic statesman, who ironically was the one who passed the restrictive citizenship law of 451 which effectively ruled out Athenian marriages with foreigners.