

What is the point of a dowry in Athenian Marriage and Law?

Athenian Marriage customs required a dowry, something which a woman would take with her when she got married (and would remain hers if the marriage was dissolved). In essence, “the dowry was designed to provide the wife with some protection if her husband abandoned or divorced her”¹. The dowry of a woman was, therefore, very important in Athenian Marriage and Law.

A dowry was important in marriage and law in Ancient Athens because of the it gave security to the wife, should anything happen to end the marriage; anything she brought into the marriage will remain hers should said marriage be ended. The security provided by a dowry was important for a woman, as there was little other power that women were given in marriage, or in Athenian society as a whole (such as voting rights), as it would ensure that she had some property or money (depending on the status of those involved) should anything happen to her marriage. There is also the idea that the exchange of a dowry and its possible return to the bride’s familial oikos would provide an “incentive for the wife’s birth family to retain an interest in the marriage and in her well-being”². This would ensure that the bride would be able to return to her original oikos should her marriage be ended, as she is bringing something back into the oikos which will be beneficial to it.

Marriage in Ancient Athens was a transaction between two oikos, with the dowry serving as a sort of insurance for the bride as the marriage was an “unstable transaction”³ which could be ended with very little forewarning or reasoning. Women had very little say over property in Ancient Athens, with their dowry remaining their property but being under the management of her husband. Women only inherited property if their father died without providing any male heirs to take the inheritance (this woman was called an *epikleros*), though in this event, women would be married off to the “nearest male relative even if she was already married”⁴ (though it is unclear how many times a men lost their wives in these circumstances). Even if the inherited property an *epikleros* had was small, the nearest male relative to her father would still be required to marry her, otherwise he was compelled by the *Archon* (senior magistrate of the State) to “provide her with a dowry of his own and find her a husband”⁵.

A dowry was important in Athenian marriage and law because it gave women security both within their marriage and to return to their original oikos should anything happen to end the marriage. While women were not able to manage their own property (as seen with the *epikleros*), they were still the official owners of the dowry exchanged at the beginning of the marriage.

¹ Rehm, “Marriage to Death: The Conflation of Wedding and Funeral Rituals in Greek Tragedy”, 1994, pg11

² <http://www.womenintheancientworld.com/marriageinancientathens.htm>

³ Ormand, “Exchange and the Maiden”, 1999, pg17

⁴ Ormand, “Exchange and the Maiden”, 1999, pg 17

⁵ http://www.stoa.org/demos/article_women_and_family@page=9&greekEncoding=UnicodeC.html