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Women in Ancient Rome—Piecing Together A Historical Picture

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FROM THE LECTURE SERIES: THE RISE OF ROME

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A major obstacle to studying the lives of women in Ancient Rome is the problem of surviving sources—the sources available to us were all authored by men. As a result, nearly everything we know about Roman women is filtered through the lens of how Roman men viewed them. Despite this, historians have still been able to piece together a picture of what life may have looked like for women in Ancient Rome. Here’s what they have learned.



(Image: By Andrei Molchan/Shutterstock)

Women's Legal Status in Ancient Rome

Women in Ancient Rome did not have equal legal status with men. By law, Roman girls and women were almost always under the jurisdiction of a male, whether a paterfamilias, a husband, or a legally appointed guardian. Throughout her life, a woman might pass from the control of one male to another—most typically, from father to husband.

Despite their inferior legal status, Roman mothers were expected to be strong figures within the household, to play an important role in supervising the upbringing and education of children, and to maintain the smooth day-to-day running of the household.

Above all, the Roman wife was expected to be self-effacing and to provide strong support for, but not any challenge to, the paterfamilias.

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Rich and Poor Women in Rome

Roman women in poor families often had to work hard, just like the men in the family. Most women's day-to-day lives were thus not significantly different from men's, although legally, they were accorded an inferior status. Upper-class girls were raised almost entirely within the household, rarely venturing outside the house itself.

This is a transcript from the video series
The Rise of Rome. [Watch it now, on](#)
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There are a few famous examples of highly educated women, but on the whole—and especially during the early and middle Republic—excessive knowledge or intellectual ability in women was regarded with suspicion and disfavor. The main focus of a girl's education was to learn how to spin thread and weave clothing.

Most aristocratic women were probably married off in their mid-teens, and a woman who was not wed by 20 was considered a deviant. Later, the emperor Augustus would formalize this judgment by passing a law that heavily penalized any woman over the age of 20 who was unmarried. The man that a girl wed was selected by her father, usually for economic or political reasons. The Romans allowed marriages between closer family members than we would. It was permissible for first cousins to marry, and from the early empire on, uncles could even marry their nieces.

Ancient Roman Marriage

Marriage was a political tool and used to cement an alliance between two families or political factions. It was extremely common for politicians to marry, divorce, and remarry as their political allegiances shifted, or to contract marriages among their children.



Fragment from the front of a sarcophagus, showing a Roman marriage ceremony. (Image: By Unknown/Public Domain)

The desire to use children as political pawns led to children being engaged at very young ages, sometimes even as babies. To curb this, a law was passed stating that to be engaged, the two people had to be at least seven years old.

To symbolize the engagement, the man (or boy) placed an iron ring on the middle finger of the left hand of his fiancée. The reason for this was that, while conducting dissections of human bodies, Roman doctors believed that they had discovered a nerve that ran directly from this finger to the heart. To make a marriage legally binding was very simple.

The only requirement was a public statement of intent. Marriage was viewed as a religious duty whose goal was to produce children to ensure that the family gods would continue to be worshipped.

Learn more about [how women throughout Rome were expected to marry and live sheltered lives](#)

During most of the Republic, the most common form of marriage was known as a *manus* marriage. *Manus* means “hand” in Latin, and this marriage received its name from the fact that the woman was regarded as a piece of property that passed from the hand of her father to that of her husband.

In this type of marriage, the woman had no rights, and any property she had was under the control of her husband. She herself was considered the legal equivalent of a daughter to her husband, and he had all the powers of life and death which a father held over a daughter.

The Marriage Ceremony—Types of Marriage in Ancient Rome

There were three ways in which a *manus* marriage could be legally contracted.

The most archaic, called a *confarreatio* marriage, required engaging in a series of complicated religious rituals.

The second, and more common, was the *coemptio* marriage. In this form of marriage, the groom symbolically gave money to the bride’s father and thus was viewed as having bought her like a piece of property.

A final sort was the *usus* marriage, or the marriage accomplished by use. In an *usus* marriage, the man

and woman simply began to live together, and on the day after they had lived together continuously for one year, the woman passed under the control of her husband in a *manus* marriage. This was probably the kind of marriage most typical among ordinary or poorer Romans.

While a legally binding marriage could consist of merely a statement of intent, just as today, there were many rituals that people commonly performed to mark the occasion symbolically. As they are described, note how several of them are like modern wedding rituals and may have been the inspiration for some of these. Typically, the bride-to-be would dedicate her childhood toys to the household gods, signifying that she was making the transition from child to woman.

While she had been a child, she would usually have worn her hair in a pony-tail, but on her wedding day, her hair was parted into six strands which were then tied together on top of her head in a complex fashion, forming a cone shape. It was traditional that her hair be parted using a bent iron spear-head, and the best spear-head of all was one which had been used to kill a gladiator. Gladiators were sometimes seen as symbols of virility, so perhaps this custom was viewed as a way to ensure a fertile union. The bride then donned a veil of transparent fabric that was bright orange or red in color, which her shoes matched. Her tunic was white, and she placed a wreath of marjoram on her head.

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In front of a gathering of friends and relatives, various sacrifices were performed and the woman declared to her husband, "I am now of your family," at which point their hands were joined. This was followed by a feast at which the new bride and groom sat side by



Sarcophagus of the Dioscures, detail depicting the marriage of a Roman couple joining hands; the bride's belt may show the knot symbolizing that the husband was "belted and bound" to her, which he was to untie in their bed. (Image: By Ad Meskens/Public Domain).

side in two chairs over which was stretched a single sheep-skin. At the feast, it was customary for the guests to shout "*Feliciter!*" which means "happiness" or "good luck." Towards the end of the evening, the bride was placed in the arms of her mother, and then the groom came and tore her out of her mother's grasp.

Women in the Roman Family

The main duty of the wife was to produce children, but because some were married before they were physically mature, not surprisingly, many young wives died of complications during childbirth. One of the main sources of information on Roman women is their tombstones.

Many of these record the sad stories of girls who were married at 12 or 13, gave birth five or six times, and died in childbirth before they reached the age of 20.

These tombstones are also the best guide to what Roman men considered the ideal qualities of a wife. Some of the most common positive attributes used by husbands to describe their deceased wives include chaste, obedient, friendly, old-fashioned, frugal, content to stay at home, pious, dressed simply, good at spinning thread, and good at weaving cloth.



The main duty of the roman wife was to produce children. (Image: By Marie-Lan Nguyen (2009)/Public Domain)

One way that Roman men were praised on their tombstones was to say that they treated their wives kindly, with the implication that such kindness was unnecessary and perhaps even unusual. In a manus marriage, for example, a husband could beat his wife with impunity, and was expected to do so if she “misbehaved.”

Husbands and wives were obligated to produce children, but there often seems not to have been a lot of affection between them. Marriage was seen as a social and political relationship, not a romantic one. Some of this lack of warmth was no doubt because many Roman men and women did not themselves

choose their spouses, and frequently there was a vast age difference between them.

A woman was supposed to spend most of her time within the confines of the household. When upper-class women did venture out of the house—to visit the marketplace, the baths, temples, or female friends—they were often transported in curtained litters carried by slaves, both to avoid the filth in the streets and to stay concealed and unseen in public.

Learn more about [how the life of children in ancient Rome would be considered brutal by today's standards](#)

Women were supposed to be modest and chaste. A Roman matron's clothing was intended to cover her completely, and statues frequently depict women making a specific gesture meant to communicate their *pudicitia* or modesty. Fidelity to one's husband was crucial. It was considered wrong for a woman to be avaricious, ambitious, ostentatious, or self-promoting.

Common Questions About the Life of Women in Ancient Rome

Q: Did women have a defined role in ancient Rome?

Women in ancient Rome were largely expected to **raise children** and tend to the house.

Q: Did the women of ancient Rome enlist in the military?

Women in ancient Rome were not allowed in the military, but it is now thought that they took part in

the **triumphal ceremonies**.

Q: What was the social life of women in ancient Rome?

The **social life of women in ancient Rome** was limited as they could not vote or hold office and were expected to spend most of their time in the house tending to the needs of the husband and children. However, while at the market they were very social.

Q: Was there any public role for women in ancient Rome?

The role of **Vestal virgin** in the priesthood was a very important public role strictly for **women in ancient Rome**.

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