Chapter 10: Rome: From City-State to Empire: 10-6b Gender Relations
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10-6b Gender Relations

The earmark of female status was the far-reaching authority of the father over his daughter and, indeed, over all his *familia*—defined as wife, children, grandchildren, and household slaves. This **patria potestas** ((PAH-tree-yah poh-TESS-tahs) The power of the father over his family in ancient Rome.) (PAH-tree-ah poh-TESS-tahs; literally, the "power of the father") extended even to life and death, although the exercise of the death penalty was rare.

All Roman law was concerned primarily with the protection of property, and the laws concerning women clearly show that they were considered the property of the male head of the familia. It is worth noting that the father's powers exceeded those of the husband. For example, if a wife died without leaving a will, the property she left reverted not to her husband but to her father. A woman who passed from her father's control and was not under that of a husband was termed **sui iuris** ((SOO-ee YOO-riss) Of his own law; Roman term for an individual, especially a female, who was not restricted by the usual laws or customs.) (SOO-ee YOO-riss; "of his or her own law"). This status was quite unusual. Women who were neither married nor possessing sui iuris had to be under tutelage—that is, a male relative was legally responsible for her.

Roman girls married young by today's standards, and betrothal often occurred much earlier still. Marriage at age thirteen was not unusual. The girl's consent was not necessary. Unlike in many other civilizations, a Roman widow was expected to remarry if she could, and she was normally then sui iuris—legally equal to her new husband in terms of control over property.

A Roman Apartment House.

This model has been reconstructed from archaeological evidence found at Ostia, Rome's port. The building on the right is the home of a wealthy family, possibly the owners of the multistory tenement to the left. Although some tenements were solidly built, many were thrown up to maximize the income for the landlord and allowed to become filthy nests.

Scala/Art Resource, NY

Divorce of wives by husbands was common among the upper classes. Augustus, scandalized by the habits of some of his colleagues, decreed that a man catching his wife in adultery must divorce her or be considered her procurer and be punished himself. Divorce was much harder for a woman to obtain, and sexual impotence was one of the few grounds accepted. Because marriage was considered a consensual union rather than a legal obligation of the spouses, the lack of continued consent was itself grounds for its dissolution. This is the source of the modern divorce by "irreconcilable differences." Abortion was legal until the first century C.E., and when it was then declared a crime, it was because the act affected the property of the father of the fetus—a typical Roman viewpoint. Infanticide by exposure also continued, but no one knows how common it may have been or whether it favored the male over the female child, as is frequently assumed. A large proportion of slaves and prostitutes originated as girl babies picked up "from the trash heap," as the Roman saying went.

Women worked in all trades not requiring the heaviest labor. Textile trades were still the most common occupation for women of all classes, slave and free. Midwives, many physicians, scribes, and secretaries were female. Personal servants, hairdressers, nannies, and masseuses (a Roman passion) were always women. Entertainers of all sorts—acrobats, clowns, actresses, musicians, dancers—were in high demand. They were often female and frequently combined their stage talents with a bit of prostitution on the side. The tradition that female artistes are sexually available continues in Mediterranean folklore to the present day.

Like most peoples, Romans attempted to legislate morality. Rape and female adultery were two of the most serious offenses. Both were punishable by death, although actual prosecutions seem to have been few. Homosexuality does not seem to have been as widespread in Rome as it had been in Greece, although it was certainly not unusual among the upper classes. Prostitution itself was not illegal, but it carried with it *infamia* (in-FAH-mee-ah), meaning disrepute and shame for the practitioners.

Yet, for all the disadvantages women had under Roman law, it would be incorrect to conclude that relations between the sexes were entirely bad. Husbands and wives, parents and children seem to have had genuine feelings of affection for each other. Some of the best sources of information suggestive of Romans' personal lives are grave markers. For a few samples, see the Evidence of the Past feature.

Evidence of the Past

Roman Tomb Inscriptions

Inscriptions on burials in ancient Rome provide glimpses of ordinary Romans, their familial ties, and their roles in society. Romans of financial means placed their tombs side by side along the major roads, with the inscriptions facing the roads. Prosperous freedmen built highly visible, elaborate tombs, perhaps intending to establish a new family line. For example, Eurysaces's unusual bakery-shaped tomb is situated at the busy intersection of two major roads (see the first item below). The coffins of the uncremated wealthy owners might be flanked by niches containing the ashes or bones of slaves and freed persons (ex-slaves). Many inscriptions are narratives about the deceased, with family members mentioned by name. The preservation of family history was well worth the cost of having these tributes chiselled in stone. The emphasis was on events in this life; the shadowy afterlife held no appeal for pagan Romans (see the first four inscriptions below). The infant's epitaph in the last item shows a picture of the dove of Noah, symbol of a Christian grave.

1. The baker and his wife (50–20 B.C.E.)

This is the monument of M. V. Eurysaces [freedman of Marcus Vergilius, of Syrian origin] baker, bread-contractor to civil servants. Atistia was my wife, she lived the best of women, whose remains lie in this "bread-basket".

2. The boy prodigy (late first century C.E.)

To Q. Sulpicius Maximus, son of Quintus, born in Rome, and lived eleven years, 5 months, 12 days. He won the competition, among 52 Greek poets, at the third celebration of the Capitoline games. His most unhappy parents, Q. S. Eugramus and L. Januaria, have had his extemporized poem engraved here, to prove that in praising his talents they were not inspired solely by their deep love for him.

3. Inscription on the urn of a son, Marius Exoriens

The preposterous laws of death have torn him from my arms! As I have the advantage of years, so ought death to have reaped me first.

4. Beloved infant (fourth century C.E.)

To Brumasia, sweetest daughter, well-deserving [of this tribute], who lived one year nine months. She is at peace.

5. Aurelia Philematium, faithful wife

I was a woman chaste and modest, unsoiled by the common crowd, faithful to her husband. My husband whom, alas, I now have left, was a fellow freedman. He was

truly like a father to me. When I was 7 years old he embraced me. Now I am 40 and in the power of death. Through my constant care, my husband flourished.

6. Beloved wife, Blandinia Mariola (Gaul, second century C.E.)

Pompeius Catussa … dedicates this memorial to his wife who … lived with him for 5 years, 6 months, and 18 days. You who read this, go bathe in the public baths of Apollo, as I used to do with my wife. I wish I could still.

Analyze and Interpret

Compare and contrast the three epitaphs for children (the boy prodigy, the inscription on the urn of a son, and the beloved infant). Which of these inscriptions is most like a modern one? Explain your answer.

What do you surmise about the characteristics of the ideal Roman matron, based on the epitaph about the faithful wife?