MEN'S AGE AT MARRIAGE
AND ITS CONSEQUENCES
IN THE ROMAN FAMILY

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A GE AT FIRST MARRIAGE of men and women is a significant factor influencing the size and shape of families. In a classic article published two decades ago, J. Hajnal drew a broad historical distinction between eastern and western family forms based in part on characteristic marriage age: in western Europe men and women took a first spouse of much the same age relatively late (mid-twenties), while in areas of eastern Europe and the Balkans first marriage for both sexes usually occurred in the teens.[1] Since publication of that article, the broad distinction has been refined, in particular with the addition of a Mediterranean type in which men tend to get married for the first time in their late twenties or thirties, a decade or so later than women.[2]

The typical ages at marriage have various implications for family size and form. Through a computer simulation devised by K. W. Wachter, E. A. Hammel, and P. Laslett, it was discovered that among the demographic variables household size was most sensitive to changes in age at first marriage.[3] In regard to family form, the western marriage pattern is associated with the nuclear family, while the eastern pattern has been found in areas where large, extended family households were common.[4] Because of their influence on the shape of the basic social unit, the family, it is worth trying to identify typical ages at marriage in Roman society with as much accuracy as possible and to consider the family of the western Roman Empire in relation to the typology.

For demographers female age at marriage is of chief interest because of its importance for fertility rates. For the historian of the Roman family and society, on the other hand, the usual age at marriage for men deserves close attention because of its consequences for the effects of *patria*

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1. "European Marriage Patterns in Perspective," in *Population in History,* ed. D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley (London, 1965), pp. 101–43; and more recently id., "Two Kinds of Pre-Industrial Household Formation System," in *Family Forms in Historic Europe,* ed. R. Wall, J. Robin, and P. Laslett (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 65–104.

2. P. Laslett includes "Mediterranean" in his recent typology in "Family and Household as Work Group and Kin Group: Areas of Traditional Europe Compared," in *Family Forms,* pp. 526–27. Hajnal had already noted in "European Marriage Patterns" that the low marriage age for women in parts of Italy and Spain represented a departure from his "European pattern" (p. 103).

3. *Statistical Studies of Historical Social Structure* (New York, 1978), p. 50.

4. R. Wall, "Introduction," *Family Forms,* p. 16; Laslett, "Family and Household," pp. 526–27.

potestas and, indeed, for the whole image of the Roman family. In the recent literature on the family it has become fashionable to emphasize the powerful effects of *patria potestas*. The legal powers of a father over his son, it has been argued, resulted in a dominance of the older generation over the younger in public life and an oppressiveness at home that produced hostility and even violence in the form of parricide—a dark side of Roman civilization.[5] As for daughters, a recent essay has suggested that the stress on the freedom of Roman women has been misguided, because, though women in non-*manus* marriages were not under the authority of their husbands, they remained in the *potestas* of the father and so without rights of ownership or the power to make decisions regarding marriage.[6] Most of these claims have been advanced without consideration of the demographic realities. How many adult men and women in the Roman Empire are likely to have had a living father? The answer to this question depends in part on the age at which men were married: put briefly, the later in life men married, the larger the genera-tion gap and, consequently, the fewer fathers alive for children of a given age.[7]

The body of this paper is divided into two sections. The first offers a new analysis of the epigraphic evidence for male age at marriage. The second uses the results of the epigraphic study to estimate, with the aid of a computer simulation, what proportion of the population at a given age would have had a living father or paternal grandfather and so would have been *in potestate*. The scope of the study is determined by the availability of the epigraphic evidence: it covers those regions of the Latin-speaking west of the Roman Empire that have yielded enough epitaphs of the standard type; the inscriptions come largely from the second and early third centuries after Christ.[8]

I. THE AGE AT FIRST MARRIAGE OF ROMAN MEN

Data and method. By the second century after Christ Roman culture had spread in the western Empire so that funerary commemorations with standard Roman elements were widely erected, not only by Roman emigrants but also by natives, as the many non-Roman names on the tombstones make clear. The following is a typical inscription with the data

5. P. Veyne, "La famille et l'amour sous le Haut-Empire romain," *Annales (ESC)* 33 (1978): 36; Y. Thomas, "Parricidium I: Le père, la famille et la cité," *MEFRA* 93 (1981): 690, and id., "Droit domestique et droit politique à Rome: Remarques sur le pecule et les *honores* des fils de famille," *MEFRA* 94 (1982): 552; K. Hopkins, *Death and Renewal* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 245; the theme was developed some time ago by D. Daube in "Did Macedo Murder His Father?" *ZSS* 65 (1947): 261–311, and more recently in *Roman Law: Linguistic, Social and Philosophical Aspects* (Edinburgh, 1969), p. 88.

6. A. S. Gratwick, "Free or Not So Free? Wives and Daughters in the Late Roman Republic," in *Marriage and Property,* ed. E. M. Craik (Aberdeen, 1984), pp. 30–53.

7. L. Bonfield, "Marriage Settlements and the 'Rise of Great Estates': The Demographic Aspect," *Economic History Review* n.s. 32 (1979): 483–93, uses a similar demographic argument to show that since most fathers of the early modern English nobility did not live to see their eldest son's marriage, strict settlements to keep property in the family cannot have been used as extensively as previously supposed.

8. R. MacMullen, "The Epigraphic Habit in the Roman Empire," *AJP* 103 (1982): 233–46, reproduces evidence for the chronological distribution of Latin inscriptions and also discusses them as a reflection of romanization.

necessary for this study (*CIL* 11. 784): "D. M. C(aio) Tuscilio Romano Elpis coniunx coniugi b(ene) m(erenti) f(ecit) vixit a(nnis) XXXV" ("To the sacred shades. For Gaius Tuscilius Romanus, a well-deserving spouse, his spouse Elpis made this; he lived 35 years"). Occasionally a husband or wife also included the length of the marriage. Past conclusions about male and female ages at marriage have been based on the few hundred epitaphs with such information.[9] The advantage of this approach is the precision with which the age at marriage can be calculated. The disadvantage is that only a handful of such informative inscriptions are extant from each province (the bulk come from Rome); consequently, all had to be averaged together, and no allowance could be made for regional variation of the kind that studies of more recent eras would lead us to expect.[10]

To take account of regional differences, I have adopted a less restrictive approach. From the tens of thousands of funerary inscriptions I have sorted out all those for males over the age of ten that give age at death and the kinship relation of the commemorator. The result is a body of data for the provinces more than ten times larger than that of the previous studies. This larger body of data has allowed more discrimination in other critical respects: all soldiers and those suspected to be of servile origins have been excluded on the grounds that service in the army (often lasting for decades) and slavery must have disrupted normal patterns of family life; and because Christian doctrine influenced family mores, epitaphs of Christians have also been eliminated.

For each province or region I have grouped and tabulated the data according to age at death and relationship of the commemorator (table 1.a–g) to enable the reader to see what proportion of commemorations for deceased men of various age groups came from what sort of kin. The aim was to determine at what age men began to be commemorated by wives or children (rather than parents or siblings) in significant numbers. The fact that a man commemorated by a wife had been married for an unknown period is of no consequence in this method: the principal question is what proportion of men dying at a given age were married and had a wife to commemorate them.

The data, though they are the best available for arriving at a general idea of age at marriage, have limitations and biases. No precise mean or mode can be calculated, even for those areas yielding a great deal of useful data. For other provinces, particularly those of northwestern Europe, too few inscriptions are available to make any survey at all worthwhile. Some areas (notably in North Africa) offer large numbers of tombstones, but without the indication of commemorator required by our method. In all

9. A. Harkness, "Age at Marriage and at Death in the Roman Empire," *TAPA* 27 (1896): 35–72; K. Hopkins, "The Age of Roman Girls at Marriage," *Population Studies* 18 (1965): 309–27.

10. For evidence of variations and fluctuations in marriage ages in medieval Italy, see D. O. Hughes, "Urban Growth and Family Structure in Medieval Genoa," *P&P* 66 (1974): 22, and D. Herlihy, "The Generation in Medieval History," *Viator* 5 (1974): 347–64. Herlihy writes of a "great change in European marriage across the central Middle Ages" in "the opening up of a significant gap between the ages of the bride and groom" (p. 359). Perhaps so, but such a gap had been typical in much of Mediterranean Europe a millennium earlier.

regions the published inscriptions come mainly from the towns, leaving the countryside grossly underrepresented. On the other hand, many of the towns were modest and included families whose livelihood came from the land. The social class of the deceased often cannot be determined with precision. Since those in the ruling classes usually indicated their exalted rank, it is possible to argue from the absence of such indications on most epitaphs that most of the data come from social strata below the elite. It must be assumed further that the impoverished could not afford any funerary monument.[11]

Finally, the biases in ages recorded in the dedications must be considered. In a fundamental article on the use of epitaphs for demographic studies, K. Hopkins pointed out that epitaphs including age at death are not a representative cross section of the population in most areas.[12] The distribution of the ages in some regions makes it clear that there was a stronger inclination to erect a commemoration including age at death for those who died in the flower of youth than for mature adults or the very young. Such biases make these inscriptions useless for establishing the life expectancy of the population, but they do not affect the argument of this study. Of interest here is what proportion of the deceased in a particular age group were commemorated by parents, by a wife, or by other kin, not whether that age group is over- or underrepresented in comparison with other age groups.

The phenomena of age-rounding and age-exaggeration also require comment. In some areas of the Empire older Romans tended to add two years to their age for every calendar year they lived and then rounded off their age to numbers ending in 0 or 5.[13] For instance, among the 171 males from the Danubian provinces surveyed for this study, nearly a third (53) were said to have died at an age ending in 0—obviously a statistical improbability. Age exaggeration in North African tombstones is such that the naive might be led to believe that octogenarians, nonagenarians, and centenarians were common in the salubrious North African climate. Fortunately, these sources of inaccuracy would not appear to present serious difficulties for our study. The critical age group for our purposes is 15 to 39, and in this group age-exaggeration is not significant. Since this study is concerned with broad age groups rather than specific ages, age-rounding does not vitiate the argument. There would be cause for concern only if a large number of wives commemorated husbands whose age was listed as 25 but who were in fact significantly younger. Of the twenty wife-to-husband dedications in the 25 to 29 year age bracket, seven were to 25-year-old husbands—a proportion that may reflect some age-rounding, but not enough to require altering the conclusions.

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11. R. Saller and B. Shaw, "Tombstones and Roman Family Relations in the Principate: Civilians, Soldiers and Slaves," *JRS* 74 (1984): 127.

12. "On the Probable Age Structure of the Roman Population," *Population Studies* 20 (1966): 245–64.

13. R. Duncan-Jones, "Age-rounding, Illiteracy and Social Differentiation in the Roman Empire," *Chiron* 7 (1977): 333–53, discusses age-rounding and points out the increasing tendency to round at higher ages (p. 348).

The following regions were chosen for analysis because they offered enough inscriptions with the information required: (a) the provinces of Lusitania and Baetica in the southwestern Iberian peninsula; (b) Aquitania and Narbonensis in southern Gaul; (c) Etruria, Umbria, and Aemilia in northern peninsular Italy; (d) in southern Italy regiones II and IV, including Apulia, Calabria, and Samnium; (e) the Danubian provinces of the Moesias, Dalmatia, Dacia, and the Pannonias; (f) Theveste and its region in the North African province of Numidia; and (g) Mauretania Caesariensis. The Gallic province of Lugdunensis was also surveyed in the hope of collecting an adequate body of data: though the results were similar to those from the other regions, the numbers were too small to justify a table. The city of Rome has been omitted because of the large proportion of slaves and ex-slaves in the population.

Results. The results for all regions studied are broadly similar and point to late age at marriage for men in all populations of the western Empire sufficiently romanized to erect the standard type of funerary inscription.

Young men in their late teens are overrepresented in the tables (1.a–g), to judge from a comparison with appropriate model life tables[14]—no doubt because their tender age at death prompted their parents to take note of it in the inscription. Of the 128 men commemorated in the 15 to 19 year age bracket from all regions, none was commemorated by a wife or child. In a great majority of cases (111) the parents provided the dedication. A small fraction must have been orphans at their deaths (perhaps one-sixth or so, based on the simulation described in the next section). For them the dedications were erected by siblings or by more distant kin. Since in older age brackets, as we shall see, wives and children were preferred as commemorators to siblings and more distant kin, the complete absence of wife or children as commemorators for this group surely means that teenage marriages were generally rare for men.

The next age bracket, 20 to 24, exhibits much the same distribution. In every population, seventy-five percent or more of the deceased were commemorated by one or both parents—more or less the proportion who would have been survived by at least one parent (again, based on the simulation). Naturally, because a somewhat larger proportion were parentless than in the younger age bracket, correspondingly more received dedications from other kin: most were siblings; only two were wives, one from Spain (1.a) and one from northern Italy (1.c) (5 percent and 10 percent, respectively, of the total in the age bracket from each area). The available evidence suggests that men in the populations erecting commemorations normally did not marry before age 25.

For men in their later twenties or older, wives regularly appear in dedications, but the interpretation of the data is made difficult by apparent variations in commemorative customs. In some regions the rapid disappearance of parent dedicators for men dying in their thirties or forties suggests that during marriage the wife or children became the

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14. For the most appropriate model life table for the Roman Empire, see n. 27 below.

TABLE 1

DISTRIBUTION OF EPITAPHS FOR MEN BY AGE AND RELATION OF COMMEMORATOR

a. SPAIN: LUSITANIA AND BAETICA

AGE OF DECEASED	RELATIONSHIP OF COMMEMORATOR					Total
	Parent	Sibling	Wife	Child[a]	Kin[b]	
10–14	3(75)[c]	—	—	—	1(25)	4
15–19	16(80)	3(15)	—	—	1(5)	20
20–24	15(75)	2(10)	1(5)	—	2(10)	20
25–29	9(60)	2(13)	4(27)	—	—	15
30–34	5(42)	4(33)	3(25)	—	—	12
35–39	6(50)	2(17)	2(17)	1(8)	1(8)	12
40–49	4(18)	2(9)	11(50)	3(14)	2(9)	22
50+	—	1(3)	14(42)	18(55)	—	33
Total	58(42)	16(12)	35(25)	22(16)	7(5)	138

b. GAUL: NARBONENSIS AND AQUITANIA

AGE OF DECEASED	RELATIONSHIP OF COMMEMORATOR					Total
	Parent	Sibling	Wife	Child[a]	Kin[b]	
10–14	8(67)[c]	1(8)	—	—	3(25)	12
15–19	19(95)	—	—	—	1(5)	20
20–24	15(79)	1(5)	—	—	3(16)	19
25–29	7(58)	—	4(33)	—	—	11
30–34	1(25)	—	3(75)	—	—	4
35–39	1(17)	1(17)	3(50)	1(17)	—	6
40–49	—	—	10(83)	1(8)	1(8)	12
50+	—	1(12)	2(25)	5(62)	—	8
Total	51(55)	4(4)	22(24)	7(8)	8(9)	92

c. NORTHERN PENINSULAR ITALY

AGE OF DECEASED	RELATIONSHIP OF COMMEMORATOR					Total
	Parent	Sibling	Wife	Child[a]	Kin[b]	
10–14	12(92)[c]	—	—	—	1(8)	13
15–19	21(95)	1(5)	—	—	—	22
20–24	6(60)	2(20)	1(10)	—	1(10)	10
25–29	7(78)	—	2(22)	—	—	9
30–34	2(29)	1(14)	4(57)	—	—	7
35–39	3(43)	1(14)	3(43)	—	—	7
40–49	1(12)	—	7(88)	—	—	8
50+	—	1(9)	7(64)	3(27)	—	11
Total	52(60)	6(7)	24(28)	3(3)	2(2)	87

d. SOUTHERN ITALY

AGE OF DECEASED	RELATIONSHIP OF COMMEMORATOR					Total
	Parent	Sibling	Wife	Child[a]	Kin[b]	
10–14	16(94)[c]	—	—	—	1(6)	17
15–19	21(91)	—	—	—	2(9)	23
20–24	23(100)	—	—	—	—	23
25–29	16(100)	—	—	—	—	16
30–34	5(56)	—	3(33)	—	1(11)	9
35–39	2(29)	1(14)	4(57)	—	—	7
40–49	—	—	9(100)	—	—	9
50+	—	—	11(69)	5(31)	—	16
Total	83(69)	1(1)	27(22)	5(4)	4(3)	120

e. DANUBIAN PROVINCES

	RELATIONSHIP OF COMMEMORATOR					
	Parent	Sibling	Wife	Child[a]	Kin[b]	Total
10–14	19(90)[c]	—	—	—	2(10)	21
15–19	22(79)	1(4)	—	—	5(18)	28
20–24	19(76)	5(20)	—	—	1(4)	25
AGE OF 25–29	11(46)	5(21)	7(29)	1(4)	—	24
DECEASED 30–34	9(36)	5(20)	10(40)	—	1(4)	25
35–39	2(12)	2(12)	10(63)	2(12)	—	16
40–49	4(13)	1(3)	17(55)	9(29)	—	31
50+	1(1)	2(3)	33(47)	30(43)	4(6)	70
Total	87(36)	21(9)	77(32)	42(17)	13(5)	240

f. AFRICA: THEVESTE REGION

	RELATIONSHIP OF COMMEMORATOR					
	Parent	Sibling	Wife	Child[a]	Kin[b]	Total
10–14	4(100)[c]	—	—	—	—	4
15–19	3(60)	—	—	—	2(40)	5
20–24	3(75)	1(25)	—	—	—	4
25–29	6(75)	2(25)	—	—	—	8
AGE OF 30–34	4(50)	2(25)	1(12)	1(12)	—	8
DECEASED 35–39	3(60)	1(20)	1(20)	—	—	5
40–49	1(8)	2(15)	5(38)	5(38)	—	13
50+	—	3(4)	17(24)	50(70)	1(1)	71
Total	24(20)	11(9)	24(20)	56(47)	3(3)	118

g. AFRICA: MAURETANIA CAESARIENSIS

	RELATIONSHIP OF COMMEMORATOR					
	Parent	Sibling	Wife	Child[a]	Kin[b]	Total
10–14	2(100)[c]	—	—	—	—	2
15–19	9(90)	1(10)	—	—	—	10
20–24	6(86)	1(14)	—	—	—	7
25–29	3(37)	3(37)	2(25)	—	—	8
AGE OF 30–34	—	—	1(100)	—	—	1
DECEASED 35–39	1(25)	1(25)	2(50)	—	—	4
40–49	3(16)	3(16)	11(58)	2(11)	—	19
50+	1(3)	4(11)	17(46)	14(38)	1(3)	37
Total	25(28)	13(15)	33(37)	16(18)	1(1)	88

[a] In cases where a wife and children provided a joint commemoration, the dedication was counted in the wife column, so that the column headed "child" generally represents independent commemorations from children.

[b] "Kin" here includes only relatives outside the immediate family.

[c] The figures in parentheses give the percentage of all dedications within the age bracket.

culturally preferred commemorators. Wives replace parents as the most common dedicators to men in the 30 to 34 year age group in southern Gaul (1.b), northern Italy (1.c), the Danubian provinces (1.e), and Mauretania Caesariensis (1.g). This shift appears in the table for southern Italy in the 35 to 39 year age group (1.d). On the face of it, the conclusion to be drawn from these tables is that men in southern Gaul, northern Italy, and the Danubian provinces were usually married by their early thirties, and in southern Italy perhaps somewhat later. But it is possible that the relative proportions of parents and wives may have been influenced by cultural factors. In particular, parents may have felt rather more inclined than wives to include age at death and consequently may be over-represented in the inscriptions counted for the tables. If so, then the usual age at marriage should be placed in the late twenties. Since wives were willing to record the age of husbands who died after 30, the absence of wife-to-husband dedications for men younger than 24 cannot be explained by the hypothesis that it was customary for wives to omit the age of their deceased husbands.

In contrast to the regions above, it looks as if parents in Spain (1.a) and in the area around Theveste (1.f) continued to be the preferred commemorators as long as one of them lived. Spanish parents provided half the dedications for men in their late thirties and nearly one-fifth for those in their forties—much larger proportions than in most other regions.[15] This preference for parents means that the proportion commemorated by wives in the older groups does not reflect the proportion of married men in the population. Nevertheless, the almost complete absence of wives from dedications to men younger than 25, even in cases where parents did not provide the dedication, can still be taken as evidence of late marriage for men.

The problems in interpreting the North African data are compounded by the lack of a bias in favor of the young. The 50 year and older age bracket accounts for fully sixty percent of the deceased in the table for Theveste (1.f) and for forty-two percent of those in the table for Mauretania Caesariensis (1.g). As a result, though the total number of data for the African tables is similar to others, the number of men in the crucial brackets between 20 and 39 years of age is much smaller and provides a less reliable guide. It can nevertheless be said that there is no sign here of a custom of male marriage in the teens or early twenties: all twenty-four wife-dedicators from Theveste had husbands over 30, and all forty-three from Mauretania Caesariensis had husbands over 25.

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15. There are several possible explanations for the continuing propensity of parents to provide commemoration after the son's marriage. The pattern could be connected with residence, with financial responsibility for burial and funerary monument, or with other cultural preferences. I see no way to decide among the alternatives, though I am doubtful about the explanation based on shared residence because of the rarity in the inscriptions of the paternal grandfathers, uncles, and cousins who should have been members of such extended households (see Saller and Shaw, "Tombstones and Roman Family Relations," pp. 126–27, 136–37).

The pattern of commemoration by children appears to strengthen the conclusion that males in the western Roman Empire married late. Roman children were thought to become adults capable of making decisions and supporting themselves (or being married, in the case of women) in their mid-teens. If Roman men had married and fathered children in the late teens or early twenties, these children might be expected to begin to appear as independent commemorators in their teens for fathers dying in their thirties. The tables show that few sons or daughters commemorated fathers younger than 40. In the tables for the Danubian provinces and Theveste, twenty-nine percent and thirty-eight percent of commemorators for deceased in the 40 to 49 year cohort are children, while in the other regions children appear as a significant proportion of dedicators only for men 50 years old and older. Thus the generation gap in all these populations would appear to be twenty-five or more years.

The epigraphic evidence points to a customary age at marriage of at least 25 years for men in all areas of the Latin-speaking Empire outside the capital city for which data are available. Some men differed from the norm and married as youths. Harkness managed to discover in the whole of CIL five cases of men married before the age of 20 who were not ex-slaves, soldiers, or Christians, and who were living outside Rome; a further nine such examples of men married between the ages of 20 and 24 were found. But these cases are not typical of the epigraphic evidence as a whole. (The length of marriage may have been noted in them precisely because they were exceptional.) Of course, the sparseness of the evidence that has made possible the wide sweep of this survey leaves open the possibility that there were areas unrepresented by inscriptions with different marriage patterns. Nevertheless, the uniformity of the evidence that is available is noteworthy: in later eras considerable variation in customary marriage ages existed across this expanse of territory.[16]

There is some reason to believe that the typical marriage pattern for the western Empire may not have extended to the senatorial order. Syme suggested that the Augustan marriage legislation, with its career incentives for senators with wives and children, encouraged marriage before age 25 among men of the highest social order.[17] Not enough funerary inscriptions for senators have survived to test this hypothesis with the method used above, but a different kind of corroboration is available. Among those consuls of the early second century after Christ whose sons also reached the consulship, the average gap between father's and son's magistracies was about thirty years, with a significant cluster around twenty-five years.[18] If the consulship was held at a standard age, then this time lapse offers a guide to the generation gap and suggests that a

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16. See above, n. 10.
17. *Tacitus* (Oxford, 1958), p. 64.
18. My calculation is based on the list of consuls and consular sons in G. Alföldy, *Konsulat und Senatorenstand unter den Antoninen* (Bonn, 1977), pp. 323–26.

significant proportion of senators were marrying in their early twenties and producing a first son in their mid-twenties. Comparative evidence indicates that a pattern of earlier marriage among nobility than among commoners is not unusual.[19]

Hopkins' study of the age of women at first marriage concluded that Roman girls were often married quite young, in their early or mid-teens.[20] While the conclusion probably holds for the aristocracy, B. Shaw's recent survey, using the method outlined in this article, shows that for the population outside Rome and environs the typical age ought to be revised upward by some five years to the late teens or early twenties.[21] These findings and the conclusion of this study point to a typical Mediterranean pattern of late male and early female marriage across the romanized west. Even though aristocrats may have married somewhat younger, they also exhibit the age-gap characteristic of the Mediterranean.[22] R. M. Smith's suggestion in a review of research on late medieval Tuscany, that this marriage pattern has been a very long enduring feature in the history of Mediterranean lands, finds support in the Roman evidence.[23]

II. THE CONSEQUENCES

Upon brief reflection the consequences of a late age at marriage for men begin to become clear. In a society in which men usually marry in their teens, a man need live only to age 40 in order to see adult sons and their children (twenty years until their own marriage plus at least another twenty years until the marriage of their eldest child).[24] Where men (and their sons) typically marry a decade later in life, they must live at least sixty years in order to see a son wed and producing legitimate children. Since the mortality rate begins to go up dramatically for men over age 50 in preindustrial societies,[25] this difference in the generation gap has a considerable effect on the proportion of adult sons who would be under their father's authority and on the possibility of households comprising three generations.

Can we be more precise about the probabilities? The funerary inscriptions offer no direct means of measuring the proportion of Romans at a

19. See, e.g., Hughes, "Urban Growth and Family Structure," p. 22; L. Stone, The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800 (New York, 1977), p. 50.

20. "Age of Roman Girls," p. 326.

21. "The Age of Roman Girls at Marriage: Some Reconsiderations," forthcoming.

22. Laslett, "Family and Household," pp. 526–27, gives a list of characteristics associated with the Mediterranean marriage pattern, from which Roman marriages differed in significant ways (e.g., Roman marriages entailed the formation of new households and Roman widows commonly remarried).

23. "The People of Tuscany and Their Families in the Fifteenth Century: Medieval or Mediterranean?" Journal of Family History 6 (1981): 111–12.

24. For a description of the characteristics of the eastern European family form as found in Russia, see P. Czap, "'A Large Family: The Peasant's Greatest Wealth': Serf Households in Mishino, Russia, 1814–1858," in Family Forms, pp. 105–51.

25. N. Howell, "Toward a Uniformitarian Theory of Human Paleodemography," in The Demographic Evolution of Human Populations, ed. R. H. Ward and K. M. Weiss (New York, 1976), p. 34. In the model life tables used for this study (see below, n. 27) the central death rate for men increases sixty-six percent between ages 50 and 60.

given age who would have a living father. As I pointed out before, because of the variation in cultural preferences for particular kin as commemorators, the epitaphs do not offer a reliable answer when we ask whether or not the father of the deceased was alive at the time of the latter's death.

A computer simulation developed by the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure offers an indirect approach to the problem. Using information on life expectancy, marriage ages for men and women, and fertility rates, this sophisticated computer program generates a model population of families whose members get married, produce children, and die in accordance with the data and probabilities fed into it.[26] After generating a model population of several generations, the program can then survey the population to compute the probability that a man or woman of a specified age would have a particular kind of relative alive (e.g., aunt, cousin, paternal grandfather). In order to produce a simulation for Rome, the program used a life expectancy of twenty-five years at birth based on B. Frier's recent studies.[27] The results of two different simulations are presented in table 2, one for the aristocracy and one for the rest of the population, using median ages at marriage of 25 for aristocratic men (15 for aristocratic women) and 30 for other men (20 for women). (The computer program distributed the marriage ages so that half of each group was married by the median age.) For the frequency of births for women, it was necessary in the absence of Roman evidence to make a guess based on comparative data for eighteenth-century England accumulated by the Cambridge Group and on the assumption of a stable population.[28]

The computer made it possible not only to incorporate more subtleties in reproducing a population than would otherwise have been possible, but also to rerun the program repeatedly with alterations in the variables to test how sensitive the results were to changes in our assumptions. The outcome was comforting. The use of any life expectancy in the range of 20 to 30 years at birth (the range generally agreed to be likely) yields results

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26. I am deeply grateful to various members and associates of the Cambridge Group for their help: to Dr. James Smith for developing the simulation program and taking time to run simulations incorporating the Roman variables; to Professor Ezra Zubrow for getting the program running again with different Roman variables; and to Dr. Peter Laslett for support and encouragement. Finally I should like to thank the American Philosophical Society for providing a grant to enable me to consult with the Cambridge Group.

27. "Roman Life Expectancy: Ulpian's Evidence," *HSCP* 86 (1982): 213–51, and "Roman Life Expectancy: The Pannonian Evidence," *Phoenix* 37 (1983): 328–44. Some of Frier's evidence seems to me more convincing than other evidence he presents. The table of life expectancies associated with Ulpian in the *Digest* includes too many schematic and unrealistic elements to persuade me that it is based on good data using appropriate demographic techniques. On the other hand, I find the Cirtan epigraphic evidence more convincing. The simulation used a model life table with an average life expectancy at birth for women of 25 years (Model West, Level 3) taken from A. J. Coale and P. Demeny, *Regional Model Life Tables and Stable Populations*[2] (New York, 1983).

28. Because there was more variation in ages above the median than below, the mean ages in the two simulations (based on 1,000 egos each) were slightly higher: 17 for senatorial women, 26 for senatorial men; 21 for other women, 31 for other men. The pattern of birth-spacing resulted in a mean age at childbirth of 28 for senatorial women and 31 for other women.

sufficiently similar that the conclusions of this paper are left intact. Changes in the guess at birth frequency might make a noticeable differ- ence in the number of siblings and cousins to be expected, but the proportion of the population with fathers alive is not much affected by this factor.[29] This proportion is most influenced by age at marriage, and it is for this variable that our evidence is most solid. Even in the case of marriage-age, variations of a few years make little difference, as the similarity of the figures in table 2 for the senatorial aristocracy and other Romans shows.

It must be emphasized that the figures in table 2 do not have the precision of a census count; rather, they are intended as rough indicators of proportions. Despite their inexactness, many interesting implications about Roman society can be drawn from the simulation results. Here I want only to comment briefly on these figures. It seems clear that inadequate consideration of family demography has led historians to overestimate the impact of *patria potestas*. Late marriage of men and a premodern mortality rate minimized the number of adults in their fathers' power. In law the father had the right to arrange and to break off his children's marriages, subject to a few constraints.[30] This was a consider- able potential power, but its effects were blunted by the fact that only a fraction of Romans were *in potestate* when they first married (perhaps half of senatorial women, two-fifths of other women, one-third of sena- torial men, and only a fifth of other men). Of course, the fraction under the father's authority became progressively smaller in subsequent marriages.

In addition, most Roman adults did not suffer the legal disability of being unable to own property because they were not *sui iuris*. The possibility of emancipation aside, more than three-fifths of Romans in their twenties, more than four-fifths in their thirties, and nearly all Romans over forty had become *sui iuris* through the death of their fathers and so were able to own property.[31] For women, then, the absence of husbands' legal powers over wives did result in a real legal freedom because most women led most of their adult lives as *sui iuris,* not *in potestate*.[32] As for men, it seems to me that too few would have been under a father's authority as adults for there to have occurred the

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29. The fertility rate and family size could affect the results if Romans limited their families after having just a few children. In such circumstances the children would be concentrated in the early years of a marriage rather than being spread over the wife's fertile years. Consequently, the average generation gap between father and child would be shortened. Because of the high mortality rate, this sort of drastic family limitation (as opposed to the exposure of ten to twenty percent of female infants) could not have been practiced across the population as a whole without a noticeable decline in the population; but the senatorial aristocracy, whose families in the Empire disappeared very rapidly, might have limited their families to just a few children.

30. G. Matringe, "La puissance paternelle et le mariage des fils et filles de famille en droit romaine," in *Studi in onore di Edoardo Volterra,* vol. 5 (Milan, 1971), pp. 191–237.

31. Consequently, the image of four generations of males under the thumb of a ninety-year-old patriarch presented by Daube, *Aspects of Roman Law,* p. 75, is wholly unrealistic. Even the paternal grandfather rarely makes an appearance in Latin literature.

32. *Pace* Gratwick; see above, n. 6.

TABLE 2

PERCENTAGE OF ROMANS AT A GIVEN AGE
WITH A LIVING FATHER

SENATORIAL ORDER		ORDINARY ROMANS	
Age	Percentage	Age	Percentage
5	85%	5	84%
10	69%	10	68%
15	55%	15	54%
20	43%	20	41%
25	32%	25	30%
30	20%	30	19%
35	12%	35	12%
40	6%	40	6%

extensive political repercussions sometimes suggested.[33] For example, at age 33, the age at which the tribunate of the plebs was commonly held, only one man in five would have had a living father. Therefore, most could not have been restrained in political affairs by a father's threat of using the sweeping powers granted him by Roman private law. On the other hand, most young senators setting out on the *cursus honorum* could not have looked to a father for help—a fact which may increase our estimation of the importance of more distant kin and patrons in the political process.

Because *patria potestas* extended to grandchildren produced by sons, some historians have envisaged the typical Roman family as a patriarchal unit.[34] This is certainly a possibility in law, but it must also be said that at birth only one in ten Romans had a living paternal grandfather; by the time they reached their teens the proportion diminished to one in fifty. This provides most of the explanation for the notable absence of the paternal grandfather from funerary dedications despite his legal position as *paterfamilias* of his sons' children.[35]

III. CONCLUSION

The aims of this article have been limited: to establish with more accuracy and refinement the age of Roman men at first marriage, and then to use this information to establish a demographic framework for understanding the extent of the application of *patria potestas*. The evidence of funerary inscriptions, in particular the almost complete absence of dedications

33. Daube writes (*Aspects of Roman Law*, p. 85): "In general, even in public life, a *filiusfamilias* remained rigidly controlled by his *paterfamilias*, who held the purse strings. It is difficult to conceive of a more powerful brake on any deviation from traditional family politics or, indeed, on any tendency to detract in a thorough-going way from the old established scope of *patria potestas*. The means for such a platform would not be forthcoming."
34. M. Mitterauer and R. Sieder, *The European Family* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 16.
35. Saller and Shaw, "Tombstones and Roman Family Relations," pp. 136–37.

from wives to husbands younger than twenty-five years old, points to late male marriage, in contrast to the much earlier marriage of Roman women, whose husbands often commemorated them upon death in their teens or early twenties. This age gap between husband and wife places the Roman family within the "Mediterranean" type identified by historians of the European family.

Late male marriage produced a large age gap between fathers and their offspring. As a consequence, only a minority of young adult Romans were in the *potestas* of their fathers. This may have been one reason why the classical Romans felt little need to make substantial changes in the formal law, with all its harshness and awkwardness. Obviously, much remains to be said both about the implications of the demography of the Roman family and about the way in which *patria potestas* (and private law in general) affected the quality of family life. In an excellent essay on *patria potestas* J. A. Crook wrote: "The Romans in law not only . . . pushed things to the limit of logic, so that, given that *paterfamilias* had certain roles, their implications were rigorously drawn; they also kept law sharply apart from religion and morals, so that the legal character of *patria potestas* stands out in sociologically misleading clarity."[36] As a counterweight to the "misleading clarity" of the law, more research in the nonlegal sources should be done to determine how the formal legal powers of the father affected day-to-day family life. The jurist Gaius may have been right that Roman law gave virtually unique powers to the father over his adult sons; but it remains to be seen whether comparative family history will show that these special powers produced a unique quality of family relationships.[37] The growing body of publications on the history of the European family makes the time ripe for such comparisons.[38]

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