

THE AGE OF ROMAN GIRLS AT MARRIAGE: SOME RECONSIDERATIONS

By BRENT D. SHAW

INTRODUCTION

The age at which girls tend to marry is one of the most important factors in determining the overall rates of fertility in a given population, and hence its general demographic profile. It also affects a whole range of social institutions of reproduction, above all the 'shape' of the family, the relationships between the mother and her children, between husband and wife, and the ways in which property can be redistributed through inheritance.¹ It is the simple and restricted purpose of this paper to re-examine the data that have hitherto been used to determine the age at marriage of girls in Roman society. For the purposes of this study, 'Roman society' is defined as the conglomerate of urban-centred communities that developed in Europe west of the Adriatic, as well as in the lands of the Danubian Basin. It is conceded that family types and modes of family formation in the eastern parts of the empire were different from those in the west, and therefore require separate analysis.² In performing this task, the analysis presented here also attempts to demonstrate the highly specific nature of the set of data employed in the 'age-at-marriage' debate, and to question its relevance to the age at first marriage of most girls in the western Roman empire. Having demonstrated the limited validity of these data, I shall then suggest another method that might usefully be employed to approach the problem. Finally, to complete the argument, a series of hypotheses will be advanced that seek to link the range and modes of age at first marriage of girls of various status groups and classes to other social and economic factors in the Roman world.

To provide a longer-range context for our analysis, however, it is perhaps best to begin with what is known, in very broad terms, of marriage patterns in the pre-industrial societies of western Europe in the great time-span extending back to the beginning of the early modern period. In an important article published in 1965, John Hajnal was able to demonstrate the existence of two broadly different historical marriage patterns in pre-modern Europe, the 'eastern' and the 'western'.³ The 'eastern' pattern, which predominated in the pre-modern era in the vast regions east of the Trieste-Leningrad longitude, was characterized by a very high proportion of all women marrying, most of these women entering marriage relatively soon after the age of puberty. In the 'western' pattern, by contrast, significant proportions of women remained unmarried, and those who married did so late, relative to the age of puberty. The contrast is shown by the fact that for western European populations of the pre-industrial period, means of age at first marriage (the 'mean' being, in layman's language, the arithmetical average of all values in a given set) for women from various national groups tend to fall within a rather narrow range, namely 25–26.5 years.⁴ This later age at marriage for girls in pre-modern western Europe was also true of men in the same period; only in the more recent times of the post-industrial age have both means fallen to their modern levels.

¹ M. W. Flinn, *The European Demographic System, 1500–1820* (1981), 19 f.

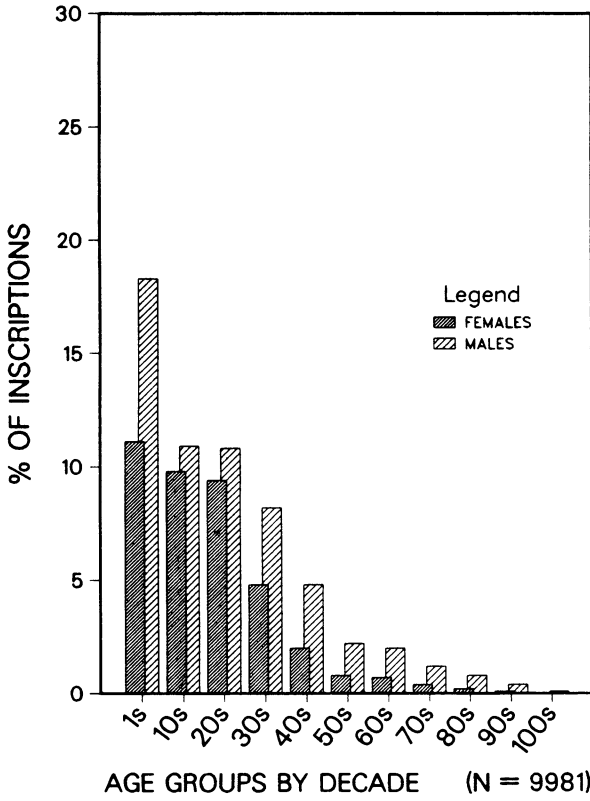
² Even for these lands, however, possibly the best set of statistics we shall ever have, census figures from Roman Egypt, indicate quite clearly, as against the averages obtained from the epigraphical data from the west, that 'barely half of all women were married by the age of 20–24 years' (N, i.e. number analysed = 192), see K. Hopkins, 'Brother-Sister Marriage in Roman Egypt', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22 (1980), 333–4 and his Table 3 and fig. 5; the average age at first marriage for girls in this sample seems to lie

in the late teens or early twenties. Hopkins called the results 'striking and unexpected' when set against 'the early age at marriage of girls (median 15.5 years) recorded on stone inscriptions in the western half of the Roman empire. By that standard, a considerable proportion of Egyptian families were postponing the marriage of their daughters by up to ten years.'

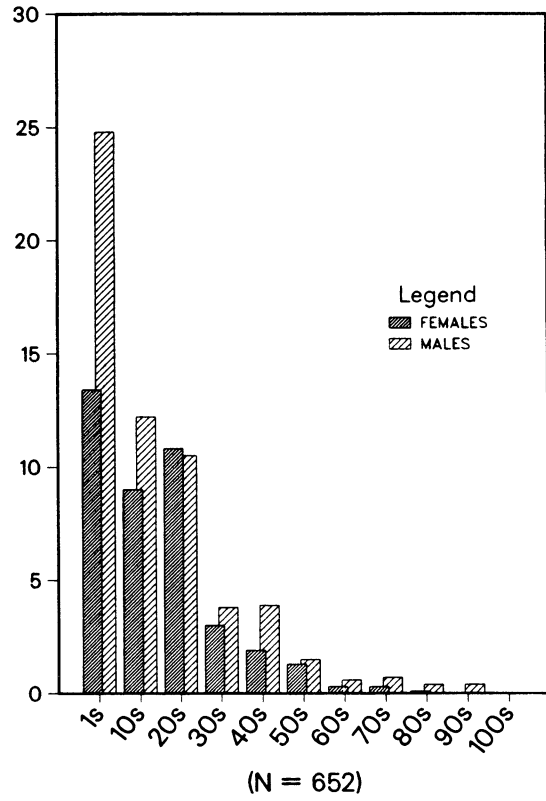
³ J. Hajnal, 'European Marriage Patterns in Perspective', ch. 6 in D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley (eds), *Population in History* (1965), 101–43.

⁴ Flinn, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 19–20.

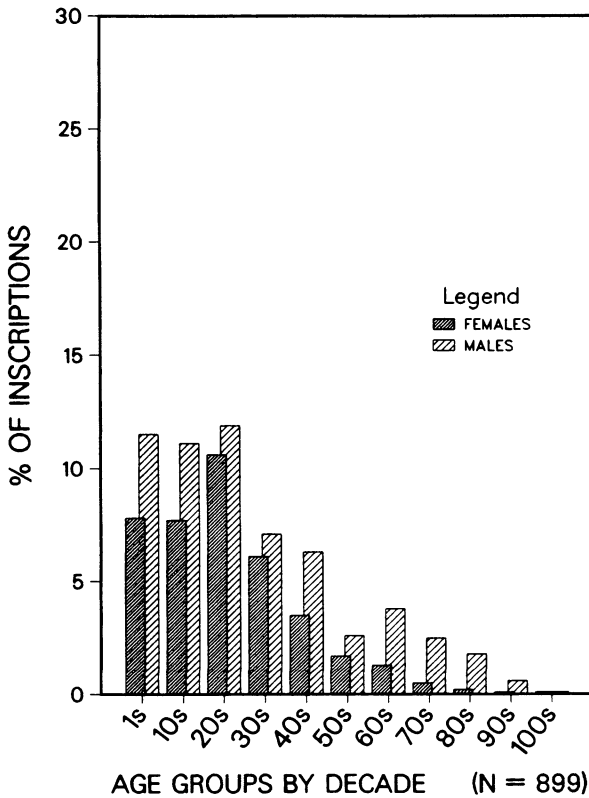
1. ROME



2. OSTIA



7. GAUL



8. DANUBE

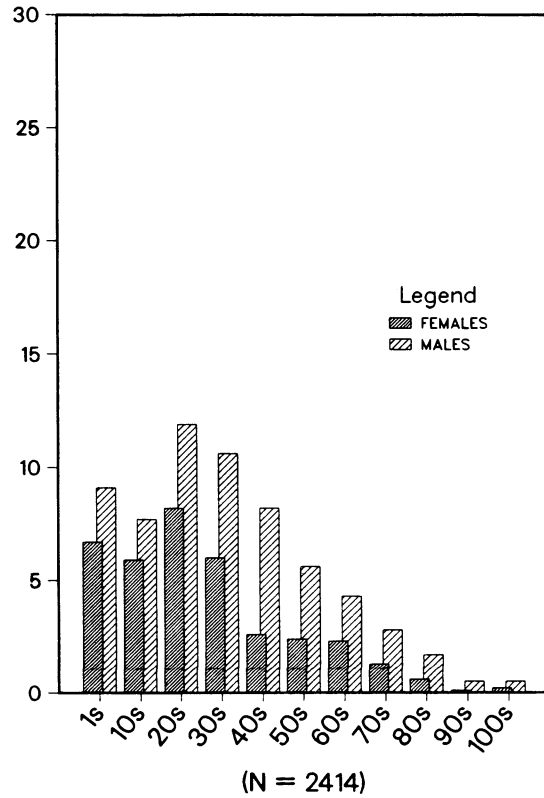
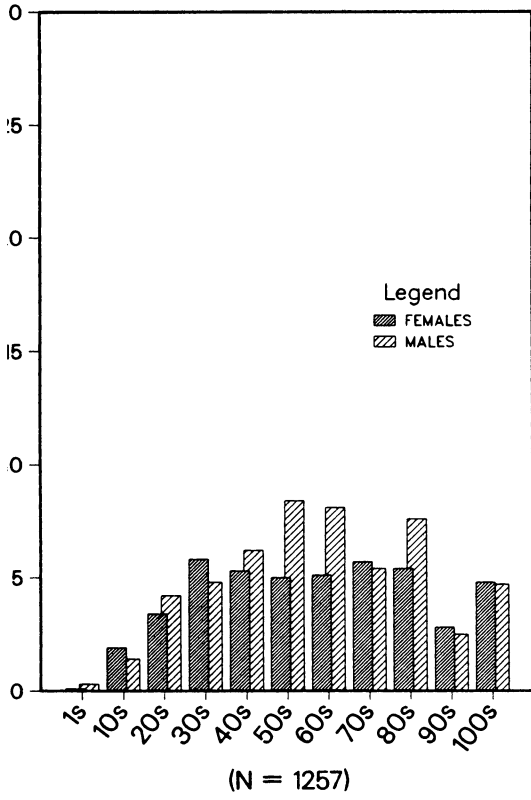
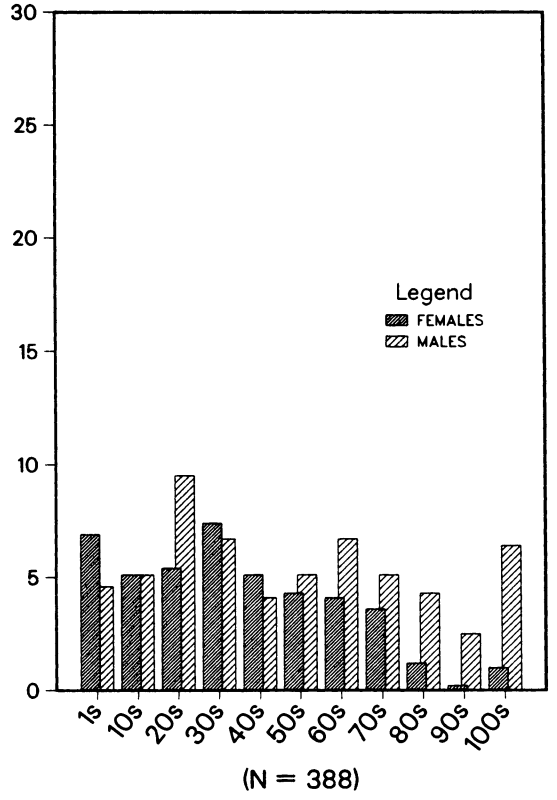


FIG. 1. AGE DISTRIBUTION OF FUNERARY COMMEMORATIONS

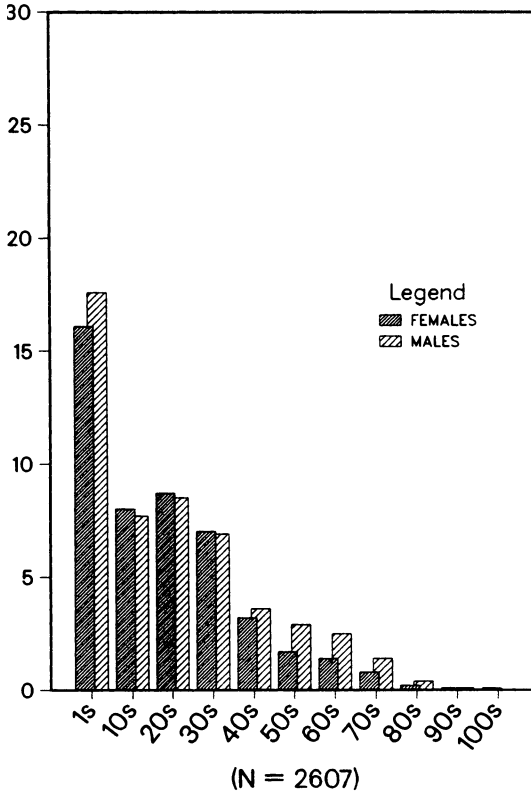
3. C. CELTIANUM



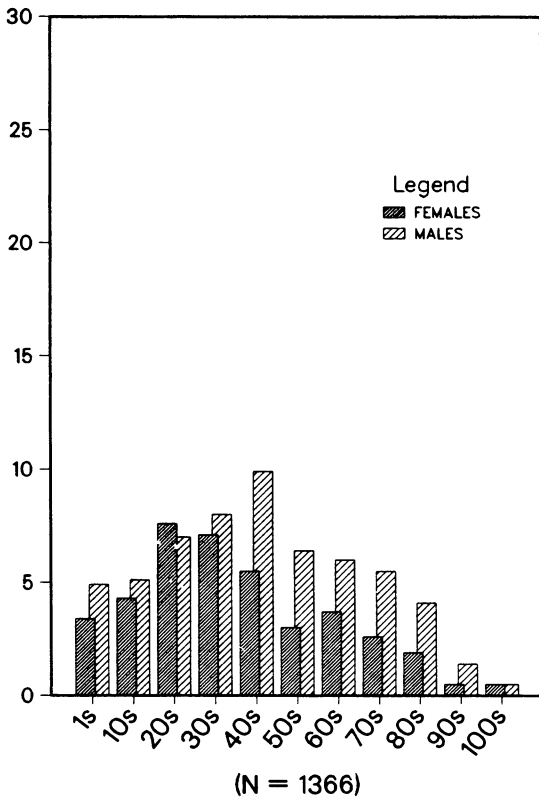
4. THEVESTE



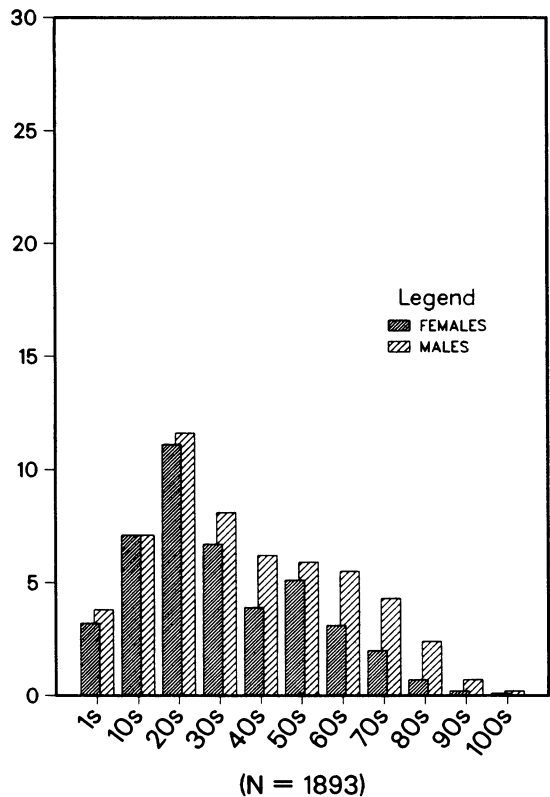
9. ROME, CHRISTIAN



5. LAMBAESIS



6. SPAIN

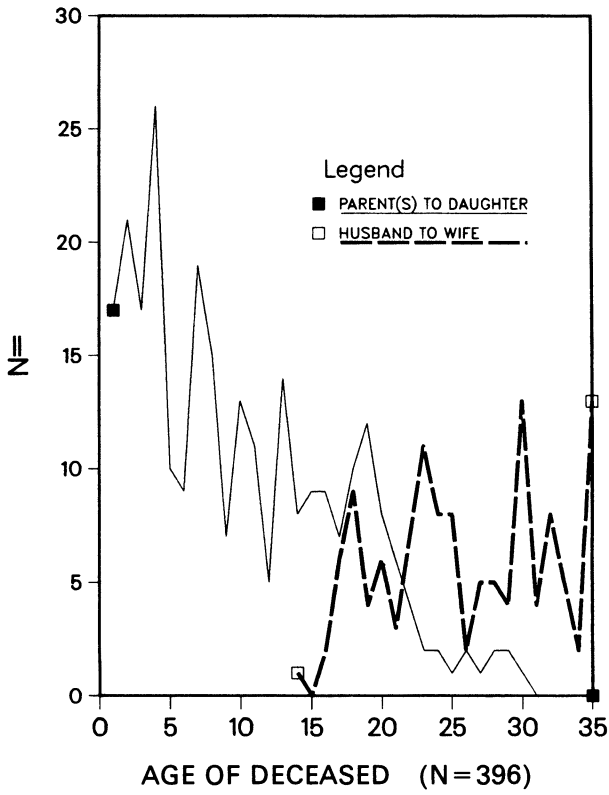


Unless otherwise noted, all computations were based on the following standard collections of the data by J. Szilágyi on 'Sterblichkeit' in the Roman Empire:

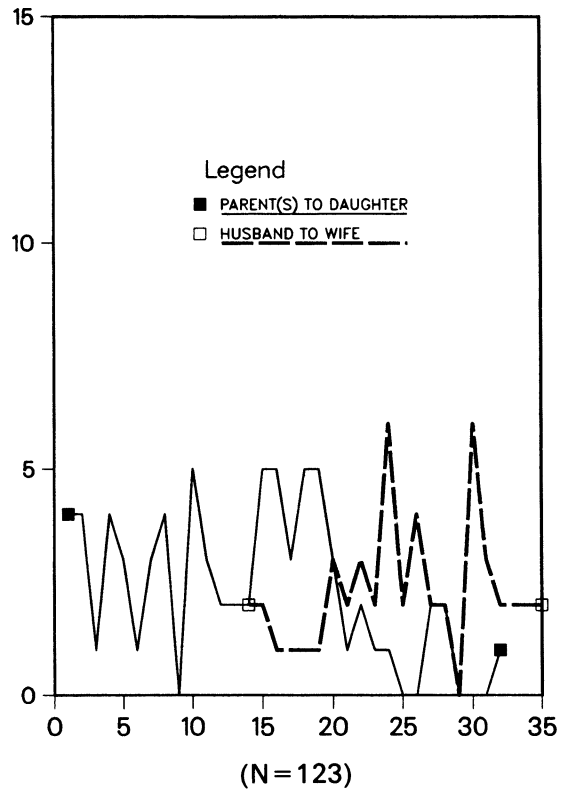
- 'Beiträge zur Statistik der Sterblichkeit in den westeuropäischen Provinzen des römischen Imperiums', *AArchHung* 13 (1961), 125-55.
- 'Beiträge zur Statistik der Sterblichkeit in der Illyrischen Provinzgruppe und in Norditalien (Gallia Padana)', *AArchHung* 14 (1962), 297-396
- 'Die Sterblichkeit in den Städten Mittel- und Süd-Italiens sowie in Hispanien (in der römischen Kaiserzeit)', *AArchHung* 15 (1963), 129-224
- 'Die Sterblichkeit in den nordafrikanischen Provinzen I', *AArchHung* 17 (1965), 309-34; 'II', *AArchHung* 18 (1966), 235-77; 'III', *AArchHung* 19 (1967), 25-59

1. Rome: General Sample: Szilágyi (1963), 131-2
2. Ostia: *ibid.*, 133-4
3. Africa: Castellum Celtianum: *id.* (1965), 313-14
4. Africa: Theveste: *id.* (1966), 238-9
5. Africa: Lambaesis: *id.* (1965), 311-13
6. Spain: *id.* (1963), 147-9
7. Gaul (Southern): *id.* (1961), 134-5, 138-42
8. Danube: *id.* (1962), 303-5, 311-16
9. Rome: Christian: H. Nordberg, *Biometrical Notes*, Helsinki (1963), 43-7

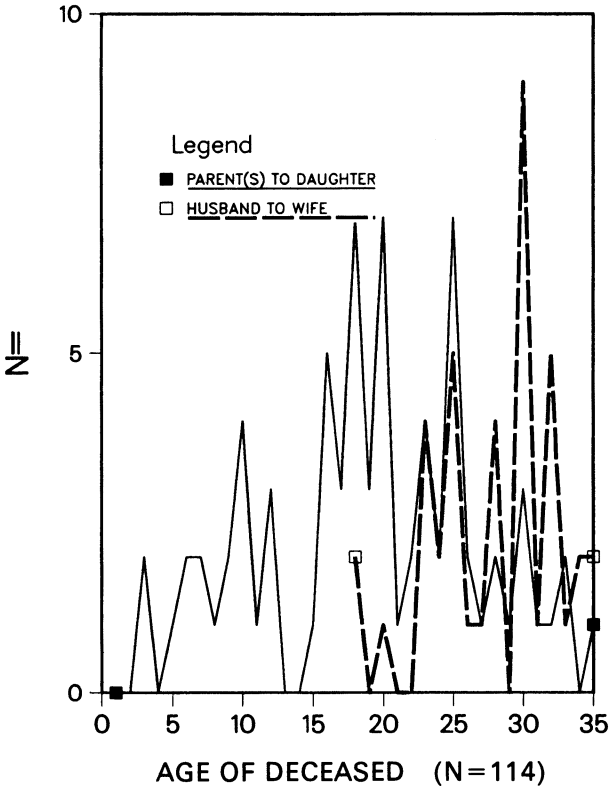
1. ROME



2. N. ITALY



7. SPAIN



8. GALLIA NARB.

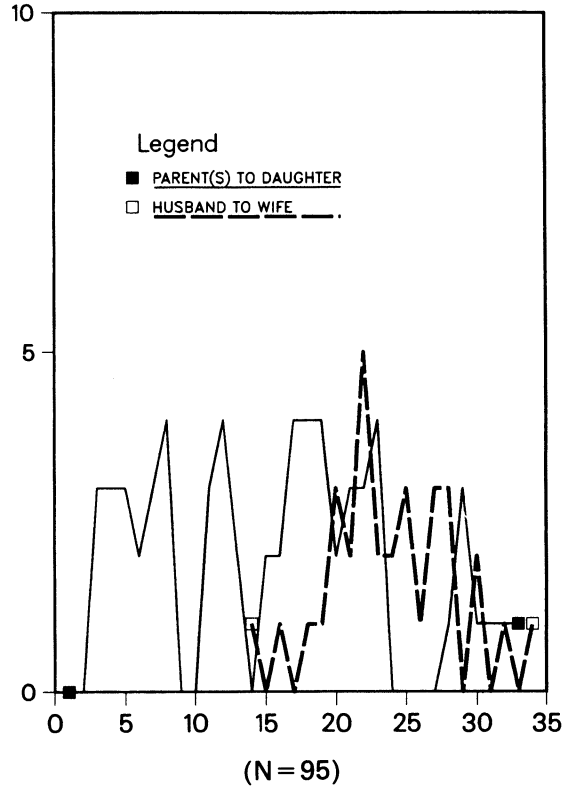
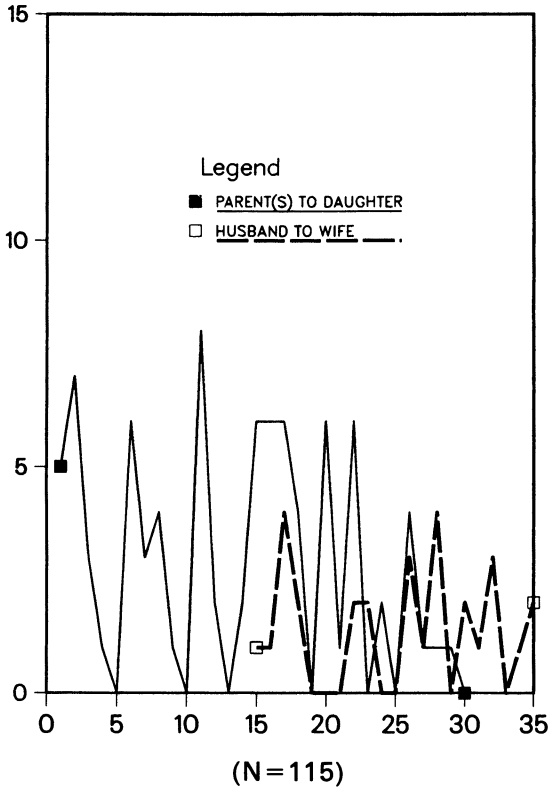
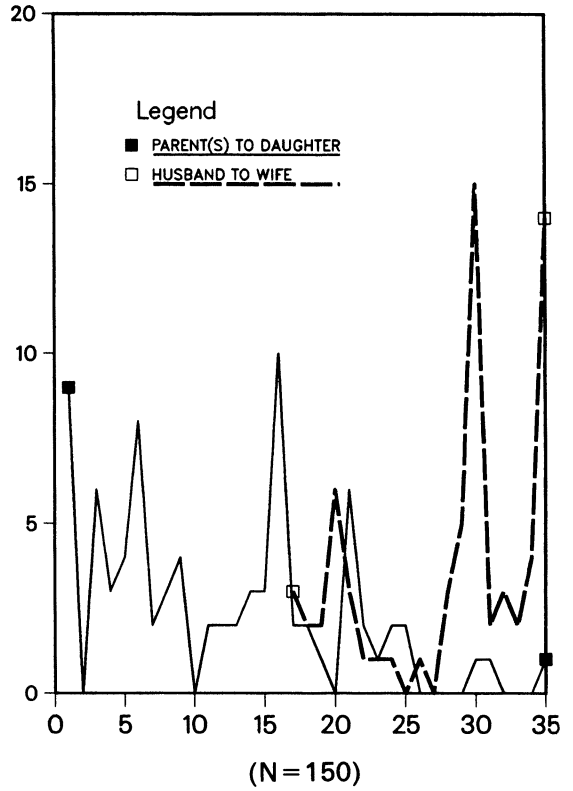


FIG. 2. HUSBANDS vs PARENTS AS COMMEMORATORS

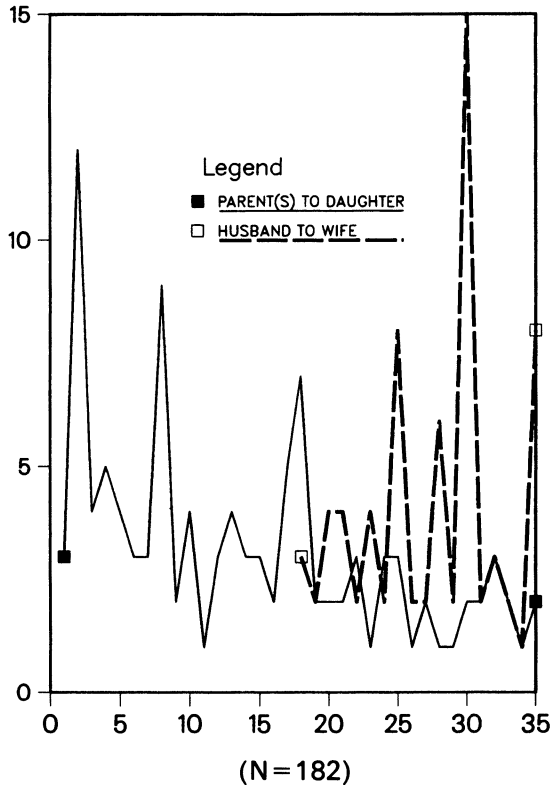
3. S. ITALY



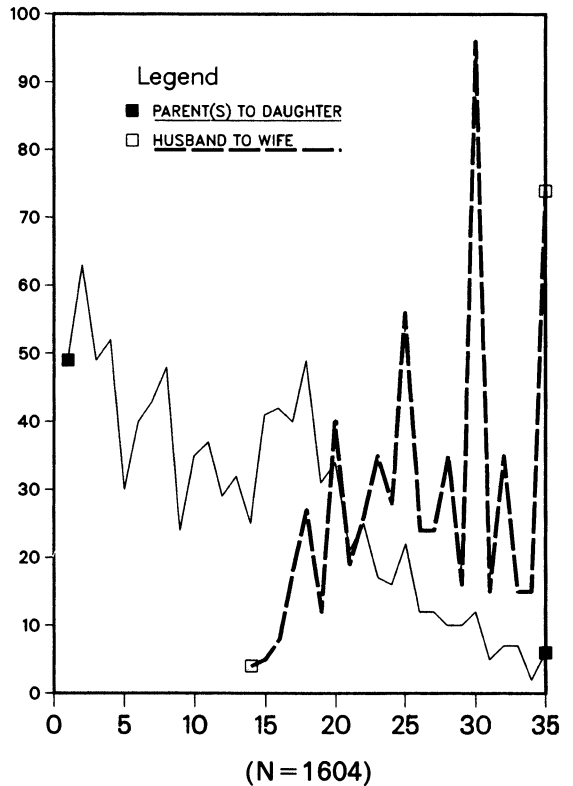
4. THEVESTE



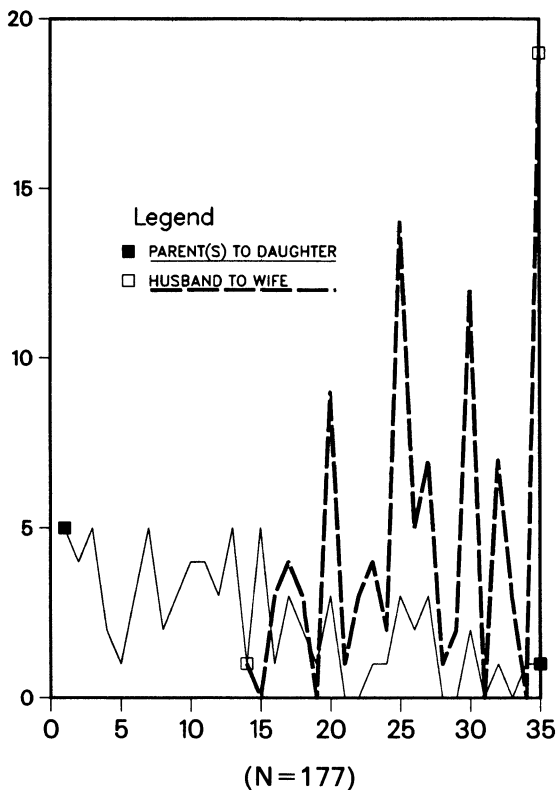
9. DANUBE



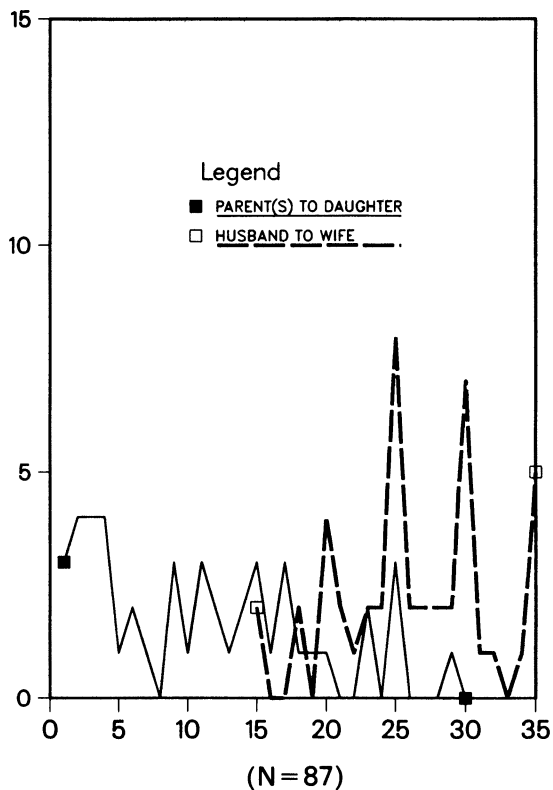
10. WESTERN EMPIRE



5. LAMBAESIS



6. MAURETANIA C.



All samples were taken from the relevant volumes of the *C(orpus) I(nscriptionum) L(atinarum)*, unless otherwise noted.

1. Rome: *CIL* VI, nos. 10424-17050
2. Northern Italy: *CIL* XI, Regio VI: nos. 4131-6611; Regio VII: nos. 1383-4024; Regio VIII: nos. 1-1289
3. Southern Italy: *CIL* XIV, Regio I, Latium: nos. 2055-4221; *CIL* IX, Regiones IV and V: nos. 2272-5919
4. Africa: Lambaesis: *CIL* VIII, nos. 2802-4183; 18369-18463
5. Africa: Theveste Region: *CIL* VIII, nos. 1837-2327; 16498-17803
6. Africa: Mauretania Caesariensis: *CIL* VIII, nos. 8223-9979; 20224-21803
7. Spain: *CIL* II, all
8. Southern Gaul: *CIL* XII, all
9. Danube: *CIL* III, 1641, 1704-4517
10. All of the above

Hajnal's patterns, however, referred almost solely to the more northerly European populations, in the sense that his 'east-west' dichotomy only applied to regions north of the Mediterranean. To a considerable degree this limitation in Hajnal's patterns was the result of the simple lack of evidence from the Mediterranean for the later pre-modern period, a situation that has not improved markedly in the interim. What can now be said is that the populations in these lands seem to have moved, within the last 150 years, into a pattern close to that of Hajnal's 'western European' model.⁵ To acquire information on much earlier periods of Mediterranean demographic history has proved to be a rather difficult task, but the data which have been assembled seem to indicate that before the recent shift to a 'western European' pattern women tended to marry much younger than the early to mid-twenties.⁶ In towns and villages in Tuscany during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, for instance, mean ages of women at first marriage ranged from 16 to 21, with modes (the 'mode' being, as the word itself suggests, the value in a given set that occurs most frequently) in the late teens. In the countryside around these towns and cities, age of girls at first marriage was slightly lower, varying in the range between 15 and 19. A separate, and earlier, sample from Florence for the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries revealed a range between 15 to 18/19 years, also with modes in the late teens.⁷

Although the evidence is still more indicative than probative, it is sufficient to make one suspect the existence of earlier marriage patterns that were significantly different from Hajnal's 'western European' model. In the case of arguments based on arithmetic means, such as these, however, one must be mindful of the degree to which generalizations derived from aggregate statistics can mask important regional and cultural differences. Above all, they may disguise highly significant variations from the mean that concern the very subject of our analysis. For example, all the nineteenth and early twentieth-century rural Italian communities studied by Rudolph Bell cohered closely to the trends of a 'western European' pattern: the mean age at first marriage of women tended to be in the early to mid-twenties; that of men was somewhat later. One village, that of Nissoria in Sicily, however, had a particularly important divergence from the mean at the lower end of the age range. In this case, 'nearly one in every ten Nissoria weddings involved a girl of fifteen or younger, the husbands of these brides being, on average, eleven years older'.⁸ That is to say, the community of Nissoria, at least, offers a distant comparison with what is sometimes argued to have been the prevalent pattern of marriage in the Roman empire.

I. AGE-AT-MARRIAGE IN THE WESTERN ROMAN EMPIRE: THE PROBLEM

Against these marriage patterns for pre-modern western Europe, one might compare the data from the western Roman empire, although it must be emphasized at

⁵ See, for instance, M. Livi-Bacci, *A History of Italian Fertility during the last two centuries* (1977), 15 (1659-1866) and 100 (1806-1900 to 1966-1969); and R. M. Bell, *Fate and Honor, Family and Village: Demographic and Cultural Change in Rural Italy since 1800* (1979), 78 ff.

⁶ In the mid-60s, before much of the more recent data collation had taken place, Hajnal, *op. cit.* (n. 3), 120, made the following guess about the nature of these earlier marriage patterns: 'It does not seem possible that the populations of medieval Europe had the fully developed European marriage pattern; they must either have had a marriage pattern clearly classifiable as non-European, or else some mixture of the two types with a wider variation of age at first marriage than is found later' (my italics). He also noted that 'in the Middle Ages the betrothal of children and the marriage of very young adolescents were apparently widespread throughout the population (not only among the nobility).'

⁷ D. Herlihy and C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Les Toscans et leurs familles: une étude du catasto florentin de 1427* (1978), 204 ff.; see the abridged Engl. transl. *Tuscans and their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427* (1985) at 202 and 210 ff. See also the review of the first French edition by R. M. Smith, 'The People of Tuscany and their Families in the Fifteenth Century: Medieval or Mediterranean?', *Journal of Family History* 6 (1981), 107-28. I now think that the answer to Smith's question must be that the Florentine families reported by Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber were species of 'Mediterranean' type families, similar to those found in the Roman west. Whether or not one wishes to claim that these types are also in some sense 'medieval' is another, perhaps semantic, problem, although there is no reason to believe that, given the probable elements of continuity, they were not that as well.

⁸ Bell, *op. cit.* (n. 5), 89, even though the mean for all first marriages for women in the village was about 20; for the other cases see pp. 78 ff.

the outset that the evidence is so meagre (and likely to remain so) that the conclusions will always remain, perforce, tentative in nature. In the most competent and influential analysis so far of the data on the problem of the age of Roman girls at marriage, published in 1965, Keith Hopkins argued for a significant proportion of marriages by girls at very young ages as a central characteristic of the Roman pattern.⁹ Noting the evidence for pre-pubertal marriages, and the literary evidence for the very early age at marriage of some girls in the Roman 'aristocracy', he appealed to the apparent substantiation provided by the epigraphical data: 'Of 145 inscriptions, from which the age of marriage of pagan girls under 25 can be calculated, 12 (or 8 per cent) married at the ages of 10 and 11'.¹⁰ Of the whole corpus of 171 such inscriptions, Hopkins finally concluded that 'over half of all the girls recorded in these inscriptions were married by age of 15 (inclusive) or that the modal marriage age lay between 12 and 15'.¹¹ Indeed, it is upon these statistical modes that he ultimately rested the case for his general conclusions that 'whether pre-pubertal or not, girls' age at marriage was, by our standards very young'. He then noted in support of this observation the fact that both pagan and Christian tombstones set up to Roman girls 'record a surprising number of early marriages'.¹²

It is important to note that all modern studies of the subject, including that of Hopkins, have used as the basis of their analyses the standard lists of ages of Roman girls at first marriage compiled and published by Harkness in 1896 and by Leclercq in 1932, both dependent in part on earlier work published around the turn of the century by Pelka. However much these lists may have been refined or supplemented, the evidential basis for the debate has remained up to now within the confines of the same sample accumulated by these scholars.¹³ The reason why the inscriptions assembled in these collections are apparently so useful is that the type of funerary epitaph they collect is one which permits us to deduce the age at marriage of the deceased girl or woman. The calculation is possible because the stones concerned record not only the age at death of the deceased, but also the length of her marriage. By the simple device of subtracting the length of the marriage from the age at death one can arrive at a reasonably accurate computation of the age at which the girl was first married. In employing these data, Hopkins was both cautious about the degree of probable accuracy in them and also attentive to possible biases in them. He was particularly concerned with the question of who set up the funerary inscriptions; his main

⁹ K. Hopkins, 'The Age of Roman Girls at Marriage', *Population Studies* 18 (1964-65), 309-27. The article has been very influential in determining the age at marriage of Roman girls accepted by other scholars; see e.g., P. R. C. Weaver, *Familia Caesaris: A Social Study of the Emperor's Freedmen and Slaves* (1972) at 105-6 and 182-3—one amongst many such examples. P. A. Brunt, *Italian Manpower, 225 B.C.-A.D. 14* (1971), 137 f. depends on Hopkins' analysis in his statement that the 'epigraphic evidence shows that the largest number of first marriages were contracted by pagan girls between the ages of 12 and 15, and bears out the deductions that might be made from the more meagre literary testimony'. It is only fair to add that Brunt accepts this analysis with what can only be described as considerable reservations, which he states, and then adds 'Can we be sure that the poor married so early (when they married at all)?'. He goes on to doubt whether arguments based on the maximum ages permitted for receiving the benefits of alimentary programmes have any relevance for the age-at-marriage problem.

¹⁰ Hopkins (1964-65), 313. This is not the place to raise a whole range of other matters relevant to the subject under investigation, but one should, for instance, note how flimsy the evidence is for the consummation of such prepubertal marriages. For the counter arguments see M. Durry, *RIDA* 2 (1955), 263-73; *Anthropos* 50 (1955), 432-4; *CRAI* (1955), 84-91; *Gymnasium* 63 (1956), 187 ff.; cf. his 'autocritique' in

RIDA 3 (1956), 227-43, and the comments by J. Reinach, 'Puberté féminine et mariage romain', *RHD* 33 (1956), 268-73. Durry's argument rests in the main on the fact that some girls were married at very young ages and that these ages were probably before menarche. One must also object that, as yet, the problem of residence has not been adequately dealt with; in some cases, at least, one could argue that 'marriage' seems not necessarily to have meant an actual move to the husband's house in the case of marriages at very young ages.

¹¹ Hopkins (1964-65), 319 and his fig. 1.

¹² *ibid.*, 326.

¹³ A. G. Harkness, 'Age at Marriage and at Death in the Roman Empire', *TAPhA* 27 (1896), 35-72, mainly pagan but with some Christian examples; he outlined the basic literary sources (which then became standard fare in the subsequent debate), and then assembled his epigraphical data based on the volumes of *CIL* then available; H. Leclercq, 'Mariage', *DAFL* 10. 2 (1932), 1843-1982, at cols. 1967-73, whose lists are an updated version (to 1932) of those collected by O. Pelka, 'Aetas Nubilis', Pt. III. 1 of his *Altchristliche Ehedenkmäler* (in *Zur Kunstgeschichte des Auslands* v, 1901), 47-74: B, 'Frauen', 55-69: 165 cases. The latter list was restricted to Christian epigraphical data assembled from *CIL*, Fabretti, Boldetti, de Rossi (vol. 1), and a number of other collections published before 1900. For Rome, Leclercq is now superseded by the collection in Carletta (1977), see n. 23 below.

concern, however, was with the general question of economic class as earlier debated by Friedländer, Bang, and Harkness.¹⁴ Based on the cost of funerary stones alone, Hopkins claimed that 'the well-to-do middle classes are better represented in these inscriptions than the lower, the lower-middle or the upper classes'.¹⁵ But in other respects he seemed satisfied with the reliability of the data and felt confident in his claim that 'the group of inscriptions from which the age at marriage can be calculated has no serious bias towards recording low ages'.¹⁶ The case has tended to rest at the point to which Hopkins took it in the mid-1960s, and with some justification, given the degree of sophistication in demographic analysis which he brought to the subject.

Nevertheless, a better sorting and analysis of the data are necessary before these sweeping conclusions, amongst them the claim that the modes of marriage of Roman girls were in the 12–15 range, are accepted too readily as being true of girls in the western empire in general. First, insofar as *most* Roman girls are concerned, the literary evidence adduced is almost useless. The obvious point of reference of remarks by, say, an Epictetus, a Plutarch, or a Galen, and of reports on notorious marriages by historians of the time, is girls of the upper classes.¹⁷ The handful of *exempla* that can be culled from the major literary sources is so manifestly biased towards the behaviour of the narrowest of élites (and in most cases of an office-holding and power-wielding segment within that élite), that they can surely reveal very little of general practices outside those circles and circumstances.¹⁸ There is no need to deny indications that some girls in the upper classes, including those in the 'aristocracy' and imperial family, were married off young, sometimes very young (that is, compared to the popular standards now accepted by most of us). But such has often been the case with propertied nobilities, many of them in pre-modern western Europe where we know that the vast majority of girls in those same societies in almost all social groups outside the narrow élites 'at the top' were marrying at relatively late ages.¹⁹ For most girls in the western Roman empire, therefore, the literature of the upper classes offers little hope of a solution to our problem, and no arbitrary match of the statistical modes found in epigraphical data with the upper-class cases provided by the literary evidence can prove very much. Nevertheless, it was precisely to provide a check on the literary evidence that recourse was first had to the epigraphical evidence by Harkness, Bang, Friedländer, and others.

But the hope still remains that epigraphy might be able to suggest to us what the age at first marriage was for girls in many areas of the Roman west, even if only for the urban-centred populations that engaged in the peculiar habit of setting up inscribed tombstones for the deceased. But it is very important to remember, first, that all such

¹⁴ For these earlier studies see M. Bang, 'Das gewöhnliche Alter der Mädchen bei der Verlobung und Verheiratung', app. 11 in L. Friedländer, *Darstellungen aus der Sittengeschichte Roms* IV (9th–10th. ed., 1921), 133–41, and Harkness in n. 13 above.

¹⁵ Hopkins (1964–65), 322; since the social composition of the sample is in fact dominated by slaves and freedmen, however, the suggestion that the dedicators were primarily from the 'well-to-do middle classes' needs to be refined.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 326; cf. 322 where he denies that the Romans tended to record younger marriages disproportionately on stones.

¹⁷ The standard repertoire of references repeated by Pelka, Leclercq, Bang (in Friedländer), Harkness, and Hopkins, amongst others, includes Epictet., *Enchirid.* 40; Plut., *Mor.* 138e = *Præcepta Coniugalia*; *Comp. Vit. Lycurg. et Num.* 4; Suet., *Aug.* 62. 1, *Calig.* 7, *Claud.* 26. 1; Dio 48. 5. 3; Tac., *Ann.* 2. 41, 2. 54, 6. 15, 12. 58, 14. 64; *Agr.* 9; Quintil., *Inst. Or.* 6, pr. 4; and a few other peripheral instances. Where these are not statements of an ideal, as in the case of Epictetus and Plutarch, the actual cases cited are overwhelmingly related to special marriages within the imperial family or the senatorial 'aristocracy'.

¹⁸ Hopkins, while citing the instances, often ex-

presses his scepticism of them (e.g. (1964–65), 315–17); but Brunt, *op. cit.* (n. 9), 138 seems to be the only scholar consistently to take this bias in the data seriously. He questions the postulation of low ages at first marriage for the mass of the population, and in commenting on the general conditions of 'the poor', for instance, he states 'these conditions make me doubt whether the evidence we possess for the mean age of marriage has any validity for the mass of the population'. Brunt then opts for a much later average age for the general populace of girls, in specific contrast to the younger modes common amongst 'the wealthy', noting the specific connection with slavery. At pp. 138–9, he outlines several economic constraints that would militate against the assumption of very young wives by the less well-off urban males (cf. Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *op. cit.* (n. 7), 221 f.). One might also note that most of these 'observations' about Roman girls are made by outsiders to Roman society, principally Greeks, and that they therefore assume the context of 'anthropological' curiosities about certain elements of Roman society and their modes of behaviour that were of particular interest to the observers.

¹⁹ Hajnal, *op. cit.* (n. 3), 113 f. is a sufficient demonstration of this social contrast.

epigraphical data relating to the question of 'age at marriage' are *indirect* as regards the question itself.²⁰ The basic type of evidence employed is the inscribed tombstone, whose primary context is not that of marriage but of death. And the erection of a permanent memorial in stone to the deceased, a practice with nothing natural or biologically necessary about it, is a distinctly artificial and cultural act. As such, it reflects, in varying degrees and manners, the social and cultural attitudes to death and the valuation of the *persona* of the deceased in different regions of the western empire. Since all age-at-marriage evidence is extracted from, and every relevant inscription embedded in, this context, one must always be on the watch for ways in which this circumstance has determined the shape of the data that we do have.

We might begin by mapping the geographical distribution of the particular type of inscription that provides us with our statistics—that is to say, an epitaph that includes *both* the length of marriage *and* the age at death of the deceased girl on the same gravestone. Of the approximately 400 inscriptions of this type (including the Christian instances), well over 90 per cent come from Rome and Italy (Table 1). Of the remaining 7 per cent from outside Italy, almost all come from North Africa, and from Dalmatia-Pannonia. Many regions of the western empire, including Britain, the Spains, the Gallic provinces, the Germanies, Raetia, and Noricum, have produced no inscriptions at all of this type.²¹ What is more, within Italy itself the distribution of these inscriptions is very uneven; inscriptions from the city of Rome predominate greatly over the others (Table 2). In fact, there are more than twice as many examples from the city of Rome as there are from all other areas of the peninsula combined. Furthermore, the Italian cases from outside the metropolis are distributed in a pattern which only serves further to emphasize the centrality of Rome. Most of them (75 per cent, N=69) come from two zones: a circuit immediately around the city of Rome (Latium, Regio I; and Etruria, Regio VII) and a zone in the far north of Italy (Aemilia, Regio VIII; Venetia, Regio X; and Transpadana, Regio XI). Other regions in Italy such as Lucania-Bruttium, Calabria, Samnium, Umbria and Liguria produce almost no such inscriptions. What is immediately apparent is that this type of inscription is correlated with the most urbanized regions of Italy, above all the urban centre of the empire, Rome, and its immediate environs.²²

Since this is the *sole* body of epigraphical data that has hitherto been used to obtain the modes of age at marriage for Roman girls, one must question, first of all, on the basis of its highly restricted regional and cultural focus, whether any conclusions drawn from it can be applied to Roman girls in general. But there are more serious objections, especially when one considers the great emphasis that has been placed on 'the surprising number of early marriages' attested in this sample. This claim is particularly open to question because the Rome sample displays precisely that potential bias towards the recording of low ages (i.e., as against other epigraphical samples from the western empire) that has been denied for it. If one considers the age-set distribution of funerary commemorations from the city of Rome, one immediately sees a remarkable contrast with other areas of the empire (contrast, e.g., Fig. 1. 1 with Figs. 1. 3, 1. 4, and 1. 5). Unlike many other populations in the west, the Rome population reveals a very heavy 'downward' skewing in the age-sets of the deceased who received inscribed tombstones. The under-10 age bracket represents by far the largest set of all decades receiving such commemorations. This trend applies to females as well; in fact, the skewing is so pronounced that 40 per cent of all commemorations to females are to girls 15 years of age and younger (Table 3). This same trend is even more pronounced for specific social groups in the city of Rome, and in regions near the city. At Ostia, for example, the emphasis in commemorating those in the under-10 and under-20 age groups is even greater; this undue emphasis is

²⁰ Once again, Hajnal, *ibid.*, 116 f. noted this difficulty some time ago for almost any pre-modern period, but especially for the European Middle Ages and earlier.

²¹ There is a possible example from Britain: *RIB* 295 = *CIL* VII, 160 (Viroconium).

²² The Po Valley region and Aemilia in the north do produce some 'pagan' examples, but the greater number by far are from the Christian period (Table 2), surely reflecting not only the correlate of 'urbanism', but also the shift of late imperial capitals to northern Italy in the period.

also shared by the female population, with 46 per cent of all stones set up for deceased females being for girls 15 years of age and younger (Fig. 1. 2 and Table 3). In general terms these figures suggest that at Ostia nearly one out of every two funerary commemorations for deceased females was to a rather young girl. The Christian inscriptions, which have also been used in this debate (because they too provided examples of the peculiar type of funerary epitaph described above), have the same geographical distribution as the 'pagan' set: 77 per cent are from Rome (N = 187) and 98 per cent (N = 238) are from Rome and Italy combined (excluding Sardinia). These epitaphs are also skewed heavily 'downwards' to the lower age ranges in the celebration of under tens and under twenties (Fig. 1. 9). About 45 per cent of all inscriptions set up to females are to those under 15 years of age (Table 3).²³

There can be no doubt, then, that the epigraphical sample from which the overwhelming number of inscriptions has been derived in the age-at-marriage debate belongs to a set of epigraphical data where the age-at-death figures are heavily skewed downwards to lower age ranges—'skewed down', that is, compared to almost all other epigraphical sets from the western empire. However, if mortality rates of close to 50 per cent of the population for ages under 15 are what we ought to expect for a Roman-type population, the question might well be asked if this skewing makes any difference to the age-at-marriage problem. In one specifiable way, it does make a big difference. If one tabulates the available data from the Rome sample, one finds that the correlation between age at death and length of marriage does not remain constant. That is to say, the length of marriage recorded on the stones does not increase commensurately with the increasing older age at death at which female deaths are recorded. Put differently, women dying in the older age ranges (i.e., in their thirties, forties and older) do not record marriages that are long enough to give us average ages at marriage as young as those for women dying, say, in their twenties.²⁴ The simple conclusion that must be drawn from this observation is that the Rome sample, where the ages at death are distorted, with great emphasis on the younger decades, is going to yield a 'disproportionate' number of younger ages at first marriage for girls. The question remains: is this disproportion in some sense 'real' (i.e., a distortion of what was then the actual situation) or is it just a skewing relative to other epigraphical samples? One way to answer that question would be to compare the mortality distribution of the Rome set with what we would believe to be a comparable life-table from the modern world that should reflect 'Roman conditions'. If we perform this sort of check on the data, we do indeed find that there is considerable 'overcommemoration' of girls in certain age groups. In the 10–20 decade, for example, the proportion of tombstone data for females not only places more emphasis on this group than does any other epigraphical sample from the Roman empire, it also emphasizes that group three or four times as much as one would expect, based on reasonable estimates derived from comparable model life-tables. The discrepancy between the two only widens if one ignores the factor of infant and child mortality, which is not directly relevant to the pool of girls of marriageable age.²⁵

²³ C. Carletta, 'Aspetti biometrici del matrimonio nelle iscrizioni cristiane di Roma', *Augustinianum* 17 (1977), 39–51. Carletta's study is by far the most thorough analysis of the Christian evidence, based on a collation of data from G. B. de Rossi, *ICUR*, I–III; E. Diehl, *ILCV*; and H. Zilliacus, *SICV*; see also C. Vogel, 'Facere cum virginia (-o) sua (-o) annos...; l'âge des époux chrétiens au moment de contracter mariage, d'après les inscriptions paléochrétiennes', *Revue de Droit Canonique* 16 (1966), 355–66, who cites the earlier relevant literature.

²⁴ An analysis of the Leclercq-Harkness figures, for example, will readily show that the average duration of marriage for women dying in their teens to mid-twenties, when subtracted from their age at death, will yield an average age at first marriage of about 15, whereas for those women dying in their mid-thirties to

mid-forties, the average duration is not commensurately longer, so that for them the subtraction indicates an average age at first marriage in their early twenties.

²⁵ At Rome, 9. 8 (general population), 9. 5 (slaves), and 12. 5 (freedmen) per cent of all funerary stones set up for females were for girls in that age range (the different social distribution is in itself significant, since most of the inscriptions of the type hitherto used in the argument over age at first marriage were those set up by freed elements in the population of Rome and its environs). But any of these death rates would be exceptional, if not unprecedented, in an actual population. For a model population one would expect about 5.2–5.4 per cent female deaths in that age range; see A. J. Coale and P. Demeny, with B. Vaughn, *Regional Model Life Tables and Stable Populations*, (2nd ed., 1983): Model South, Level 3.

The problem with this method, however, is that it is not reliable, nor even justifiable, for two reasons. Although the use of model life-tables may well be an interesting heuristic device legitimate in certain contexts for ancient demographic studies, in this particular case the ploy does have one serious drawback. The life-tables that are conventionally used in such tests are those designed to reflect *stable populations*. It is abundantly clear to most Roman historians, however, that the overall population of the Roman empire in the period between the first and the fifth to sixth centuries A.D. was not at all a 'stable population'. For western parts of the empire, between the second and fourth centuries, at least, it seems fairly certain that the population was growing at a considerable rate, and that certain sectors of it (especially those related to urban centres) were rather mobile. But there is another more certain, and much bigger, problem. As will be shown below, almost all the epigraphical sample used in the age-at-marriage debate comes from the city of Rome and its environs (or later, Ravenna and Mediolanum and similar northern urban centres). Now the population dynamics of the burgeoning urban centre of Rome during the empire were probably much the same as those typical of most pre-industrial megacities. That is to say, the city of Rome is likely to have been a huge net consumer of human population, which could only have survived and grown as a very large urban centre by the constant importation of large numbers of people from regions outside the city, both by natural immigration and by other means. Based on comparative historical studies, we must assume that the death rates in these urban immigrant groups (usually in their teens to thirties) would have been quite high. The replenishment of Rome's urban population, therefore, would have been a continual process, in which immigrants were probably drawn from the younger age ranges of the whole surrounding population. This process necessarily means that the age-profile of mortality of any of these large pre-modern urban centres, including Rome, reflects anything but the ideal of a stable population.²⁶ The simple deduction that must be made from all these considerations is that in this case one cannot use a simple check between life-tables of stable populations and our funerary data from Rome. Because of the peculiar downward skewing of all age-sets of commemoration in the Rome tombstone epigraphic evidence, we can say that we are likely to find greater numbers of lower ages at first marriage for girls than in most other epigraphical samples from the Roman west. But we cannot say that this sample does or does not have some peculiar skewing against the real conditions of the time. One must be aware of the element of the purely arbitrary in the sample. It does contain at least one possibly serious and misleading bias in it which would, specifically, give a false impression of the relative percentage of girls (out of all girls) married in their early teens. But, more important, the context of the data themselves is so arbitrary that the statistical modes derived from them bear an unknown relationship to the actual modes of age at first marriage for girls in Roman society.

II. AN ALTERNATIVE METHOD

Since this body of data represents, so to speak, the 'sum total' of the epigraphical material that has hitherto been used in the attempt to solve the 'age-at-marriage' question, and since our literary evidence is equally unlikely to offer a solution, the situation might well appear to be hopeless. But there is another possibility, another way of 'massaging' the data available to us in order to produce some useful results. This method is also fraught with problems, and the appropriate caveats are in order.²⁷ Admittedly, therefore, it can only produce a general indication of trends; even so, however, it has the distinct advantage of permitting the use of a far wider

²⁶ See Flinn, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 22 ff., citing the fundamental paper by E. A. Wrigley, 'A Simple Model of London's Importance in Changing English Society and Economy, 1650-1750', *P&P* 37 (1967), 44-70, and the

reply by A. Sharlin, 'Natural Decrease in Early Modern Cities: A Reconsideration', *P&P* 79 (1978), 126-38.

²⁷ For some of these see nn. 24-5 above.

range of epigraphical data, and the possibility of a far better regional and social coverage. Putting this method into practice is probably worth the attempt, even if there remains the distinct suspicion, as with many such commensurations, that all we are doing is measuring the world of the data themselves. The method, quite simply, is based on the question: Who is commemorating the deceased female? It has been argued elsewhere that the duty and act of commemoration is inextricably linked with the fact of family.²⁸ In the case of a girl who dies young, therefore, and who is unmarried, one must expect that her parents (one or both) would undertake the duty of her burial and commemoration. On the other hand, if the woman was older and married at the time of her death, one would expect these duties to be assumed by her husband. In either case, other relatives or friends *could* undertake the duty of commemoration, but test samples taken from three regional contexts in which the full range of commemorators of girls and women were analysed (e.g. including brothers, sisters, cousins, grandparents) indicated that these other persons did not in any case form a significant alternative to husbands and parents.²⁹ Therefore, if we trace a series of funerary dedications to girls and women over the period from birth to, say, age 35, we should find somewhere along that spectrum a gross indication of the point where parents tend to 'decline' as commemorators, and where husbands begin to assume this duty and to take over from parents as the principal dedicators. The change in the girl's status that marked her shift from the former to the latter situation is, of course, that of marriage. The data processed in this way should therefore indicate the approximate general range when most girls concerned were beginning to marry.

There are dangers and caveats; and certain minimum requirements are demanded by this method, amongst them the use of a large enough sample to permit reasonably probable deductions. But, as stated above, its advantages are manifest: it permits the exploitation of a far wider range of the available epigraphical data, and extends our coverage to social and cultural groups outside the urban milieu of Rome and Italy.

We might begin, then, with the case of Rome and Italy. As already remarked above, there is a pronounced emphasis on the commemoration of the very young in the general corpus of Roman funerary inscriptions from which our evidence is drawn (Fig. 1. 1) and, as one would expect, this bias is also true of the female population (Fig. 1. 1 and Table 3). In the plotting of the commemoration of deceased females, first by parents and then by husbands (Fig. 2. 1), we find that parents remain strong commemorators of daughters until the early twenties, after which a noticeable decline sets in, reaching a nadir at age 25. In the sample of *c.* 400 cases taken from *CIL* VI, there was only one commemoration by a husband to a girl at 15 years of age and younger; as a rule husbands appear as commemorators increasingly in the late teens, and take over from parents absolutely in that role after the early twenties. If we consider the regions of Italy north and south of the city (Figs. 2. 2 and 2. 3), because of funerary practices that seem not to have called for a record of age at death on the stone in the southern zone, and given the exiguous data, the trends are perhaps not as clear. In the northern zone (Regiones VI, VII and VIII: Umbria, Etruria and Aemilia), parents remain strongly in evidence as commemorators until about age 20, after which a marked decline sets in; whereas some husband commemorators are found as early as age 15, they begin to dominate at and after age 20. As just stated, in the case of the southern zone (Regiones I, IV and V: Latium only, plus Sannium and Picenum), the data are fewer and the patterns decidedly more erratic (Fig. 2. 3).

²⁸ R. P. Saller and B. D. Shaw, 'Tombstones and Roman Family Relationships in the Principate: Civilians, Soldiers and Slaves', *JRS* 74 (1984), 124–56, esp. 126–7. In part the argument for expected types of commemorators (in the case of husband as opposed to father/mother) reposes on the structural form of the family, the sentiments attached to it, and the element of residence of the conjugal unit; in part it also depends on legal provisions that lay the obligation on the husband

to perform the funeral rites for his deceased wife if he retains the dowry (as I assume to be the case in most instances). For the latter argument see *Dig.* 11. 7. 16; 20; 22; 28 and 29.

²⁹ The samples taken were those of Rome/Italy, North Africa/Lambaesis and the Danube; in none of these regional samples did 'other persons' amount to 5 per cent of the total, and often were less than this proportion of the total.

Parents seem well in evidence until the early twenties; husbands first appear at about age 15, but do not take over until the mid-twenties.

If our analysis is focused on the provincial regions of the western empire, we might begin with north Africa. For large parts of this region of the Roman west the singular lack of the notation of the names or relationships of commemorators of the deceased on tombstones unfortunately robs us of the opportunity of applying our type of analysis to them. Nevertheless, three regions or sites where the analysis was possible were selected for investigation: Tébessa and Lambaesis in southern Numidia, and the province of Mauretania Caesariensis in the west. In all three epigraphical samples, there are clear signs of a typical African pattern of funerary commemoration in which there is a pronounced skewing of commemoration 'upwards' towards the older age groups. One must bear in mind this overall distribution of the data when one considers the apparent decline in emphasis of parent-to-daughter commemorations in the whole set. Although there are a few cases of husband-to-wife dedications in the under-15 age range, the trend is for commemoration by parents to decline decisively in the early twenties, and for husband-to-wife dedications to rise markedly in the late teens and to supersede those by parents from the early twenties onwards (Figs. 2. 4, 2. 5 and 2. 6).

If the funerary epigraphy of Roman Spain is analysed, the same general pattern continues, though with what one might call some 'Spanish peculiarities'.³⁰ In the processing of funerary dedications to girls, no commemorations of wives at age 15 or under 15 were found; the earliest husband-to-wife dedications begin in the late teens and, again, it is not until the early twenties that any trend to a dominance in dedications by husbands becomes noticeable (Fig. 2. 7). Two matters might be remarked upon, however, as peculiar to the Spanish sample. First, there is the fact that parents continue to be strongly represented as commemorators of their daughters until the late twenties and early thirties, much more so than elsewhere. And second, something that does seem to be uniquely Spanish: most of the commemorators are mothers as opposed to fathers, even as opposed to both parents together (Table 4). Both these phenomena seem to be related to a peculiar valuation of girls and women in Spanish society, the explanation of which is not as yet entirely clear.³¹ Turning to the funerary epigraphy from the region of southern Gaul, we find that parents are attested fairly consistently as commemorators of their female children until their early twenties, at which point there is a rather sudden decline. On the husband-to-wife side, although there is one example of an under-15 dedication, the trend is for husbands to appear in that role with greater frequency in the late teens, finally to become dominant in the early twenties (Fig. 2. 8). In the last region surveyed for this paper, that of the Danube (the zone covered by the Pannonias and Dalmatia), the pattern of commemoration of girls shows a profile like that of Spain, in the sense that husbands only begin to appear in the late teens, and only begin to dominate from the mid-20s onwards. The difference is that there is a noticeable decline in the dedications made by parents in the late teens and early twenties, which therefore appears as the period of the critical shift from one set of commemorators to the other (Fig. 2. 9).

Despite the problems involved in using this method, when it is combined with the control provided by the overall distribution of the epigraphical material in each region from which the data are derived, it does provide some valuable indications for different regions of the western empire. The value of any one of the individual regional surveys (i.e., Figs. 1. 1-9) is probably marginal in hard statistical terms, but the aggregate data on parent-daughter, husband-wife dedications for the western empire used for this investigation ($N = 1604$) provide a reasonably reliable sample. It might then be noted that the disaggregated data for the different provincial populations still confirm the overall tendencies in the larger data set. And the point at which

³⁰ Initially, separate samples were taken for each of the Spanish provinces—Baetica, Lusitania, and Tarraconensis—but no significant differences were found between them, and so the Spanish evidence is pre-

sented as a whole.

³¹ See Saller-Shaw, *op. cit.* (n. 28), 138-9 for an initial impression of the unusual 'female dominance' in the Spanish funerary epigraphy.

the parent-to-daughter dedications and husband-to-wife dedications transect in the cumulative sample of data from the western empire is at about age twenty (Fig. 2. 10). In the case of any single funerary inscription, the marriage in question may well have preceded the death of the girl by a good number of years. But the method depends on the measurement of a large number of such instances, and in that case it seems inconceivable, if there were in fact considerable numbers of girls marrying in the under-15 age range (e.g., at ages 12, 13, 14), that there would be almost no record whatever of husbands setting up funerary stones to them—a lacuna which is found throughout the western provinces of the empire. Given the fact that the general decline in the ties between parents and daughters tends to coincide with a take-off and rise in the ties attested between husbands and wives, and that this point is consistently set in the period of the late teens (the 'break point' in the aggregate data being in the early twenties), it seems reasonable to postulate that the modes of age at first marriage for most girls in the western Roman empire (i.e., in the Roman-type urban communities setting up funerary stones) were probably in the late teens.

III. THE EVIDENCE FROM ROME

If correct, this deduction means quite simply that the urban-oriented Roman-type populations of the western Mediterranean were already exhibiting some of those characteristics of marriage and family formation which Peter Laslett distinguishes as typical of a 'South European' or 'Mediterranean' family structure, as opposed to Hajnal's eastern and western European types.³² We are now in a position to return to the significance of the peculiar type of inscription, mainly from Rome and Italy, used hitherto in the age-at-marriage debate. As pointed out above, the modes derived from these data are of unknown significance. Yet, whatever the possible effects the 'disproportionate' emphasis on different age groups in the Rome funerary inscriptions might have on the whole set of the data, the body of evidence does show that at least some girls were getting married at very young ages that are not common in marriages today. What is the meaning of this evidence? One is at least compelled to admit that for this population of girls the *range* of ages at first marriage was considerably wider (at least in its lower ranges) than today. The question is: which Roman girls, and why?

It must be recalled that this particular type of inscription is a peculiar combination of two facts recorded on the same gravestone: the girl's age at death (AAD) and the length of marriage (LOM) to her husband. If those two factors are considered, we can see that this type of stone is in fact a subset of a wider and more numerous type, namely that which records length of marriage (LOM), either alone or cojoined with the AAD, as an integral part of the epitaph. The LOM funerary stones are indeed more numerous, but, significantly, their geographical distribution is much the same as the smaller subset of AAD/LOM stones: they are mainly from Rome and its environs, with a few scattered provincial examples added to this core. The LOM inscriptions, therefore, are the larger set that subsumes the type of inscription used to determine the modes of age at first marriage for Roman girls. When one considers this larger set, some characteristic features are immediately apparent. First, when we consider the AAD as recorded on most stones in the empire, we find varying degrees of the phenomenon of age-rounding. Perhaps significantly, the tendency to age-rounding is rather low in the set of LOM inscriptions.³³ As just stated, however, in the whole body of inscriptions it is LOM that predominates rather than AAD, much as if the latter were not in some sense 'known' to those who set up the inscription, or as if they did not care or prefer to record it, as opposed to the emphasis they wished to place on the fact of their marriage. In any event, in a large sample taken from *CIL VI* for analysis, LOM prevailed in all cases over AAD on the whole group of such stones, the trend being for a near balance between the two on stones erected for marriages

³² P. Laslett, 'Family and Household as Work Group and Kin Group: Areas of Traditional Europe Compared', ch. 17 in R. Wall (ed.), *Family Forms in Historic Europe* (1983), 513-63, at 526 ff.

³³ R. P. Duncan-Jones, 'Age-rounding, Illiteracy and Social Differentiation in the Roman Empire', *Chiron* 7 (1977), 333-54 and 'Age-Rounding in Greco-Roman Egypt', *ZPE* 33 (1979), 169-77.

lasting under ten years, to an almost total disappearance of the AAD record on stones of marriages lasting two, three, and more decades (Table 5). Lastly, the LOM and, where recorded, the AAD, are established with greater accuracy than normal, especially for those marriages of ten years or less in duration.

Both observations converge to indicate a peculiar type of population: one where records or knowledge of birth are de-emphasized (though knowledge of them, when known or recorded, is paraded or advertised in a more accurate way than amongst the general population) and where precision in length of marriage is both known and seems to be preferred in marking the funerary stone. The question is: who are these people? The answer would seem to be suggested in part by the simple fact of the geographical distribution of this type of inscription, with its very heavy emphasis on Rome and environs, on urban centres like Ravenna and Mediolanum in the north during the Christian period, and in provincial administrative centres. The populations involved are, as is also clearly indicated by the nomenclature of the persons in almost all instances, either slaves or freedmen (predominantly the latter), or at least from that sort of social background.³⁴ That singular fact may well account for the lack of emphasis on age as opposed to length of marriage in these inscriptions (namely the fact that many of these persons may not have known much about their origins). One must also suspect, given the size and cost of the funerary stones concerned, that these slaves and freedmen were specifically the slaves and freedmen of the wealthy and powerful of the city of Rome (and of similar groups in other urban centres of the empire). One is in fact led to agree with Lily Ross Taylor that the vast bulk of the funerary epigraphy of the city of Rome as we have it (i.e., *CIL VI*) was produced by this peculiar social status group.³⁵

If this observation on the social make-up of the populations that are responsible for setting up most of the Rome funerary stones in the high empire holds, then one must also suspect that the attachments that linked these same persons to the wealthy and powerful whom they served throughout their whole lives shaped their behaviour in ways that made them quite different from the vast majority of the free populace of the city.³⁶ I would hypothesize, further, that the mere fact that they set up comparatively elaborate memorials for themselves in the manner that they did was in effect a form of imitation of the styles set by the rich and powerful whom they served. Indeed, it has reasonably been argued that the type of portraiture on these stones was a form derived from upper-class models, and was one way in which the fact of family was solidified by the servile persons who set up these funerary monuments.³⁷ If all these indications hold, then one might justifiably suspect that the social mimicry of masters went much deeper than the mere assumption of upper-class styles in dress, deportment, and other modes of personal expression. It also involved the attempt to emulate various forms of family life, including the erection of tombstones with a

³⁴ Many of them were from the households of the upper echelons of the administrative élite of the Roman emperor, or of wealthy families in the city; in this respect our distribution reflects that of married servile persons designated *contubernales* in the Rome sample, see S. Treggiari, 'Contubernales in *CIL 6*', *Phoenix* 35 (1981), 42–69, at 46 f. (note the concept of 'extended familia', which might usefully be applied to private households, as well as the imperial palace), 50 f., 52, and 61: 'What sort of people commemorate themselves as *contubernales*? As far as we can tell, predominantly the slaves and ex-slaves of the imperial family, the aristocracy and their dependants, that is, domestics from the city households and administrators in the service of the emperor or senators and *equites*. Prosperous freedmen of the class of *tabernarii* and *opifices*, who must have formed a substantial proportion of the slave and freed population of the capital, but who rarely appear linked with the great houses, hardly show up here.'

³⁵ L. R. Taylor, 'Freedmen and Freeborn in the Epitaphs of Rome', *AJPh* 82 (1961), 113–32; cf. n. 37 below and the remarks made there by Kleiner.

³⁶ A further conclusion that may then be reached for these data is that although a large sector of the population of Rome has provided us with the bulk of our funerary epigraphy from the city, it is not necessarily the predominant one numerically. If this deduction is valid, it is then highly misleading to make deductions from this corpus of data about the relative proportions of slave/freed and free in the make-up of the whole population of the city. Nevertheless, this has been a common assumption. For example, Brunt, *op. cit.* (n. 9), 386–7, makes this argument even while wondering whether the statistics taken from epitaphs would tend to underrate the proportion of men of free birth in the whole population. Despite these misgivings, he still opts for the traditional view: 'It seems to me safe to conclude that slaves and freedmen accounted for well over two-thirds of the urban population in 70, perhaps three-quarters'.

³⁷ See D. E. E. Kleiner, *Roman Group Portraiture: The Funerary Reliefs of the Late Republic and Early Empire* (1977), at 188–90; Kleiner's materials are restricted to the funerary monuments from the city of Rome and environs that are our subject here.

portraiture emphasizing the domestic group of the nuclear family, as well as the advertisement of a genuine marriage and its duration. A distinct, though correlated, tendency that is readily apparent, even on a cursory examination of the iconography of these stones, is the simple fact that, for those stones on which a family group including children is portrayed, the portrait of the child is almost invariably that of a son. It is a small point, but one which adds weight to our argument regarding the probable function of the iconography of these tombstones. One might also note that it is only in this group that sizeable numbers of early-age-at-first-marriage inscriptions are attested for girls. This may indeed have been part of a wider range of marriage ages shared by girls in all parts of the western empire. As was pointed out above, however, such a wide range with emphasis on early age of marriage for young girls is often true of propertied classes; it was certainly true of the Roman upper classes. The remaining question which must then be asked is: was it also true in some sense of their servants as a social group?

IV. THE CHRISTIAN EVIDENCE

Whatever the answer to that question, I think that we may reasonably question (in a different sense) any ready acceptance of an assertion that very young ages at first marriage were typical (as statistical modes) of *most* girls and women in Roman towns and cities, and their rural *territoria*, in the west. Indeed, there is one sample already employed in the age-at-marriage debate that points in a different direction. This is the larger number of LOM/AAD inscriptions provided by the Christian epigraphy of the Latin West, principally from the city of Rome and its environs (see Tables 1 and 2). As has already been noted by Hopkins, this group of inscriptions produces significantly later modes of age for first marriages of girls. Hopkins argued that we therefore have to find special explanations for why Christian girls were apparently delaying their first marriages to later ages than their 'pagan' predecessors.³⁸ A recent, and more comprehensive, study of all the Christian epigraphy from Rome relevant to the question enables us to place the modal ages at first marriage for Christian girls recorded in these inscriptions at 17 and 18; the mean for the whole sample is 17.5 years, and the mean for marriages at 25 years of age and under (that is, excluding possible remarriages) is still 17.³⁹ Why do these data apparently provide us with rather later ages of first marriage for Christian girls? The immediate explanation to which every scholar treating the question has rushed is the fact of their Christianity—namely that some element in Christian belief prompted these girls to behave differently from their earlier non-Christian counterparts.

I very much doubt this convenient explanation, and on several grounds. Firstly, the general field of Christian epigraphy from which the sample is taken does not show any marked skewing away from the urban pattern of funerary commemoration typical of 'pagan' Rome. Then again, the patterns of age-at-death as against length-of-marriage correlations of the two sets of inscriptions do not reveal any great variance as against each other. The explanation for the changing modes, therefore, must lie in some other realm. That which strikes me as obvious relates to the social status of the different populations making the two sets of commemorations. In the case of the so-called 'pagan' sample, the predominant commemorators, as mentioned above, were better-off persons of servile descent: imperial slaves and freedmen, freedmen serving the wealthy and powerful households of the city, and similar social groups. This social background is immediately apparent if we compare the most common type of

³⁸ Hopkins (1964-65), 319-20, 'It would be interesting to be able to explain the continuation of the old pagan practices and also the general rise in the age of marriage shown by the Christian inscriptions which probably came from the fourth century onwards. It would be possible to see the change as in some way a by-product of Christian asceticism; but that is only partially an explanation, and in part re-labelling. It is still necessary to explain what pressures drove Chris-

tians to delay marriage in the cause of asceticism, and to trace their reactions to these changes in pressure and to the changes in social behaviour'. As I hope to demonstrate in what follows, such a privileged explanation, including recourse to 'Christian asceticism' is probably unnecessary.

³⁹ Carletta, *op. cit.* (n. 23), 41-42 and his Table 1, p. 49; the calculations are mine.

inscription from the first (i.e., 'pagan') set, with that most typical of the so-called Christian set. The former are usually reasonably elaborate stones, with a five to ten line epitaph inscribed in fair to excellent letter-cutting, and with the occasional addition of a funerary portrait of the deceased, often in a conjugal or familial setting. The Christian inscriptions can be perceived at first glance, even by the non-expert, as produced out of an entirely different social milieu. Their quality is exceedingly poor. The carving of the epitaph, often only one or two lines in length, is of very low quality, often not surpassing the level of a graffito.⁴⁰ From this context alone, I would argue that it is a reasonable hypothesis that these so-called 'Christian' inscriptions provide us with a genuine insight into the mass of the free poor and the poor of distant servile origins in the city of Rome, and that the modes of age at first marriage contained in them therefore do not need any special explanation. In short, the argument is this: that these vast numbers of epitaphs which appear for the first time on a large scale after the beginning of the fourth century reflect the spread of funerary commemoration, however poorly done, to the great and hitherto anonymous public of the city. What we are witnessing, then, is hardly any great change from 'pagan' to Christian, but, if we are to believe our other indications, what was there all along. The Christian sample, far from being peculiarly 'Christian', is simply evidence of a broader lower-class pattern of marriage that typified most of Roman society, even in the earlier 'non-Christian' centuries.⁴¹ The Christians were in fact merely continuing in a lower-class mode of family formation that was broadly typical of *most* men and women in the urban centres of the western Roman empire, a pattern which, so to speak, has been hidden from our historical view only because of the determinate impact of different social customs of funerary commemoration as they developed through time.

V. LEGAL EVIDENCE

This is perhaps a good point at which to introduce an aspect of the literary record that deserves reconsideration. The one 'basic age' that has been cited repeatedly in this debate is that of the legal minimum age for marriage. These minimum ages were 12 for girls and 14 for boys, and were probably first set as legal barriers in the 'moral' legislation of Augustus.⁴² This evidence has been used, in combination with the epigraphical data, to show that at least some girls in Roman society could marry at very young ages, and that such marriages would be regarded as legal. But although marriages may indeed have occurred at very young ages amongst certain social ranks, neither the existence of these marriages nor the legal minimum ages constitute a very good guide to the usual practice. In other historical periods for which we can specify the legal minima (often still those of the Roman law) and for which we can also ascertain the average age at first marriage, the two are at considerable variance; in fact, legal minima and actual marriages in the very low teens could still be found in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries in western European countries for which the average age at first marriage was rising to the mid-twenties.⁴³ Indeed, minimum legal ages for marriage were set at ages 14 to 16 by many states in western Europe and in North America in precisely those centuries of the modern era when the average ages at first

⁴⁰ An impression of the difference can be gained quickly by looking at the representative illustrated sample in Zilliaccus, *SICV*.

⁴¹ I have made this point elsewhere with regard to other aspects of family life in the Roman West, see B. D. Shaw, 'Latin Funerary Epigraphy and Family Life in the Later Roman Empire', *Historia* 33 (1984), 457-97, at 483 f.

⁴² *CJ* 5. 4. 24 (A.D. 530): 'in quo nuptiarum aetas vel feminis post duodecimum annum accesserit vel maribus post quartum decimum annum completum'; cf. *Dig.* 23. 1. 9 (Ulpian) and *Dio* 54. 16. 7 (as part of Augustus' programme); the 'twelfth year' and the

'fourteenth year' being age 11 and 13 in our terms; the text of Gaius, *Inst.* 1. 196 is defective at precisely the point where the age is given.

⁴³ Hence it was not difficult for Bang, *op. cit.* (n. 14), 140-1 to cite many examples of very young ages at first marriage for girls in these centuries; the problem is that they were not an accurate reflection of general practice. For such variance for the centuries before the sixteenth century, and even for Mediterranean contexts, see D. Herlihy, *Medieval Households* (1985), 103-7, cases where census records reveal a different average pattern from the indications of some of the striking literary examples of marriages at very young ages.

marriage were about a decade higher.⁴⁴ There is in fact another set of legal norms that perhaps offers a better indication of the usual age of women at first marriage than do the legal minima. These norms were also part of the Augustan 'moral' legislation; they specified the age at which women were legally required to have produced children (and, *a fortiori*, to have been married) in order to qualify for exemptions from penalties imposed on the childless. Although this legislation probably applied only to members of the Roman upper classes, it nevertheless must have expressed certain general normative expectations with respect to marriage and child-bearing. Norms such as these, which represent approximations in a given society of the age by which people should be married, seem to come much closer to the actual averages than do the lowest possible cases envisaged by the legal minima. Observers seem mentally to screen out the extreme outriders—the unusual low and high ages—to arrive at and to give expression to what they believe to be a reasonable age by which marriage does and should take place.⁴⁵ The age 'from which the law required children' of women was set at twenty years.⁴⁶ That is to say, the normal expectation of the drafters of the Augustan law was that most women should have produced their first child by about twenty years of age, and therefore that most women would be married by about age nineteen. Of course, the drafters of the law knew full well that many women actually produced children at ages lower than twenty; the point is that they seem to have regarded an age approaching twenty as a reasonable limit for marriage and production of children for most women. That approximate age would make good sense if the general norms in Roman society in the West were, as has been argued above, in much this same range.

CONCLUSION

The few indicators that there are concerning age at marriage, therefore, seem to point to a rather later age of marriage, probably in the late teens, as typical of *most* girls in Roman society. A recent study on the age at first marriage of males in the Roman empire in the west has reached the conclusion that, unlike many young men in competitive 'office-aristocracy' of the upper classes, most men in the western regions of the empire seem to have married in their late twenties, with modes perhaps in the range 27/28 to 30.⁴⁷ If the data and the arguments made so far on the age at first marriage of males and females are combined, some of the following characteristics of family formation in the western empire seem to emerge. First, girls tended to marry in their late teens, though perhaps in some cases at very young ages; that is to say, a wider range of ages at first marriage, with some marriages taking place at rather young ages, seems to have been part of the overall pattern for women (this much being 'guaranteed' by the Christian sample). Men, on the other hand, tended to begin marrying in their mid to late twenties. Therefore, an age-gap of ten or more years tended to separate man and wife. These factors then merged to produce characteristic patterns of reproduction, of relations between husbands and wives, of widowhood and remarriage, and others, that would have broadly typified the urban-centred populations living in the western provinces of the empire. The upper-class patterns of

⁴⁴ W. W. Buckland and A. D. McNair, rev. F. H. Lawson, *Roman Law and Common Law* (1965), 47, with Flinn in n. 1 above; in the United States many states, including Iowa, Kentucky, New York, South Carolina, Texas and Utah set legal minima at 16 for boys and 14 for girls; many of the New England states, including Massachusetts and New Hampshire set them at the Roman/Civil Law limits of 14 for boys and 12 for girls (as did Mississippi); see G. E. Howard, *A History of Matrimonial Institutions* (Chicago, 1904; repr. New York, 1964), II. 395–7; W. Bernard, *Law for the Family* (New York, 1962), 10–13; and J. Goldstein and J. Katz, *The Family and the Law* (New York, 1965), 13.

⁴⁵ See Herlihy, n. 43 above; when early modern states began to abandon the Roman/Civil law mini-

mum ages and to institute those normative ages of expected first marriage in legislation, these new ages were very much closer to the actual average age at first marriage; see, e.g., S. Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (1983), 37–8, 58 ff.

⁴⁶ Ulpian, *Tit. 16. 1 = FIRA II*², 278–9: 'velut si uterque vel alteruter eorum [sc. vir et uxor] nondum eius aetatis sint, a qua lex liberis exigit, id est si vir minor annorum XXV sit aut uxor annorum XX minor'.

⁴⁷ R. Saller, 'Men's Age at Marriage and its Consequences in the Roman Family', *CPh* 82 (1987), 21–34, esp. 28–30; cf. Hopkins (1964–65), 323, noting that sons were commemorated by their parents to much later average ages than were daughters.

marriage, on the other hand, were rather different with, one must suspect, modes of marriage for girls that were significantly lower, but for men that were probably much the same as those of men in the lower classes (i.e. in their late twenties or early thirties), with the exception of those highly competitive office-seekers in the upper élite who may have married in their early twenties for purposes of political advantage. The upper-class marriage, therefore, would have been characterized by a wider age-gap between husband and wife, with all the implications that hiatus would have for reproduction, conjugal relations, widowhood and remarriage, and the devolution of property. Whatever position one takes on the absolute validity of these hypothetical patterns of marriage and family formation, they seem to be the most plausible deductions that can be made from the data available to us for analysis. These Roman marriage patterns seem to depend, very broadly, on the social and political factors of class, status, and culture; the different marriage patterns themselves then had determinate effects that must be taken into account in any generalizations we make about the structure of the Roman family, and the historical implications of that structure for the distribution of power and property in Roman society in the west.⁴⁸

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TABLE 1. REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF FUNERARY EPITAPHS BEARING BOTH LENGTH-OF-MARRIAGE AND AGE-AT-DEATH INFORMATION
(% of total N in each category expressed in brackets)

	Rome	Italy	Dalmatia	Africa	Pannonia	Spain	Others	Total
Early Empire (‘Pagan’)	79 (56)	42 (30)	7 (5)	7 (5)	3 (2)	0	2 (1)	140
Christian	187 (77)	51 (21)	4 (2)	0	0	1 (-)	1 (-)	244
Total N =	266 (69)	93 (24)	11 (3)	7 (2)	3 (1)	1 (-)	3 (1)	384

⁴⁸ I would like to thank Professor Richard Saller for his comments and criticisms of this paper, and for allowing me to consult his paper on the age of males at first marriage (see n. 47 above) in advance of its publication. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the annual meeting of the Association of Ancient

Historians at the University of Pittsburgh, 4 May 1985. I would like to thank the participants for their perceptive questions; Professor Susan Treggiari, the commentator, for her remarks; and, above all, Professor Keith Hopkins for his suggestions on a subject which he has made his own.

TABLE 2. DISTRIBUTION OF LENGTH-OF-MARRIAGE PLUS AGE-AT-DEATH INSCRIPTIONS IN ITALY

Region	Early Empire (‘Pagan’)	Christian	Total
Regio I–Latium/Campania	5	7	12
Regio II–Apulia	8	0	8
Regio III–Lucania/Bruttium	3	0	3
Regio IV–Samnium	2	1	3
Regio V–Picenum	3	2	5
Regio VI–Umbria	0	1	1
Regio VII–Etruria	4	8	12
Regio VIII–Aemilia	4	3	7
Regio IX–Liguria	2	0	2
Regio X–Venetia	6	15	21
Regio XI–Transpadana	4	13	17
Sardinia	1	1	2
Total (N=)	42	51	93

TABLE 3. PROPORTION OF DEDICATIONS (OF ALL) TO FEMALES 15 YEARS OF AGE AND UNDER

Region/Social Group	%
Ostia	46
Rome: Christians	44
Rome: Slaves	43
Rome: General Populace (Total)	40
Dalmatia: Salonae	31
Africa: Carthage: Slaves	30
Southern Gaul	30
Rome: Freedmen	28
Pannonia: Army Towns	27
Dalmatia: Country Towns	26
Slaves: Empire: General Sample	25
Pannonia: Country Towns	22
Africa: Theveste	21
Freedmen: Empire: General Sample	20
Spain	15
Africa: Lambaesis	15
Africa: Castellum Celtianum	2

Sources: Same as those for Fig. 1. 1–9 (see fold-out) (plus: Rome/Slaves: Szilágyi (1963), 149–50; Dalmatia/Salonae: id. (1962), 303–4; Africa/Carthage/slaves: id. (1967), 27–8; Rome/freedmen: id. (1963), 150–1; Pannonia/Army towns: id. (1962), 311–15; Dalmatia/country towns: *ibid.*, 304–5; Slaves/empire/general: *ibid.*, 323–4; Pannonia/country towns: *ibid.*, 315–16; Freedmen/empire/general: *ibid.*, 323–4).

TABLE 4. PROPORTIONS OF DEDICATIONS FROM FATHERS, MOTHERS, AND BOTH PARENTS TO DAUGHTERS (REGIONAL SAMPLES)
(% of total N in each category expressed in brackets)

	Rome	N. Italy	S. Italy	Lambaesis	Spain	Danube
Father to daughter	35 (28)	15 (22)	23 (28)	40 (56)	10 (14)	21 (24)
Mother to daughter	34 (27)	12 (17)	18 (22)	22 (30)	41 (58)	32 (38)
Both parents to daughter	58 (45)	42 (61)	41 (50)	10 (14)	20 (28)	32 (38)
Total N = 506	127	69	82	72	71	85

Source: Samples drawn from the surveys taken for Fig. 2. 1-10 (see sources for those as appended), but restricted to girls between ages 1-30.

TABLE 5. THE LENGTH-OF-MARRIAGE (LOM) BODY OF INSCRIPTIONS
(Females only)

1. *LOM Inscriptions: Notation of the Age-at-Death*

Length of Marriage (in years)	1-9	10-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59
Age-at-Death recorded N =	14	13	6	8	1	0
Age-at-Death <i>not</i> given N =	16	28	45	39	28	9
Total N = 207	30	41	51	47	29	9

2. *LOM Inscriptions: Accuracy in Recording the LOM*

Length of Marriage (in years)	1-9	10-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59
Length given in years	8	26	40	44	25	8
Length given in years plus months and/or days	22	15	11	3	4	1
Total N = 207	30	41	51	47	29	9

Source: Random sample from *CIL* vi.