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A Mediterranean Family?
A Comparative Approach to the Ancient World

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The Family in the Mediterranean in Modern Times

In this volume we have brought together a group of scholars working on different periods and regions of the Mediterranean to study the family from the earliest historical periods of the Mediterranean to early medieval times spanning a time range from the second millennium BCE to the sixth century CE. This volume also offers an outlook on the family in later periods of the Mediterranean, which helps us to put our findings into perspective with better documented periods.

The family should be understood here as an evolving process, also called the family life cycle, comprising marriage, childbirth, death, and divorce. On the basis of the family and household we can study the organization of domestic space, gender relations, social representation, and small-scale economic activities along a continuum of the centuries and millennia. A house in this volume is defined as the physical building, while a household defines a group of individuals sharing a common dwelling, usually family members and their servants and/or lodgers. In a comparative approach taking into consideration the material, visual, and textual evidence for answering questions of cultural influence and social change, a study of houses and households as the core units of society we hope will eventually enhance considerably our knowledge of social organization in the ancient Mediterranean at large.

It is our view that the Greek and Roman worlds as pre-industrial societies were not fundamentally different from societies in the medieval and early modern Mediterranean, and we firmly believe that further comparative work on the Mediterranean family therefore would prove itself extremely fruitful in mending the academic fragmentation of a subject split between so many different disciplines.
The study of the family life cycle and household formation patterns in cross-cultural comparative perspective has received surprisingly little attention by ancient historians interested in the family so far.

While a comparative approach is still unusual for traditional family studies of Greek and Roman antiquity, it is intrinsic to the study of the family in Mediterranean communities of later periods. Studies of more recent years have increasingly stressed the region’s variety and variability, testing and challenging the notions of geographical, historical, and cultural unity introduced by the founding fathers of Mediterranean anthropology. The French historian Fernand Braudel was one of the first who set out this concept of the Mediterranean world (Braudel 1949). Braudel thought he had discovered “an ancient substratum” in Mediterranean life that had remained unchanged since antiquity. His stress was therefore on continuity over the ages, on the one hand, and a certain homogeneity of the people around it, on the other. Seven years before the English translation of Braudel’s Méditerranée appeared, another pioneering scholar of the Mediterranean based in Oxford, the anthropologist J. G. Peristiany, published parts of the proceedings of a conference under the title Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society (Peristiany 1965). Like Braudel, Peristiany’s writings fostered the perception of unity, proposing the concept of “Mediterranean modes of thought” central to the people around the Mediterranean Sea, such as the unifying ideas about “honor” and “shame” (cf. Peristiany 1976; Gilmore 1987).

The collection of essays Mediterranean Countrymen, edited by Pitt-Rivers in 1963, was one of the first in the field comparing social structures of rural communities in Spain, Egypt, Algeria, Greece, Corsica, Morocco, Lebanon, Turkey, and France. The contributions to this volume aimed to show that it was the geomorphological and climatic characteristics held in common by the Mediterranean regions, called “timeless” factors, that represented the source of Mediterranean unity. A similar climate with dry summers and torrential rainfall in winters, a mountainous rugged hinterland, the cultivation of olives, figs, vines, and wheat, transhumant pastoralism of goats and sheep, and the comparatively high degree of urbanization, with peasants residing in towns rather than in hamlets on their land, hypothetically favored a certain homogeneity of the region’s people. Pitt-Rivers’s aim in Mediterranean Countrymen was to “discover continuities which run counter to the varying political hegemonies, observing the exigencies of the ecology or the entrenched conservatism of the local settlement” (Pitt-Rivers 1963: 9–10) continuities that had been little affected by changing rulers or religious systems or borders of modern nation states.

Over the past few decades, however, a growing consensus in the scholarly community has rejected Braudel’s, Peristiany’s, and Pitt-River’s view of the Mediterranean as a culturally homogeneous zone as an adequate model for studying the Mediterranean area in its historical and cultural context (e.g., Davis 1977; Gilmore 1982; Goitein 1983; Albera, Blok, and Bromberger 2001; Constable 2003; Harris 2005a). Horden and Purcell (2000) have been among the most recent to criticize Braudel’s romanticizing characterization of timeless Mediterranean life, while nonetheless trying to find some unifying concepts that distinguish the Mediterranean from other regions and unite the
societies inhabiting its shores. *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History*, published in 2000, focuses on the time before that studied by Braudel, namely antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Horden and Purcell advance as unifying criteria the region’s relatively easy seaborne communications and its fragmented topography of microregions (cf. for the manifold reactions to this volume Harris 2005b; Horden, and Purcell 2006; Purcell 2014). Did the climate, the region’s distinct topography, and the modes of production provide the people around the sea with the same preconditions so that they produced the same responses? Was it the long history of commerce and conquests that made interactions inescapable over the millennia? Did the easy exchange of goods over the millennia lead to similar artistic styles and forms of expression?

In the same vein we might ask, interested as we are in the history of the family, whether similar topographic conditions and the continuous exchange of ideas have also produced similar concepts of marriage, attitudes to children, or intergenerational solidarity. Surprisingly, however, Horden and Purcell have nothing to say about the “family,” even though the family was, according to Peristiany’s later works, one of the central concepts of “Mediterranean modes of thought.” Horden and Purcell are interested in ecological and economic matters – they note the impact of environmental factors on Mediterranean societies with regard to trade patterns and economic diversity – but they do not consider them for their impact on the family. In their review of Horden and Purcell’s *The Corrupting Sea*, Elizabeth and James Fentress therefore rightly ask: “How can the authors discuss the anthropology of the Mediterranean without kinship, marriage, inheritance or social structure? It is like Mediterranean archaeology without pots or buildings” (Fentress, and Fentress 2001).

The classic Cambridge household classification system, developed by Laslett in the 1970s and improved and modified by later scholars, distinguishes between at least five different types of households (cf. Laslett, and Wall 1972; see also: Laslett 1983): first, solitary households consisting of just one individual; second, no-family households in which we do not find any conjugal or parental bounds between its residents (in historic times these were usually unmarried siblings residing together; contemporarily these will be flat shares); third, simple or nuclear family households in which a conjugal couple resides with or without their children; single-parent families also count as nuclear family households; fourth, nuclear families extended by an elderly parent residing with them; fifth, so-called multiple family households in which we find more than one conjugal couple, often the parent generation and a married son with his family. Daughters usually moved out and joined their husbands’ parents’ households. In agricultural societies across cultures and historical periods we always find a high percentage of intergenerational co-residence because the requirements of farming the land provided the young and the old with numerous incentives to live together.

A special subtype of multiple-family households was the *frérèche*, where more than one son was married and all were living under the same roof. The explanation for joint family households is more complex than for intergenerational co-residence. An agricultural basis favored intergenerational co-residence, but in some regions it
Huebner also favored the co-residence of several married brothers. We hardly find any evidence for joint families in historic northwestern Europe. In Southeast Asia, on the other hand, and also the Middle East, joint family households were very common until late into the twentieth century. Also in certain regions of early modern Italy, Greece, and southern France far into the nineteenth century we find a comparatively high percentage of joint family households consisting of several married brothers with or without the parent generation. Apart from this, combining two nuclear households saves money. The current economic crisis has led to an increase in more complex families in both Europe and the United States. However, for the ancient world the relationship between socioeconomic status and co-residence is not so simple. A characteristic of affluent landowning clans seems to have been residence in large multiple-family households, as we can see for instance for families in Republican Rome (Plut. *Aem. P.* 5, cf. *De fraterno amore* 478.1; Plut. *Crass.* 1; cf. Dixon 1992: 7, 232; Huebner 2010), Roman Egypt (Bagnall and Frier 2006; Huebner 2013, 2014), and medieval Tuscan (Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber 1978). Urban workers or craftsmen, however, lived in simple family households.

These different forms of household composition are not meant as alternatives but rather as stages in an ideal model of household progression. They all might be experienced by a single family over the course of several decades. Different types of household form – solitary, nuclear, extended, or joint – should be seen as phases in a cycle reflecting the age and reproductive status of its members. While Laslett’s model helps as a tool for any comparative approach to the family, we need to be aware that real households were always a process rather than a norm. Household boundaries are fluid, defined by the everyday practices and relationships of their members and influenced by inheritance and marriage patterns, number of children, life expectancy, and forms of residence for the elderly (Hammel 1972, 1984: 31; Wilk and Netting 1984: 5; Wilk 1991; Burton, Nero, and Hess 2002; for the ancient world and particularly Roman Egypt, see Huebner 2013).

Moreover, in more recent years scholars have stressed the need to combine this purely quantitative approach with socio-anthropological interpretations and qualitative methods to investigate family systems in more depth and more accurately. Since quantitative data for classical antiquity are only available for Roman Egypt (see Huebner this volume, Chapter 9: 155–6), this is exactly what we need to do as well for the ancient family. Sacchi and Viazzo in their most recent overview of the study of the household in *A Companion to Mediterranean History* have therefore rightly stressed the lack of scholarship for the ancient period outside Roman Egypt and the need to turn to qualitative sources where epigraphic and papyrological evidence does not exist (Sacchi and Viazzo 2014: 239–41).

In 1983 Laslett proposed four different models of family and household formation in historic Europe: the “Western and North-Western,” the “middle European,” the “Eastern,” and the “Mediterranean” family (Laslett 1983). His suggestion to unify major areas of Europe under particular types of household formation has been vehemently disputed and condemned as inadequate by historical anthropologists, but nonetheless constitutes to this day the dominant framework for comparison (Kertzer 1991: 156;
Sacchi and Viazzo 2014: 235). Laslett hereby extended the initial distinction between northern and eastern Europe of John Hajnal, originator of the so-called Hajnal line.1 According to Laslett, the “Mediterranean family” pattern was dominated by larger, more complex household communities than, for instance, in Western Europe.2 He saw the origins of this distinctive pattern in ecological factors, the widespread sharecropping system that favored large households forming an economic unit, but also in cultural characteristics of the societies in the Mediterranean, such as, for instance, the importance of “family honor” resting on the chastity of women and the accomplishments of men. Also typical for the Mediterranean type was, according to Laslett, early and near universal marriage for women, a considerable age gap between husband and wife, and patrivirilocal residence patterns for the young couple. By contrast, the family system that according to Laslett seems to have been widespread through the centuries all over northwestern Europe was characterized by nuclear household structures, few three-generational households, and high proportions of young people circulating between households as servants. It exhibited, however, no evidence for married brothers residing together. In northwestern Europe, men and women married only in their mid to late twenties, and the young couple usually set up their own independent household after marriage.

When proposing his model of the Mediterranean family in the early 1980s, though, Laslett mainly based his conclusions on studies conducted on the family in early modern Italy and southern France, for which most of the evidence was available at that time. Studies on the family in other regions of the Mediterranean have only been added later, even though mainland Italy has remained the central focus of family historians and anthropologists. For early modern times we now have numerous studies on northern, central, and southern Italy, Spain, and France, and also, even if considerably fewer, on the Balkans, Greece, and the Greek islands. Studies on the Ottoman and Arab family have been advanced as well, even though those are generally not treated as part of the Mediterranean cultural sphere (Ahlawat, and Zaghal 1989; Al-Haj 1989; Tucker 1988, 1993). The family in societies on the eastern and southern coast of the Mediterranean, namely Turkey, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, or the Maghreb, has usually not been considered as belonging to the Mediterranean family type, but has been studied as part of the Middle Eastern world (for a discussion of Egypt’s place in a larger Mediterranean, see Bagnall 2005). Current political circumstances, such as the rise of political Islam and the European Union, might have contributed to this division. In antiquity, on the other hand, Asia

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1 Hajnal 1965 drew a line running from northeast to southwest from St Petersburg to Trieste, thereby dividing Europe into two areas of different marriage patterns. The western area was characterized by comparatively late age at marriage for women, close spousal ages, and a considerable percentage of adults who never married. East of Hajnal’s line, women married at a much younger age, the age gap between spouses was greater, and marriage was nearly universal for men and women. Later scholars have stressed regional variations within these two broad areas but have not entirely disputed the validity of his theory.

2 For the importance paid to Laslett’s model by scholars of the family working on the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean, see Sacchi, and Viazzo 2014: 235.
Minor and Syria no doubt belonged as much to the Mediterranean cultural sphere as did the Iberian peninsula, which justifies the debate about the concept of the Mediterranean as a cultural unit of the ancient world all the more.

In combination the results of all these studies contradict Laslett's model, blatantly showing considerable regional and local variety of family and household forms in the Mediterranean, ranging from almost exclusively nuclear households to a system of a high percentage of complex family households (Sacchi, and Viazzo 2014: 237). Especially for Italy and France regional differences have been well studied (Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber 1978; Barbagli 1984; Kertzer and Saller 1991; Cavaciocchi 2009). As Manfredini also stresses in a later chapter of this volume, central and northern Italy was characterized by complex family forms and multigenerational households, while the southern regions of Italy exhibited far more nuclear family structures (see also the chapters by Barbiera, Castiglioni, and Dalla Zuanna in this volume). Moreover, whereas postmarital residence in the northern and central regions was customarily patrilocal, in the south young couples usually set up their independent household. Age at first marriage for women was young. The differences in household structures are usually explained by different forms of landholding. In the south the peasants resided in towns, while in the central and northern parts of Italy they tended to live in hamlets on their land. Urban structures seem to have been everywhere more conducive to the nuclear family, whereas in rural settings we find a higher degree of multiple and extended families. However, within the same region stark differences have also been noted between social classes depending on economic circumstances. Wealthy landed peasants lived in more complex households, while the poor day laborers and landless population lived in simply structured households (Kertzer 1984; Herlihy 1985; Viazzo and Albera 1990). While in northwestern France the northwestern European family model prevailed, in Haute-Provence and the French Pyrenees people lived in complex households consisting of married siblings and their parents from at least the sixteenth to the early twentieth century, as Jenkins also demonstrates in his chapter in this volume (see also Shaffer 1982; Collomp 1983; Fauve-Chamoux 1987).

Reher has added a new dimension to the “Mediterranean family” pattern by his suggestion of a division of “strong” versus “weak” family links. In strong families the community of the extended family has priority over the individual, and in weak family links the individual or conjugal couple has priority. While he finds the former mainly around the Mediterranean, weak families are predominantly found in the northwestern part of Europe (Reher 1998; cf. Micheli 2012). This reminds us of Goody’s “Oriental” versus “Occidental family” structures (1983), the former being characterized by weak conjugal ties, strong ties with extended kin, strictly patrilineal descent lines, preference for endogamous unions, and dependence and subordination of females, while the latter exhibited more autonomy for the individual, marriage as a partnership, and a stronger stand for women (see also Goody 1990). However, do these models also hold up for antiquity? The example of Roman Egypt, at least where we find large households and a preference for endogamous marriages but on the other hand according to the law of the land more rights for women than anywhere else in the ancient Mediterranean
The Family in the Mediterranean

The number of studies advanced on the Greek and Roman family is immense; in fact, family history has been one of the most prolific areas of historical research over recent decades (for an overview see Dixon 1988, 1992; Rawson, and Weaver 1997; Gardner 1998; Rawson 2003b; George 2005; Huebner 2013: 14–15). Studies on the ancient family have used juridical, literary, medical, visual, archaeological, papyrological and epigraphic sources. More recently, the study of the family has received additional impetus from other disciplines such as gender studies, anthropology, comparative studies, and historical demography (for the impetus from other disciplines see Hopkins 1966; Sallares 1991; Scheidel 1996, 2001a, 2001b; Shaw 1996; Sallares 2002; Huebner, and Ratzan 2009; Huebner 2007, 2009, 2013). In the progression and refinement of the field, regional and cultural differentiations within the ancient Mediterranean – development over time, on the one hand, and continuity from pagan to early Christian times, on the other hand – have been stressed. Most studies have concentrated so far on classical Greek (Harrison 1968; Lacey 1968; Garland 1990; Golden 1990; Pomeroy 1997; Cox 1998; Patterson 1998; Nevett 1999; Schmitz 2007) and Roman families (Rawson 1986;

While studies on early modern Mediterranean societies have been based on census or parish registers, quantitative data that help us to establish household structure and family size are rare for the ancient world. We have, for example, household listings from Deir el-Medina from the second half of the second millennium BCE, a village for Egyptian workmen. From around the same time the Middle Babylonian tablets that record the public servile labor force at Nippur, use households as their registration unit. The information contained in these cuneiform tablets masterly studied by Tenney allows us to identify the demographic composition and family and household organization of this population group (Tenney 2012). Further, a collection of tablets known as the “Harran census” has come down to us from late eighth/early seventh-century Assyria, in which the heads of all households, their family members, landholdings, animals, and all other property were recorded. Most of the individuals recorded were common people, farmers, gardeners, and shepherds, and average household size was four.

The Ptolemaic census, in operation at least from the reign of Ptolemy II, also seems to have been based on the household as declaration unit. The declarant gave the names of all members of his/her household, their gender, and their relationships to each other. In contrast to the later Roman census in Egypt, ages were, however, only infrequently supplied. Censuses were also held by the Romans from early republican days and later extended as well to the provinces that became part of the empire. We are best informed about the census of Roman Egypt, conducted at a 14-year interval from at least 11/12 CE to 257/8 CE, for which nearly 400 individual census returns have survived among the papyrological evidence (cf. Bagnall and Frier 2006; Huebner 2013; Claytor, and Bagnall 2015). Because of unequal preservation, most of the returns date to the second century CE and come from the Arsinoite and Oxyrhynchite nomes of Middle Egypt. These returns record all residents of Egypt, most of them ordinary people, such as farmers, laborers, soldiers, weavers, doctors, goldsmiths, gardeners, stonecutters, donkey-drivers, and their families.

Moving away from strictly classificatory approaches that are impossible to pursue due to a lack of quantifiable data for the ancient Mediterranean world, apart from Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt, and in addition have proven problematic for more recent periods of Mediterranean history, let us consider some further qualifying factors reaching beyond the household walls, such as political circumstances, economic and ecological determinants, kinship systems, religious beliefs about the family, gender systems, and last, but not least, temporal stability versus variability.
We have to stress here once more, however, that the available source material on which we can base any assumptions about the ancient and early medieval family is very disparate, ranging from only poetry and scant archaeological evidence for Early Iron Age Greece to detailed census lists from Roman Egypt, rich archaeological evidence from later Roman Ephesus, prosopographical material for late antique Gaul, to extensive legal sources for the Byzantine Empire. The available sources for each region and time period limit the range of aspects we can analyze, and so it will be impossible to answer the same questions for all regions of the Mediterranean under study in this volume.

Household size and form

Owing to the scarcity of direct evidence, assumptions about household forms in the Roman Mediterranean have mainly been made on the basis of literary, archaeological, and epigraphic evidence (Roman West: Saller and Shaw 1984. Roman West in Late Antiquity: Shaw 1984. Roman Asia Minor: Martin 1996. Roman Lusitania: Edmondson 2005). The problem with the latter has been that often family ties mentioned in funerary inscriptions were taken too closely as the reflection of actual co-residence patterns (for the problems of defining the meaning of *familia* and *domus* in a legal and colloquial sense, see Bradley 1991b: 4; Saller 1994: 75–6, 81–2, 91–4; Gardner 1998). An analysis of the epigraphic evidence from early imperial Italy, for instance, led Saller and Shaw (1984) to conclude that the nuclear family was the most prevalent family type in the Roman world. The problem with any study of epitaphs is that funerary texts are governed by certain conventions and commemorative patterns, and we do not know how these patterns relate to actual real-life conditions (see Bryce, and Zahle 1986: 115; Hope 1997: 113–14; Bodel 2001: 38). While many scholars followed Saller and Shaw and adopted and generalized their view that the Roman family was predominantly nuclear (Dixon 1988: 9; Gallivan, and Wilkins 1997: 240; Nielsen 1997: 172; Treggiari 2005: 376; Parkin, and Pomeroy 2007: 74), others have emphasized the shaky grounds on which these claims about actual household structure have been made (Phang 2001: 180–1; George 2005: 2; Gagos, and Potter 2010: 54; Huebner 2010, 2013).

Moreover, the studies mentioned above on the family in later periods of the Italian peninsula should make us very cautious that anything like the “Roman family” existed at all. By 1992 Bagnall was criticizing the point that, in the thriving study of the Roman family, the second part of the compound, “family,” had been carefully analyzed, while the first part, “Roman,” was treated as a too self-evident category that was never as carefully considered in its complexity (Bagnall 1992: 181). The “Roman aspect” usually always included the city of Rome, sometimes also Italy, sometimes even the Western provinces, and due to its rich sources occasionally even Egypt in Roman times. However, should we not expect to find enormous variations between regions just within Italy, not to speak of the other provinces of the Roman Empire? Comparative evidence suggests that we will find a family pattern for the
elite senatorial family and another one for the working class of Rome, yet another family pattern for the olive-tree farmers in northern Lazio, and others for the dairy farmers in Etruria, the fishermen of Neapolis, the craftsmen of Pompeii, the great landowners of Sicily, the donkey drivers in Roman Egypt, and so on. Urban or rural environment, the economic basis of the household, social class, inheritance practices, and demographic conditions such as average life expectancy and age at first marriage determined household composition and must have produced a great variety even within the same region. Keegan stresses in his chapter in this volume that “manifestations of family in the Roman world in fact differed greatly.” Furthermore, as Noy points out in his chapter in this volume, migration could also strongly affect family and household composition and could differ considerably from the traditionally expected family pattern at the migrants’ region of origin or their new home.

From studies by family historians, sociologists, and social anthropologists on societies of early modern and modern periods, we know that composition and size of household depended on the economic basis on which the family made its living, because different forms of property and economic activities required different kinds of labor. In regions with low population density and abundance of land, neolocality was common and young couples established their own households upon marriage. In those areas where land was scarce there was a tendency to form complex households with several generations living under one roof. The fact that exigencies rarely changed with time or political rulers, afforded family forms some regional continuity. We have several attempts in this volume to trace family forms over time in specific regions of the Mediterranean, such as Varto in her chapter on Early Iron Age Greece or Schwaiger for the city of Ephesus from 7000 BCE to 700 CE. Moreover, across time and place families that were smaller and simpler in organization have been observed for day laborers, small traders, craftsmen, and fishermen, whereas peasant farmers usually lived in larger, more complex families because they needed a sufficient pool of labor to meet peak periods of labor demand (Pasternak 1972; Cohen 1976; Viazzo, and Albera 1990). In societies where partible inheritance was the rule, that is, where all sons inherited a share of the patrimony, married brothers often preferred to continue living and farming their land together even after their parents’ death in order to prevent the division of their paternal land (Meriwether 1999; Cuno 2005). Among the urban lower classes, on the other hand – the small traders and craftsmen – multiple family households made less sense. Those families that were unable to generate surplus property and lacked inherited property had little reason to stay together; multiple family households might even have been more difficult to maintain because of restricted living space in the cities (Barbagli 1991: 257; cf. Lemaître 1976; Shaffer 1982).

Marriage patterns

What seems to unite the societies around the Mediterranean Sea in premodern times is their family system that, by contrast to the modern Western family model centering on the conjugal couple, favored the patrilineal descent group (cf. Hellerman 2001). Several chapters of this volume stress the importance
accorded to patrilineal organization of the family regardless of whether we are looking at Greece, Roman Gaul, or Egypt (Varto, McHardy, Nathan, Huebner). Sons were central to the success and continuation of the family; the bloodline could only be passed on by male offspring. A daughter belonged to her father’s patriline, but the bloodline ended with her. Her role was to bear children, and above all sons, in her husband’s household, who would continue their father’s bloodline. If a father had no sons but only daughters, his family died out with the next generation – unless his brothers had sons.

Marriage patterns for men and women are an important factor in analyzing household structure because age at first marriage is closely linked with the onset of childbearing. Moreover, age at first marriage, especially for women, is often heavily influenced by social norms, such as the importance attributed to bridal virginity, the educational background of the woman, urbanization, and social class. The age of the young couple therefore also has implications for the organization of family life and for the relations between the generations and men and women in the household. As far as the evidence goes, women seem to have married considerably older men in all ancient societies around the Mediterranean. In early imperial Rome, women married in their mid-teens, while men were already in their late twenties when they first tied the knot (Shaw 1987; Scheidel 2007). Among the elite, age at first marriage seems to have been on average even a bit lower than in the sub-elite strata. In Classical Athens the usual ages to wed seem to have been for young women the mid-teens and for young men the late twenties or early thirties. In Sparta alone women were probably a bit older, in their late teens or early twenties when they married a man who was somewhere in his twenties. Unfortunately, we know next to nothing about the other Greek city states, since most of our sources are concerned with Athens. From the papyrological evidence from Roman Egypt we know that men were on average around 25 when they first married, while their spouses were about eight years younger than them (Bagnall, and Frier 2006: 111–18).

Postmarital residence patterns

An important factor that also influenced the structure and size of the household was the decision of a young couple about where to start their new life together, a decision that seems to have been heavily governed by social expectations and cultural patterns. Forms of postmarital residence in the non-elite strata are touched on in this volume by Day for Minoan Crete, Huebner for Middle and Upper Egypt in Roman times, and LaFosse for early Roman Asia Minor. While the elite often diverged from these residence patterns, among the common population in traditional societies we often find the patrilocal pattern, while the most common form of postmarital residence in the contemporary Western world is certainly the neolocal pattern. According to the first, the young bride joins her groom in his parents’ household, and children born are added to this household. According to the second, the neolocal pattern, the young couple establish an independent household upon or soon after their wedding. The result of the former is a high percentage of extended and
multiple family households, while under the latter most households are simple. We know that in Rome in the first few centuries CE, at least among the elite, neolocality was the rule. A newly married couple established their independent household; children did not grow up with their grandparents in the same household (Saller, and Shaw 1984). Among the common population at least in the Eastern provinces marriage was regularly patrilocal (see LaFosse on the Eastern provinces in Roman times, and Huebner more specifically on Roman Egypt). Men had lifelong membership in the family into which they were born, whereas females were only temporary residents of their natal families’ households and joined their husbands’ households at marriage, when they then took up disadvantaged membership. Co-residence was restricted to patrilinear kinship and females marrying into the family. Despite these postmarital arrangements favoring the husband’s parental home, efforts were made to afford the bride some continuity of relationships by marriage within the same village or even same family to a cousin or other close relative.

While in societies with simple family household patterns marriage is usually late, as the couple can only establish an independent household and start having a family once the necessary means to do so have been acquired, where the multiple family household was common marriage could take place earlier. As marriage in such a system did not require any savings on the part of the young couple or the transfer of the estate from father to son, marriage must have been possible at any point, whether or not the groom was already financially independent. For this reason also more three-generational households were possible than in societies, such as classical Athens, where sons had to wait until their fathers around their sixtieth birthday transferred the headship and patrimony to them. In general, the observed pattern of multiple family households goes together with the similarly noted early age at first marriage and nearly universal marriage for both sexes. Divorce seems to have been easy to obtain for both sexes and usually did not generate any social disdain.

Some men even in patrivialocally orientated societies must have married into their brides’ families, thus making an uxorilocal marriage. The few recorded instances, for example in the census returns from Roman Egypt, show that especially men from an impoverished family background considered this option (Bagnall and Frier 2006: 57–74; Huebner 2007, 2013).

Postmarital residency also had an effect on children from previous unions. Usually children stayed in their paternal household when their parents divorced. A new marriage of their father had no effect on their place of residence. Children whose fathers had died stayed with their mother in their paternal household, or if the mother remarried, with their father’s family. Mothers rarely brought their children into a new marriage and into the house of a stepfather (cf. Huebner 2009).

Non-kin as household members

Another important aspect to consider is the presence of non-family household members, such as domestic or agricultural servants, slaves, lodgers, or apprentices who spent anything from a few weeks to a couple of years or their entire lifetime
with the family of the household. Slaves seem to have played a rather negligible role in households below the social elite in the Roman world. While the Roman elite household of Rome or Pompeii or the great landowners’ estates of Roman Italy would have been unthinkable without a numerous slave population, households of for example the Roman Egyptian middle and lower classes seem to have owned at most one or two, and then mainly female, slaves. The employment of slaves for working the land seems to have been negligible for non-elite households around the ancient Eastern Mediterranean. Slave-run plantations owned by the aristocratic elite were rare in the Roman East, and slavery was never a substantial factor in production or labor organization for the majority of the population (cf. Culbertson 2011).

In many early modern societies of northwestern Europe but also in some regions in the early modern Mediterranean we see that a considerable number of young adults in their early to mid-teens left their parental home and entered service in another household which was not necessarily of higher social status. These young people stayed in service for a couple of years, but not longer than their mid-twenties, and then returned home or married and established their own independent household. Their master or mistress was expected to feed and clothe them during the period of their service and teach them some skills. However, while in northern Europe between 30 and 55 percent of all young adults between 15 and 24 years of age were servants, only between 5 and 20 percent of young adults in southern Europe entered service in another household (cf. Reher 1998: 206). Moreover, in the southern European regions these so-called “life-cycle servants” were predominantly males. A stronger emphasis on female honor in these societies is usually adduced as the explanation as to why young females could not enter service in another household.

At first glance this institution of life-cycle servants seems unfamiliar to the ancient world, but we do also find such servants in the ancient Mediterranean. Dixon published an insightful article on the circulation of children in the Roman world in which she discusses the mobility of children between families (Dixon 1999). Bremmer advanced a study on the circulation of children in the Greek world in the same year (Bremmer 1999). The institution of apprenticeship of adolescents that we know best for Roman Egypt thanks to the papyrological evidence can also be regarded as life-cycle service (cf. Westermann 1914; Brewster 1917; Herrmann 1958; Bradley 1991a; van Minnen 1998). Farmers and artisans sent their own children to other peasants or artisans to help them out or let them learn a trade, while hosting themselves other families’ children in their household (see e.g., Bradley 1991a: 109). They would live there, be fed and clothed, and be treated like a member of the family. After a few years they would return home with the skills they had acquired.3

Discussing non-kin as household members, we also need to consider here those households that were formed entirely without the nucleus of a biological family, but rather by non-related individuals who remodeled traditional family bonds and household patterns, such as the firefighters in Ostia and the Roman capital and

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3 Van Minnen argues that we find only very few freeborn females among the apprentices because “parents of freeborn females of marriageable age preferred to keep them at home, to keep them from losing their virginity.” This does not mean that freeborn women did not learn or practice a trade; they just learned it at home (1998: 201).
apprentices to service in the Palatine palace, discussed by Keegan in this volume, or recently arrived settlers in their new place of residence, as set out in Noy’s chapter.

Another interesting phenomenon that upends the usual definition of households as focal points of preparing and sharing meals is proposed by Schwaiger in this volume when discussing Ephesian elite houses of the third century CE. Most of the rooms of accommodation unit 6, for instance, a city palazzo of the second or third century with 950 m² floor space, served representative purposes. Basically no room has been detected that clearly functioned as a place for food storage and processing. However, kitchens with storage facilities centrally located between different houses have been discovered that clearly were shared by several elite households. Furthermore, numerous receipts for take-out food from neighboring cookshops carved into the wall plaster of these houses stress the low significance attributed to domestic meal preparation and potentially even sharing of meals among household members.

Living arrangements of the elderly

While in modern nuclear families older individuals live in an ever-shrinking household as their children grow up and move out, in the multiple family households of patrilocal societies all of the couple’s sons usually stayed in the parental household even after marriage, repopulating the household with their spouses and children. Growing old thus did not entail isolation, but quite the contrary. The number of family members in the household ideally increased as the parents entered old age. A cultural norm of age hierarchy protected the elderly within their households (see LaFosse’s chapter in this volume), emphasizing again the life cycle of the family and household and the continuously evolving roles and standings of its members. Both daughters and sons were involved in the support of their elderly parents, even if to different degrees and in different ways. Forms of support varied between financial, practical, and emotional support and depended on the respective living situation and the child’s economic and physical capability.

However, joint family households headed by the old patriarch were not the norm in all parts of the Greco-Roman world, though in many studies on old age and the elderly in ancient societies little attention has been paid to actual living arrangements. In the classical period laws existed in many Greek city states that compelled children to care for their parents in the latter’s old age (Vitruvius 6, pr. 3; cf. Richardson 1933; Garland 1985; David 1991; Falkner 1995), an indication that other than in Rome the patrimony was transferred during one’s lifetime,

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which left the elderly without resources and dependent on the goodwill of their children in their last years. In Greek mythology and literature we meet several old men who had given up power while alive: so, for instance, the elderly Philokleon from Aristophanes’ *Wasps*, who shared a household with his son dependent on his son’s care and upkeep. In the Roman world, however, the patriarch stayed in power until his death (Parkin 1997; Harlow, and Laurence 2002; Cokayne 2003; Parkin 2003).

To avoid these troubles between retired parents and adult children, elderly parents with sufficient means sometimes moved into a separate house on the family estate when they retired and left the main house and land to one of their children, who then also had the responsibility to maintain and support them in their old age (Berkner 1972; Moring 2003). We know this pattern from across much of early modern Europe and also have examples from the ancient world, for instance from Euripides’ *Alcestis*. The elderly parents of King Admetus had already handed over the throne to their son, but had kept parts of the patrimony to themselves. Likewise, the elderly Laertes, father of Odysseus, was farming his retirement portion while his son had already succeeded him as king of Ithaca.

LaFosse’s analysis of the early Christian texts comes to the conclusion that the Christian community functioned in relationship like household members do, as fictive or pseudo-kin. Age served as one of the most important markers of status within society and within the family: “a younger person owed deference to his or her elders, and an older person normally earned precedence with age,” as LaFosse puts it (p. 206, footnote 9).

A number of further factors come to mind that have an effect on the life cycle of a family household. Tightly connected with the living arrangements for the elderly are the prevalent inheritance and succession patterns in a society. We find a wide range of inheritance patterns for the ancient and modern Mediterranean ranging from primogeniture (i.e., the first-born son inheriting everything) to partible inheritance where all children, sons and daughters, received equal shares. The division of the paternal estate had of course a direct influence on household composition, leading to rather nuclear structures in the former and joint-brother households in the latter case. Another factor is the dichotomy between rural and urban life. One of the characteristics of early modern and modern Mediterranean life is the settlement of even the peasant population in villages or small towns instead of on scattered farms in the countryside. This seems to hold true also for ancient times: in particular the Roman period is characterized by an unprecedented urbanization rate in Italy and especially the Eastern provinces of the empire (Halstead 1987; Pleket 1993; Schwartz, and Falconer 1994; Garnsey 1998; Harris 2005b: 31–3).

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5 Cf. above with the evidence for more nuclear family structures among the Greeks in Ptolemaic Egypt than in the indigenous population.

6 For inheritance and succession in the ancient and medieval Mediterranean, see now Caseau, and Huebner 2014.
Conclusions

If we want to get a deeper understanding of the inner workings of ancient family life, it is inevitable that we also start examining which internal and external factors had an influence on the life cycle of the household. The house itself often served as a metaphor for the family unit, its reproduction, identity, and continuity. In our opinion, we cannot understand Greek or Roman family life without knowing and understanding their general household formation pattern, which indubitably varied from region to region and was closely interrelated with the political system, the demographic environment, the geographical and geological context, landholding patterns, migration intensity, inheritance systems, marriage practices, postmarital residence patterns, the status of women, and the forms of care for the elderly and other vulnerable members of the family. By understanding the context of ancient household and family life, we might even get a better understanding of these ancient societies in general, their economic mechanisms, cultural patterns, and social norms.

So far nothing that comes close to a map of family forms in the ancient Mediterranean exists, even though the evidence is available to allow for such an approach. This volume aims to be a starting point to create such a map, expanding our knowledge about the history and development of the “Mediterranean family” – or should we say “Mediterranean families” – an endeavor that will benefit not only ancient family historians but also scholars who study the family and household in much later periods of the Mediterranean world, trying to come to grips with the origins of the family forms they observe in their respective locality and period of time under study.

Chapters of this volume cover the entire classical Mediterranean from Bronze and Iron Age Spain (Ayán) and Crete (Day) to Archaic (Varto) and Classical Athens (McHardy), Hellenistic Delos (Noy), Roman Italy (Keegan), Roman Asia Minor and Syria (Schwaiger, LaFosse), Roman Egypt (Boozer, Huebner), Roman and Byzantine Africa (Haase and Steinacher), later Roman Gaul (Laes and Vuolanto, Nathan), to later Roman Syria (Nathan), and a diachronological study by Barbiera, Castiglioni and dalla Zuanna on female burials from the first to the fifteenth century. Finally, Manfredini’s overview of demographers’ approaches to family forms in the early modern and modern Mediterranean serves as an outlook to later much better documented and studied periods of Mediterranean family history.

Contributors have not only considered a wide geographical area and time range but used an extensive array of sources and methodological approaches as well to study the family in the Mediterranean. The volume offers studies on the archaeological evidence for domestic space of sub-elite strata for Bronze and Iron Age Spain and Crete, Roman Egypt, and Roman Asia Minor the epigraphic evidence has been fruitfully used for Hellenistic Delos, Roman Italy, and Roman Northern Africa, and the papyrological evidence for Greco-Roman Egypt. Further, osteological data from a time span of 1,500 years of Mediterranean history complement the usual
array of sources employed to learn about historic family and household composition. Aspects of family life and household composition in Archaic and Classical Athens, later Roman Gaul, and later Roman Syria are studied on the basis of literary and legal evidence. Literary sources, generally at the center of attention in any historical study, however, take almost a marginal role in this volume, considering their nearly exclusive focus on the elite strata of the population and our aim to consider above all the majority of the population, the peasant farmers, small merchants, and craftsmen in the many villages and towns of the ancient and early medieval Mediterranean world. Most contributors fall back on theories developed outside the proper classical canon, such as anthropology, demography, and sociology. All of them stress, however, the variety and variability of family and household forms, thereby dismissing any effort to find a Mediterranean or even Greek or Roman family as futile.

References


The Family in the Mediterranean


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