

The Role of the Family in Roman Society A Roman Wedding (ca. 160 C.E.)

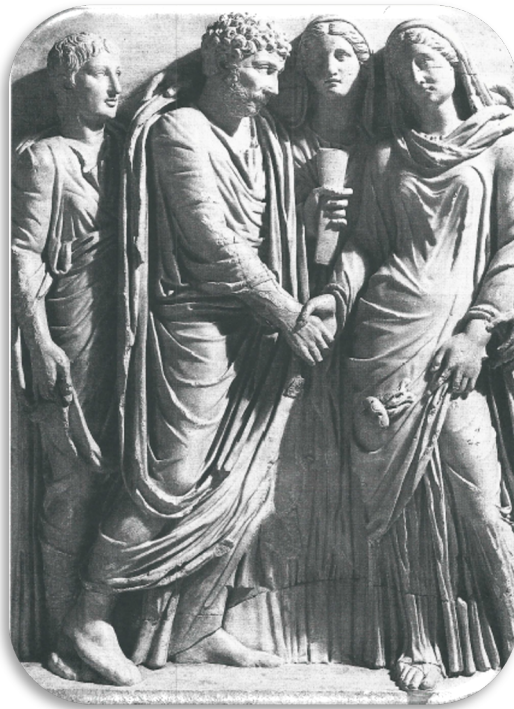
The family was at the heart of Roman social and political organization. Families were part of tribes, which were represented in the Tribal Assembly (*comitia tributa*), which held elections for political office. Therefore, the choice of marriage partners was not personal but a way for families to advance their political status or business relationships.

A wife was subject to her husband or her father (depending on the specific form of the marriage agreement) through-out her life. She could inherit property, which usually was part of the dowry she received when she married.

The image below is from a Roman wedding. The groom holds his wife with one hand and the marriage contract in another. The woman behind them is the matron of honor, and the man beside the groom is a witness.

READING QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think the marriage contract is displayed so prominently between the bride and groom?
2. Why does the groom hold the contract and not the bride?
3. How would you characterize the relationship between the bride and groom? Do they seem to be in love? What role will each person's image assume in their future life together?



Life in a Roman City - SENECA, The Sounds of a Roman Bath (ca.50 C.E.)

Personal cleanliness was imperative to both Greeks and Romans. The Greeks in particular frequently complained that barbarians were dirty. Public baths were central gathering places for Romans of many classes. The well-off frequently had baths in their own houses, but even so, they might visit the public baths to meet friends or partake in other activities. The public baths had a questionable reputation, in part because prostitutes often sought clients there. Seneca (ca. 4 s.u.-65 CE.), a philosopher, orator, and eventually the chief adviser to the emperor, recorded this sketch of a bath's commotion.

I live over a bath. Imagine the variety of voices, enough noise to make you sick. When the stronger fellows are working out with heavy weights, when they are working hard or pretending to work hard, I hear their grunts, and whenever they exhale, I hear their hissing and panting. Or when some lazy type is getting a cheap rubdown, I hear the slap of the hand pounding his shoulders If a serious ballplayer comes along and starts keeping score out loud, that's the end for me And there's the guy who always likes to hear his own voice when washing, or those people who jump into the swimming pool with a tremendous splash The hair plucker keeps up a constant chatter to attract customers, except when he is plucking armpits and making his customer scream instead of screaming himself. It would be disgusting to list all the cries from the sausage seller, and the fellow hawking cakes, and all the food vendors yelling out what they have to sell, each with own special intonation.

READING QUESTIONS

1. What other activities took place at the public baths besides bathing?
2. How would you describe Roman notions of privacy and personal space?
3. What does it reveal about Roman urban life that someone like Seneca would live so close to the public baths?