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‘THE FAMILY’ IN THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN: PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

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## ‘THE FAMILY’ IN THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN: PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

The 1996 issue of a leading journal (*Journal of Roman Studies* 86) is a remarkable testimonial to the development of ‘family’ studies during the last two or three decades and to the impact of epigraphy on Roman social history. Three of the eight articles (those of Woolf, Martin and Shaw), or 44% of the text, bear directly on this. In 1984 Richard Saller and Brent Shaw could say, ‘The family has received comparatively little attention from Roman historians’ (*JRS* 74: 124).

Probably the most influential work in these fields has been done by Saller and Shaw, and their joint article of 1984, ‘Tombstones and Roman family relations in the Principate: civilians, soldiers and slaves’ (*JRS* 74: 124-156), was truly a breakthrough. Their extensive study of funerary inscriptions of the western Roman empire aimed ‘to measure variations in family and non-familial relationships within different regional and social contexts’ (p. 125). Their conclusion was that ‘for the populations putting up tombstones throughout the western provinces the nuclear family was the primary focus of certain types of familial obligation’ (p. 124). Martin’s piece, ‘The construction of the ancient family: methodological considerations’ (*JRS* 86: 40-60), now challenges the methodology of that article and thus some of the conclusions which he says have been drawn by them and by subsequent scholars.

Martin (p. 41) quotes Saller and Shaw correctly as saying that all the facts produced by their study ‘point away from the patriarchal family being a common reality in the population of the western empire erecting tombstones’ and ‘Modern historians have shown that in most areas of western Europe the nuclear family was the main type of familial organization as far back as dependable records are available. On the basis of our evidence, it seems a reasonable hypothesis that the continuity of the nuclear family goes back much further in time and that it was characteristic of many regions of western Europe as early as the Roman Empire’. But in much of his article Martin misrepresents the implications of the argument of Saller and Shaw, and his own methodology has defects. His plea for a reconsideration of what is meant by ‘family’ in antiquity is important, as is the potential of his own study of Eastern Mediterranean inscriptions. It is in the hope that this further progress will be made that I offer the following critique.

The detailed study of Saller and Shaw (1984) found that, in funerary inscriptions of the Western Mediterranean, examples of nuclear family relationships (father-mother-child) vastly outnumbered examples of other relationships, e.g. extended family, friends, dependents. Martin’s criticism is that they should have counted inscriptions rather than individual relationships. If one inscription attests several relationships (even if some of these are anticipatory and not yet existing) Martin believes that that is evidence of one extended family rather than of several individual relationships. On his methodology the balance between nuclear and extended families would be significantly changed.

Although Martin criticises Saller and Shaw for under-recognising extended families, his own methodology suppresses the variety of relationships attested by the Western epitaphs. Saller and Shaw wanted to document how often a commemoration is recorded for different sorts of relationship. The fact that nuclear relationships are overwhelmingly catered for does not necessarily tell us how the various relationships interacted and overlapped on a day-to-day basis, so it does not tell us how a household was structured. Nor does the 1984 article make such claims for household structure, but Martin slides from relationships to household on p. 45 (twice in paragraph 3). What Saller and Shaw imply is that immediate family relationships were probably more important than other relationships, or, in their own words (quoted by Martin p. 41), ‘the nuclear family was the main type of familial organization’. This probably does have implications for household, as that is where the intimate day-to-day relationships operate; it does not preclude relationships beyond these. Even if ‘other’, non-nuclear, non-family contacts resided in the same household, the commemorative pattern suggests that these had a lesser

claim on the affections and obligations of individual members of the nuclear family group. They were not often expected to commemorate a member of that group who had died, and when they themselves died they were usually commemorated by an immediate family member or not at all.

There may be other criteria for close relationships, beyond commemorative practice, but the evidence of epitaphs – i.e. the individual relationships attested – is consistent and strong and it is supported by iconography and by the legal evidence of testamentary practice and ideology. Best practice in social research now is to take account of the whole range of evidence available, to contextualise inscription/image/legal principle (and, indeed, literature) rather than analysing one genre in a vacuum. The convergence of these kinds of evidence should therefore be accepted as the best indicator yet identified for the core loyalties and affections of most people's daily lives, but it does not preclude the inclusion of others, from time to time, in the activities and affections of 'the family' and it does not exclude any individual's wish to place him- or herself in a family lineage of preceding relations and hoped-for posterity. As Martin says (p. 53), '(The nuclear family) provides the *nucleus* for a great variety of actual family structures', and he uses a felicitous phrase in saying that 'the nuclear family holds a "gravitational pull" in the inscriptions'.

Martin recognises (p. 43 and n. 17) that regional and cultural differences can be important, and that it can be misleading to make comparisons across wide geographical areas without taking these differences into account. But he ignores this principle in much of what follows. He cites R. S. Bagnall and B. W. Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt* (1994), as support for his own argument without taking account of the fact that this study, like his own sample, deals with the Eastern Mediterranean and not the West studied by Saller and Shaw. (And urban communities should be differentiated from rural.) Martin (p. 50 para. 2) accepts that Roman law might not be widely relevant for the East; but he does not recognise the implications of this for the West. There is an egregious example of cultural confusion in the note (n. 53 p. 54) on female exposure and infanticide, where there is no demarcation of the areas covered by the scholarship cited: work on West and East is set side by side. And the Conclusion attributes the Saller and Shaw argument to all of 'Antiquity', whereas their study explicitly focussed on the West.

Section II of the Martin article does identify differences *within* East Mediterranean epigraphic patterns, and he sensibly suggests that there could be 'different epigraphical styles and funerary customs' even between centres not very distant geographically. This would be interesting to explore further and try to explain. It is plausible that the history of the East Mediterranean produced more nucleated and differentiated cultures than in the West. But Martin goes on to present an arbitrary preference for one style, the so-called 'inclusive' style of Olympus in Lycia, instead of exploring what the Bithynian and other styles might reflect of values and structures. Moreover, he uses this preference to criticise the methodology of Saller and Shaw, ignoring the fact that many Roman inscriptions are 'inclusive' in something of the Olympian style, and his original criticism of Saller and Shaw was that they mis-interpreted or mis-categorised the diverse relationships recorded in the Roman epitaphs. This leaves his Conclusion flawed.

Towards the end of his article, Martin makes some perceptive comments about family structure, e.g. the 'diverse and complex' Roman family structures (p. 52), the concept of a "nucleated" centre surrounded by a spectrum of relations of more or less intimacy' and the statement that 'The boundaries between the 'immediate' and 'extended' family members is discernible but permeable' (p. 58). He goes on to suggest that the lack of a Latin word for 'nuclear family', as distinct from the *familia* or *domus*, was not because the nuclear family was 'not important as a series of relationships, but because it was not important to them to distinguish those relations firmly from other, less intimate familial relations'.

Martin is right in seeing the nuclear *vs* extended dichotomy as too rigid and unsubtle (already recognised by others, as he acknowledges of Saller in n. 9 and Bradley in n. 1, and as I myself reported in the Introduction (pp. 3–4) to *Marriage, Divorce and Children in Ancient Rome* 1991). But he does not recognise the historiography of the argument. He omits any reference to Peter Laslett and Richard

Wall, *Household and Family in Past Time* (1972), but it was that work which first challenged the consensus about extended family. The work of subsequent years, on Roman and pre-modern European families, has stemmed from that and cannot be assessed in a vacuum. Now that the long-time importance of the nuclear family has been established, and its creation by the Industrial Revolution demolished, we can move on to more nuanced studies. These will not only continue to refine methodology but will take full account of regional and cultural variation. New studies of 'the family' will thus not only have intrinsic interest but may contribute to better understanding of regional history and cultures.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> One such project in progress is that of Gallivan–Wilkins–Weaver–Rawson on the family inscriptions of Roman Italy. A report on that project is given in the chapter 'Roman familial structures: a regional approach' by Paul Gallivan and Peter Wilkins, pp. 239–280 of *The Roman Family in Italy: Status, Sentiment, Space*, ed. Beryl Rawson and Paul Weaver, Oxford 1997.