

Notes on Quiz #8: The Roman Aristocratic Matron

1. Most Roman upper-class women married at least once, but the birth rate among nobles remained low. What were some of the reasons for this?

Arranged marriage. Within the nobility marriages tended to be arranged for the political and financial profit of the families involved, rather than for sentimental reasons. Girls as young as 12 could be so married, and the first marriage usually took place between 12 and 15. Men, however, though eligible from 14, often married much later, increasing the differences between husband and wife.

Adultery. Adultery was common, but the law held it against the woman only. It was considered a public offense only in women, leading to divorce, forfeiture of half the dowry, and exile or death. Husbands were not liable for criminal prosecution for adultery. This gave tacit permission for husbands to sleep with women other than their wives. (Stoic philosophy, important in Rome from the Late Republic on, did condemn both male and female adulterers.)

Death in childbirth. This happened frequently enough that females had a shorter lifespan overall, making the likelihood of giving birth to two children much lower than giving birth to one. This also produced a gender imbalance, with more male nobles than female.

Contraception. Roman married couples (and adulterers and other illicit pairings) practiced contraception and, if necessary, abortion to prevent unwanted children. There were a variety of methods in both cases.

2. What was the crime of Sextus Tarquinius (the son of the king)? What were the results of this act?

Sextus raped Lucretia explicitly because she was the most virtuous of all the Roman matrons. After her father and husband vowed vengeance on her behalf, Lucretia committed suicide so as not to provide future matrons with a model of virtue that had been corrupted. Ultimately the entire clan of the Tarquins was ejected from Rome (leading to a series of wars with the Tarquins' Etruscan and Latin allies). Most importantly of all, this betrayal by the king's family caused the Romans to foreswear monarchy altogether and instead declare a Republic, in which no one man or family would have greater authority than any other.

EC1. The idealized matron Cornelia was famous for all of the following EXCEPT:

- ✓ (a) After becoming widowed, she remarried to a Ptolemy, becoming Egyptian royalty
- (b) She was admired for being independent, cultured, self-assured, and devoted to her children's education
- (c) She took pride in being the daughter of Scipio Africanus, who defeated Hannibal
- (d) She bore 12 children, two of whom grew up to be important political figures

EC2. How was marriage with manus different from without manus? What was the effect for the woman?

Manus marriage was relatively rare by the time of the Late Republic. It was achieved through either formal ceremony (confarreatio or coemptio) or through continuous cohabitation for one year (usus, also known as common-law marriage). It constituted a transfer of guardianship from the wife's paterfamilias to the husband from which she had no refuge. A wife married by manus changed from her birth household religion to her husband's; the husband's ancestors became hers. Whether the husband's manus gave him the same absolute power over his wife as a paterfamilias is unclear, but her birth family remained invested in her behavior (supervising her drinking, for example) and provided a bulwark against the husband's abuses. Manus marriage gave the wife some rights over the husband's property, but also gave the husband rights over hers.

Non-manus marriage was the more common form. It was achieved by interrupting cohabitation by spending three continuous days elsewhere than the husband's home. Non-manus marriage gave the wife more freedom; the husband had no formal authority over her, and she could return at will to her birth family. There was no transfer of religion, and the wife was theoretically excluded from household rites, remaining instead in her father's cult. She did not gain rights relating to the husband's property; her own property remained with her birth family.

EC3. What did the abducted Sabine women do after marrying Romulus's men? Why did they say they did it?

The women intervened and stopped the war between their old families and the Romans, saying they owed their duty to Rome and their families now that they were Roman matrons.