CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

History and pseudo-history

_Some girls were 12 or 13 when they married. We call it pedophilia; they called it marriage. That's one of the exciting things about Roman culture. It's different from ours._ – Mary Beard, Professor of Classics, University of Cambridge.

The protection of children is such a sensitive issue these days that perhaps only a woman, and a woman who is also an eminent historian, could express such a view without reputational damage. What male scholar, after all, could admit to excitement in this delicate context without inviting dark suspicion?

Beard is right, though, and if we are to do justice to the difference of historical times from our own it is vital to resist a tempting impulse, namely that of re-writing the past in our own image, reflecting modern values not historical ones. Some gay “historians” have recently been guilty of this, re-writing the history of pederasty in Ancient Greece as though it had been characterised by sexual relationships between adult males, even though the evidence from literature and art alike points to a very different story. Overwhelmingly, these sources indicate a system of socially valued mentoring relationships, in which a man was expected to care for and teach a boy within relationships that were sexually expressed, not just erotically charged. Political correctness dictated that unwelcome facts had to be erased: a new pseudo-history needed to be written in order to distance “gay” history from the taint of “pedophilia”.

Real historians, by contrast, as opposed to pseudo ones, see it as their duty to respect the evidence, not bend it to suit modern values. In the case of marriage in Ancient Rome, historians have been busy revising the marriage age upwards, claiming hard evidence of early marriages is limited to the upper classes and that even those marriages went unconsummated in the early years of the union. This essay will contest both of these claims, which have been made by scholars who deserve respect but not on a respectable basis of evidence. In agreement with Mary Beard that “some” girls married at 12-13, it will demonstrate that _some_ girls married even earlier, with indications that consummation was expected. It will show that, because the death rate was very high, Rome’s population could not have grown, or even have been maintained, unless couples had married young and started having children as
soon as it was physically possible. It will be demonstrated that the *average* age at first marriage (AAFM) for girls was 12-16, at least until the Christian era, when it began to rise, and that the *average* age for young men was 17-20. This contrasts sharply with revisionist claims that the AAFM was around 19 for females and as high as 30 for men.

As might be expected, the scholarly dispute has been slugged out in academic publications, including a monograph co-written by one of the present essay’s authors, William A. Percy. The case presented in *The Age of Marriage in Ancient Rome* by Arnold A. Lelis, William A. Percy & Beert C. Verstraete, published in 2003, was reviewed in a number of academic journals and resulted in a significant degree of recantation by one leading revisionist. What the present essay now aims to do is to take the case put forward in the monograph beyond the obscurity of academia, setting it out in a more accessible form for the intelligent general reader with an interest in social history. It will also reinforce this case in the light of criticisms made in the reviews.

A disclaimer should be entered at this point. As authors of this essay, we would be pseudo-historians ourselves were we to twist Roman history to suit a 21st century “sexual liberationist” view. While there may be much to be said for young people’s right to sexual self-determination in our own times, it cannot be stated too strongly that girls’ early entry into sexual life in Ancient Rome was nothing whatever to do with their freedom, or their sexual “liberation”. On the contrary, as will be seen, it was more to do with the wishes of their parents, especially their fathers, in what was a strikingly patriarchal society. Looking back from the relatively comfortable vantage point of modern times, we may see in Roman society many harsh aspects of life that we would not see as ideal and to which we would not wish to return, obligatory early marriage for girls being one of them.

Famously, the father of a Roman household had powers of life and death: a paterfamilias could banish, kill, or disown a child. He could sell his children into slavery. These aspects of patria potestas (power of the father) are presumably ones we would not wish to emulate today.

Then and now: elements of perspective

It should also be underscored at this early stage that apparently vast differences between Roman culture and ours – exciting differences for those
who share Beard’s enthusiasm – sometimes contain within them elements that might seem very familiar. For instance, young Romans from more well-to-do families might remain dependent on their father well into adulthood. Handouts from mom and pop to children in their twenties or even thirties might be thought an exclusively modern phenomenon arising from the long years of education and professional training that are such a striking feature of our times. Reading Lucian’s hilariously imagined second century AD Dialogues of the Courtesans, though, the modern paterfamilias might find himself chuckling with recognition to discover a Roman world in which strapped-for-cash young, and not so young, men had a tough time paying for their pleasures because their only money was a limited allowance from their father.

The modern eternal student, however, and perhaps the modern dad, might envy the context: in those days it was apparently as easy – and not as socially disapproved as now – to overspend on “courtesans” (whores in plainer language) as today’s more dissolute youth might find it to overdo the outlay on drink and drugs. Also, it should not be overlooked that a Roman boy might himself inherit from his father in his early teens and become the head of a household, with the enormous responsibilities that entailed: many a paterfamilias died young so this would not have been a great rarity. And as long as their choices did not conflict with the parental veto, in practice freeborn young people of both sexes enjoyed a degree of autonomy in the everyday conduct of their lives that the constantly monitored and cosseted modern child can only dream about, or live vicariously through the adventures of those smart and feisty kids who so abundantly populate Hollywood movies. Talk of Hollywood takes us about as far from Ancient Rome as may be imagined, but moving away is no idle exercise: distance lends perspective. The late Vern Bullough, historian of sexuality, explored many eras and cultures in his researches and writings. He contributed just such a wide-ranging view in a preface he wrote for The Age of Marriage in Ancient Rome. He pointed out, for instance, that:

...the question of the ages of first marriage of men and women in ancient Roman society has perhaps acquired fresh relevancy today since there has taken place over the past few decades a marked increase in the average age of marriage in all countries of the industrialized world and this has become one of the factors contributing to the sharply decreased fertility in females and therefore to stagnating and even declining population growth. The reader will see that in preindustrial
Rome with its very high mortality rate, the factor of the average age of first marriage impacted with especially heavy force on the ability of the society to perpetuate itself numerically.

Bullough's reference to present day population trends is actually at least as relevant to our study of Ancient Rome as the other way around. What it persuasively illustrates, based on sophisticated modern population statistics, is that populations are sensitively dependent on the age of marriage, among many other demographic factors: rising populations are not automatic. As Bullough emphasised, and as we will be seeing in some detail, the high mortality rate in pre-industrial Rome impacted heavily on the ability of the society to perpetuate itself. As an unprecedentedly large and densely-populated metropolis, urban Rome suffered a greater susceptibility to fatal infectious diseases than almost every other place around the Mediterranean at that time, although life expectancy everywhere was far less than today.

As Bullough said, the Romans were following a long tradition of early marriage, at least for girls. Only a few ancient societies differed from this tradition. Sparta differed dramatically in age of marriage for both sexes. Many other Greek states also tended to discourage a young age of marriage for males. As Percy has argued, this could well have been the key factor underlying the origin of institutionalized pederasty in the Greek world. Bullough continued the theme in his preface:

Even so, the Greek bride was probably still in her early teens and the resulting age discrepancy served to strengthen the patriarchal power of the husband and father. Though the age at which West Europeans and North Americans married began to rise in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, even in the middle of the twentieth century, the statistical mode, i.e. the most common age, for females in the United States was 17, the next common being 18. In fact in most cultures until the last century, consent, and, in the case of girls, marriage, generally coincided with the onset of puberty, the physical signs of which are clearly visible.

The age at which marriage took place was, however, also influenced by lineage, by the desire to maintain inherited status, and by ideologies underlying social stability, order, and hierarchy. Controlling marriage in a sense had been a way of stabilizing the patriarchal system. When family interests were at stake, age of consent was unimportant.
Ancient Romans Married During Their Teens by Thomas O’Carroll & William A. Percy

Though the Roman canonist Gratian, writing in the twelfth century, held that seven was the minimum age for "meaningful consent," he accepted the traditional age of 12 for girls and 14 for boys as the more acceptable minimum. In setting such ages he was following Roman law as established in the Justinian code.

Marriage age: the sources of evidence

The evidence that has been used to estimate the average ages of marriage of Roman males and females is copious and comes from a variety of sources. Some of these are complex, making interpretation difficult. The clearest and most abundant sources, however, indicate a low age for both males and females: those who seek to revise the ages upwards based on the more difficult materials thus have a hard row to hoe. This difficult burden of proof for the revisionists is a factor to be born in mind throughout.

What, then, are these sources of evidence?

First of all, there is an extensive body of surviving literature from which we can glean biographical data, especially for Roman males, relevant to the first age of marriage; these suggest a very early average age of marriage both for males and females.

Secondly, there is a massive corpus of epigraphic texts. Epigraphy, the study of inscriptions in a variety of durable media, ranging from public monuments across the ancient world to bits of broken pottery, has come to the fore in connection with the age of marriage in ancient Rome via the epigraphic study of the epitaphs on thousands of surviving tombstones. Such an indirect and, as will be seen, dubious, source of information would hardly need to be sought if good evidence was available from statistical sources such as censuses, or the systematic recording of births, marriages and deaths, such as has been undertaken in the parish records of England for many hundreds of years – or, even better, a national database of such records, such as Sweden implemented for its parishes from 1749 onwards, followed soon after by Britain and other countries. Unfortunately, sources like these are not available for Rome. In their absence some scholars, such as Richard Saller and Brent Shaw, have used epigraphic information to infer average ages of marriages for men and women that are considerably higher than the literary evidence would suggest, i.e. late teens for women and late twenties for men. They then reconcile these two diverging sets of data (literary and epigraphic) by assuming that the figures
from the literary sources apply only to the upper classes. This essay will demonstrate that the epigraphic data do not warrant such conclusions, and that both the epigraphic and the literary evidence support a generally very early age of marriage across all socioeconomic classes.

The lack of comprehensive data for the Roman world of the sort that would be provided by a modern census means that we do not have compelling statistical data related to marriage: for instance, the number of marriages contracted in any particular year; or the number of unmarried, divorced, and widowed adult males and females in the various age categories. So in-depth statistical analysis, such as we expect from modern demographic science, is not available to the historian.

Instead, we believe that a well organized and suitably analyzed assemblage of information on the actual actions of Romans when contracting their first marriage will provide a more accurate understanding than any other method undertaken so far. This will be a necessarily impressionistic approach. Thus, we shall allow the pieces of evidence to suggest the actual patterns of Roman experience and practice, within parameters of plausibility as established by demographic theory, rather than seek purely statistical conclusions from data that will always be inadequate for that purpose. Unlike epitaphs, which seldom supply much biographical context even when the inscription allows (as it very rarely does) an age of first marriage to be calculated, the literary evidence provides us with a large number of individuals whose age of first marriage, even if this is not stated explicitly, can be determined with a reasonable degree of precision; and perhaps, even more important, permits us to place this bare numerical fact against the background of family, career, and society.

The sources of evidence, then, are essentially literary and epigraphic, but not statistical. But there is more. The “impressionistic” approach taken here is holistic, drawing on contextual and circumstantial evidence going far beyond the biographical literary data that enables us to pinpoint the marriage age of particular individuals. This third source of evidence will include information from a range of historic sources regarding the laws and customs of the times, and how these were part of a pattern of life that makes sense in connection with the economics of agriculture, the demands of military service and the growing urbanisation of Rome, amongst other factors. These sources are themselves mainly written, but it would be misleading to subsume them under the heading of literary evidence. This is because, for instance, considerations from archaeology enter the picture in terms of what Roman tenement blocks
tell us about the density of urban living. Likewise, from medical knowledge about women’s lactation it is possible to make inferences about the spacing of births, the length of marriage that would be needed to accommodate all the births needed to sustain and grow the population, and hence the likeliest average age at which marriage and reproduction started. None of this wider context can be ignored. In addition to directly biographical evidence, then, whether literary or epigraphic, we might consider contextual and circumstantial factors to amount to a third form of evidence. Some of this broader evidence we could call demographic, but not all of it: our knowledge of Roman laws and their effects would not fit comfortably under that heading. Because the “impressionistic” evidence ranges broadly across the whole of Roman culture in a holistic, integrative fashion, we might sum up this third source of evidence under the heading “holistic”.

Structure of this essay

All this evidence, literary, epigraphic, and holistic, could be presented in a variety of ways. The approach taken here will be largely a historical survey, focusing on factors of continuity and change affecting the age of Roman marriage across successive periods of history.

The present chapter, Chapter 1, is introductory. Chapter 2 will examine more closely the nature of the evidence for early marriage in ancient Roman society and place this in the context of fundamental demographic considerations applicable to the pre-modern world. Chapter 3 will offer a historical survey of the literary and broader cultural evidence for the age of first marriage in early Rome up to the end of the second century BC; Chapter 4 will continue for the late Republic and the early Empire; Chapter 5 will not move to a later period, but will instead focus on the epigraphic evidence; Chapter 6 will survey the later, and increasingly Christian, period of the Empire.

There are two appendices: Appendix 1 is a detailed exposition of the biographical data for the first marriages of 83 Roman males; Appendix 2 is a similar assemblage on the first marriages of 31 Roman females.