CHAPTER 2:  
THE EVIDENCE

A sustained pattern

Romans of both genders married young. We find this pattern in place in the early Republic, which had its origins half a millennium before the Empire, and it continued as the norm for most classes of Latin-speakers in all periods until well into the era when the Empire adopted Christianity.

The ubiquity and persistence of the pattern of early marriage were sustained by the continuation of other basic factors in Roman life, most notably paternal power (patria potestas), which was regularly exercised in arranging the marriages and controlling the finances of offspring. The demands of military service on all classes in the republican period were also a contributing factor in establishing the pattern of early marriages, though their effect in later eras becomes less clear. Perhaps more consistent through the centuries was the continued role of marriage in securing political advantage and dynastic continuity for upper class families. In any case, the standard Roman life-course, with its several rites of passage, would accommodate early first marriages much more readily than late ones. Moreover, early marriages are consistent with the general trend in all pre-modern societies as well as the high death rate Rome undoubtedly experienced.

Before coming to the evidence specific to Ancient Rome, it will help to address a potential source of confusion that arises when discussing demographic evidence. Demography, the statistical study of populations, encompasses study of the size, structure, and distribution of these populations, and changes in them in response to birth, migration, aging and death. One demographic feature already noted, is that the Roman death rate was very high. A key inference that can be drawn from this is that 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. This is a hugely important inference but we should not let its importance obscure what kind of information it is: it is knowledge derived from numbers (insofar as they are available) and logic. Historical demographers can calculate how many children couples must have had on average in order to account for a growing population. That is one thing. How many children couples wanted to have is
quite another: different sources of information are needed to tell us about their family planning motivations, insofar as they were able to plan. People did not arrange their sex lives in order to meet baby-making production targets set by sternly demanding students (or studs!) of history two thousand years later.

There would have been many circumstances, then as now, when couples did not want more children, or even a first child. If, then, we are to account for a growing population, even when there was a high death rate, we might perhaps look to another demographic factor, such as migration; but we will also need to consider – especially if there are long-term patterns for which local and time-limited migration cannot account – what would have motivated people in general to have large families, implying an early start to marriage and reproduction. Where this is concerned we do not need to rely upon microscopically obscure evidence. As noted above, early marriages are consistent with the general trend in all pre-modern societies, a common feature of which by Roman times was agriculture. Being largely agricultural, the economy of Ancient Rome would have favoured early marriage and reproduction because, as in all agricultural societies, having children meant more labour for the farm. This was a fundamental feature of how people felt about family size at the time, not a matter of later demographic calculation. It was a key aspect of the sustained pattern of early marriage. It would have influenced the marriage age of women more than that of men, who in some agricultural societies would typically have needed to wait some years in order to inherit the farm. As we will see, though, this was not always the case for men in Rome, and the overall evidence clearly suggests an early marriage age for them too.

The evidence

The normal Roman pattern of an early age-at-first-marriage (AAFm) throughout these centuries is substantiated by an impressive array of evidence, including the literature of various periods, the laws, and in some cases funerary epigraphs which specify ages at marriage.

In the 1980s, Richard Saller and others misinterpreted unspecific epigraphic evidence in favor of relatively late Roman AAFMs for all but upper class families. A re-evaluation of their evidence in terms of the effects of patria potestas, marriage and property transfer laws, and demographics, shows that it too is more consistent with early AAFMs. To be sure, the records also reveal
variations and deviations from the norm. These can be explained either by special considerations affecting the matrimonial decisions of specific individuals, by novel cultural trends or legal strictures which at times affected certain classes of people in some eras, or by fluctuations in response to environmental conditions. Certainly, in the formative centuries of the early and middle Republic, the environment was conducive to early marriages on the part of “the Roman commons” i.e. the great mass of the ordinary people.

The preponderance of the available evidence allows the following to be postulated as the Roman norm. For females, first marriages occurred from pre-puberty to the mid-teens with the most usual ages (the modal range) being from 12-16; for males they occurred from the mid-teens to the early twenties, with a modal range of 17-20. In all cases, first marriages of females later than 17 or of males later than 22 must be considered unusually late. Indeed, the most striking feature of the evidence is that various textual and epigraphic sources, regardless of the class or era to which they refer, tend to agree with the estimate of AAFM indicated above. It is this agreement, or convergence in the evidence, which suggests the pattern was common to Roman society in general rather than limited to the upper classes.

Admittedly, the ancient literary evidence which we adduce in this article, including the comedies of Plautus and Terence, the personal correspondence of Cicero, and the opinions of Greek and Roman doctors to name but a few sources, is concerned mainly with the elite, although some, like Petronius, may shed light also on the behavior of more plebeian types. The plebeians, or plebs, as opposed to the aristocratic patricians, were not aristocratic, but they did own land. They were the middling orders of freed people, shopkeepers, craftsmen, skilled or unskilled workers and farmers. Although the term “pleb” was used in a derogatory way (and still is among classically educated snobs!), plebeians were sometimes wealthy and powerful. They are not to be confused with the lowest classes, including the proletariat, who had no appreciable property, or the slaves. In contrast with the bulk of the literary evidence, the tombstones, especially those reviewed by Keith Hopkins, concern primarily urban plebeians: the urban artisan and shopkeeper class, plus freed slaves.

As for the laws, in general they refer to the entire spectrum of Roman society, although some were aimed at specific classes. The emperor Augustus, for instance, introduced legislation aimed at increasing the birth rate of the upper classes. The emperors Nerva and Trajan instituted public funds (alimenta) for the support of poor children – provisions from which inferences can be drawn
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as to the early age at which the lower classes married. Above all, the laws continually upheld the tradition and reality of patria potestas, and fathers tended to commit their offspring to marriages early rather than late.

Actual Roman marriages: a new biographical database

The Senate of Rome, which had existed as an advisory body from the city’s earliest days, long before the Republic, was the preserve of the Roman male aristocracy. Among the senatorial rank, the father of a family normally matched sons aged 17-20 with daughters of 12-16. This pattern for Roman aristocratic first marriages remained strikingly consistent, enduring at least from about the time of the Punic wars (264 BC to 146 BC), when reliable textual evidence first appears, into the Christian Roman empire of the fifth century AD, a span of over six centuries. To illustrate this point more systematically than had been done before, Lelis, Percy and Verstraete produced the first attempt to compile a systematic database of known Roman AAFMs, both male and female, culled from classical written sources. In other words, this information would be compiled from the biographical details of individual Romans who were mentioned in the literature of the time. This database amply confirms the view that Roman AAFMs were generally early, at least for upper class Romans. Unsurprisingly, the personal lives of individual Romans of the middle and lower orders, like the ordinary mass of folk over the course of history in general, are seldom mentioned in the literature; so inferences about their marriages must be made, if possible, in other ways.

The story of previous scholarly efforts to make such a biographical compilation is astonishingly brief. A century ago, Ludwig Friedlander presented from ancient literature only eight examples of the AAFM of Roman girls, establishing a very young average age of about 14. He explicitly declined to expand the list, opining that “There is no reason to assume that a larger collection would give essentially different results.” In 1965 Keith Hopkins repeated Friedlander’s catalogue of eight female AAFMs drawn from literature and confessed he had found only two in addition. The study by Lelis, Percy and Verstraete took up where Hopkins left off, resulting in two tables of biographical data along with commentary and notes on sources. These were included in their book, *The Age of Marriage in Ancient Rome*, and are reproduced as appendices here. Appendix I comprises Roman males, including 70 AAFMs, and Appendix II comprises Roman females, including 31 AAFMs. The latter more than tripled the previous tally in Hopkins, and the former represented a virtually fresh enterprise.
As remarked by Hopkins, the ancient writers seem to have been uninterested in the issue of age-at-marriage and rarely stated it as such; it must be deduced from other data. Lelis, Percy and Verstraete relied on the calculations of other modern scholars, employing secondary sources. The evidence is often contradictory and fragmentary, even for well-known figures from the civil wars or the imperial families. While Julius Caesar could hardly be more famous, next to nothing is known about his father.

Often, as in the case of the sons of Pompey the Great or Tiberius Gracchus the elder and his wife Cornelia, the sources are so imprecise or contradictory that such shadowy figures were left out of the new database. Sometimes, as in the case of the two men, father and son, called Quintus Servilius Caepio, from the late second century BC, there is almost enough information to make a close calculation regarding the age-at-marriage of one or the other, but the matter has to be dropped as too ambiguous. One extremely tricky problem is that many dates from the literature are not tied down to a particular year, but only reveal the latest date on which something could have happened. These are called “ante quem” dates, meaning “before which”. Others ascertain the earliest date possible for the event in question (“post quem”, or “after which”). Sometimes an event can be pinpointed to a range of years if both ante quem and post quem dates are available, but often either one limiting date or the other is available but not both. Despite such problems, though, Lelis, Percy and Verstraete are confident that their lists make a fair representation of various categories of first marriages.

One important point to note is the danger of assuming that a late marriage is a first marriage, when it could easily have been a second; or, for those in their forties or older, even a third. So, even where a definite marriage date is known it can be misleading. In a related trap, unwary commentators have been known to make the absurd assumption that a man married only late in life based solely on a birth year calculable for one known offspring. Given the very high rate of child mortality at the time, there would have been many first marriages with no surviving children: evidence that a first marriage had ever existed would have died along with those short-lived offspring. Sir Ronald Syme, widely considered the 20th century’s greatest historian on Ancient Rome, put it this way:
If a sole attested son first saw the light of day when a senator was about thirty-five or forty, a surmise becomes legitimate that others preceding had aggregated to the nameless nations of the dead. And by the same token, more wives than one. Not many eschewed matrimony ... until thirty, and even with them the evidence may be deceptive, ignoring a bride who disappeared some years previously. The more that is known about a senator, the more consorts accrue.

How, then, are the traps and pitfalls to be avoided? Essentially, this is best achieved by holistically using all of the evidence, as stated in the last chapter. Recognizing the anecdotal, impressionistic, nature of the evidence, both literary and epigraphic, patterns of Roman experience and practice must be allowed to emerge, rather than imposing conclusions based on inadequate statistical data. Unlike epigraphs, which rarely provide much biographical context even when the inscription allows a precise AAFM to be calculated, the literature affords an expanding number of AAFMs. These will be supported by an increased understanding of the motives and context behind each individual marriage.

One way of arriving at this increased understanding is by close study of information such as that provided in the Lelis, Percy and Verstraete databases, reproduced here in the appendices.

What techniques might be brought to bear for such a purpose? One, called prosopography, was pioneered by the above-mentioned Sir Ronald Syme. The word comes from the Greek prosopopeia, a figure of speech in which an absent or imaginary person is represented as speaking. Prosopography conjures people up into the imagination, as it were, by drawing on their background. Prosopographical research has the aim of learning about patterns of relationships and activities through the study of collective biography. In his book The Roman Revolution, Syme traced the linkages of kinship, marriage, and shared interest among the leading families of republican and imperial Rome.

The Mount Everest fallacy

This is all very well, it may be objected, but Syme’s studies of leading families tell us about the elite, not the ordinary people. The new biographical database by Lelis, Percy and Verstraete is subject to precisely the same limitation. So where does that get us? It is a familiar argument, known as “the Everest
“fallacy”. Keith Hopkins, an ancient historian of whom we will be hearing much, described it thus:

... they fall foul of what we can call the Everest fallacy, that is a tendency to illustrate a category by an example which is exceptional. The exceptional nature of the illustration is not made clear, and the illustration veils rather than reveals the normal. For example, Mount Everest is a "typical" mountain...

The danger of emphasising the extraordinary at the expense of the norm is a very real one when using ancient Roman literary sources, but to refrain from their use altogether for this reason is to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Used with caution, information about the elite can throw light on the lives of the other classes as well. Ancient and early mediaeval historian Sam Barnish: “Everest may still tell us much about mountain geology, or the rise to the throne of Justin I, however exceptional, about the Byzantine army”. Similarly, the careers of the people in the appendices, the Lelis, Percy and Verstraete biographical database, can tell us more about not just when they normally married but also why, and what factors might routinely cause variations from the norm, more than any statistical model devoid of context could. Work on this database remains an important task for the future.

Variations and Deviations

The evidence suggests that there were regional variations in marriage customs throughout the Empire. In the Latin half alone there were Greek, Berber, Punic, Celtic, German, Basque and other variations. Among the Romans themselves, in addition to Latins there were Italians and other Latinized populations. These may be considered to have taken over Roman marriage customs along with the language, especially in the urban areas. Within these groups there were also variations with respect to time, place, class, and circumstance.

For the upper classes, deviation from the norm was mainly due to two factors. One was the Greek influences which began infiltrating Roman life in the early second century BC. These Hellenizing factors included the custom of late male marriage and various homoerotic practices. The other was the delay of marriage for career reasons, especially by upwardly mobile “new men” during the Republic and by certain provincials under the Empire. For the lower classes, marriages were encouraged or delayed mainly according to the favorability or unfavorability of conditions such as the availability of
employment and living space; or would respond to catastrophes such as wars, plagues, and famines. There were also general evolutionary trends in Roman society and culture from Republic to Empire to Christian Empire which affected AAFMs.

The myth of “the Mediterranean type”

Whatever the situation today, or in recent times, there is no good case for believing a "Mediterranean type" of marriage prevailed in antiquity, that is, late marriages for males around age 28, and early for females around age 18, as proposed by Richard Saller and Brent Shaw. A pattern somewhat like that emerged after c. 600 BC among upper class Greeks, where males did marry around 30, usually to females 15 or 16 (in Sparta to females of 18 or 19). This pattern is not characteristic of Rome, though, where it was far more common for youths of 17-20 to take brides of 12-16, though legally boys could marry at 14 and girls at 12. Among the Jews in Ancient Israel, which, unlike Greece and Rome, allowed polygamy, the Talmud recommended marriage for males by 18 (they could marry after 13 when they had the Bar Mizvah) to girls as young as 12.

In Egypt, brother-sister marriage was not unknown, sometimes when both were below puberty. Roman law, meanwhile, explicitly forbade marriage between close relatives. It is very unlikely that the polygamous Persians "married" their mothers, as some Greeks maintained, but the Persian kings did inherit their fathers' harems. The Phoenicians and their colonists at Carthage and other Mediterranean sites doubtless had their own marriage patterns, probably not unlike those of the Jews, but perhaps overseas in North Africa they were influenced by Hamitic or, in Spain, by Celto-Iberian practices. Gauls were only slowly Latinized and, like Illyrians, may long have continued their native practices, influenced perhaps by religion as well as ethnicity. Even where groups mingled, as in Alexandria, Carthage, Rome, and “Magna Graecia” (Great Greece – extensive coastal areas of Southern Italy, including Sicily, colonized by Greek settlers), it is by no means certain that they developed common marriage practices; in fact, it seems they often did not.

For these reasons, to use Egyptian records to estimate habits in the Latin West is almost certainly a mistake. The ethnically and regionally based differences in marriage customs in the ancient Mediterranean were more lasting than the fluctuations between the good times that permitted early marriages and the bad times that discouraged them. The boundaries between cultural regions
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must be carefully observed before making generalizations about practices in any one of them. Even less relevant to the classical period in Ancient Rome is what happened in the best documented "Mediterranean society", to wit, 14th AD Florence – Christian, mercantile, and a thousand years removed as it was.

Fertility and nutrition

If any generalization about marriage customs in the Mediterranean basin during antiquity is appropriate, it would be the observation of anthropologists and sociologists that in almost all pre-modern societies girls marry in their early to mid teens, Sparta being a striking exception. While it is theoretically possible to achieve high fertility and reproduction rates even with delayed female AAFMs, an early female AAFM remains one of the surest guarantors of a high rate. High reproduction rates were necessary to offset the high mortality rates which also were the rule in almost all pre-modern populations. Estimating, as most demographers do, that average life expectancy in the Roman Empire was about 25 years, those women who survived to their reproductive years (usually assumed to be between ages 15-44) would have had to produce over five live births apiece just to keep the population steady and almost six live births apiece to generate a modest growth rate of about 0.5% a year. A growth rate of 0.5% in a stable population would double it in about 140 years. It has been suggested that just such a doubling did take place in the century and a half between the establishment of the relatively peaceful era (the Pax Romana), begun under Augustus following his accession in 27 BC, and the plagues and famines which struck the Empire in the time of Marcus Aurelius, who died in 180 AD. If the general population was increasing, we have to assume the higher value for the reproduction rate.

These numbers may, however, be optimistic. Elaborating on the same theme in the context of medieval Scandinavia, which had mortality patterns similar to those of Ancient Rome, Norwegian demographic historian Ole Jørgen Benedictow found that even with a female AAFM of fifteen, 6.8 live births per woman of reproductive age would be required to maintain the population, assuming a life expectancy of 25 years, and 7.8 if life expectancy was as low as 20. The number of live births required per woman increases if female AAFM is raised to 20. Benedictow estimated an average interval between births of 29 months. More importantly, birth spacing as wide as this combined with reduced fertility after age 35 means that women marrying as late as 20 run a significant risk of failing to produce their quota of offspring (a “quota” imposed, remember, centuries after the death of all the women in question!),
leading to population collapse. The 29-month average interval between births suggests that babies would have been breast-fed for a substantial period. Breast-feeding delays the onset of menstruation for 10 months after a pregnancy as compared to three-months for non-breast feeding. It also takes longer for breast-feeding mothers to conceive a child after their last birth.

Although in Ancient Rome wet nurses were popular among the more well-to-do, breast-feeding was certainly the usual practice among lower class Romans who formed the vast majority of the breeding population. The fertility rates necessary to maintain the Roman population or to increase it should dispose us to presume that female AAFMs among the masses were the earliest that the evidence possibly allows.

Vern Bullough studied nutritional factors affecting fertility. Like Benedictow, he drew on his researches into medieval Europe, relating nutrition and fertility in the relatively well documented medieval period to fundamental biological facts which would also have applied in the earlier Roman one. He argued that there were strong biological grounds for believing that girls married young in Ancient Rome.

Anemia was one factor, leading to spontaneous abortions, difficult pregnancies and susceptibility to life-threatening diseases. Among females in both ancient and medieval times the prospect of becoming anemic increased with age. The degree of the problem would have varied with local diet and customs – such as how early infants were weaned and whether wet nursing was practiced – but everywhere would have been affected. In the Middle Ages, the average absorption of iron by both sexes was at most from 0.5 to 0.75 milligrams per day. This intake is marginal for men and less than adequate for women. Loss of iron in the menstrual flow increased the potential for deficiency in women both in the Roman and in the medieval world. To avoid becoming anemic, a female would need between 1 and 2 mgs. of iron per day, an amount only a few could achieve since it would take a diet high in both protein and iron, something that was highly unlikely in both ancient and medieval diet. The primary source of readily available iron comes from egg yolks and lean meat, and in this form it is more readily absorbed than iron of vegetable origin. Though cereal grains have some iron, they are high in the enzyme phytate, which makes the iron less available for absorption. Some dark green vegetables are iron-rich, and nuts, legumes (such as peas, beans and lentils), raisins, and prunes are also good sources, but even at best a woman's diet in the classical period would still leave her anemic.
It is the loss of iron in the menstrual flow and in the birth process which makes females particularly vulnerable to anemia. Since a millilitre of blood contains approximately 0.5 mg. of iron, even a mild increase in the menstrual flow increases iron loss significantly. Therefore a woman after menarche and until menopause, even without getting pregnant, probably would need about twice as much iron as a man. During pregnancy, a woman's need for replacement iron is even greater than when she is not pregnant due to the needs of the fetus for iron, and also post-natal discharges of blood and tissue. During the last two thirds of pregnancy, iron requirements are said to be from 3.5 to 7.5 mgs. per day. This is an amount greater than the amounts available in ordinary diet in the medieval world and probably also in most of the classical world. The total loss of iron during an average pregnancy was probably 680 mgs. of iron, or 2.4 mgs. per day.

Lactation itself causes an additional loss of approximately 0.5 mg. per day. This means that a woman's iron requirement during her lifetime would be nearly three times that of the iron required by men. The lack of iron results in anemia, the likelihood of which increases with age and pregnancies; this results in a greater probability of spontaneous abortion and more difficult pregnancies as the female enters her twenties. Anemia also diminishes the oxygen-carrying capacity of the blood and makes females more susceptible to diseases such as pneumonia, bronchitis, and emphysema, all of which further diminish the supply of oxygen in the blood.

As iron cooking pots came in towards the end of the medieval era, the amount of iron in the blood increased, and probably lessened somewhat the dangers of anemia. The appearance of potatoes also was a factor in increasing iron intake, but iron deficiency anemia remains a serious problem for women even in the 21st century, although it can be corrected by taking iron supplements which have been available since the last part of the 20th century.

Infanticide, abortion, contraception, divorce

Romans were of course totally unaware, blissfully or otherwise, of the reproduction “quotas” that would later be set for them by modern demographers; neither would they have fretted over the dietary deficiencies noted by historians in the light of modern medical knowledge. Turning back, then, to variations in the conscious customs of the time that had a bearing on the age of marriage, it is time to consider the implications of a notorious (to
modern sensibilities) practice that might at first sight seem to contradict the idea that Romans wanted many children and would have married early to achieve that objective: infanticide.

However, the fact that considerable artificial reduction in the supply of breeding females was effected by the ubiquitous practice of infanticide, especially female infanticide, only strengthens the logic pointing towards early female AAFMs in the general population. It is known there was a high death rate due to diseases, high general infant mortality, lack of modern medical knowledge and facilities, etc. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the population in general kept growing. In the absence of this being accounted for by migration, it must have meant reproduction started early. Infanticide, an additional cause of the high death rate, adds to the arithmetical necessity that couples must in general have started breeding (and marrying) early.

Without modern means of contraception, and safe abortion, infanticide was common because even wealthy Romans often wished to restrict the number of their legitimate offspring. Not that some means of contraception were entirely unknown. A broad array of contraceptives and abortion-inducing substances were discussed in ancient sources, and recent scholarship indicates that at least some of them may have been effective. The available evidence suggests, though, that knowledge and use of the most effective herbal agents was probably confined to the elite.

A further, and often overlooked, drag on lifetime fertility was divorce. Quantifiable data are limited to the census documents of Roman Egypt, which report fairly frequent and often early marital dissolution. In Rome, too, divorce was easy to obtain by both sexes. It may be more than merely coincidental that the Roman age of marriage for women did not begin to rise until the Christian era, when changing mores began to make divorce more difficult: people might have begun to think longer and harder about entering marriages they knew would be difficult or impossible to dissolve.

Economic opportunity and need

That said, among all but the wealthiest and most privileged classes everywhere, marriage and reproduction are conditioned by economic opportunity and need. It is common for marriages to await the attainment by the man of economic preconditions such as control of a farm or attainment of a craft or establishment of a career, requirements which vary considerably
over time and place and from class to class and culture to culture. Irish peasants, for example, waited for their parents to relinquish the farm, and middle-class men in Florence before the Black Death waited like those of Victorian England to "establish themselves" before marrying, practices producing considerably delayed marriage ages.

If population is to grow without modern hygiene or medicine, favorable economic conditions must arise, such as opportunities for employment in new or expanded industries, internal or external colonization of new lands, and the like. To put it somewhat differently, spouses will be acquired and children reared when doing so will result in economic benefit for the individuals concerned. In agrarian societies, such as the Roman state was despite its considerable urban development, children are a valuable source of labor, as already noted, and the tendency is to rear many quickly.

Examples of this phenomenon are Java under Dutch colonialism, and Ireland in the grain-growing phase of English colonialism, from 1750 to 1820. Similarly, a spouse may be desired as much for her productive as for her reproductive labor. Ireland again serves as an example. There the spinning of flax yarn demanded by England's early textile mills "gave a special economic value to young women ... which seems to have been implicated in an increase during this period in the rate of marriage, as well as the tendency of it to take place at a younger age". England, too, is instructive. There the wages earned in the factories by wives were indispensable to the sustenance of the working class family. In the Roman case, there is evidence for husband-and-wife shopkeeping teams, and other instances where a wife's earning potential was very important to her husband. For both the rural and urban working people in Rome, the economic incentives to have many offspring need to be considered when assessing the probable AAFM.

Plagues and wars

It appears also that demographic catastrophes such as plagues and wars induce more active mating among the survivors. One example of the effect of catastrophic plagues on marriages and fertility is documented by David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber in post-plague Tuscany: "As we show ... massive deaths raised fertility levels among the survivors.... In encouraging marriages, the high levels of mortality also encouraged births." Population losses sufficient to trigger post-disaster demographic reflexes certainly occurred in Italy during the Second Punic war (218 to 201 BC), and possibly in the civil wars.
of the last century BC, while plagues hit the empire in the later second century AD.