CHAPTER 5
EARLY EMPIRE: TOMBSTONE TEXTS

Blood out of a tombstone?

Proverbially, you can’t get blood out of a stone. It is impossible to extract what is not there in the first place. It is amazing, though, what a wealth of information scholars manage to extract from old “stones” such as flint axes. So it is understandable that epigraphers have tried to wring out of Roman tombstones all the information they are worth. It is a laudable project, and a successful one too in yielding all sorts of telling details about Roman life that are not to be found in literary sources, especially about the lives of those outside the elite, whose affairs would otherwise only very rarely enter the record.

One detail of great interest would be the AAFM of ordinary, non-elite, Romans. Tombstones might seem to be the very place one would expect to find basic biographic data, such the birth and death years of the deceased, the year of any marriage and the year of birth of any children, along with the name of the deceased and the names of their spouse, or spouses, and their children. One might also expect to see an epitaph with a sentence or two about the commemorated person’s occupation and achievements, and what was most cherished about them to their nearest and dearest.

Such details are indeed to be found among the many thousands of tombstone inscriptions meticulously noted and systematically recorded in books of modern scholarship. But not every tombstone is replete with detail. Most of the inscriptions, unfortunately, lack sufficient basic detail to pin down AAFM or even whether a marriage was a first or subsequent one. Even more unfortunately, that has not prevented scholars whose ambition exceeds their judgment from wringing imaginary blood, as it were, from the stones, drawing unwarranted conclusions, unsupported by the available data. Based on incomplete, inconclusive inscriptions, they have attempted to adjust sharply upwards the estimated average Roman AAFM for both men and women. We might call these scholars simply epigraphers rather than historians in a full sense, because their dubious calculations and inferences can only be made by ignoring or unreasonably downplaying the overall pattern of historical evidence.
This is not to deny that tombstones include a significant amount of interesting and important information about non-elite marriages. It will be argued here, though, that the least strained interpretation of these data clearly supports early AAFMs for both genders. This was until recently the generally held view of the epigraphic data, in line with the broader historical evidence; so a return to that position, far from being a sensational bid for controversial novelty, instead marks the reassertion of a consensus with over a century of wide-ranging scholarship behind it.

First blood goes to early marriage

Most of the surviving funerary inscriptions are from the Empire rather than the Republic. Epitaphs were in the main put up by city dwellers and by members of the "respectable classes" who could afford the expense of such memorials. Accordingly, this category of evidence generally leaves out urban slaves and the slum-dwelling proletariat as well as the rural population. Additionally, few inscriptions can be identified with confidence as aristocratic. Generally, then, we are dealing here with moderately prosperous urban working people, such as craftsmen and merchants – including freed slaves.

Those funerary inscriptions which state an age at marriage (not necessarily a first one) explicitly, or from which an age at marriage can be deduced by subtracting the stated length of the marriage (LOM) from the age at death (AAD) of the deceased, generally show early marriage ages consistent with our contention that this was the normal Roman pattern.

The first major collection of epigraphic evidence for Roman AAFMs was published by Friedlander in the 19th century. The data from this collection support the literary evidence that Roman females had very early marriages. By as early as 1896 Albert Granger Harkness had expanded the epigraphic database and labored to disprove Friedlander. He put the typical AAFM of Roman girls at around 18. His Victorian sensibilities would not allow him to accept the scandalously low age revealed by Friedlander. He refused to entertain two inscriptions purporting to show brides aged seven as not credible; indeed, even Hopkins in much more recent times baulked at those. Hopkins demonstrated unequivocally in 1965 that Harkness's ages were too high, in particular because the latter was using a crude mean average of the data which masked the fact that the commonest ages of the listed AAFMs fell in the early and mid-teens. Hopkins’s analysis revealed the modal average,
rather than the mean average, of the data, in which the clustering of marriages in the lower ages was clearly represented.

Hopkins’s database started with the evidence Harkins had used: 145 pagan and 26 Christian female gravestones from all parts of the western Empire. Hopkins then added 154 inscriptions for Christian females, mostly from the City of Rome; and he composed his own tally from a book of collected inscriptions for the City of Rome, of 86 pagan and 90 Christian men. This book was one volume of a great collection titled the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, which hardly needs a translation and is in any case generally referred to just as *CIL*. In all, Hopkins took 501 inscriptions representing women and men, pagans and Christians. It bears repeating that the inscriptions usually do not state that the marriage is a first marriage. Consequently, the older the age-at-marriage that is recorded, the greater is the likelihood that the deceased had been previously widowed or divorced; both were very common occurrences in the Roman world. Even so, with the likelihood that the data are thus skewed upwards, Hopkins concluded that the modal AAFM (i.e. the most frequent ages in the records) was 12-15 for pagan girls, 15-18 for Christian girls, 17-20 for pagan males, and 20-23 for Christian males. It also was his conclusion that the inscriptions mostly represented "upper-middle-class" persons (including enterprising and prosperous freed slaves) rather than senators or the urban poor. In a later article he defined more precisely the applicability of this evidence, confining it to represent people of the "respectable classes," – shopkeepers or above.

The epigraphic evidence suggests, therefore, that early marriage was general, at least among the Roman upper classes and upper middle classes, and that it was not restricted to the senatorial class.

There will be blood: scholars squeeze the evidence

Brent Shaw impugned Hopkins's use of the LOM + AAD epigraphs as evidence for a generally early AAFM for girls in the western Empire on the grounds that a disproportionately large number of these funerary monuments were erected by freed slaves and that this social group was unrepresentative of the mass of ordinary Roman citizens. Shaw suggested that a tendency to earlier marriages among this social group might be an example of ex-slaves mimicking not only the dress and deportment of the rich and powerful families they had served but also their marital patterns, and noted that "it is only in this group that sizeable numbers of early-AAFM inscriptions are attested for girls”. However,
in an earlier study written in collaboration with Richard Saller, and based on funerary inscriptions, Shaw had explained the relative scarcity of freed slaves commemorating their deceased parents as indicating that gaining their freedom, and therefore also legal marriages, occurred late in life for this group.

The relationship between these divergent observations is far from clear. We might reconcile them by supposing that old freed males tended to imitate Roman aristocrats and take unusually young brides. But who, then, were these teenage brides? Among freed slaves an unusually high proportion of inscriptions show LOM. This overrepresentation of LOM-bearing inscriptions probably reflects the special interest these people had in proving their marriages had been long enough to establish the freedom and legitimacy of their children; but this does not simultaneously prove that the marriage ages deducible as a result of the presence of the LOM-element are unusual.

The wealthier freed slaves certainly mimicked their masters’ commemorative practices in terms of memorialising their deceased with elaborately carved and inscribed funerary monuments. They also imitated the early female marriage pattern of the aristocracy. The crucial question is, of course, whether the custom of early female marriage was also present in the general population.

Using funerary inscriptions to reach conclusions about the demographic behavior of ancient populations is an endeavor fraught with special problems. Demographer Tim Parkin has dismissed decisively the suitability of data from Roman epigraphs for answering questions about mortality and age-structure. The best that can be done, said Parkin, is to “accurately portray the population as commemorated, with whatever biases were prevalent in the burial and commemorative processes in that cemetery at that time”. The hard fact is, though, that commemorative practice varied hugely from place to place and time to time, making generalisation to broader populations utterly unreliable. As we will see below, Saller and Shaw fall right into the trap of making just such dubious generalisations.

Despite this obvious weakness, the attempt by Saller and Shaw to expand the database beyond that used by Hopkins and to build upon it a general revision of Roman AAFM estimates has received considerable attention. This becomes even more surprising, and less justified, when we remember another dodgy claim the wannabe demographic duo rely on to bolster their case, namely the theory of the "Mediterranean type" of marriage, including the fact that this theory requires the husband to be a decade older than the wife.
The graveyard shift: a commemorative conundrum

At this point we need to bring in a tricky concept from which Saller and Shaw seek to wring a major inference: the commemorative shift. This refers to a changing pattern of who it is that does the commemorating, depending on how old the deceased happens to be upon shuffling off this mortal coil – and being sent to the Elysian Fields as a good warrior or hero, or perhaps punished by the Furies after a less meritorious life. The most likely commemorator of a man who died young, in childhood, youth, or their early and mid-twenties, was the deceased’s father. After that, from the late twenties onwards, the most likely commemorator was the deceased’s wife. An adult might also, of course, memorialise a parent; in the modern developed world, indeed, where few people die young, at least in peacetime, this would be the most usual form of commemoration. But that is not an issue affecting Saller and Shaw’s logic: they seek to use the timing of the shift from parent as commemorator to spouse as commemorator as evidence for the age at which Romans married. They point to the commemorative shift for males occurring in the late twenties, and for women in the late teens. They say these ages reflect the usual AAFM of each gender, arguing plausibly but wrongly that because spouses would naturally have become the most important people in each other’s lives when they married, they would also have taken on the responsibility of setting up a memorial when their spouse died.

Saller and Shaw fed into their calculations numerous epitaphs that give AAD plus the identity – parent(s) or spouse – of the commemorator. The approach is superficially appealing because there are many more epitaphs that show AAD plus commemorator than show AAD plus LOM. Thus the database looks huge, and therefore more thorough and authoritative than what went before. However, this method assumes an unproven and – as we saw above – utterly baseless correspondence between commemorative practice and demographic fact.

Objections to this innovation in epigraphic analysis have been summarized by John K. Evans: "Saller’s conclusion rests squarely upon the unconscious, untested, and ultimately unprovable assumption that, when a son married, his parents invariably passed on the duty of commemorating him to his wife.” The supposition is just as invalid in the case of a daughter. Indeed, we have inscriptions showing parents did in fact commemorate married daughters. In one example the parents commemorated their daughter Scantia, a medical
practitioner, remarking that her husband had lost in her "his wife, his own personal physician, and his principal source of revenue."

There are several objections to the way Saller and Shaw used the evidence, even if it were allowed (but it is not) that the identity of the dedicator accurately expressed the marital status of the deceased. These include unevenness in their data selection and insufficient attention to the hidden effects of divorce and widowhood. Perhaps the most important objection relates to their implied decision to exclude inscriptions of the AAD + LOM type from their samples. All the inscriptions of this type have the requisite AAD component. Since it is the AAD component of an inscription that allows parents as commemorators to be compared with spouses as commemorators, there is no justification for excluding from that comparison any AAD inscriptions dedicated by spouses which also contain LOM. Inclusion of the AAD + LOM inscriptions would have increased Shaw's sample by nearly a quarter at a stroke. And since we know that the AAD + LOM epitaphs represent quite a large number of early marriages, we are entitled to wonder how their inclusion would have affected Shaw's results, especially in his Rome sample. Shaw's data for Rome show only one instance (out of 396 commemorations) of a husband commemorating a wife who had died under 15, but the AAD + LOM inscriptions attest a significant number of wives married under the age of 15.

Would they turn up additional instances of a wife deceased under 15 commemorated by a husband? If they would not, then is it not more likely that husbands simply did not normally commemorate very young teenage wives than that they did not marry such wives in the first place?

Accounting for the commemorative shift: a complex picture

Saller and Shaw's attempt to revise Roman AAFMs based on the identity of the commemorator fails on a number of counts. Objections to their handling of the data have been noted above, and they founder on their inability to prove a close connection between the observed commemorative practices and the marital status of those commemorated. Saller and Shaw offer remarkably little evidence on this crucial point. This is despite the fact that a comment by Shaw shows he is aware the issue does not turn solely on the marital status of those commemorated. He correctly writes:

In part the argument for expected types of commemorators . . . reposes on the structural form of the family, the sentiments attached to it, and
the element of residence of the conjugal unit; in part it also depends on legal provisions that lay the obligation on the husband to perform the funeral rites for his deceased wife if he retains the dowry (as I assume to be the case in most instances).

The dowry issue will be discussed below. Meanwhile, Saller and Shaw's collaborative article presents commemoration as reflecting mainly heirship, family duty, and affection, with a legally determined order of responsibility to arrange a funeral (including reasonable costs of burial and a memorial) falling first to a legatee specially designated to do so, then to the primary heir of the estate, and finally to a son. But, where none of these was available or willing to undertake burial, the law stipulated a legatee not specially designated to do so, or relatives in order of degree of relationship. The law anticipated that often a variety of people outside the legal chain of responsibility might be motivated to undertake a funeral. What level of elaboration and expenditure on a funeral might be appropriate was determined by a magistrate according to the station and resources of the deceased. It may be supposed that for higher-ranking persons "appropriate expenditures" could include an inscribed memorial, but the laws do not specify this.

Doubtless it is correct to conclude, as Saller and Shaw write, that "where the deceased is associated with a named commemorator.... the latter is very likely to be an heir or ... the family member thought to be tied by the strongest bond of duty." However, it is not at all clear that "the strongest bond of duty" would automatically devolve in all times and places to spouses rather than to parents. Saller's own discussion notes that there are regional "variations in commemorative customs." He admits that "it looks as if parents in Spain and in the area around Theveste [Africa] continued to be the preferred commemorators as long as one of them lived" and that "it is possible that the relative proportions of parents and wives may have been influenced by cultural factors" elsewhere. The fact that wives in southern Gaul, northern Italy, on the Danube, and in Mauretania do not replace parents as commemorators of men dying before their early thirties, and in southern Italy, do not replace parents of men dying before their late thirties, is compatible with the proposition that parents of males in these areas continued to be the culturally preferred commemorators long past the usual age of marriage. Indeed, the compatibility of these late commemorative shifts with a cultural preference for parental commemoration of deceased males is just as great as is Saller's contention that men in these regions married only at quite advanced ages. In southern Italy, however, the epigraphic evidence may be reflecting the residual influence of
heavy colonization by Greeks, whose men when they were around 30 did in fact commonly take girls in their mid- to late teens to be their first marriage partners.

The pronounced shift from parents as commemorators to spouses as commemorators that is evident in the memorials for females deceased in the late teens and for males deceased in the late twenties may be explained quite satisfactorily by assuming that it reflects not the average age at which marital status changed for the two genders respectively but the average age of the deceased at which a combination of other factors made such a shift in the identity of commemorator understandable and likely.

The legal context of the commemorative shift

What follows in this section is complex but mercifully the conclusion is simple: the range of circumstances relating to dowry and inheritance, especially, is variable and complicated in ways that were bound to affect which party, if any, would commemorate the deceased; this complexity makes it unwise to draw simplistic conclusions about the average AAFM based on the commemorative shift alone.

When the laws concerning marriage, dowries, inheritance and responsibility are put into proper perspective, the commemorative shift from parent to spouse actually appears much more consistent with early AAFMs for both genders than with late ones. Appeals to inheritance law, especially, do not save Saller and Shaw's hypothesis. Shaw's assumptions about the connection between the duty of burial and retention of the dowry greatly oversimplify the legal situation. In addition to the fact that the law anticipated many occasions where commemoration of the deceased would occur regardless of legal obligation, work by both Saller and Evans shows that the transfer of heritable property involved a great and increasing variety of legal instruments and potential beneficiaries that confused the issue of responsibility for burial. The fact that commemorations are made preponderantly either by parents or spouses, is easily explained by parental devotion, and a proper sense of family duty, on the part of the former and increasing responsibility with greater maturity on the part of the latter.

A wife in a traditional (cum manu) marriage was in the care of her husband, like a daughter: all her property was at his disposal, and the situation was comparatively straightforward. If, at the time of his death, the husband had a
living father, the husband was still at that point under his father’s authority, with no independent property; and his widow was legally like a granddaughter, with no responsibility either for property or funeral arrangements. If the husband’s father was already dead, so the husband held all his property independently, but his mother was still alive, the widow would share the inheritance with any of the couple’s children and sundry legatees; but, especially if she was very young, she would not necessarily have sole funerary responsibility; her mother-in-law and any legatees more mature than herself would also come into the picture for this. A wife cum manu only became the likeliest commemorator when both of the husband’s parents had predeceased him and she herself was adult while her children were still minors.

A wife in a free marriage (sine manu), on the other hand, would have had no claim on her husband’s property if he was under his father’s authority. If he were independent she might expect to have been named as a legatee, or even the executor of any property he left to be held in trust. From the second century BC she could advance a claim on behalf of herself or her children if he died intestate. In these cases it is possible that she would have been the likeliest commemorator, but with relatively early ages of marriage this was unlikely to occur when the husband died young.

The husband of a wife cum manu would retain her dowry along with the rest of her property upon her death just as he would that of a child, as she legally had the status of a daughter for these purposes. As the dowry was safely the husband’s, he could do what he wanted with it. He might or might not choose to commemorate his deceased wife; this would depend on considerations other than dowry law.

Marriages sine manu had become more common by the last years of the Republic at the latest. In these the husband usually enjoyed the use of his wife’s dowry so long as the marriage lasted. If the marriage ended in his death or their divorce, the wife or her father as head of the family could reclaim the dowry. Indeed, the father of the bride would occasionally have a greater interest in the dowry than in his daughter’s marriage and might compel divorce in order to repossess it. A dowry given by the bride’s father would return to him upon her death. In some cases, this right of the paterfamilias could be passed on to one of his male heirs, such as a brother of the deceased wife, or otherwise assigned to someone other than the surviving husband. The husband could claim the dowry in case of a divorce with “just cause”, such as adultery, or child-poisoning on the part of the wife. Less uncommon, perhaps,
was a provision under which he kept part or all of the dowry for child support. A dowry put up by the wife herself, or some third party, would belong to the husband if she died; but, here again, the dowry could have been made conditional and could return to the donor upon the wife's death. In view of all this, the instances where a husband might keep a dowry outright became quite infrequent, whereas the case for parents retaining an interest in a married daughter was strengthened. Even a husband who buried a wife and kept her money need not have been inspired to commemorate her.

Combining the above understanding of the inheritance laws with more realistic AAFMs than those proposed by Saller and Shaw, and with a correct understanding of Roman life expectancy, easily explains the pattern of identity shift in commemorators by which they set such store. It has already been noted that that average life expectancy in the Roman Empire was very low by modern standards, about 25 years. The implications of this now need to be considered.

Life expectancy: not what we might expect

What you are now about to read is highly counterintuitive. After looking at a quite simple chart, though, it makes robust good sense. For now, it is essential to realize that, on an individual basis, a parent was more likely to outlive a son or daughter than vice versa. The relative chances of survival of parents and offspring can be calculated using life tables not unlike like those used by modern life insurance companies. In actuarial science and demography, a life table is a table which shows, for each age, what the probability is that a person of that age will die before his or her next birthday ("probability of death"). From this starting point, a number of inferences can be derived, including the probability of surviving any particular year of age and the remaining life expectancy for people at different ages.

The modern life insurance company of course has a huge advantage compared to those studying ancient populations: the figures available from modern records of births and deaths are vastly more extensive and reliable than any ancient figures. Surprisingly, though, robust modelling of the age structures of ancient populations is possible. This is because reliable statistics are available for societies in the near historical past, and in contemporary underdeveloped countries, which provide a good match with ancient societies in terms of key features such as levels of infant mortality, death from disease throughout the life cycle, and general longevity. Used as a model for ancient societies,
appropriate modern life tables can give good answers to questions such as “What was the approximate age structure of a population experiencing high mortality rates?” and – a key question for the present inquiry – “How many children on average would a mother need to have given birth to in order for such a population to have remained constant or to have grown?”

The Coale-Demeny tables, first published in 1963, are the most widely used life tables today. There are 25 of them for each sex, over a range of values of life expectancy at birth from 20 to 80 years. Four different age patterns of mortality are considered. The four different types are called North, South, East and West, which differ from each other in the relative mortality levels in infancy, childhood, adulthood and old age. The model tables are based on real life tables for each sex, the real sources being mainly from fairly recent European history.

The four types are as follows: East: from central European life tables – high infant mortality and increasingly high mortality over the age of 50. North: life tables from Scandinavia – low infant mortality and old age mortality relative to adult years. South: Mediterranean life tables – high infant and early childhood mortality, low mortality in the 40-60 age group, high mortality from 65 on. West: represents a "standard" or "average" pattern of mortality, recommended for use where life statistics are too inadequate to provide a definite allocation of the population to one of the other three types; based on varied life tables from around the globe.

Saller modelled the population structure of Ancient Rome using the West type of life table, which was the best choice in view of Ancient Rome’s lack of relevant statistics, even though South might superficially seem the logical choice based on geography: the compass-point names are really just a somewhat misleading label of convenience. Remember also that the South life table, like the North and East ones, is derived from fairly modern populations that are not necessarily similar, just by virtue of location, to the population structures in the same region a couple of thousand years earlier.

The chart below is based on Saller’s use of particular Coale-Demeny tables which he felt could reasonably be used in order to distinguish the different survival prospects of Romans according to their social class. The percentage survival figures in the first column correspond most closely to the demographic conditions experienced by the mass of the Roman population, whereas those in the second column represent the somewhat better life-chances of those at
the top. The set of data in the first three rows shows the chances of a newborn reaching certain key ages: 15, 20 and 30. Roughly, 15 can be taken to represent the average AAFM of Roman females of all classes or, according to Saller, the average AAFM of senatorial females only; 20 is the average AAFM of Roman males, or in Saller’s view of lower class females; and 30 is the hypothetical AAFM of lower class Roman males in the opinion of Saller and his followers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lower Classes %</th>
<th>Upper Classes %</th>
<th>Surviving from each age</th>
<th>Age to which survived</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>48.7</td>
<td>59.1</td>
<td>of those born survive to age</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>56.3</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38.6</td>
<td>49.6</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76.3</td>
<td>81.2</td>
<td>of 20-year-olds survive to age</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68.2</td>
<td>74.9</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>61.9</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73.9</td>
<td>79.5</td>
<td>of 25-year-olds survive to age</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>72.6</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48.9</td>
<td>57.7</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71.7</td>
<td>77.7</td>
<td>of 30-year-olds survive to age</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63.2</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69.9</td>
<td>75.9</td>
<td>of 35-year-olds survive to age</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59.2</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.9</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66.2</td>
<td>72.6</td>
<td>of 40-year-olds survive to age</td>
<td>55</td>
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<tr>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>61.3</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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What emerges from the chart is that even a man who, at around age thirty, fathers a son is more likely to reach sixty (43.3% or 52.2%) than his son is to reach thirty (38.6% or 49.6%). But, as we have seen, most Roman men started
their procreative life around twenty. In fact, the Roman “life-table” attributed to the third century AD jurist and imperial advisor Ulpian is, in the range pertinent to this issue, remarkably close to the Lower Classes column above, giving life expectancies roughly a year less at every stage. While this table was developed as a guide for imperial tax assessors and is demonstrably inaccurate at both ends, the soundness of its middle portion suggests that the Romans had a rough awareness of the likely extent of their years of productive adult life and adjusted their attempts to procreate and to exercise influence over their offspring in accordance with this awareness.

Death, not marriage, explains the commemorative shift

We might reasonably postulate that the average Roman male’s span of reproductive activity covered the years from 20-40, with 30 roughly the average age at which a man became a father. This 30-year-old average father had an excellent chance of seeing a daughter reach her AAFM of 15 and almost as good a chance to see his son reach his AAFM of 20. Young wives in their middle and upper teens were very likely to have a father present to commemorate them if they died and so were young married men in their twenties. (Since mothers on average were younger than fathers, they, of course, would also be present.) It was only when a son approached 30 that it became more likely he would outlive his father. This is especially so for sons born late in their father's procreative lives, that is, at ages greater than 30. Herein lies the explanation for the commemorative shift noticed by Saller for Roman men. It is in the upper twenties or early thirties that it becomes more likely that a son would outlive the father. Increasingly, sons older than 30 would no longer have had a living father. Hence the duty of commemoration devolved to their spouses.

For Roman women, the commemorative shift from parent to spouse is noticeable for those dying from the late teens onwards. The explanation is somewhat different to the commemorative shift for male deaths, but it is also based on the high-mortality demographics of Ancient Rome. Wives were supposed to produce offspring. But given the extreme rates of infant mortality in the Roman population, a bride of 14 or 15 was very likely to see the death of any child born to her before she herself chanced to die at any age less than 19 or 20. Since a wife's value was conventionally determined by her reproductive success, the teenage girl who died without a surviving child would, bluntly, be less valued and favoured in the memory of her husband or his family. It is far more likely she would be deeply mourned by her parents. We might surmise
that a process of natural selection is illustrated here by the pattern of commemorations of dead females. Those who were infertile or bore weak babies or died in labor disappeared from the memories of their in-laws, while those who succeeded in a first or second birthing and produced a child that survived were remembered. The chances for a 15-year-old bride to produce a viable heir for her husband and his family are greatly increased if she is given four or five years to do so instead of just two or three; hence the commemorator shift in the late teens for females that was noticed by Saller and Shaw.

The potential number of children could be higher for wealthy Romans than for the other classes. The rich were more able to afford wet-nurses, an advantage that could increase their female fertility. As noted earlier, breast feeding delays menstruation, and it also takes longer for breast feeding mothers to conceive a child after their last birth. The diet of the rich, too, probably increased the fertility of their wives. Malnourished females are susceptible to anemia. If they marry at 14 or 15 and bear children, they can be anemic by 21 and die by 28 or 29.

Modern statistics show us that frequency of coitus in marriage falls substantially over time; we have no such figures for Rome, but a similar pattern seems likely. Kinsey documented the average frequency of marital coitus at 3.9 times per week for males married between 16 and 20. At age 30 the average drops to 2.9, then to 2.0 at 40, 1.8 at 50, and 0.9 at 60. Diminishing coitus was a factor, along with anemia, that reduced fertility as the years went by for each family.

Our epigraphic evidence indicates that a father died on average when his son was 28. Also on average, the middle child of his family would have been born when he was around 30. So the deceased, again on average, would have survived until age 58 (28 + 30), a not implausible figure for those wealthy enough to provide tombstones during the Roman Republic and Empire. The rich were likely to survive somewhat longer, as we have seen.

For both genders, then, the shift in commemorators from parents to spouses at certain ages is readily explained by assuming cultural preferences regarding the choice of commemorator in combination with the pattern of infant and adult mortality in Rome. Parents tended to commemorate a son as long as the father was alive to do so, and parents tended to commemorate a daughter
until she had become favoured in the memory of her husband and in-laws by producing offspring. Neither consideration affects the AAFM.

The near absence of gravestones where wives commemorate husbands under 25 and where husbands commemorate wives under 15 can be easily explained if one does not accept the dubious contention that young, and especially teenage, spouses – however dependent or poor or briefly married – always or even normally commemorated one another. To find parents acting as dedicators of a youthful deceased neither proves that he or she was unmarried at the time of death nor eliminates the possibility of divorce or widowhood prior to the death. An earlier marriage, especially if brief, could well have been ignored, unlike a long, intimate, or fertile one. The widow or widower might have been too young, immature, lacking in commitment, not in control of funds, or for other causes displaced as commemorator by the still-living parents. In the case of a youthful bereaved husband, he might well have been away on military service or some other duty involving travel when his young bride died, so the funeral arrangements would perforce be handled by someone else. One can surmise further that at a certain point, no doubt differing significantly from region to region and from time to time, the increasing average maturity of the spouse and the increasing decrepitude, impoverishment, or dying-off of the parents obliged the former to replace the latter as commemorators.

If children are absent as dedicators of tombstones of young fathers who die before them, this could be explained on the basis of the inheritance laws. Virtually no man under 30 would have a son over 14, nor under age 40 have a son who had reached 25, the Roman age of full adulthood, or majority. For Roman males this was the age of freedom from both tutelage (up to age 14-15) and guardianship (14-15 to 25). Because tutors and, to a lesser extent, guardians were charged with good management of the minor's estate and could be sued for mismanagement if they allowed unnecessary or extravagant expenditure, many might have vetoed the inclusion of an expensive inscribed monument in the funeral arrangements as just such an extravagance. The law did not, after all, stipulate memorials, only funerals.

All in all, a review of the epigraphic evidence lends no firm support to the revised and inherently improbable late AAFMs advocated by Saller and Shaw. Rather, the epigraphic evidence supports the conclusion that normal Roman AAFMs were in the early- to mid-teens for females and late teens or early twenties for males.
Until the publication of *The Age of Marriage in Ancient Rome* in 2003, the case put forward by Saller and Shaw appeared to be gaining favour. That has since changed considerably. In a paper published two years later, leading classicist Walter Scheidel accepted that “the evidence remains insufficient to make a strong case for the Saller-Shaw hypothesis regarding the female age of marriage”. He was less ready to accept a low male age of marriage but another leading scholar, Luuk de Ligt, felt Saller and Shaw had put that age too high. Ligt concluded that Lelis, Percy and Verstraete had succeeded in putting a dent in the Saller-Shaw hypothesis. Roman marriage specialist Judith Evans-Grubbs considered Lelis, Percy and Verstraete’s chapter on epigraphy their “strongest and most coherent”. Scheidel points to figures suggesting that only a small proportion of men aged 20-29 were commemorated by wives, despite the fact that a somewhat higher proportion of the men’s fathers would have predeceased them. This, he claims, is because few of these sons had been married when they died. In the final analysis, though, all the data interpreted solely on the basis of commemoration practice are dubious attempts to squeeze blood from a stone. By contrast, a low male AAFM among the common people, as well as a low female one, finds independent backing in the ages at which support for poor children and orphans was terminated. This independent backing was studied and discussed in *The Age of Marriage in Ancient Rome* but is nowhere mentioned in Scheidel’s paper.