The Age of (First) Marriage of Roman Men: A Reconsideration

In his paper entitled, "Roman funerary commemoration and the age of first marriage," (version 1.0), which he posted on his website in November 2005, Dr Walter Scheidel of Stanford University responded to our interpretation of the epigraphic data which had led us to the conclusion (in Arnold A. Lelis, William A. Percy, and Beert C. Verstraete, *The Age of Marriage in Ancient Rome*, Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003) that the interpretation of these by Richard Saller and Brent Shaw (in their respective 1987 articles) had been erroneous and that, in fact, according to our own hypothesis, they could be interpreted so as to replicate the data we derived from the literary record, namely that for males and females of all social classes, first marriage took place at a very early age, i.e. early to middle teens for females and late teens for males.

A key objection Scheidel made to our hypothesis was that it put forward two quite separate and different hypotheses, one determining our calculation of the age of marriage for females, and the other determining that of the age of marriage for males. His other major objection was that the pronounced shift from surviving fathers to surviving wives as commemorators of deceased married males around the age of 30 of the latter could not be explained on the basis of a supposedly much accelerated rate of death of the fathers of the deceased males at this point of time, these *paterfamilias*'s having been, according to our hypothesis, the normative commemorators of their deceased sons until then; a thick clustering of deaths of these *paterfamilias*'s within such a narrowly circumscribed span of time would be very improbable from a demographic and statistical point of view.

I have rethought the whole matter carefully and have come to the conclusion that our hypothesis for the age of first marriage for males should indeed parallel that for females, in other words, that wives were most likely to become the commemorators of their deceased husbands when the marital relationship had been cemented by surviving offspring—a stage in the relationship that, given the extremely high mortality rates for infants and young children in the ancient Roman world, would not have been reached, in many if not most cases, until several years of marriage had passed. On this hypothesis, calculating backwards from 30, we arrive at a modal age of first marriage for males that lies somewhere in the early to the mid-twenties. This hypothesis also meets Scheidel's second objection. As is clearly demonstrated by the data we compiled from the literary record for our monograph, the modal age of first marriage for males of the upper classes and, during the period of the Empire, of the imperial family was lower.

My recalculation of the modal age of the large majority of Roman males corresponds to the estimate of Dr Luuk de Ligt of the University of Leiden; he put this forward in his review of our monograph in *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 111 (no. 1), 2005, 75-77, where, on the basis of data provided by Christian epitaphs from the later Roman Empire, he places (p. 76-77) the approximate age of first marriage of Roman males at 23.

Whether one accepts de Ligt's or my own calculation, we arrive at a figure well below an age of late twenties to early thirties arrived at by Saller and Shaw.

It will be noted, finally, that my revised estimate of the average age of first marriage for the overwhelming majority of Roman males establishes an age disparity of approximately a decade between husband and wife, the same as in Saller's and Shaw's calculation.

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