

# Paterfamilias

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Jack DeSantis Western Civilization 3/4/13 The Roman Family “Familia”, the Latin word for family. This word played a very large role in that of that Roman society. The Roman family is essentially the basic component of Roman society and could also be the archetype of political authority. Without a strong connection and bond in your Familia your family name could not be respected. Everyone in the family had to play his or her own part and had a specific role or purpose to fulfill in order to be a successful family.

Whether you were the head of the family, a wife, or a daughter or son, everyone had their own role and duties to execute. There was a very specific hierarchy and structure in which the Roman family was set up. It started with the oldest living male and stemmed down to the children. At the top of the social hierarchy was the oldest living male, usually the father, known as the “paterfamilias.” This paterfamilias had supreme power within the family, not only in terms of respect but also legally and politically. He held the right to sell family members if he deemed necessary (although rare).

Regardless of age, a son was always legally subject to obeying any living Paterfamilias and was also in charge of fulfilling said duties if the current Paterfamilias passed away (eldest son would become the paterfamilias). Although their legal capabilities allowed them to kill a child, wife or any member of the family, most fathers only used this ability as more of a threat than an action. The idea of a strong family bond proved to be valid throughout most familial in that the Paterfamilias for the most part was an affectionate, caring, and kind father.

The respect for the Paterfamilias came from the idea of respect for their elders and ancestors. Every patrician belonged to gen, which was essentially

a group that lineage back to common ancestor. With that being said all patricians were required to include their “third name” which indicated their gens. All Roman males had a person and a family name, yet only the elite and well off would have a middle name. This basically set them apart from everyone else and would indicate their wealth. Similar to most societies of their the time the Roman woman never became independent from their familias.

For the most part woman would be considered more of an object than a member of a family. Instead of receiving a personal name like men, a daughter would be referred to by her fathers’ gens. The paterfamilias was only responsible for the first-born daughter in the family. He would be responsible for his wife, son, and daughter yet if second daughter were to be born he could legally renounce her and let her die. Although for the most part abandoned daughters would survive and be raised as slaves.

Not only did the paterfamilias have the ability sell his daughter to slavery, kill her either by abandoning her or by actually sentencing her to death as punishment, but he also reserved the right to marry her off to whomever he pleased. Although it seems that the paterfamilias would not really treat his daughters with respect, for the most part fathers still loved and cared for their daughters. Once married off to other familias, the wives would commonly be among the rest of the family during meals. Unlike classical Greece, woman had much more influence behind the scenes.

Husbands would often look to their wives for advice on certain issues being that wives were taught to take an interest in their husband’s lives outside the realm of the household. Divorce was very common among Romans

throughout the existence of the empire. Without question if a divorce were to occur the father would retain custody of the children. An article titled “Roman Family Structure” quoted that, “In later years, women had the choice of retaining loyalty to their birth family or their husband's family. They also had expanded rights to seek divorce themselves; but, the children still remained with the father's family. In later years is in reference to the fact that women's status underwent changes throughout the Roman empire's period of domination (750 BC to 480 AD). The son was given the responsibility of carrying on the family name by marrying a woman (most likely in the same social class) and reproducing an heir. A son was also given the responsibility of carry out any and all tasks his paterfamilias asks of him. If the paterfamilias were to pass away (usually around ages 30-40) the eldest son would take on the responsibilities of the head of the family.

This would only take place if he were the eldest male member of the family. Not only did blood relatives take part in the familia. Almost every Roman household contained a large family but also at least one slave. Whether you were a patrician or a plebian it was seen as a necessity to own a slave. Most slaves would be in charge of taking care of household tasks. Such as cooking, cleaning as well as gardening. If intelligent enough and actually literate (not common) slaves would also tutor children and help them with their studies. In some households slaves would be treated like family and given certain rights.

Most Romans believed in the idea that if a slave were treated well they would work harder than if they were treated poorly. Although all the statistics point to the paterfamilias having supreme right over everyone, only

in times of need and punishment would the paterfamilias use their rights. Otherwise he would be a loving, caring father figure who also tried to do what was best for his family. This is all thanks the Roman morals as well as beliefs that through a strong family bond, they could acquire and hold power. Many of these beliefs as well as morals have been passed down to our society today such as a strong family bond.