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## THE FALL OF THE ROMAN HOUSEHOLD

In his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon laid the fall of the Roman Empire at Christianity's door, suggesting that 'pusillanimous youth preferred the penance of the monastic to the dangers of a military life . . . whole legions were buried in these religious sanctuaries; and the same cause, which relieved the distress of individuals, impaired the strength and fortitude of the empire.' Gibbon's idea still presents a challenge for historians. Certainly, Christian values and institutions changed the landscape of possibility during this key period of Roman history, but how? This surprising study suggests that, far from seeing Christianity as the cause of the fall of the Roman Empire, we should understand the Christianization of the household as a central Roman survival strategy. By establishing new 'ground rules' for marriage and family life, the Roman Christians of the last century of the Western empire found a way to reinvent the Roman family as a social institution to weather the political, military, and social upheaval of two centuries of invasion and civil war. In doing so, these men and women – both clergy and lay – found themselves changing both what it meant to be Roman, and what it meant to be Christian.

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*For Hester and Hildelith*

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So it has been since the days of Hecuba and of Hector, Tamer of Horses: inside the gates, the women with streaming hair and uplifted hands offering prayers, watching the world combat from afar, filling their long empty days with memories and fears: outside, the men in fierce struggle with things divine and human, quenching memory in the stronger light of purpose, losing the sense of dread and even of wounds in the hurrying ardour of action.

George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*

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## *Preface*

This study considers the end of the Roman empire from the point of view of household and family life. This is an aspect which has been comparatively neglected in the otherwise voluminous literature on the empire's decline and fall. At issue here is how late Roman householders drew on an emerging Christian wherewithal of ideas and resources – I do not mean theology but practical ethical ideas and personal relationships with Christian *virtuosi*: nuns and bishops, priests and monks – to help them find a path through an unprecedented period of social change. At the end of antiquity, I will argue, the older vision of Roman family life based on the legal powers of the *paterfamilias* gave way to a new ideal, in which the *paterfamilias* had essentially ceded to the Christian bishop his role of arbiter in matters of piety and justice. But this development did not occur in a vacuum. Rather, it had roots reaching back into the third century, to an erosion of the powers of Roman heads of households that had more to do with tax-collecting than with religious ideas.

Our concern is with the Western, Latin-speaking part of the Empire, which after the death of Theodosius the Great in 395 became first an administrative unit separate from the eastern territories, and then a cluster of independent kingdoms under Gothic, Vandal, and other non-Roman kings. In the West, the 'long fifth century', from the death of Theodosius up to the invasion of Italy in 535 by Roman armies based in Byzantium, saw a revolution in the ground-rules of two related but distinct Roman social institutions, the family and the household. One aspect of this social revolution – relatively well understood by modern historians – involved the choice, by the sons and daughters of Roman families, to avoid marriage, and rather to live as professed ascetics either at home or in dedicated communities. Yet a second aspect of the revolution in family life, the widespread adoption of an evolving ideal of marriage as a commitment for eternity, has received far less attention. It is

this revolution in the role of married householders that forms the subject of the present study.

*Iustum matrimonium*, the traditional form of marriage practised by Roman citizens whether pagan or Christian from the time of Augustus to the end of the empire, was a limited reproductive contract, ideally established between two men. One of the two parties to the contract was a man at the height of his powers, the father of a marriageable daughter. The other, perhaps though not necessarily younger, was the aspiring father of sons. The partners to the marriage were the former man's daughter and the latter man himself. (The rules of *patria potestas* meant that there was variation: in some families the bride was *sui iuris* and able to enter the contract herself, while in others the groom was still *in potestate* and his father acted on his behalf. But since the bride was ideally in her mid-teens, and the husband ideally a decade or so older, he was more likely to be *sui iuris*, whether because of his father's death or through the father's choice.)

Roman marriage was fundamentally sequential. It served a private purpose, of course, that of producing legitimate heirs to continue the father's line. But its public purpose, that of producing a new generation of citizens and thus of securing the population against staggering mortality rates for childbirth, disease, and infection, was if anything even more urgent. All parties agreed that it was desirable for the union to last until the death of one or the other partner, but even so the conditions of ancient medicine and public health meant that this might well happen before the children reached maturity. If one partner died, or the changing circumstances of either family made it advantageous to dissolve the union, the firm expectation was that the surviving partner or partners should remarry as swiftly as possible.

In the last century or so of the Roman empire in the West, marriage was reinvented as a specifically Christian institution. On the one hand, I argue, the civic importance of marriage was heightened by the progressive erosion of Roman political stability and the subsequent attempt by barbarian kings to re-establish the peace on new terms. At the same time, the new attention to the theoretical basis of Christian marriage reflected a self-conscious attempt on the part of bishops and other Christian writers to steer powerful lay patrons toward understanding sexually active marriage as a second-tier form of asceticism. Ironically, we suggest, the new attention to marriage can be understood as a knock-on effect of the success of ascetic Christianity. Across the fifth and sixth centuries, the understanding of *adfinitas*, kinship by marriage, changed. Traditionally, a man could choose his affines in a way he could not choose his consanguine kin, but traditional



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Roman marriage, with its pragmatic approach to divorce, offered only a weak, because reversible, form of kinship. The new mode of affinity, by contrast, was meant to be as binding as blood kinship while retaining the advantage of being chosen. The increased hold of the marriage bond, whether or not it involved reproduction, would have far-reaching repercussions for both women and men.

Historians have tended to assume that a far-reaching ‘Christianization’ of marriage did not really take place until after the first millennium, as a corollary to the celibacy of the priesthood championed by the ‘Gregorian Reform’ (e.g. Georges Duby, *The Knight, the Lady, and the Priest*). Before 1000, the laity and their marriage bonds are seen to be improvised and inchoate, awaiting the formative intervention of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. This influential hypothesis is at least partly untrue: on the evidence presented here, the Christianization of marriage is a late Roman, not a medieval, problem. Already at the end of antiquity the need to re-theorize marriage had begun to be addressed, and the Christian identity of the married laity was far from inarticulate.

To capture in a single gesture the movement within marriage at the end of antiquity, we may focus our attention on the position of the female partner, the daughter who becomes first bride, then wife and mother. In Roman marriage, the wife was a liminal figure, standing on the threshold between two households. Rather than joining her husband’s *familia*, the circle of dependents who by law were under his *potestas*, including both children and slaves, the wife remained part of the *familia* of her father. In the fifth and early sixth centuries, however, Christian writers did their best to bring the wife into the sphere of her husband’s authority.

Under the Roman empire, however many successive husbands a woman might acquire following widowhood, divorce, or both, in legal terms she remained first and foremost her father’s daughter. Despite the harsh realities of divorce and infant mortality, Roman parents loved their children, and there is copious evidence that Roman marriage was at least in many cases a bond of lasting mutual affection. But the fact remains that Roman marriage was a reproductive contract between *two* families, not the creation of a new, third family around the conjugal bond.

Her position at the intersection of two kin-groups had many advantages for the Roman wife, who was able to draw on the protection of her blood kin, the *familia* to whom she belonged by law, while enjoying many rights as a distinguished guest of the *familia* of her husband. By modern standards, her independence from the husband was surprisingly high. She had her own property and up to the time of Constantine if she wished to

divorce, she might depending on her status require the permission of her father, but the consent of the husband was not required. At the same time, she had correspondingly little protection if her husband or his kin wished to be rid of her. Her husband had no claim on the property she had brought into the marriage (while the husband had usufruct of her dowry, it returned to her or her family if the marriage ended), but if she were poorer than he, or had no surviving kin, she might well find herself vulnerable if the marriage ended unexpectedly.

More importantly, the Roman mother had no legal claim on the children of a marriage. If they were born in wedlock and her husband had accepted them as his own, they belonged to his *familia* – not, like herself, to that of her own father. This made things easier for Roman magistrates – there were no grounds for a custody battle between divorcing parents – but it made for a staggering imbalance of power between husband and wife when divorce was on the horizon. Although modern studies often perceive the freedom to divorce as an advantage for Roman women, in the context of Roman family law it is fair to assume that most women with children went to extraordinary lengths to *avoid* divorce, with its resulting limitation of access to beloved children.

The most striking of the changes proposed to Roman marriage by Christian bishops was the prohibition of divorce. Christian literature had always taken a dim view of divorce and remarriage, but there is significant evidence to suggest that, like the scriptural view that Christians would do better not to marry in the first place, the literature against divorce had little measurable effect on Christian practice up to the fourth century. Even after the emperor Constantine and his successors began to limit the conditions under which a man or woman could claim a unilateral divorce (i.e. against the will of his or her partner), there is good evidence that Christians as well as pagans made free use of divorce by mutual agreement. But from the late fourth century there is evidence that this began to change.

Naturally, ecclesiastical writers and lay patrons had different points of view where marriage was concerned, and where the sources allow, we will explore these differences in the study that follows. Our evidence for the laity is restricted for the most part to the senatorial aristocracy, but the story of their struggle with the clergy over the nature of the marriage bond is well worth telling. We will try to capture the distinctive flavour of aristocratic lay Christianity – the Christianity, for example, of the poetess Proba, whose biblical cento, a history of Old and New Testaments composed exclusively from lines of Virgil, seems to have been a staple of the medieval school-room. Steeped in both the memory of Rome's greatness and anxiety

for Rome's future, aristocratic lay Christianity reflected vividly both the harsh realities and the cultural aspirations of the age.

Meanwhile, churchmen in the fifth and sixth centuries crafted a spirituality of marriage expressed in the distinctively martial imagery of the period. Thus were married women encouraged to think of themselves as soldiers of Christ, whose persistence in virtue would crush the armies of Satan. It is not difficult to see how this imagery reflects the atmosphere of military alert during the years of the fall of the Theodosian dynasty and the uncertain tenure of the Visigothic, Ostrogothic, and Vandal kingdoms (the first of which would endure for centuries, while the latter two collapsed within decades). At the same time, Christian writers were attempting to reinvent married life as a spiritual path of daily martyrdom. Central here was the need to explain why 'opting out' of conjugal relations, as a number of influential married couples were seen to do from the late fourth to early sixth centuries, did not mean that the marriage bond itself was dissolved.

The chapters that follow consider contrasting aspects of the Roman household as a progressively Christian institution. The structure may be somewhat unexpected, since the outlines of a history of marriage and household are repeatedly interwoven with attention to source material, and scholarly debates from other aspects of social and cultural history, that have seemed to me to be important for understanding the context within which late Roman men and women made decisions about marriage, reproduction, property, and religious identity.

Chapter One, 'The Battle of this Life', offers an introduction to Christianity from the late fourth to the early sixth centuries, with special attention to two little-known Latin conduct manuals addressed to aristocratic laypersons: the anonymous *Ad Gregoriam in palatio* written in the late fifth or early sixth century for an otherwise unknown Gregoria, the wife of a Roman senator, and a second treatise addressed by Ferrandus of Carthage to Reginus, *dux* in North Africa around 535, shortly after the Roman reconquest of the territory. Chapter Two, 'The Obscurity of Eloquence', considers the distinctive sub-culture of senatorial lay Christianity during our period, arguing that the 'patronage class' of aristocratic lay householders played a far more active role in shaping the Christian ethics of the day than has previously been understood. Chapter Three, Household and empire, considers the ethical perspective of the senatorial laity with specific reference to their role as landowners, suggesting that a consideration of the economic position of the late Roman estate makes it possible to understand the moral urgency of fifth-century debates on the duties and obligations of rich Christians.

Chapters Four and Five turn from social context to the efforts of Christian writers to create a compelling and distinctive spiritual worldview for their lay correspondents. In Chapter Four, 'Such Trustful Partnership', letters of advice from bishops to married Christian couples take centre stage, with special attention to the attempt to understand sexually active marriage as a form of *askesis* or spiritual training. Thus the Christian wife is portrayed on the one hand as the mistress of a citadel besieged by the satanic army of the vices, at the same time as her ability to endure the routine indignities of life with a husband is rendered heroic through the lens of Christian martyrdom. Chapter Five, The invisible enemy, develops a discussion of the wider Christian vision of life as a spiritual battle, showing how the reinvention of marriage contributes to a distinctive late Roman and early medieval Christian spirituality. Finally, I have included, as an appendix, a translation of *Ad Gregoriam in palatio*, a text which I believe to be of unparalleled importance for understanding the social and spiritual tensions centred on the Christian household in our period.

\* \* \*

In preparing this study I have acquired many debts, the greatest of which I would like to record here. Many institutions have made time, books, and other resources available during the course of the project, and I would like especially to thank the University of Manchester, the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, Georgetown University, Dumbarton Oaks, The British Academy, and the Austrian Academy of Sciences for their assistance. I am especially grateful to the staff and students of the History Department of the University of Padova, who offered a congenial home within which to think out the final shape of the study.

I have benefited from unusual generosity on the part of friends and colleagues who have shared their time, expertise, and inspiration. Gillian Clark and Judith Evans Grubbs each read the whole manuscript, and parts of it more than once, revealing exemplary forbearance, generosity, and expertise. Other friends have kindly read chapters, or shared their considerable wisdom in discussion: Kim Bowes, Averil Cameron, Paul Fouracre, Julia Hillner, Christopher Kelly, Gavin Kelly, Henrietta Leyser, Anneke Mulder-Bakker, Philip Rousseau, Kristina Sessa, Bryan Ward-Perkins, Chris Wickham, and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne. At different stages of its evolution, Janet Martin, Nicholas Horsfall, and Carole Hill read through drafts of the translation of *Ad Gregoriam in palatio* appended to the study. My gratitude for this act of friendship and encouragement is deep, especially since it opened a window on the kind of literary friendship so important to late Roman men and women. None of the above, it goes without saying, bears responsibility for the errors

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and interpretations to be found in what follows. To Michael Sharp and his team at Cambridge University Press, I am grateful for shepherding the book through production as swiftly and painlessly as possible, and I owe thanks to Sarah Tatum for preparing the index. Translations, where not explicitly acknowledged, are my own.

A last group of friends, Robert and Margaret Markus, Peter and Betsy Brown, and Jim and Mary Douglas, have offered indispensable criticism and encouragement since the project's inception many years ago, always accompanied by memorable hospitality. Among these, I would especially like to remember Mary, who, over the course of a twenty-year friendship, repeatedly brought the conversation around to deceptively straightforward questions about how Romans coped with their in-laws. If a confident line of inquiry about how Roman kinship systems work can be traced in what follows, it is thanks to this intellectual generosity. Her death this past spring, with Jim's in 2005, have left their friends, and the world of letters, immeasurably poorer.

Finally I am grateful to my family. My parents, Robbi and Kent Cooper, did their best to draw me away from a Casaubonesque obsession with detail toward aspects of the project that might be of use or interest to readers whose starting-point differs from my own. Conrad Leyser, my husband, revealed an astonishing ability to remain inspired and inspiring through dozens of drafts and a thousand conversations, though no one who knows him will really be surprised. Our two daughters, both born while this project was already in progress, are now old enough to have shown real generosity of spirit in encouraging their mother to lend her attention to something they could see was important to her, even if far less important than themselves. To Hester and Hildelith, in thanks for countless small kindnesses, I dedicate this book, with my love.

## *Abbreviations*

Periodicals are abbreviated according to the conventions in *L'Année philologique*

<i>AA</i>	<i>Auctores Antiquissimi</i>
<i>AASS</i>	<i>Acta Sanctorum</i>
<i>ANF</i>	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i>
<i>BHL</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina</i>
<i>BMCR</i>	<i>Bryn Mawr Classical Review</i>
<i>CC</i>	<i>Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina</i>
<i>CCCM</i>	<i>Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Medievalis</i>
<i>CIL</i>	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum</i>
<i>CSEL</i>	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</i>
<i>MGH</i>	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica</i>
<i>Epp.</i>	<i>Epistolae</i>
<i>ILS</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae</i>
<i>NPNF</i>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i>
<i>PCBE</i>	<i>Prosopographie chrétienne du Bas-Empire</i>
<i>PG</i>	<i>Patrologia Graeca</i>
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia Latina</i>
<i>PLS</i>	<i>Patrologiae Latinae Supplementum</i>
<i>PRLE</i>	<i>Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire</i>
<i>SC</i>	<i>Sources chrétiennes</i>
<i>SRM</i>	<i>Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum</i>
<i>TLL</i>	<i>Thesaurus Linguae Latinae</i>
<i>TU</i>	<i>Texte und Untersuchungen</i>