

INTRODUCTION

I. GOALS, ASSUMPTIONS, AND THE ORDER OF BUSINESS

This is a book about family in a very specific social context. My essays concentrate their attention on the imperial court and those rich, powerful, and often famous people associated with it. Although the essays move from the beginning of the first century CE to the end of the fourth and from Rome to north Africa, Greece, and other parts of the Roman Empire, each one places in the foreground objects connected with or representing the interests of the ruler, his family, and his associates. The goal of the book is to make clear the extraordinary inventiveness of these art patrons and the way their political goals generated new artistic problems, which elicited creative solutions from the artists who worked for them.

By now it is an accepted fact of the history of art that family representations play a major role in constructing the social and political power of powerful people.¹ Not only do people in many cultures use family imagery to define social identity, to show who they are by who their ancestors were or who their heirs are, the powerful do the same but with different stakes. For them, assertion, legitimation, and consolidation of power may require a rich iconography, one that combines traditionalism with inventive responses to new political circumstances. They have the means, as most people do not, to generate and display their own images as part of the process of constructing and maintaining their power, and – under favorable conditions – they make

use of those means in historically specific ways. Rulers and their associates may tell the world that their possession of power is an inevitable result of blood, merit or virtue, courage or wisdom, that it is given by the gods or God and is a part of the natural order. Nevertheless, the work of convincing the world and themselves of the inarguable nature of their power, the work of sustaining that power in the face of debate or opposition or mere uncertainty, requires more than force . . . although it always requires that too.²

Art historians have recently become interested in the imagery of the Roman imperial family, but (with exceptions) they have focused less on *family* than on the individual members and on identifying them. By the same token, they have been less explicitly concerned with the complex relationships between artists and their patrons and with the conditions that permitted innovation or required conventionality in the representation of individuals as family members. This book focuses on both issues in order to understand the particular ways in which elite families and their relationships were given artistic form.

Family, in all its apparent naturalness, is a fine vehicle for communicating the rightness of structures and holders of power, and the Romans used it to do serious political work. To see this point clearly, to avoid taking it for granted – as many Roman viewers of the objects under scrutiny here might have done – is to bring out the very specific character of individual families within their time and place and within the medium and genre that gave them form. I place my focus here and expect that it will extend and amplify the work that has come before mine.

I use the notion of family in an extremely fluid way throughout this book, not only because I find it appropriate to Roman thinking but also because the works of art become comprehensible only in light of this kind of openness. It seems especially useful to maintain the fluidity in relation to the Roman elite of the imperial period because their households were, as Andrew Wallace-Hadrill and others have suggested, more like the great country houses of the early modern period than the modern bourgeois house with its small population and rigid sense of privacy.³ Whether emperors or senators, highly placed members of the imperial staff, or the very rich freeborn citizens of Rome, the elite maintained numerous houses and rural estates, traveled among them, and used them for both economic and political purposes, not for a privatized notion of domesticity. Even the way leisure (*otium*) was conceptualized and located in the Roman villa was shaped by elite ideas about family and about the gender and status functions of the contemplative life.

The great households of the Roman Empire were always full of people of all sorts, some visible, some invisible. When Cicero and Pliny the Younger delight in the peace and solitude of their days at their villas, even when they fail to mention the presence of any other person in their lives of reading and thinking, they are always attended by the requisite army of slaves

(e.g., Pliny *Epistle* II.17.24). When the household was populated by the visible, it included biological kin, mothers and fathers with their children and perhaps also with their elderly parents (a rarity given the life-expectancy figures for the Roman world). The *domus* (household, family, house) was likely to resemble those modern houses with blended families, products of divorce or the death of a parent and subsequent remarriage bringing together new combinations of people.⁴ Along with these there might be more distant relations, perhaps from less prosperous branches of the family, orphans and foster children with some blood connection, young men from the provinces just embarking on public careers in the city, and so on. There might be those whose ties to the family were more professional, whether Ummidia Quadratilla's troop of mimes (Pliny *Epistle* VII.24.3) or a resident philosopher, and there were often long-term guests, such as Aulus Gellius visiting the rich sophist Herodes Atticus at his estate outside of Athens (*Noctes Atticae* XVIII.10.1–2). And there were always those invisible ones, the slaves who did the work of the household. The greater the *domus*, the more likely it was to have a huge staff that might include personal servants, maintenance and kitchen staff, professionals such as teachers, and grounds keepers.⁵ In all likelihood the great estates included hundreds of slaves whom the immediate family never set eyes on, but it may be that some of their children, *vernae* or home-bred slaves, came to the attention of an owner occasionally and lived in the house, perhaps as a pet (*delicium*) or sexual plaything or as a potential house slave. Since some Roman owners freed their slaves, the household could also have included *liberti* and *libertae*, those freed slaves who continued to serve the family or who remained with it by reason of age or sentiment.⁶

The *domus* could include all of these people, temporary as well as “permanent” residents, but not all of them were part of the *familia*.⁷ Whereas *domus* was used to indicate the household as well as the house, the *familia* was even more complicated. It could evoke the biological family, for which there seems to have been nothing comparable to our term “nuclear family.” It might mean the multigenerational biological family as well as those who came into it through remarriage and adoption. And it was regularly used to indicate the entire property of a *paterfamilias*; the people, free and enslaved, the animals and the land, under his control were at certain periods considered *familia* and at other times *domus*. Further, *familia* could and often did mean the collectivity of slaves or *liberti* or both when they served the same master or mistress or *patronus*, *-a*, who had freed them. Finally, *familia* sometimes functioned as an indicator of other kinds of corporate structures, such as a troop of gladiators or the imperial slaves of the court.⁸

Most elite Roman families seem strange to me, a modern western product of the suburban nuclear family, which is why I began work on this book in the first place. Sometimes they are strange by any criterion, as when, in the

first chapter, the widowed empress Livia appears on a gem (plate III), not only as a widow but as the mortal widow of a god whose cult she honors, as her husband's adopted daughter, and as the mother of the emperor's adopted successor. A world in which political marriages, adoptions, deifications, and other transmogrifications shaped the imperial family could indeed be strange even to "locals." The apparently "normal" family of the late antique general Stilicho (figure 42), with its father, mother, and son represented on the ivory diptych discussed in Chapter 6, provides the viewer, modern and, as I argue, ancient too, with a somewhat different sense of dislocation. Traditional ways of showing immediate family groups are disrupted in part because the father is in some sense a social outsider in relation to his wife and son; he was half Roman, half Vandal, whereas his wife Serena was a product of the court by birth and the daughter of the emperor by adoption. So no matter how similar to modern expectations a family might look, it still has a thick layer of unfamiliarity buried within.

The nuclear family of father, mother, biological children, and perhaps grandparents was not a norm to be taken for granted in the Roman world; but then again, today's western family hardly seems less strange in relation to that postulated norm. In the era of single parents or of couples, whether man and woman or same-sex, who conceive their children through innovative means or adopt them in far-off places, of serially married and newly blended families with more than four grandparents, and so on, elite Roman families seem a bit less strange. Even the impact of slavery on the Roman family is not without crucial modern parallels. The claims, for example, of Thomas Jefferson's black descendants to a place in the Jefferson family (at the right hand, as it were, of the founder) alerts us to the complexity of enslavement's impact on both black and white Americans. In short, families are generally pretty strange in practical if not in ideological terms, even if we avoid the psychological sense of the word "family." And this is compounded by our distance and difference from Roman families, particularly those of the highest stratum of society.

All these aspects of family are present in the chapters that follow as are others raised by the fact that the objects of study are all works of art chosen specifically because they are in some sense atypical. Not only do we find adoption and fosterage alongside biological reproduction in the people depicted but we are sometimes confronted by groups of adults and children whose relationship to one another remains unclear despite our efforts at identification. In addition, the works of art regularly permit powerful people to describe their power by using familial metaphors and parallels. The powerful can project what it means to be *pater patriae*, what it means to be a tetrarch, what it means to be a legitimate member of the ruling classes through family imagery. Their ability

to transform relationships and even individual identities is manifest here too, as Livia's gem reveals and as Herodes Atticus' presentation of his *trophimus* (foster son perhaps) Polydeukion as a semidivine object of hero cult indicates. The powerful could reshape the future of family through adoption, but sometimes they also reconfigured the past and genealogy itself by asserting fictive ancestors or, as did Septimius Severus, by adopting themselves into earlier families to whom they had no ties other than those of political desire.

Reconfiguring power relations as family relations and vice versa allowed the powerful to do more than control a political and social discourse. Ultimately, it allowed them to make family into a public, rather than a private, vehicle for expressing their control over time and fate. To the extent that family meant a past, a genealogy, a history, so too it meant the future in progeny and heirs, a stake in the history yet to come. The ability of family to speak in naturalizing terms about time, and sometimes about space and the territory of empire as well, meant that it served a broad range of political needs while, at the same time, incorporating some of the idealized virtues, *concordia* (concord or agreement), *pietas* (not only as religious piety but as devotion to family), and *fides* (loyalty or "good faith") among them, into the language of power. A rich and varied iconography emerged, changed over time while pretending to be unchanging, and eventually went out of use in late antiquity as new social and political configurations made other kinds of metaphoric visual language more desirable.

The topics under consideration in the book take us from the Augustan period to late antiquity. The first chapter, to which I have already alluded above, concerns Livia as the widow of the emperor Augustus, with whom she appears on a cameo in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (plate III). This gem allows us to explore the way a person is configured as a family member and under what circumstances that may happen. At the same time it also permits a consideration of the nature of artistic experimentation and its possible outcomes in relation to intended audiences. Do we think they would have understood new messages in new forms? Some similar issues will resurface later in the book when I take up the function of touch and embrace in the porphyry statue groups of the four tetrarchs (plates XIV–XV), dated to the end of the third century and now in the Vatican and Venice (Chapter 5). There, too, unprecedented political needs required artistic experimentation, which drew on ideas about family and made use of them in new ways.

The second chapter explores family groups outside the realm of portraiture. The state monuments of the Trajanic period permit an exploration of depictions of families of Roman peasants, provincial city dwellers, frontier people, and enemy Dacians (figures 10–17). The relationship between the emperor and families is the subject, and the question of how the emperor consolidated

his image as *pater patriae* becomes important. The depiction of families here is, at least in part, about and for the ruler, even as the monument seems to appeal to a far broader audience of viewers. The problem of whether viewers of low rank could have read the images on the column of Trajan, winding away from them in a spiral of 200 feet, any better than elite viewers remains an enduring irritant in efforts to understand whom the column addresses. The column's job is, in a sense, to construct a particular kind of emperor whose memory it will then enshrine as his tomb.

We continue with the representation of a paternal figure in the next chapter, and, as was the case with Trajan, no one involved is the father of the people with whom he is shown. A discussion of the rich statesman and sophist Herodes Atticus (figure 23) and his patronage of statues in honor of the dead youth Polydeukion (figure 24), in Chapter 3, explores the way sculpture did and did not mark distinctions among members of a household and did come under criticism for expressing extreme emotional attachments. What Herodes Atticus was up to in his statue patronage and display is at least in part the construction of his own identity as an aristocratic sophist; emotional attachments and kinship are necessary participants in the process.

Chapter 4 deals with the imperial family as it is being shown in the most apparently conventional way, because it focuses on the Severan family arch at Leptis Magna (205–207 BC) (plate IX). The family consisted of Septimius Severus and his empress, Julia Domna, with their two sons, Caracalla and Geta, all represented in the most serene accord and acting with *pietas* and *fides* as they visit the emperor's birthplace. This chapter gives us something unusual in the history of great public monuments because of the important role played by Julia Domna both as a living empress and as mother of the heirs and because of the way the relationship of the two sons is represented. The structure of the arch's decoration, and not just the images, offered viewers a way to understand the emperor's plans for his heirs as corulers and used the empress as the pivot in an imagery both retrospective and oriented toward the future.

The all-male world of rulers who are not fathers with their putative sons returns in the next chapter where I ask how unconventional engagements with family imagery can generate new meanings in experimental situations; as I noted earlier, it takes up some of the same questions about artistic innovation as did the Livia chapter. The porphyry statues of the four tetrarchs (plates XIV–XV), Diocletian and Maximianus and their caesars (second-in-command, rather than junior partners) Galerius and Constantius Chlorus, have no known places of origin and little information remains about how and where they were originally displayed, but they are remarkable because the image of embracing rulers was unprecedented. The chapter asks what was at stake in this composition, particularly given the fact that these rulers were military men without genealogical connections to past rulers. It asks, as well, how

the composition drew on the only other embraces represented in Roman art, those between family members and those between soldiers.

The final chapter in the book focuses on another unconventional image. While exploring the new elements in a family depiction, that of the late-fourth-century general Stilicho and his wife and son (figure 42), the chapter also asks what happened more generally to family imagery in late antique art. Examining a wide range of monuments, the chapter considers the way family imagery changed and the reasons for its eventual centuries-long fall into near-invisibility in Byzantium and western Europe.

II. HISTORIOGRAPHY AND WHAT IS MISSING HERE

This section looks at the ways in which family and its imagery have been discussed in a variety of fields, but it also acknowledges the many kinds of objects and questions that the book does *not* take up. Areas in which there has been extensive or especially interesting work, as is the case with the representations of nonelites or the statue groups of elite families, are mentioned only in passing.

Although historians of Roman art have occasionally dealt with questions of family in relation to particular periods, genres, or subtopics, they have seldom examined the larger question of family and Roman political power more comprehensively, as I do in this book. Studies of imperial statue groups, of children on state monuments, of the tombstones of freed slaves, of the uses of domesticity in the Augustan or the Antonine period all reveal the importance of family imagery in the construction of social and political identities.⁹ What I do here involves focusing on a variety of monument types and periods, of different kinds of family relationships real and fictive, and on the question of how all of these convey an image of power. Rather than exploring one form of family representation, I take up a range of genres and media and a range of relationships, not all of which are familial in any traditional sense. By keeping all of these within the group of power holders, I attempt to demonstrate the changing ways in which members of this by no means uniform group represented significant relationships. In the process, the essays begin to sketch out sets of historical traditions and conventions as well as artistic experiments and changes in the identities and objectives of the patrons themselves.

During the imperial period, the court and its elite associates developed a number of artistic vehicles for representing family. These included statue groups, public monuments with relief sculpture, temples dedicated to the imperial family and its members, palaces, and family dedications of other kinds of buildings. For example, the Porticus Octavia of c. 32 BCE, built on the land in Rome where once the Porticus Metelli stood, honored not only Augustus' sister but also mothers and motherhood.¹⁰ Family was central both to the earlier



1. Rome, Museo Capitolino, inv. #179. Base of the Statue of Cornelia. C. 100 BCE or C. 30 BCE. Photo Rossa, DAI InstNeg. 1976.0328.

building, set up by one of Rome's great Republican families, and to the newer one which the triumvir, soon to be emperor, erected. The presence in the Porticus Octavia of a statue of Cornelia, the famous Republican mother of the second-century BCE reformers Tiberius and Sempronius Gracchus, was deeply significant.¹¹ Its preserved inscription reading *Cornelia Africanae f. Gracchorum*, "Cornelia the daughter of [Scipio] Africanus, [mother, or perhaps wife and mother] of the Gracchi," the statue provided a signal to viewers that the space was familial in at least two senses (figure 1). First, it honored the family of Octavian and Octavia (and silenced the dishonorable behavior of Marc Antony in casting Octavia aside), and, second, it honored mothers as crucial to the very notion of family.

The statue of Cornelia is so important here because it helps to make clear a change that took place in elite family imagery during the first century BCE. In contrast to the Republican concentration on men and male genealogies, images of elite women as mothers and sisters, wives and daughters enter slowly and late, and they become most visible during the imperial period. Some scholars have argued that the Cornelia statue once stood in the Porticus Metelli as early as the late second century BCE and thus may have been the first image of a woman as a mother to occupy a nondomestic and nonfunerary space.¹²

Little visual evidence remains of elite representations of family during the Republic, although certainly the great houses of Rome with their ancestor masks and genealogical charts (*stemmata*) displayed in the atrium, the great tombs outside of the city center, and the funeral processions through the city marked their status and conception of family for the world to see.¹³ That conception seems in its visual forms to have been patriarchal through much of the Republican period. Not only did the laws create a picture of men as the heads of households and as owners of property but few images of women, whether as wives or mothers, daughters or sisters, remain to suggest the kind of importance elite women may have had within their families and as links between families. Literary sources give us information about those women; images take a very long time to begin to do so.¹⁴

When familial imagery survives from the Republic, and little does, it focuses on the deeds of generations of men, no surprise in a society that valued governance and military command as the attributes of high status. Whether in the fragments of a tomb painting on the Esquiline Hill (4th–3rd century BCE), depicting what seems to be a treaty secured between two men, or on the coins of officials of the later second and first centuries BCE showing genealogical connections among public servants of the official's family going back to the legendary kings of Rome, family representation focused on men.¹⁵ A mid-first century coin (56 BCE) depicting an equestrian statue of Q. Marcius, praetor of 144 (figure 2), creates layers of genealogy through the combination of the honorific monument and the evocation of descendants responsible for restoring the Aqua Marcia.¹⁶ The coin's obverse shows King Ancus Marcius, who is supposed to have built the aqueduct. His *soi-disant* descendant, L. Marcius Philippus, is the moneyer who inserts himself into the genealogy by placing on the reverse of the coin the aqueduct, carefully labeled, on which appears the ancestral equestrian statue of Marcius Rex. Officeholding, benefactions, and public service are all, apparently, as crucial to this imagery as descent from a heroic regal ancestor, and the message is one from which women, even mothers, were necessarily excluded.¹⁷

Although families had often been the subject of representation in the Greek world, and despite the tremendous impact of Greek art, classical and



2. New York, American Numismatic Society, acc. #1941.131.255. Coin with reverse of Marcius Rex. 1st century BCE. Photo American Numismatic Society.

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3. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. #11.100.2 Rogers Fund 1911. Marble grave stele with a family group, Greek, Attic, C. 300 BCE. Photo courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art.