Introduction

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The concept of the ‘Roman family’ is of strategic importance in the study of Roman society. This applies whether the focus is on social structure, or the legal framework of Roman institutions, or cultural, moral, and emotional sensibilities, or quantitative economic questions. This importance is reflected in the vast expansion of scholarship devoted to the field and in the increase in serious attention to ‘the family’ over the last two decades. The field has expanded to embrace areas of study as diverse as the Roman aristocracy, municipal élites, the familial roles of women and children and slaves and freedmen, and housing. There have also been fertile contributions from cognate disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, archaeology, art history, and legal scholarship.

What is ‘the Roman family’? What are its distinguishing and specifically Roman features? The three international conferences on The Roman Family which have been held in Canberra since 1981 have helped develop answers to these questions. The volume which resulted from the first conference, The Family in Ancient Rome: New Perspectives (Croom Helm and Cornell University Press 1986, Routledge paperback 1992), argued that there was so little material readily available on the topic that a book was needed ‘to guide scholars in other fields and students to what has already been done, to give examples of specialised current research which illuminates the subject, and to point the way to future research’. The present volume still has the same aims but there is now a wealth of new work on which to draw. It is also possible now to have a more coherent and nuanced view of ‘the Roman family’ as a result of the work done in the last fifteen years or so.

Not that this claims to be a definitive study: perhaps there will never be a definitive work on the family in any society, because there will always be diverse perceptions of the evidence. This volume is partly about perceptions, but it also presents a wide range of evidence on which to base perceptions, arguments, and future discussion. We draw on literary and legal texts, inscriptions, art and architecture, and on a variety of disciplines. Most chapters focus on one of the
volume’s themes of ‘status, sentiment, and space’ but many have implications for the whole range of themes, illustrating their interrelationship. Most deal particularly with the sub-élite classes, where there is still scope for much new work, but there are also discussions which bear on the upper classes, providing an opportunity to see the workings and interactions of a whole society. Whereas the first volume, and then the second (Marriage, Divorce, and Children in Ancient Rome, Oxford University Press 1991, and OUP paperback 1995), focused on the city of Rome, aware of the importance of regional variation and the dangers of generalizing over a wide geographical and cultural area, this volume explicitly and systematically moves to a study of the whole of Roman Italy. It also ventures beyond the boundaries of the previous volumes in that it discusses the society of the provinces and of a later, Christian period. These are new directions, and they may well flag the route for future research.

The growing recognition of the importance of visual and physical evidence is reflected here. The publisher has made possible a good range of illustrations, which have been integrated into the text. The last three chapters, the ones most explicitly on ‘space’, make extensive use of house-plans and artefacts to try to reconstruct room use and domestic behaviour. It is no coincidence that these chapters come from young scholars, all familiar with current work in prehistoric archaeology. It is in fact one of the most encouraging aspects of this volume that many of its authors are younger scholars: this augurs well for the future of studies in ancient society and, in particular, for new directions in family studies.

Richard Saller’s study of structure and sentiment sets the framework for much of what follows. His chapter has much to say to other disciplines, especially anthropology, about the misinformation which has been based on claims about Roman society. He raises the important question of the relationship between social behaviour on the one hand and formal law and linguistic terminology on the other. What correlation is there between linguistic categories and social roles? His systematic empirical study of the language and behaviour of Romans leads him to the view that there was considerable flexibility in kinship terms and their implications. Rather than formal obligations attaching to specific kin, it was the household, the domus, which had overriding importance for the formation of a Roman’s identity. His meticulous, systematic testing of the evidence, especially funerary dedications, refutes some of the claims which have been made about commemoration preferences. He finds no special pattern of sentimental or property ties to paternal or maternal kin. Saller also draws on his previous demographic work to stress ‘how
incomplete the kinship universe must have been for most Romans’ and thus the unlikelihood of kinship roles being tightly defined and delimited.

Although Saller shows the dangers of reading legal rules as sociology, and Gardner warns (n. 26) that law should not be confused with accepted morality, that does not mean that the legal rules are unimportant. Gardner and Weaver show that there were undeniable consequences of such rules and one’s status. Gardner’s treatment of ‘anomalous’ families, however, reveals considerable flexibility and generosity in the authorities’ application of the law when dealing with such families. Weaver takes one status category of lower-class families, the Junian Latins, who may well turn out to be numerically very important and who occupy the space between citizenship and slavery. He examines the anomalies between parents’ and children’s status when one or both parents have been freed informally. Legislation which improved opportunities for slaves (making them Junian Latins) may well have discriminated against their children.

Like Weaver, Eck makes extensive use of inscriptions, this time for the upper end of the social scale. He finds that it is essential to examine the inscriptions in their archaeological context. This enables him to assess the function and role of these monuments in senatorial families’ self-representation and display. His evidence of monuments near Rome, in other parts of Italy, and in the provinces reflects something of the broadening base of the Roman senate in the imperial period. Senators from a widening geographical area had commitments to the city of Rome and might have spent long periods there, perhaps with family members; but a sense of place, of geographical origin, had continuing importance in a family’s history and identity. It had emotional value for such people and provided a point of reference for them.

Status is important for Garnsey’s study too, and he takes forward some aspects of Saller’s chapter in the 1991 volume, on sons and slaves. But he turns to the Christian and biblical world of later antiquity to see what difference Christianity made to views about slavery and consequent action. He reveals the wealth of evidence for the study of interpersonal relationships in the family context in new or little used sources, such as Lactantius and Augustine. The texts which he makes more accessible than heretofore include recently discovered sermons of Augustine. He discusses the use of metaphor from the household (familia), which encompasses sons and slaves, and the tendency in theological argument to collapse the father–son distinction; but there was no aim to collapse such distinctions in the actual world, in real social interactions.
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Parkin’s chapter takes us from the young (sons) to the elderly (parents), and to the potential power of offspring over aged parents with consequent dependence of parents on children. In contrast with earlier Athenian law, Roman law made no provision for this. Care of the elderly in Roman society was a private rather than a public matter. Those with means may have had some protection. Some reliance could be placed on children or spouse, but there should be no romanticized notion of support from an extended family. Demographic data and techniques—so ably presented by Parkin himself in his 1992 book and by Saller in articles of 1986 and 1987—can be effectively used to reveal unsuspected social facts about the life-cycle of families that help put the legal rules in more realistic perspective.

Generational difficulties are not the only ones in a family, and Dixon extends the areas of possible conflict. She draws on modern theoretical perspectives, including Marxism and feminism, to show that conflict of various kinds is to be expected in family dynamics. She shows also, however, how families unite against external threats to provide material and emotional support. There is thus tension between competition and solidarity. She discusses various ways of mediating this: it is notable that the powers of the paterfamilias do not figure largely here.

Roman funerary evidence, especially that of epitaphs, has long been a rich source for sub-elite family history. Sigismund Nielsen takes such studies further by considering each of a large number of epitaphs as a whole, with all their interrelating data about age, gender, status, relationships, and epithets. She shows that there is more discrimination in a dedicator’s choice of epithets than previously supposed and provides another tool for differentiating different relationships. Rawson and Huskinson focus on the figurative representations associated largely with funerary commemoration. Iconographic material has great potential value for family studies. It was the foundation of Ariès’ seminal 1960 study, but has not been extensively exploited for the Roman family. Its interpretation is sometimes difficult, and two perspectives are presented in Chapter 9. This chapter reveals increasing attention paid to children, and points to the role of children in Roman families as a subject of future research.

Gallivan and Wilkins take up the funerary inscriptions of Italy more comprehensively and systematically than any previous study, giving first-fruits of a major research project. When their database becomes available to other scholars it will allow a variety of analyses of the copious data. Their own pioneering work, though necessarily tentative on some points, is suggestive, offering new light on family formation, bonds, and sentiment and revealing signs of notable
regional differentiation. The regionality of Italy has long been recognized in political and economic spheres, but this phenomenon can now be extended to the world of sentiment and personal interrelations. It goes beyond ‘family’ matters to the structure of Roman Italian society more generally.

The three final chapters move us from place to space, using archaeological evidence—especially architecture—to try to reconstruct patterns of domestic activity. This builds on the work of Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, including his contribution to the previous volume, *Marriage, Divorce, and Children in Ancient Rome*. They warn against populating the Roman house with twentieth-century people and activities. It is no coincidence that these three are younger scholars: they use new evidence and new approaches to take the study of the family in new directions. They do not, however, discard the solid body of literary evidence which has long been known: they use it extensively and critically but do not let it dominate or distort what the material evidence might tell us. They try to discover what relationships there might be between the two bodies of evidence. It is encouraging that each of these authors (Nevett, George, Allison) has been supported by post-doctoral research fellowships or grants by peak bodies in their respective countries (from the British Academy, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and the Australian Research Council). The final chapter takes up one of the points of the first: our responsibility to other disciplines to guide them into drawing appropriate conclusions from the evidence.

‘Space’ will be one aspect of future Roman family studies offering further challenges and opportunities. The question of regional differentiation has been opened up in this volume and can gradually be extended to other areas of the Roman empire, offering new insights into Romanization and acculturation. Further interaction between classical studies and studies of early Christianity will provide the opportunity to look at the intersection of Roman, Greek, and Near-Eastern cultural traditions. This should illuminate the role of religion and cult in the lives of families and their societies.

Any regional extension in future Roman family studies is bound to reveal much greater diversity than suggested here for Roman Italy. It will raise difficult questions of definition, and perhaps a reformulation of our opening questions above about the nature of ‘the Roman family’. The nature of the evidence will probably require a different perspective, integrating ‘the family’ more closely with other cultural evidence.