

The Romans cared a great deal about their ancestors, especially their direct male ancestors (the maiores) who were related by blood and immediate descent. These close blood relatives were one's agnates, and were much more important than one's cognates, or relatives by marriage. Most Canadians, however, have little knowledge of their ancestors unless the services of a genealogist are employed or an amply filled out old family Bible exists. Even the English language fails us when we attempt to find words for distant relations: consider how ungainly and awkward is the term great-great-great-great grandfather. Yet in Latin the simple word tritavus fills the need with economy for such a remote forefather.

Roman family organization, especially in the Republic, fell under the control of the senior surviving male of a direct line of descendents. If, for example, we could extend the life of a Roman male to 150 years of age and call him Tritavus, then this man would have legal mastery over his son, the Atavus (125 years), his grandson, the Abavus (100 years), his great grandson, the Proavus (75 years), his great, great grandson, the Avus (50 years), his great, great, great grandson, the Pater (25 years), and finally his 5-year-old great, great, great, great grandson! In fact, old Tritavus had utter control over scores of people under him, not only the sons and daughters of his sons and daughters, but also his own wife and all the family's wives and children. Indeed, in the earliest form of Roman marriage women were brought under the hand (manus) of their husbands and legally took the position of daughters (in loco filiae).

According to Roman law one was either independent (sui iuris) or under someone else's power (alieni iuris). The senior male and head of the family was in earliest times the only man in the family who was sui iuris, all others being under his authority. This leading man was called the paterfamilias (father of the family). As such, at least in the Republic, the pater had certain rights: 1) the ius vitae necisque, the right of life and death over offspring; 2) the right to sell them into slavery; 3) the right to arrange without their consent their marriages and divorces; and 4) the ownership and control of almost all their property. In brief, the children (and their wives) of the pater stood nearly in the same light as slaves.

It was possible for a pater to free his son from his power by a fictitious sale in which the pater pretended to sell the son three times across the river Tiber (an early practice which must once have happened in reality). A freed son automatically became a pater himself with power over his own dependents. The death of a paterfamilias also served to free all the males of the next immediate generation. Even women, in time, began to break away from the pater's control by employing new forms of marriage in which, by staying away from their husbands three nights in succession in a year, they avoided coming under his hand and were not reduced to the status of daughters. They were, in that case, still under the control (theoretically, at least) of their own fathers.

Roman fathers who could order the death of a child tended to be curbed by the late Republic when a family council was usually called before the execution of a wayward son could be carried out. In the Empire, most of the ancient powers of the pater tended to disappear, though they were not formally ruled out until the 4th Century A.D. There have existed few societies in the history of the world where so much authority was vested in the family head. In ancient Rome, it mattered little whether "father knew best" or not, for father was lord and master of his tiny kingdom, and his will was law.