

The essential importance and the centrality of the family to both the Greeks and the Romans is easy to demonstrate. In many ways, however, what we tend to think of in contemporary terms when we hear the word 'family' is very different from the ancient concept. Who is in your family? Your parents, your brothers and sisters? For a few of us, a grandmother or father as well, generally when she or he lives in the same house. Cousins, aunts, uncles are more often seen as 'relatives'; 'in-laws' are a well-recognized group of people to a lot of us; even parents and siblings seem to slip out of the 'family' easily enough when we in turn marry and have children.

To a Greek or Roman, the concept of 'family' was a much larger one. It included all the relatives by blood as far as second cousins or even further in some cases as well as all the women who married into the family. So you would regard your brother's wife, for example, as a family member (though not, if you were a man, your mother-in-law or your married daughter who would be part of their husbands' families, nor your wife's unmarried sisters still in their father's family). In addition, the family included not only the three or four generations who might be alive at the same time, but the ancestors, many long dead, who stretched in as nearly unbroken a line as the family could maintain it, back to an often very far distant, even legendary forefather. On rare occasions, when the supernatural was involved, even a foremother might be remembered, as Julius Caesar or Augustus looked back to the goddess Venus herself! Even the unborn generations to come were in a sense part of the family, so that in some ancient communities it

was unlawful for a man to sell his family's land or will it away outside the family line. An Athenian who was unlucky enough to leave only a daughter to inherit his property would expect her guardian after his death (usually himself a close male relative) to marry the girl off to her paternal uncle or, failing that, another male relative on her father's side.

Adoption was often resorted to as an alternative to childlessness as well. As a rule, a well-grown teenager or young man would be selected, a blood relative if possible, but if not, an appropriate friend's son, perhaps. In such a case, full transfer of the property was sometimes only possible when the adopted son had himself married and fathered a boy, to ensure that the family of the coming generations was not going to be cheated. A legal case from 4th-century Athens describes a case of adoption of one of his childless and therefore divorced wife's brothers by a man named Menekles. Isaeus, the legal speechwriter, says (Menekles 10) that Menekles "began to worry about his childless state. He was concerned about acquiring a son to look after him before his time came to die, to bury him when he died and to carry out all the customary rituals afterwards." The best known use of adoption in the Roman Empire is the emperors' habit of adopting an heir whenever their own childlessness made the succession doubtful. Augustus adopted Tiberius (his stepson), Claudius Nero (his niece's son), Trajan Hadrian (his ward), for example; many other adoptions took place at every level of Roman society from the imperial family down to the freedmen, whose tomb monuments often record their selection of sons to inherit

the family's ongoing responsibilities.

Perhaps the biggest difference from what we think of as family members were the slaves who formed part of almost every ancient household. Actually, the word 'household' is a better one to use in some ways for the cikos or the familia, since it is clear that the master, kurios or pater, was seen as the head of a household which naturally included property such as tools, animals and slaves as well as all female relatives not belonging through marriage to another household and all the underage sons (or little brothers) too. Roman families went a step further still, since the patres retained potestas even over adult and married sons, unless they chose to make them independent of their paternal power.

Life in these extended families must often have been secure and comfortable enough for the wives, children, widowed mothers, younger brothers and sisters, unmarried womenfolk, slaves

and pensioned-off dependents (typically old nurses) of a prosperous and kindly master. But equally often, the head of the household must have seemed authoritarian, domineering and even brutal to many of his dependents, who seldom would have had any real recourse against his cruelty and his sense of his own power. Greek women spent much of their time well secluded in the women's part of the house, which could be locked up to keep them safely indoors. Roman women seem to have had considerably greater personal freedom, at least after marriage. However, both were often seen as little more than the essential fabric of the ongoing family structure: the producers of citizen heirs, the links to be used in forging new family alliances for political or financial gain, the desirable piece of property through whom the family's land or wealth could be passed on if the male line failed, without much if any say in what they, as subordinates in the household, wanted.

On this Roman sarcophagus (stone coffin) is sculpted a family scene. Two four-wheeled carriages are bowling along, each containing a man and woman. In the one on the left a baby sits on his mother's lap. In the centre are two toddlers playing under a tree. One has a pet goose, the other a sort of scooter. Genre scenes like this one, of Roman domestic life, are quite commonly found on sarcophagi and tomb monuments.