

The Roman family: How big was it?

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In both ancient and modern times, the family is the basic social unit. However, family structure is not the same in all cultures – a problem that underlies debate about the size of the Roman family.

The modern Canadian family is known as a “nuclear” family: not because it is explosive, but because it consists of a nucleus comprising mother, father and children. However, a "family" reunion might include grandparents, in-laws, uncles, aunts and cousins; and we sometimes think of our pet cat or dog as a member of the family, and speak of property that is "in the family". Although the mother-father-children triad was important among the Romans, their word *familia* usually referred, not to this inner family, but to the entire household, including slaves and property.

It has been suggested that in Republican Rome, all generations of a family lived in the same house, under the complete legal and financial control of the *paterfamilias* (male head of the household). This is what we call an “extended” family. Thus, theoretically, even if you were a consul, you would live in your grandfather’s house, and could not go to the store to buy a candy bar without asking him for the money! But is this model correct?

Studies have shown that in 80% of tombstone inscriptions from Italy and the western provinces, the deceased person is commemorated by a spouse, parent, child, or sibling, and only rarely by a member of the extended family (grandparent, aunt, cousin, etc.) According to this evidence, the nuclear mother-father-child triad seems to be the usual family structure. Moreover, tomb relief sculptures depicting family groups emphasize the nuclear family as the norm. And it seems logical (to us at least) that a married couple would want to have their own home, even if they could only afford a cheap apartment, rather than living with parents and grandparents.

However, Roman literary sources provide examples of households that included elderly parents, or married children, or adult brothers living together; and census records from Roman Egypt often show three generations in a single household. The nuclear nature of tombstone inscriptions does not exclude the possibility that other relatives lived in the same house. If grandparents rarely appear in the inscriptions, this could be due to low life expectancy rather than a nuclear family structure. (Probably fewer than twenty percent of male Romans had a father alive, let alone a grandfather, by the time they were thirty.) Although not very numerous, tombstones mentioning grandchildren, mothers-in-law and even more distant relations remind us that, beyond the ties of affection in the immediate family, there was often interaction with a larger circle of kinfolk.

What can we learn about the size of Roman families from the size of their houses? In earliest Rome, the archaic wicker huts discovered on the Palatine hill were certainly not big enough to house an extended family. House plans from Pompeii and Herculaneum (both buried by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79) show a tremendous variety in house size. Approximately one-third of these houses are less than 100 square metres in area, another third are 100-300 square metres, and only one-tenth are larger than 600 square metres. While these figures do not tell us the density of population in each house, it is a reasonable assumption that the larger houses were intended to hold more people, though these could include slaves, lodgers and clients as well as blood relatives. The average number of inhabitants at Pompeii has been calculated at 7 or 8 per house. While this is much larger than the typical modern household, it must be remembered that the Roman *familia* included domestic slaves. Unfortunately, although bedrooms in excavated houses can sometimes be identified as such, the surviving evidence does not allow us to differentiate their occupants by age, gender or social status. It is not even possible to say whether slaves slept in separate areas of the house (at the back, for instance, or on a second storey), or in the same room as their master or mistress, where they

could easily be called if needed during the night. Of course, poorer families might not have any slaves at all.

In conclusion, it would appear that the number of persons living under one roof varied significantly from household to household. Some families were quite small, others very large. Thus, it is safest to avoid making sweeping generalizations about either the “nuclear” or the “extended” family being the norm in Roman society.