

# Roman Society

*The basic unit of Roman society was the family. The state was only an enlarged family in the early days, and its practices grew out of those first formed within the family group.*

When we think of a family, we understand it to be mother, father, and children. The Roman **familias** was broader than this. It included not only the parents and children but also the sons' wives and their families, the slaves, and the clients, whose position was hereditary. When a daughter married, she passed into the household of her husband.

The father, the **paterfamilias**, had complete authority over the members of his family, much as the magistrates had authority over the citizens. He could sell his wife into slavery or divorce her, if he chose. His new-born children were placed at his feet while he decided whether they should be exposed to die if weak, or raised. If they misbehaved, he could punish them with banishment, slavery, or even death.

The father's authority, however, was limited by custom. People frowned on a man who sold a married son into slavery or who exposed a son or first-born daughter to the animals in the hills surrounding the city of Rome. Before a **paterfamilias** could condemn his child to death, he had to submit his decision to a family council. The Roman matron [a matured, usually married woman] might have few legal rights, but she enjoyed enormous respect and prestige in the home and in society. Unlike the Athenian wife, she could leave her home to make visits and to attend the games, the theater, and the courts with her husband. In the streets, a path was cleared for her, and anyone who insulted her was deemed worthy of death. In society her position was honored, and in the home she was mistress as her husband was master.



In the early days of the Roman Republic, the main occupation of the citizen was farming or herding. **Cincinnatus**, you might recall, on receiving the summons to be **dictator**, was occupied in plowing his fields. There were no great inequalities of wealth; while no one was very rich, few were very poor. Each household was largely self-sufficient. The women made the clothes from flax or wool. For themselves they made the **stola** and the outer garment called the **pella**, and for the men they made the tunic and wrap-around **toga**. Utensils were made of wood and clay. Whatever else was needed was obtained by barter in the markets held every nine days.

Until the 4<sup>c</sup> B.C.E., the Romans did not use coins, but lumps of bronze. Gradually these lumps assumed fixed weights and were stamped with the figure of an ox or some other device. The use of bronze indicates that silver and gold were rare and precious, and the slowness of the Romans to adopt

coinage, which was used by the Hellenes in Naples, suggests a lack of interest in commerce!

Just as the institutions of the state grew out of those of the family, so the state religion was built on that of the family. Within the family group the father was honored as chief priest; his home was the temple, and his **hearth** was the altar. Family worship took place every day at meal times, when the father threw a little food and wine into the flames of the hearth as an offering to the gods. The chief gods were the guardian deities, the **Lares** and **Penates**. The

*Lares* protected the fields, and the *Penates* watched over the family stores. **Vesta**, the spirit of the hearth, and **Janus**, the guardian of the doorway, were other important household deities. The family ancestors were also honored. The ancestors were souls called the **manes**, or pure ones. The Roman family included not only the living members but these dead ancestral spirits as well.

The education of the children was in the hands of the family. A mother taught her daughter household management [domestic sciences], how to prepare food and cook, and how to make the clothes. A father instructed his sons in the practical necessities of life—reading, writing, and arithmetic, the Twelve Tables, and managing affairs. Beyond this he taught them the proper conduct, the qualities of **virtus** [virtue], **dignitas** [dignity], **gravitas** [seriousness], and the stern virtues of respect for custom, tradition, the gods, and authority. The Romans revered the laws and traditions and honored those in authority, whether the *paterfamilias* or the magistrates. The Roman boy learned how to obey before he grew up to command, and as an adult he was expected to bring to bear in his public conduct the same virtues he displayed in governing his household.

The Roman family was the mold in which the character of the Roman was formed, much as the *polis* formed the character of the Athenian. The Roman poet Virgil described it thus: *We carry our children to the streams and harden them in the bitter, icy water; as boys they spend wakeful nights over the chase and tire out the whirlwind; but in manhood, unwearied by toil and trained to poverty, they subdue the soil with their plows or shake towns in war.* Such training produced men who were tough, stern, and hard, consuming food and drink in moderation, of strong will, vigorous, and harsh. They were narrow in their outlook and slow to act, severe to those under their authority, but also strong in the noble virtues of dignity, courage, and bravery. They were willing to obey as well as to command, and they kept their word when they gave it. For such men the good of the state came above personal considerations, so they willingly left their homes and families when called upon to do so and endured sufferings and hardships without complaint. In their hearts the Romans believed that they were fit to rule their neighbors and that it was their destiny to do so.