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Roman funerary commemoration and the age at first marriage

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Abstract: This paper offers a critical assessment of the debate about the customary age at first marriage of men and women in Roman Italy and the western provinces of the early Roman empire. While literary sources point to early female and male marriage (around ages 12-15 and 18-20, respectively) in elite circles, the epigraphic record is mostly consistent with Saller's thesis that non-elite men did not normally marry until their late twenties. Shaw's thesis that non-elite women married in their late teens is plausible but remains difficult to test. Comparative data from late medieval Tuscany raise doubts about the applicability of these findings beyond urban environments.

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The Saller-Shaw hypothesis

In 1987, Richard Saller and Brent Shaw put the study of Roman age at first marriage on a new footing.¹ Drawing on large samples of Latin epitaphs from the western half of the empire, they interpreted age-specific shifts in the identity of commemorators as proxy evidence for changes in marital status: thus, the age at which spouses replaced parents as commemorators for young adults is taken to denote the usual age of marriage. In most epigraphic samples, these shifts occur around age 30 for deceased men and around age 20 for women. Saller and Shaw concluded that men and women had commonly married in their late twenties and their late teens, respectively, a pattern that broadly resembles the so-called ‘Mediterranean’ marriage pattern found in later periods of southern European history.² In 1994, Saller defended the underlying methodology against criticism, adduced new evidence (from the city of Rome) to strengthen the case for moderately early female and late male marriage, and provided a computer simulation of the age-specific likelihood of marriage that matches the observed shifts in commemorative identity.³

Direct evidence: elite practice and epigraphic records

In 2003, Lelis, Percy and Verstraete published a book-length study arguing that Roman women commonly married around age 15 and men around age 20.⁴ Most of their work is taken up by a detailed survey of the literary evidence for the marital practices among the top echelons of the Republican aristocracy and the imperial families of the Principate and the Later Roman Empire. These sources consistently point to early marriage by both men and women: the median age is 14 for women and 19 for men, matched by modal ages of 14 and 19/20, respectively.⁵ However, given the exceptional character of this group (with its emphasis on political alliances, dynastic considerations, and the absence or at least dramatic relaxation of material constraints), and comparative evidence for significant age differences in first marriage between top elites and the general population in other societies,⁶ supporting quantifiable evidence for commoners is a *conditio sine qua non* for any generalizations from these limited findings.

As has long been known, the relatively small number of epitaphs that record both the length of marriage (LOM) and age at death (AAD) provide the most straightforward evidence for the age of marriage of deceased Romans. In pre-Christian data, most female marriages appear to have contracted unions from ages 12 to 18, whereas the male ages are more widely scattered, with a modest peak at ages 19 and 20.⁷ The median ages are 15 for women and 23 for men, and the (weak) modes are 14 and 20, respectively. As can be seen in Figures 1 and 2, the pattern generated by these documents matches the distribution reconstructed from literary sources for elite practices.

¹ R. P. Saller, ‘Men’s age at marriage and its consequences for the Roman family’, *CPh* 82 (1987), 21-34; B. D. Shaw, ‘The age of Roman girls at marriage: some reconsiderations’, *JRS* 77 (1987), 30-46.

² See most recently P. P. Viazzo, ‘What’s so special about the Mediterranean? Thirty years of research on household and family in Italy’, *Continuity and Change* 18 (2003), 111-37, for a rich survey of the origins of this model (Hajnal, Laslett) and subsequent debates.

³ R. P. Saller, *Patriarchy, property and death in the Roman family* (Cambridge 1994), 25-41 (marriage age), 43-69 (simulation).

⁴ A. L. Lelis, W. A. Percy and B. C. Verstraete, *The age of marriage in ancient Rome* (Lewiston, Queenston and Lampeter 2003).

⁵ Op. cit. 15-20, 29-72, 91-101 (discussion), and esp. 103-125 (database).

⁶ E.g., Saller (1987), 30 n. 19 Cf. also Shaw (1987), 33.

⁷ M. K. Hopkins, ‘The age of Roman girls at marriage’, *Population Studies* 18 (1965), 309-27, esp. 318-26.

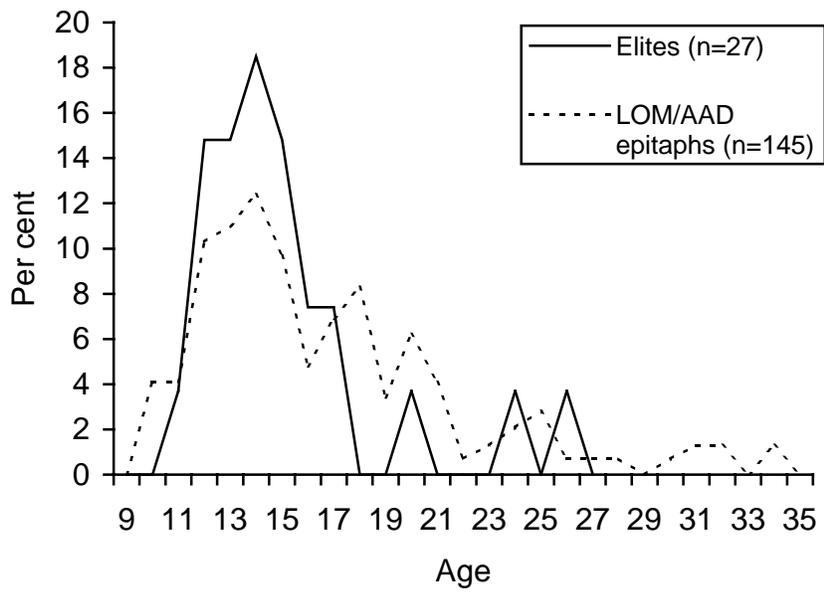


Fig. 1
 Female age of marriage in the Roman leadership and according to LOM/AAD epitaphs
 Source: Lelis, Percy and Verstraete (2003) 103; Hopkins (1965) 321

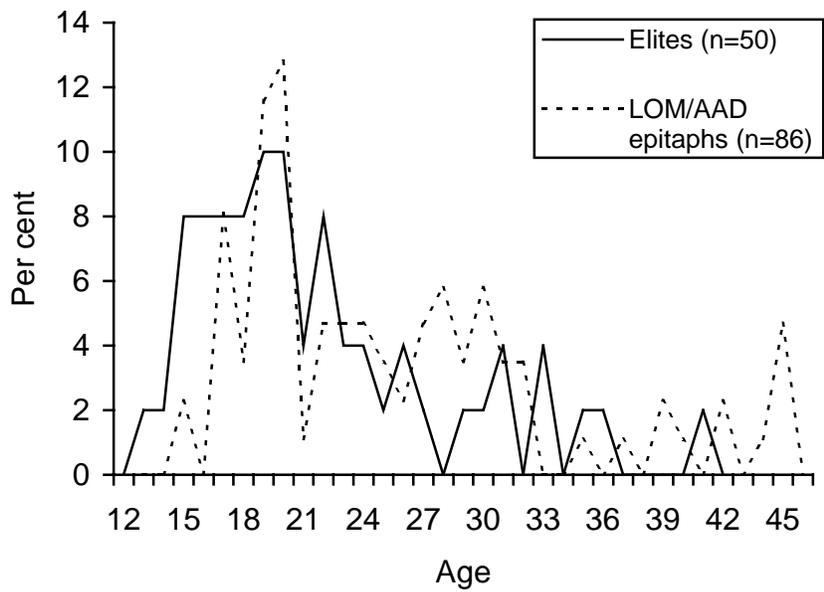


Fig. 2
 Male age of marriage in the Roman leadership and according to LOM/AAD epitaphs
 Source: see Fig. 1

This convergence can be read as evidence in support of the assumption that elite marriage patterns also extended into the general population,⁸ or as suggestive of the notion that individuals who recorded LOM as well as AAD represented a special group, either because they were dominated by (well-to-do) former slaves who may have emulated aristocratic customs in ways that were not common in the free population,⁹ or because LOM in conjunction with AAD was – for whatever reason – more likely to be recorded by individuals who had married unusually early. Either way, these patterns differ sharply from the age-specific distribution of marriage Saller and Shaw inferred from shifts in commemorative identity.

Indirect evidence: commemorative shifts and their causes

Lelis, Percy and Verstraete devote a whole chapter to this discrepancy, in which they argue that the relative frequency of spousal commemoration cannot be taken to be a function of marital status per se and was mediated by unrelated factors.¹⁰ In their opinion, as far as epitaphs for men are concerned, it was the presence or absence of a living *pater familias* that determined the identity of the (sole or principal) commemorator: if it was the father's responsibility to dedicate epitaphs for deceased sons, wives would only gradually take over as commemorators as fathers died off. This, they hold, would account for the commemorative shifts observed in the early thirties. This argument cannot be applied to the commemoration of wives, as it would logically require a concurrent shift in dedications for women. In their case, they maintain, the presence of living offspring was the critical variable: husbands would not normally dedicate epitaphs to young wives who had not already borne them a (surviving) child.¹¹ Taken together, these two factors would permit us to separate marital status from commemorative identity. For women, shifts in the latter would not occur until several years after marriage (if women customarily married in their early or mid-teens and successfully reproduced closer to age 20). The corresponding gap for men would be more substantial, around 10 or more years between marriage close to age 20 and commemorative shifts in the early thirties.

Both interpretations of the epigraphic evidence depend on *a priori* assumptions. We simply do not know if commemorative practices were habitually governed by marital status or by other factors such as *patria potestas* or successful reproduction. Saller and Shaw's attempt to infer the age-specific incidence of marriage from commemorative shifts rests on two unknowns: the determinants of commemorative identity, and the actual age of first marriage in various parts of the Roman empire. Their argument therefore inevitably entails circular reasoning, whereby the age of marriage is ascertained via commemorative shifts which are not independently known to be determined by marital status. At the same time, this approach has the benefit of being economical: only a single hypothesis is required to explain observed outcomes for both sexes. The new rival interpretation, on the other hand, not only suffers from the same reliance on unknowable assumptions about commemorative roles but is forced to advance two separate hypotheses to account for the distribution of dedications for men and for women. In brief, Lelis, Percy and Verstraete propose to replace a single unsubstantiated claim (i.e., that commemoration was determined by marriage) with two unsubstantiated claims (i.e., that fathers commemorated married sons and that husbands did not commonly commemorate childless teenage wives). Every one of these three assumptions is certainly possible and or perhaps even plausible but cannot be proven or refuted on the basis of actual evidence. In a case like this, our choice between rival explanations must be guided by considerations of goodness of fit. We need to assess which model, in all its logical implications, is better compatible with observed outcomes. In the absence of independent data, this is arguably the most promising way to judge competing plausibilities.

⁸ Thus Lelis, Percy and Verstraete (2003), 75.

⁹ Cf. Shaw (1987), 40-2.

¹⁰ Lelis, Percy and Verstraete (2003), 73-90.

¹¹ Op. cit. 83-7 (husbands), 87-8 (wives).

Testing the argument: Male marriage

Figures 3 and 4 show that with the exception of data samples from Theveste (in North Africa) and the south-western Iberian peninsula, the age-specific incidence of mens' commemoration by their wives consistently matches the incidence of marriage for men aged 10 to 40 predicted by Saller's computer simulation that reckons with a mean age of marriage of 30 for Roman men.¹² As can be seen in Figure 3, this fit is particularly close for the single largest data sample, from the city of Rome. The data from southern Italy produce a similar shape but with a five-year delay, which may suggest later male marriage, perhaps in keeping with Greek traditions in that region.¹³ Overall, these matches are clarified if we convert the raw data into bi-quinquennial moving averages that help smooth out random fluctuations caused by the small size of some of the datasets (especially from the provinces) (Fig. 4). The fact that Saller's projection for married status consistently exceeds the documented rates of spousal commemoration above age 40 is a function of his overly schematic assumption (for the sole purpose of creating the computer simulation) that *all* widowed men up to the age of 60 re-married,¹⁴ which is impossible to substantiate and may well not be true.

¹² Data from Saller (1994), 28-31, 52. The samples from outside the city of Rome exclude "those suspected to be of servile origin" (Saller (1987), 23). For discussion of the anomalous samples from Theveste and Spain, see id. (1994) 34-8.

¹³ Cf. Lelis, Percy and Verstraete (2003) 82.

¹⁴ Saller (1994), 46.

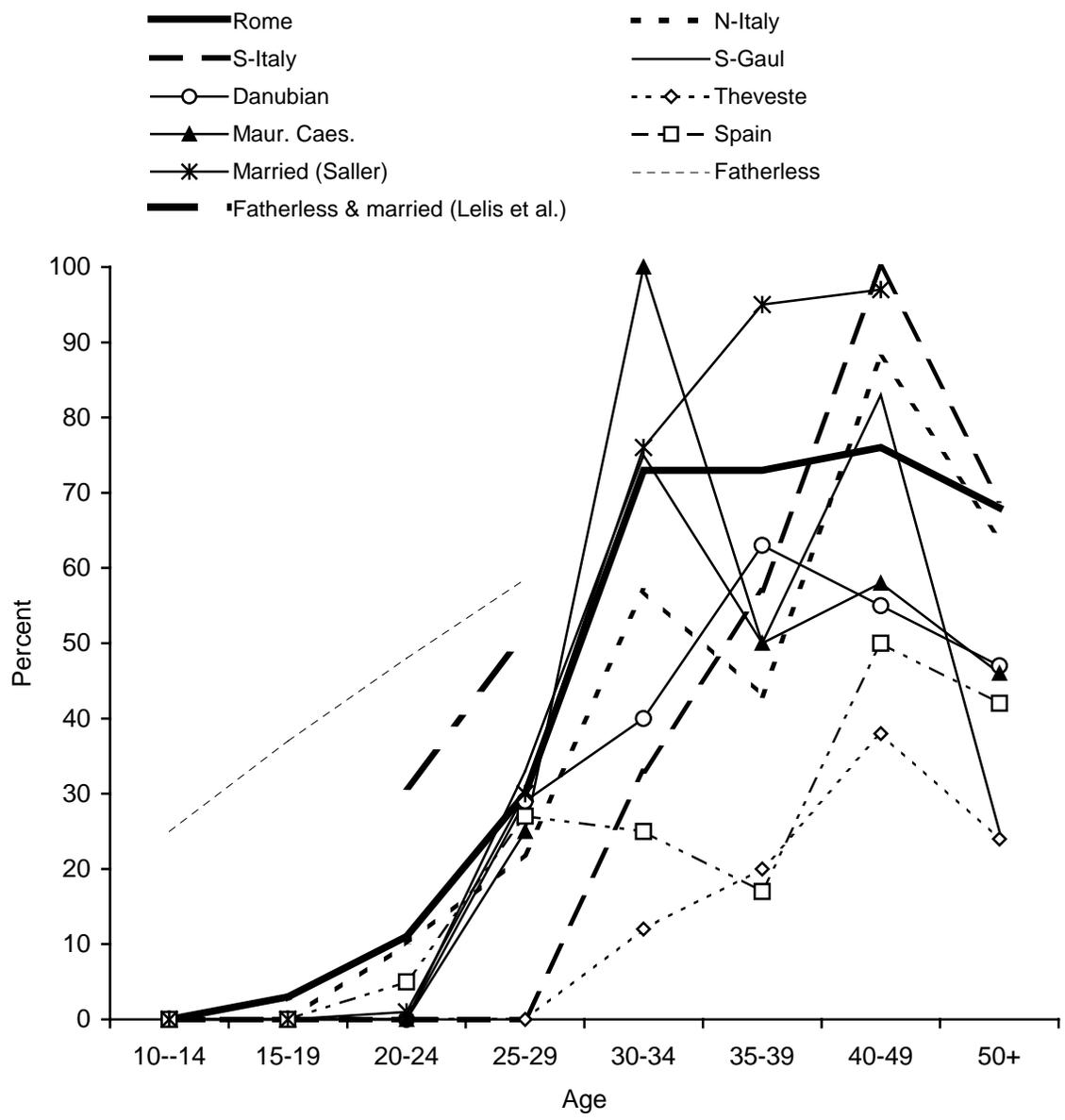


Fig. 3
 Men's commemoration by wives and select demographic predictions
 Source: Saller (1994), 28-31 (regional samples), 52 (predicted proportion of men with living wives and without living fathers)

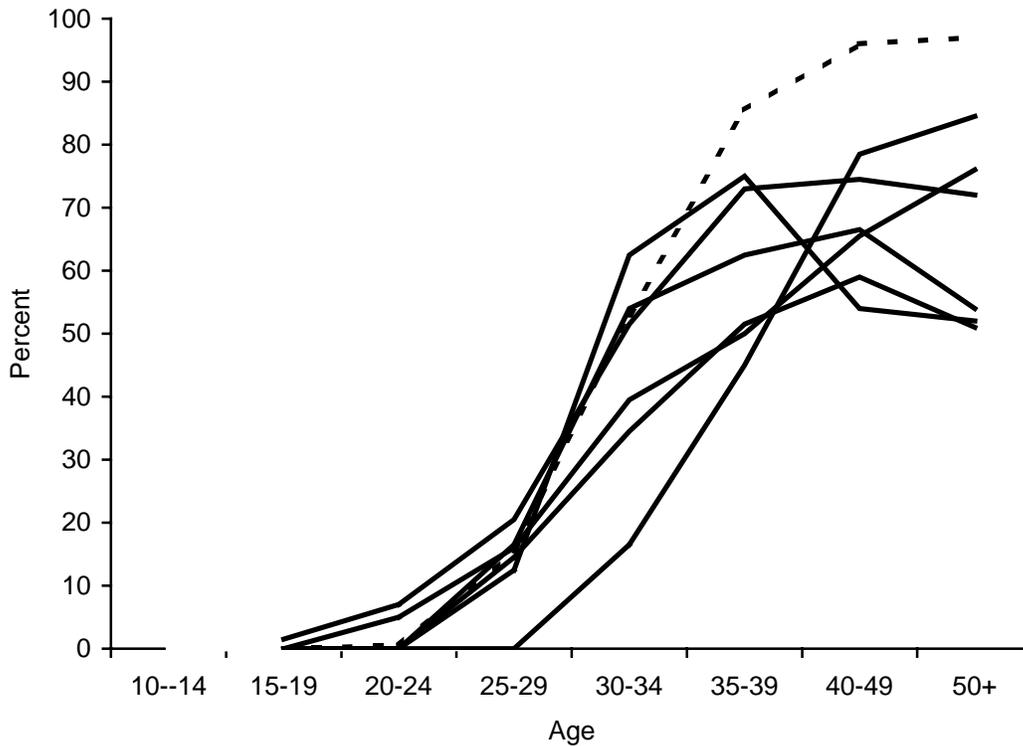


Fig. 4

Men's commemoration by wives (solid lines) and projected incidence of male marriage (dotted line): two-period moving averages

Source: Fig. 3 (excluding data from Theveste and Spain)

By contrast, these distribution patterns do not support the notion that the commemoration of deceased men by wives was significantly constrained by the presence of living fathers. This hypothesis cannot explain the steep increase in the relative frequency of spousal dedications between the late twenties and the early thirties: ageing males (i.e., fathers of married men) can be expected to have died at fairly steady and moderate rates but not all of a sudden and in droves whenever their married sons happened to turn 30.¹⁵ More importantly, the observed dearth of spousal commemoration for men in their

¹⁵ This basic principle can be illustrated by the observation that in a male stationary model population with a mean life expectancy at birth of close to 25 years, of all men who die between ages 45 and 75, 35.8% die between ages 45 and 55, 35.6% from ages 55 and 65, and 29.6% from ages 65 to 75 (Model West Level 4 Males in A. J. Coale and P. Demeny, *Regional model life tables and stable populations* (2nd ed. New York 1983), 43). While model life tables are flawed (W. Scheidel, 'Roman life expectancy: evidence and models', *JRS* 91 (2001), 1-26), a sudden mortality surge in these age groups (as required by Lelis *et al.*) is utterly improbable. We must allow for the possibility that Saller's method of grouping the age-data somewhat exaggerates the extent of the increase in spousal commemoration between the late twenties and the early thirties. Since age-rounding to age 30 is very common in Latin inscriptions (and some individuals recorded as deceased at that age may have been only 28 or 29 years old), the inclusion of those ages in the preceding age bracket (i.e., 26-30, 31-35, etc, instead of 25-29, 30-34, etc) might increase the presence of wives as commemorators in the 26-30 year bracket, but only *if* the records for age 30 already contained a higher percentage of spousal commemorations. However, schematic calculations suggest that

late teens and throughout their twenties cannot satisfactorily be explained with reference to the existence and consequent intervention of living fathers. Saller's simulations suggest that a large proportion of young men had no living fathers, from 37% at age 15 to 72% at age 30.¹⁶ Even if we adjust these figures based on the notion that men married 10 years earlier than suggested by Saller, and that the mean age of paternity was correspondingly lower, these values change very little, by just a few percentage points. Lelis, Percy and Verstraete's notion of a typical age of first marriage of approximately 20 years for men logically implies that at least half of all men aged 20-24 were married. Saller's simulation, based on a mean age of 30 years, suggests that 75% of all men aged 30-34 were married: if we shift that mean back by a full decade (so as to simulate the effects of mean marriage at age 20), 75% of men aged 20-24 ought to have been married instead. The data for Roman elites and from the LOM/AAD epitaphs summarized above are compatible with either one of these scenarios. Close to 50% of men aged 20-24 would not have had a living father even if we accept that the paternal generation had married early (i.e., at 20 rather than 30). Therefore, between 25 and 38% of all men aged 20-24 had to be both married and fatherless, and can be expected to have been commemorated by their wives if they died at those ages. The actual rate of spousal commemoration in this age bracket, however, ranges from 0 to 11%. 5 out of 8 regional samples contain no such dedications at all; the remaining rates are 5% in Spain, 10% in northern Italy, and 11% in Rome itself. In view of this, even if all married men with living fathers who received epitaphs had been commemorated by them instead of by their wives (surely an extreme assumption, given Roman levels of geographical mobility, especially in urban contexts¹⁷), the new '*pater familias* hypothesis' fails to account for the almost complete lack of spousal dedications in this age group.

Much the same is true of men aged 25-29. The notion of a typical male marriage age of 20 requires us to assume that at least three-quarters of all men in that bracket had to be married. Saller's simulation predicts 95% for men aged 35-39, based on a mean marriage age of 30, which may again be applied to 25-29 year-old men who had married at 20. At the same time, close to 60% of these men had already lost their fathers, which means that between 45 and 57% of men aged 25-29 were fatherless as well as married. Yet again, only between 0 and 33% of such men were commemorated by their wives: the median is 28%, and the rates for Rome and northern Italy are 30 and 22%, respectively. This conspicuous discrepancy is inexplicable if we expect wives to have replaced fathers as commemorators.

The '*pater familias* hypothesis' does not explain why a large percentage of putatively married men without living fathers – in fact the vast majority of such men at ages 20-24 and around one-half of them at ages 25-29 – were not commemorated by their wives. If one wished to speculate that the birth family continued to interfere even after the death of the father (thereby sidelining existing wives), it would be impossible to explain why their interest should have ceased so suddenly around age 30 instead of slowly petering out over time. In this respect, the data from Theveste and Spain seem to offer a real-life counterfactual, in the sense that they are indeed compatible with the notion of life-long involvement of the birth family.¹⁸ Their peculiar characteristics merely underscore the impression that in most areas, and most notably in Italy proper, this was not normally the case. As far as the geographical core of Roman society and the majority of provincial samples are concerned, Saller's hypothesis that changes in commemorative patterns are correlated with – and therefore causally related to – concurrent changes in the incidence of marriage remains the most economical interpretation that is consistent with demographic predictions. Few men aged 20-29 were commemorated by wives because few of them were married.

this effect, if it could in fact be observed, would not have a great impact on the overall shape the shift in commemorative identity. Saller (1987), 24 fails to appreciate this issue.

¹⁶ Saller (1994) 52.

¹⁷ Cf. W. Scheidel, 'Human mobility in Roman Italy, I: the free population', *JRS* 94 (2004), 1-26.

¹⁸ See above, Fig. 3, and n. 12.

Testing the argument: Female marriage

The nature of the evidence prevents us from assessing the relative plausibility of the two rival explanations for the observed pattern of spousal commemoration of wives in the same way as for husbands. Attested frequencies of dedications by husbands for wives by and large match the incidence of marriage for Roman women predicted by Saller's computer simulation (Fig. 5).¹⁹ Once again, the data from southern Italy lag five years behind (which cannot be explained as a result of Greek influence) but otherwise mirror the conventional shape of the distribution, while the Iberian material exhibits the familiar pattern of limited spousal commemoration across all age groups. At the same time, however, the bulk of the data similarly fit the predicted age-specific incidence of women with living offspring, regardless of whether we accept Saller's simulation (which is based on a mean marriage age of 20) or whether we raise the incidence of maternity for women over age 15 to account for the possibility that they married earlier.²⁰ In Figure 5, for ages 15-24, most observed rates of husbands' dedications for their wives fall within a narrow range bounded by the curves that are generated by the rival hypotheses. As a result, it is statistically impossible to decide whether married status or the presence of living offspring are more closely correlated with spousal commemoration.

¹⁹ Saller (1994), 28-31 (data), 49 (simulation).

²⁰ *Op. cit.* 49. The 'adjusted' proportion of women with living offspring shifts Saller's simulation five years to the left in order to simulate the effect of mean female marriage at 15 instead of 20. This schematic correction necessarily overestimates actual fertility at ages 15-19 as relatively few women in this range would have been endowed with surviving children even if they had married early: see below, n. 29.

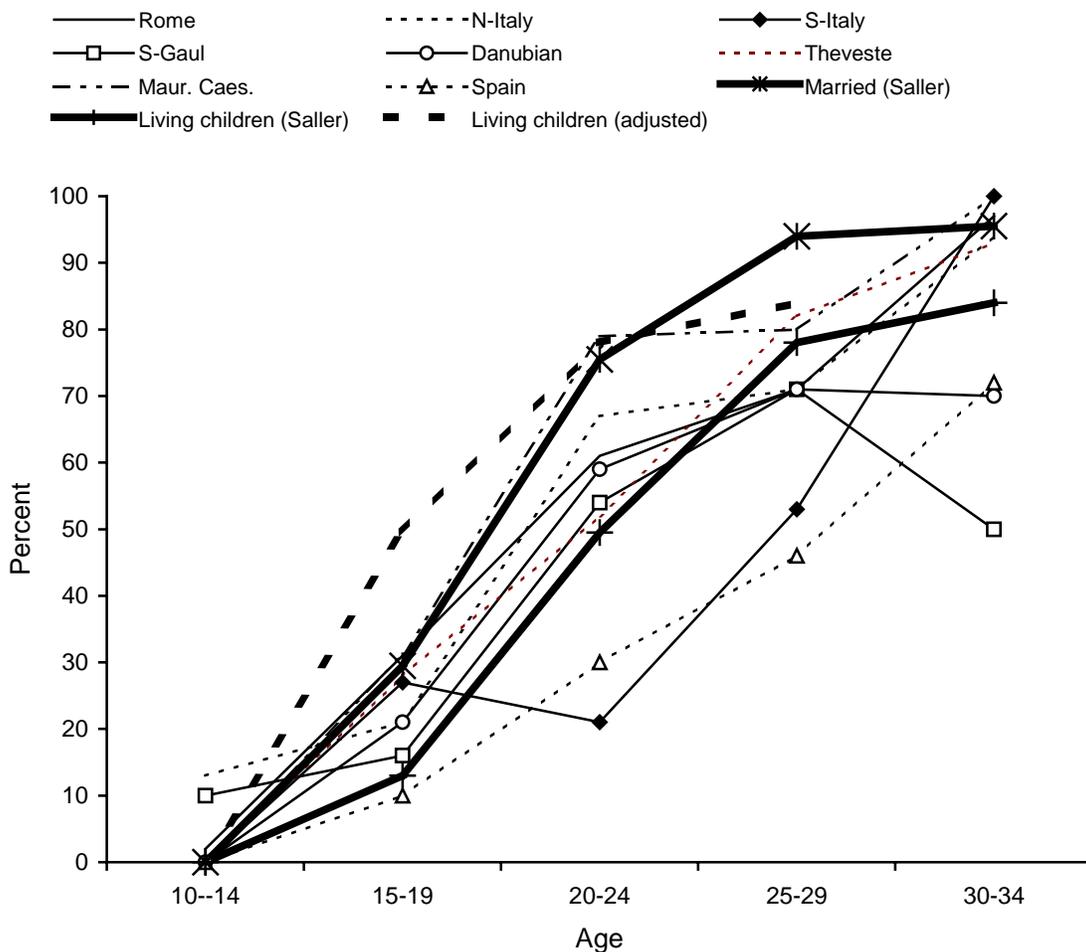


Fig. 5

Women's commemoration by husbands and select demographic predictions

Source: Saller (1994), 28-31 (regional samples), 49 (proportion of women with living husbands and with living children; see also note 20)

It seems pointless to try to distinguish between a scenario in which women mostly marry between 18 and 20 and spousal commemoration therefore greatly increases at those ages, and one where women marry between 12 and 15 but frequently fail to produce surviving offspring (and thus causing spousal commemoration to commence) until closer to age 20: both cases may produce identical commemorative patterns. All we can say is that since married status can be shown to be the most plausible determinant of spousal commemoration for deceased men, the most economical solution would be to accept the same explanation for women. Nevertheless, Occam's Razor is hardly infallible, and the evidence remains insufficient to make a strong case for the Saller-Shaw hypothesis regarding the female age of marriage.

Further problems

In their discussion of commemorative patterns, Lelis, Percy and Verstraete advance a number of criticisms against the Saller-Shaw approach. For instance, they argue that because we can observe that parents were more likely to record age at death when they commemorated sons whereas wives far less

frequently did so when commemorating husbands, it is misleading to compare the incidence of these two types of dedications as if they could be put on an equal footing since this entails “a comparison of the likeliest potential AAD-using commemorators (parents of sons) with the most unlikely ones (wives of husbands)”²¹ which would give an exaggerated impression of the relative importance of parental commemorations at ages when many men still had living parents by overshadowing existing spousal dedications without age records, thereby falsely implying that most young men were still unmarried. This argument does not account for the sudden jump in spousal commemorations for men around age 30, given that we cannot assume that parents usually dropped dead when their sons reached that age and it is hard to imagine that wives, collectively, suddenly developed a strong interest in their spouses’ age once these men turned 30.²²

They also criticize Saller and Shaw for excluding epitaphs that record length of marriage as well as age at death (LOM/AAD) – and imply earlier marriage for both sexes (see above, Figs. 1-2) – from their surveys;²³ but in doing so they fail to raise a more serious point. Shaw’s hypothesis that these epitaphs are unrepresentative due to the servile background of many of the recorded individuals is difficult to reconcile with the fact that dedications from the city of Rome, which are heavily weighted in favor of ex-slaves, display much the same age-specific commemorative shifts as regional samples that exclude members of that group. If early marriage had been causally connected to servile origin per se, and if commemorative practices (for adults) are principally determined by marital status, the metropolitan data that include numerous freedpersons should imply (by way of the timing of commemorative shifts) a lower marriage age than samples without ex-slaves. As Saller himself observes, this is not the case.²⁴ There are two ways to explain this outcome: commemorative shifts may not reflect changes in marital status after all; or LOM/AAD inscriptions are unusual and demographically atypical not because they were often set up by ex-slaves but rather because of their format per se. The former solution is inconsistent with my test for male marriage, whereas the latter logically requires us to assume that commemorators predominantly chose to record LOM in conjunction with AAD if the deceased had formed a marriage at an uncommonly early age, perhaps because they wanted to advertise the fact that their union had already lasted longer than the age at death alone might otherwise suggest. Given the overall rarity of LOM/AAD commemorations (relative to both AAD and LOM epitaphs),²⁵ they may well owe their existence to uncommon circumstances. Nonetheless, it deserves attention that the challenge posed by the evidence of LOM/AAD monuments – while by no means insurmountable – necessitates the addition of a secondary and seemingly untestable hypothesis to the Saller-Shaw reading of commemorative shifts as proxy evidence for marriage patterns, thereby diminishing the elegant simplicity of their approach and leaving some room for continuing scepticism.

Lelis, Percy and Verstraete’s sweeping claim that high levels of mortality in the Roman world somehow compelled men and women to marry early to maintain the population is invalidated by comparative evidence.²⁶ There is no good reason to believe that ancient Greece, where women appear to have married in their teens while men deferred marriage until age 30 or so, experienced significantly higher life expectancy. More importantly, the census returns from Roman Egypt (an area of very high mortality) suggest a median age of first marriage of 18 years for women, closer to Saller and Shaw’s reading of the Roman data than to that of their challengers, and indicate that – while men often married in

²¹ Lelis, Percy and Verstraete (2003), 79-80.

²² *Contra op. cit.* 79-80. See already Saller (1987), 28.

²³ Lelis, Percy and Verstraete (2003), 80-1.

²⁴ Saller (1994), 27 n. 53 notes his earlier “expectation that the heavy proportion of ex-slaves in the epigraphic record [scil. in the city of Rome] would result in atypical patterns of marriage, but in fact the Roman pattern is quite similar to those found in northern Italy, southern Gaul, and elsewhere”. Cf. above, n. 9.

²⁵ Cf. Shaw (1987), 46 tab. 5; id., “With whom I lived’: measuring Roman marriage’, *AncSoc* 32 (2002), 195-242, esp. 223 (LOM); Saller (1994), 28-31 (AAD epitaphs with identifiable commemorators). AAD epitaphs in general number in the tens of thousands.

²⁶ Lelis, Percy and Verstraete (2003), 100, and cf. 23-8.

their early twenties – no more than 60% of adult men up to age 40 were married.²⁷ In parts of medieval and early modern Europe where life expectancy did not rise much – if at all – above Roman levels, women married around ages 20 or even 25 and men closer to age 30.²⁸ In aggressive disease environments and the high-attrition demographic regimes they create, fecundability in the late teens is necessarily relatively low,²⁹ and habitual teenage marriage for women would not necessarily have had a great impact on overall fertility rates. Late marriage does not excessively constrain marital fertility as long as most women eventually marry.

Finally, we must face up to a much more serious problem that neither Saller and Shaw nor Lelis, Percy and Verstraete address at all:³⁰ the representative nature of the available evidence. Even if we accept that commemorative shifts broadly reflect marriage patterns, we cannot tell whether the implied practices of moderately early marriage for women and late marriage for men were common beyond the relatively small segment of the Roman imperial population that is visible in epigraphic documents.³¹

The Tuscan census of 1427 provides some disturbing data. In Florence itself, according to two different measures, grooms were on average 34.4 years old while their brides averaged from 17.6 to 20.8 years, whereas in small villages, the statistically average wedding featured a 23.4 old man and a woman aged either 17 or 19.3 years. Lesser cities and large villages occupied an intermediate position.³² While the female age of marriage was largely insensitive to location, men's age of marriage varied dramatically between urban and rural environments. If Tuscan marriage practices were only known from Roman-style epitaphs, we would be tempted to conclude that men commonly married in their thirties and that their wives tended to be about 15 years younger. Needless to say, this would give a completely misleading impression of the actual experience of the majority of the Tuscan population, with widespread male marriage in the early twenties and a much more modest age gap of around 5 years.

The possibility of major differences between urban and rural marriage customs raises serious questions about the general applicability of Saller and Shaw's reconstructions. To name only one particularly striking example, Nathan Rosenstein's argument that the widespread conscription of young peasants in second-century BC Italy need not have had dire consequences for their farms since most of

²⁷ R. S. Bagnall and B. W. Frier, *The demography of Roman Egypt* (Cambridge 1994), 111-7. For mortality, cf. W. Scheidel, *Death on the Nile: disease and the demography of Roman Egypt* (Leiden 2001), 1-180.

²⁸ E.g., K. A. Lynch, *Individuals, families, and communities in Europe, 1200-1800* (Cambridge 2003), 45 (c.20 for women and c.30 for men in medieval French cities). In France from 1740-1789, the mean marriage age was 25.7 for women and 27.9 for men (M. Livi Bacci, *The population of Europe* (Oxford and Malden 2000), 103), at a time when mean life expectancy at birth was 32 years (see the summary of recent research in R. Woods, 'Did Montaigne love his children? Demography and the hypothesis of parental indifference', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 33 (2003), 421-42, at 429). Women married just one year earlier around 1700, when mean life expectancy at birth was even lower, in the high 20s (ibid.). Cf. also J. E. Knodel, *Demographic behavior in the past* (Cambridge 1988), 59, 123, for a mean age of female marriage of 25-26 years in fourteen eighteenth-century Bavarian villages with an implied mean life expectancy at birth of 35-37 years. Roman levels of life expectancy are empirically unknown but were probably of a similar order of magnitude (allowing for considerable variation from the low 20s into the 30s): see W. Scheidel, 'Roman age structure: evidence and models', *JRS* 91 (2001), 1-26. Moreover, a difference in mean female marriage at c.20 (putative Roman) and at 25-26 (French/Bavarian) is very considerable in terms of reproductive potential, which suggests that even at somewhat lower rates of life expectancy, Roman populations, thanks to a significantly lower female marriage age, would not have risked demographic contraction.

²⁹ Estimates of the mean or median age of menarche in mid-nineteenth century Europe vary from 14.5 to 17.5 depending on class and region: J. W. Wood, *Dynamics of human reproduction* (New York 1994), 437. Median ages of 17 or 18 years have been reported for a number of deprived populations in developing countries (op. cit. 419).

³⁰ The only caveat is Saller (1987), 29: "the sparseness of the evidence (...) leaves open the possibility that there were areas unrepresented by inscriptions with different marriage patterns".

³¹ Saller (1987), 24 ("the published inscriptions come mainly from towns, leaving the countryside grossly underrepresented"); Shaw (1987), 33 (these data only pertain to "the urban-centred populations that engaged in the peculiar habit of setting up inscribed tombstones"), and again 43.

³² D. Herlihy and C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and their families: a study of the Florentine catasto of 1427* (New Haven and London, 1985), 203-11, esp. 210.

them would still have been unmarried during their years of service (in their late teens and early to mid-twenties) critically depends on the assumption that Saller and Shaw's reading of early imperial epitaphs sheds light on marriage practices in Republican Italy as a whole, which is certainly possible but not at all obvious.³³ Comparative evidence shows that even well before the Demographic Transition, the mean age of marriage could change considerably over time, from one century to the next, in response to the disease environment and economic opportunities.³⁴ We cannot rule out comparable developments in Roman Italy or the provinces;³⁵ and even in their absence, urban-rural differences could easily lead us astray.

Even so, it may be unwise to exaggerate the likely margins of error. The urban-rural gap in male age of marriage in late medieval Tuscany is certainly extreme, and no comparable cases appear to be similarly well documented.³⁶ Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber speculate that late male marriage in Florence was the result of differences in the functions of the family in towns and countryside: wives and children were more economically useful in rural settings, and the establishment of urban households required time-consuming capital accumulation.³⁷ Most of the inscriptions studied by Saller and Shaw were presumably produced on behalf of reasonably affluent and stable households that desired permanent commemoration and could afford the attendant outlay. Poor recent immigrants or marginalized transients – who may have had to delay marriage for economic reasons – would have been less likely to invest in these monuments. What we cannot ascertain is how male marriage in the more established urban population compared to practices among poorer city-dwellers or, more importantly, farmers. 'Respectable' urban residents and social risers of servile origin who embraced the 'epigraphic custom' *may* have delayed marriage longer than farmers if it took them greater efforts to obtain the resources necessary for neo-local marriage and household formation. It does not help that we are ignorant of the typical forms of household organization in the rural areas of the Roman West: even if commemorative practices are suggestive of a predominance of nuclear families, this observation is once again an artefact of mostly urban epigraphy.³⁸ Moreover, even if we could somehow determine the average level of complexity of a notional statistically typical 'Roman' ('Italian', 'imperial', ...) household, this would not automatically enable us to predict mean age of first marriage.³⁹

The census returns of Roman Egypt indicate that in the cities, both men and women married a few years later than in the villages, but this difference appears to have been far less dramatic than in late medieval Tuscany.⁴⁰ Students of Roman history who wish to generalize more widely from Saller and Shaw's interpretation of predominantly urban epitaphs can only hope – but not verify – that in this regard, Roman Italy or the western provinces resembled Roman Egypt more closely than late medieval Tuscany. In the epigraphically visible elements of the population of the western Roman empire, men commonly married relatively late, in their late twenties and in their thirties. While we are unable to judge whether women usually married in their early-to-mid teens or in their late teens, the latter hypothesis is more economical but otherwise hard to substantiate. More general claims about the marriage customs of Roman

³³ N. Rosenstein, *Rome at war: farms, families, and death in the Middle Republic* (Chapel Hill and London, 2004), 82.

³⁴ In Tuscany, for instance, the mean age at marriage for women rose from 14-18 in the late fourteenth century to 24-28 in the late eighteenth century, and from 21-27 to 26-32 years for men during the same period: Viazzo (2003), 124 fig. 1.

³⁵ The unusually dynamic environment of late Republican Italy is a prime candidate for such changes, even if they cannot actually be discerned in the evidence: cf. Scheidel (2004). We cannot be sure whether late Roman Christians married later than earlier generations (thus Hopkins (1965), 319-20, based on the limited evidence of LOM/AAD epitaphs) or whether this impression stems solely from changes in the social composition of the epigraphically visible population (thus Shaw (1987), 41-2), although the latter seems more plausible to me.

³⁶ Richard M. Smith (Cambridge), personal communication (September 27, 2005).

³⁷ Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber (1985), 221-2.

³⁸ R. P. Saller and B. D. Shaw, 'Tombstones and Roman family relations in the Principate: civilians, soldiers and slaves', *JRS* 74 (1984), 124-56.

³⁹ Cf. Viazzo (2003), 121-3.

⁴⁰ Bagnall and Frier (1994), 117-8.

imperial population as a whole should be advanced with the utmost caution, and with due consideration of the confounding variables revealed by comparative evidence from later periods. The demographic parameters of 'Roman' marriage, in the broadest sense of the term, remain exceedingly poorly known.⁴¹

⁴¹ I am grateful to William Percy and Richard Saller for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.