

The cities had public baths, accessible to everyone, and these promoted cleanliness and hygiene but could also be a way of spreading disease. Diseases like malaria and tuberculosis were indigenous in many areas; no one had knowledge of how they were spread. The use of lead piping to bring in the city water supply was common, with no one aware of the health hazards involved in the use of lead. Lacking knowledge of bacteria or how to kill them, people had no way except visual and olfactory inspection to know whether water was drinkable or not. Though there were famous medical schools in existence by this time and scholarly medical manuals being written, actual knowledge of diseases and how to prevent and treat them was very primitive. Generally, if the body could not heal itself of disease and illness, the person simply died. Illnesses like influenza, pneumonia, or appendicitis were surely fatal.<sup>4</sup>

Child mortality was extremely high. If one survived the first year or so, life expectancy rose considerably, but never beyond about forty years. By the time a child reached the age of ten, half of his or her birth cohort were dead. Few children grew to adulthood with both parents surviving. The customary age disparity at first marriage, in which the husband was as many as ten to fifteen years older than the bride, resulted years later in many marriageable widows. In times of war, the imbalance may have evened out as male mortality mounted. But even in times of peace, the high incidence of women's death in childbirth also contributed to balancing out the population. Probably more among the elites than ordinary people, girls were often married by the age of twelve and sometime pregnant even before their first menstruation. Early and constant childbearing took a terrible toll on their health.

The health of most inhabitants must have been rather miserable most of the time. With the possible exception of the pampered wealthy, people were old, with rotting teeth and poor eyesight, by about the age of thirty. Diseases associated with malnutrition must have been abundant, especially among the poorer segments of the population. A few survived into their seventies, eighties, and perhaps even nineties. Those who were still alive at these advanced ages, however, represented one percent or less of their birth cohort. Skill in counting years of age varied. Roman epitaphs sometimes record age at death not only by years, but by months and days. Yet in other cases, age is estimated or guessed at, sometimes with the approximation symbol  $\pm$ , "plus minus," "more or less."

Another factor to take into account when trying to get some sense of the world in which the first followers of Jesus lived is the level of violence and

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<sup>4</sup> See Alex Scobie (1986), "Slums, sanitation, and mortality in the Roman world", for further details on health and hygiene.

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overt sexuality to which they were constantly exposed. First of all, artistic representations in everything from official civic art to the paintings on the walls of private houses graphically portrayed violent scenes: battles between armies, fights between two individuals, gladiatorial shows, mythological battles and conflicts, mythological stories depicting torture, and animals fighting and devouring one another, the last usually a lion attacking a bull, deer, or other defenseless animal. These artistic representations must have created a level of desensitization that enabled the inhabitants to view the real thing. Public executions were carried out in the most brutal way possible, and public games featured varying forms of violent entertainment: animal against animal, animal against gladiator, gladiator against gladiator, and execution of criminals by animal attack and whatever other ingenious ways could be thought up, often the enactment of the same mythological stories of torture and death depicted in sculpture and painting.<sup>5</sup> In a culture in which the thirst for blood is mostly satisfied vicariously in competitive sports and artificial representation in film and television, it is very difficult to imagine what life was like when surrounded constantly by such a level of actual violence in public adornment and entertainment.

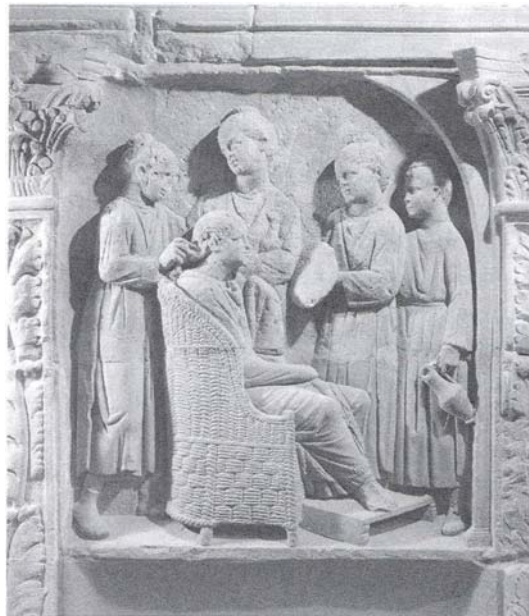


Fig 5 Four servants assist in a lady's toilet. Roman relief, second or third century CE. Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Trier, Germany.

Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf Donald G Kyle (1998), *Spectacles of death in ancient Rome*; (1998), "Fatal charades: Roman executions staged as mythological enactments".

Nor was violence limited to civic uses. Slavery was an institution maintained by the threat and use of violence. Slaves were punished by beatings, torture, and executions. Every slave knew the consequences of breaking the rules or of just being in the wrong place at the wrong time. For example, four hundred household slaves of Lucius Pedanius Secundus were executed under Nero, according to ancient custom, in spite of pleas for mercy both in the Senate and from the public. This was because their master had been murdered in his urban house; the assumption was that someone in the household was guilty and that if someone wanted to, he or she could have prevented it (Tacitus, *Annals* 14.42-45). This underlying violence maintained the social system. Those who benefited from it taught their children to perpetuate it.

The schoolmasters and tutors, afforded only by the wealthy elite, assumed that children were recalcitrant and must be forced to learn by threat of punishment, which the teacher did not hesitate to carry out when necessary. Boys were raised with strict rules and expectations to form them into strong and courageous men who could be self-disciplined and resist pain.<sup>6</sup> In Roman discussions of child rearing, severe corporal punishment of sons was considered bad form and discouraged, though some beating of male children was condoned. Yet a clear distinction was made between the loving discipline of a father for his son and the harsh discipline with which slaves were treated. Only under Christian influence did the difference recede somewhat. Along the lines of the Stoic argument that virtue is freedom and vice is the real slavery, later Christian authors like Lactantius and Augustine lessened the rhetorical difference between slaves and sons, the result of which was the principle that, since both sons and slaves are sinners saved by Christ, so both should be equally punished for their own good!<sup>7</sup>

Sexuality, too, was inescapable from an early age. Nudity in public art and sculpture was quite common, as it was in the garden sculpture and paintings that adorned the walls of houses and other places where children might see them.<sup>8</sup> The close quarters in which most poorer people lived made any kind of privacy impossible. Even in most well-to-do houses, young slaves attended their master or mistress for the most intimate of functions and activities. We would suspect that no one grew up innocent of sex, except the

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<sup>6</sup> The same idea is present in Jewish thinking about child raising; see John Pilch (1993), "Beat his ribs while he is young" (Sir 30:12): A window on the Mediterranean world".

<sup>7</sup> For example, Augustine, *City of God* 19.16. For the background of the discussion, see Richard P Saller (1994), *Patriarchy, property and death in the Roman family*, pp 144-50; Peter Garnsey (1999), "Sons, slaves – and Christians".

<sup>8</sup> Discussion and illustrations in John R Clarke (1998), *Looking at lovemaking: Constructions of sexuality in Roman Art 100 BC-AD 250*, especially chapters 6 and 7, pp 145-240. The dust jacket cover and plate 1 show part of the silver Warren cup, which portrays a young boy peeking around a door to watch two men having sex.

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daughters of wealthy families who were brought up in sufficiently spacious houses and deliberately shielded from public display to make them acceptable elite brides. But even in this case, there was still the household art.

An ancient Mediterranean history from below is not confined to the lives of independent poorer people. The advanced agrarian society of the first-century Roman Empire had no middle class as it is known today in capitalist societies, an independently wealthy middle sector of the society that is dominant in numbers. The majority were rather the peasants working the land and villages, along with the urban poor. There were certainly varying levels of poverty and wealth, however. In this noncapitalist, advanced agrarian society, prestige was not judged primarily by wealth but by status. Those who belonged to the underside of society did not have and would never have the status they envied in the small number of elites who possessed their high status from birth. They could observe these elites during public functions, and they must have been quite aware of how the entire social system was controlled by them and oriented to their opulent lifestyle. Others aimed to emulate them in whatever ways they could. There is evidence that some fortunate few who began in slavery could achieve a relatively comfortable and affluent way of life, though without the social recognition and access to public honors that they envied. Petronius's Trimalchio in his *Satyricon* set in first-century Rome, like Molière's *Bourgeois Gentilhomme* in seventeenth-century France, is the parody of someone, in this case a very wealthy freedman, who aspires to live as the elites live. As a result, he is brilliantly satirized and made to appear as a fool. While wildly exaggerated for the sake of satire, the figure of Trimalchio represents the elite's resentment for such people.

## **5. FAMILIES IN SOCIAL NETWORKS**

Many of what we would classify as lower-class people did not live independently of their social betters. Family systems included people of many social levels, so that the houses of the wealthy were also the residences and workplaces of slaves, freedmen and freedwomen, and others who were attached to wealthy houses for a variety of reasons. It is important to realize that the different social strata in first-century Mediterranean societies were not as segregated as they are in a modern industrial city.

Older ways of classifying members of Roman society were by the first century giving way to a new division between elites, or *honestiores*, and nonelites, or *tenuiores*. This twofold categorization was fully in place by the second century and was primarily a legal distinction that applied to legal penalties: *honestiores* would be exiled or decapitated, while *tenuiores* were subject to more degrading forms of execution, including crucifixion and execution in the amphitheatre. Nevertheless, this status-conscious society created distinctions of honor and status wherever it could.

## 5.1 Social status and slavery

Slavery remained an inhumane but widespread system in which slaves were totally vulnerable to the whims of owners. It is not possible to think of slaves together as a social class or even status. Their position derived solely from that of their owners. Imperial slaves and freedmen may have performed menial jobs but still carried imperial status. On the contrary, many imperial slaves and freedmen had responsible and sometimes powerful positions in which they had authority over high-status persons, with all the resentment that entailed. Paul's reference in Phlp 4:22 to believers in the household of Caesar is to persons of that group. Dale Martin (1990) has shown that being a slave was not necessarily degrading if one were the slave-agent of a high-status person, and even for a freeborn person to call oneself a slave of an important character, as Paul does, was not an act of humility but a claim to prestige.<sup>9</sup> By the time Christian thinking became the norm, the believer's status as slave of God and Christ were corollary claims to status.

Slaves belonged to the family, yet did not. Slaves and freed persons were usually buried with the natal family as dependents. They were present in Greco-Roman households for the morning ritual devotion to the household gods, and represented in household religious celebrations.<sup>10</sup> Yet their status in the household, their welfare, and their very existence depended on the goodwill of their owners. They could be bought, sold, punished, and, within some legal restraints, executed at will. We cannot forget the basic brutality of the system, in which human persons were deprived of a past and a future, unable to claim natal family or legitimate offspring, and answerable with their bodies in a brutally exploitative system that early Christians did little to alleviate.<sup>11</sup>

We will never know the numbers of slaves who were members of communities of Jesus-followers, but texts like 1 Cor 7:21-24; Gl 3:28; Paul's Letter to Philemon; Eph 6:5-9; Col 3:22-4:1; 1 Tm 6:1-2 and 1 Pt 2:18-25 indicate that their numbers were not few and that Christian communities continued to have slave members who were not freed by virtue of baptism. Slaves were members of the household who sometimes converted with the owning family, sometimes on their own, and sometimes not at all. Household slaves were sometimes trusted and sometimes seen as the strangers in the

<sup>9</sup> Dale Martin (1990), *Slavery as salvation: The metaphor of salvation in Pauline Christianity*.

<sup>10</sup> See Carolyn Osiek and David L Balch (1997), *Families in the New Testament world: Households and house churches*, pp 81-87.

<sup>11</sup> Orlando Patterson (1982), *Slavery as social death: A comparative study*; Jennifer A Glancy (2002), *Slavery in early Christianity*. For a wide perspective on ancient slavery, see Allen D Callahan, Richard A Horsley, and Abraham Smith (eds) 1998, *Slavery in text and interpretation*.

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house whose betrayal was not unreasonably feared, especially since slaves could only be interrogated by the authorities under torture and thus, understandably, were highly likely to give incriminating testimony, whether true or not.<sup>12</sup> In *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 6.1, it is a young male slave who, under torture, gives away Polycarp's hiding place.

Yet the stories that have come down to us also contain amazing accounts of slaves not only loyal to their owners but examples of strength and courage to all their companions. Blandina, a slave arrested with a group of Christians in Lugdunum in Gaul in 177, has a mistress also under arrest, who fears lest Blandina through weakness will not hold up under torture but recant. Instead, to everyone's amazement, Blandina turns out to be the most courageous and most enduring of all, the one who rallies the whole group, gives them courage, and is configured by the author of the account to Christ himself as she is hung on a stake (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.1.17-19, 40-42). A few years later in Carthage, North Africa, in 203, the slave Felicitas, also arrested with a group of catechumens, but with no mention of her owner (*pace* the frequent misconception that the highborn Perpetua is her mistress), is also a center of strength in the group, as she delivers her child in prison and prepares to die in the amphitheatre with the others.

Slave marriages and slave families existed *de facto* but with no legal acknowledgment, and they could be broken up at any time. The papyrus deeds of sale preserved from Egypt indicate that many slaves were minor children when sold. Many slave owners encouraged marital unions between slaves for the stability of the household and the increase of slaves. Perhaps Christian slave owners would have been less likely to separate slave families,<sup>13</sup> yet there is no evidence of this. Though their marriages were not legally recognized, there appears to have been some social recognition, for the burial evidence that remains of them often uses the terminology of legal marriages, terminology denied to them under the law.<sup>14</sup> Mixed marriages between slaves and freed, between slaves and freeborn, and between individuals of different clearly defined social levels existed everywhere – and were headaches for Roman legislators. We mostly know of the possibility and frequency of such marriages through their discussions. While the marriage of a free male with his female slave freed *matrimonii causa* (freed in order to marry him) was not unusual, marriage of a freeborn or even higher status woman with a slave or former slave was harshly condemned – but still

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<sup>12</sup> J Albert Harrill (2003), "The domestic enemy: A moral polarity of household slaves in early Christian apologies and martyrdoms".

<sup>13</sup> Suggested to me by Margaret MacDonald in conversation.

<sup>14</sup> Dale B Martin (2003), "Slave families and slaves in families".

practiced widely. Various penalties were intermittently applied, including reduction of the free woman to slavery by her husband's owner, a penalty enacted by the *Senatus Consultum Claudianum* under Claudius. Marriage of a free woman to her own slave was considered a particularly heinous role reversal between superior and inferior, incurring various social and legal penalties and culminating in the extreme of threatened capital punishment for such a woman in the fourth-century Christian legislation of Constantine.<sup>15</sup>

By the fourth century, Christians were still keeping slaves, as is attested from many sources. A testimony of somewhat equal treatment by this time is that they were sometimes singled out for religious leadership. Already in the early second century, Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia and Pontus, had reported in his famous account of Christian activity there that he had tortured two *ancillae* (female slaves) who bore the title of *ministrae* in their Christian community.<sup>16</sup> Scholars continue to debate whether this Latin title is the equivalent of "deacon", given to women both earlier (Phoebe in Rm 16:1) and later. Whether it is an equivalent, it must certainly be some kind of official leadership position.

The *Apostolic Canons* (*Apostolic Constitutions* 8.47.82) of the late fourth century specify that a slave is not to be ordained to the clergy without his master's or mistress's consent, because this would upset the household. But if the owner allows it, the slave must be manumitted and dismissed from the house and can then be ordained. Similarly, Gregory Nazianzen tells a lady to whom he is writing that she must manumit a slave who has been consecrated bishop against his will (*Epistle* 79)! Still in the middle of the sixth century, Justinian's legislation decrees that anyone chosen to be bishop must be manumitted from slavery (*Novellae* 123.4). All of this is confirmation of two things: slaves could become clergy, but there is still no question of Christians abandoning the institution of slavery.

## 5.2 Marriage

Marriage between followers of Jesus and others is already reflected in 1 Cor 7:12-16 and 1 Pt 3:1. Nothing is said there about disparity of status, but this problem is voiced later in Tertullian, *To his wife* 2.8.4, and Hippolytus, *Refutations* 9.12.24-25, because of both defiance of law and social disapproval. Tertullian notes that poverty and lowliness are not so bad for a wife to consider in her husband, in view of Christ's love of poverty. Hippolytus maintains "family values" by excoriating his rival Callistus for allowing upper-

<sup>15</sup> Evans-Grubbs, Judith (1993), "Marriage more shameful than adultery": Slave-mistress relationships, "mixed marriages," and late Roman law".

<sup>16</sup> Pliny, *Epistle* 10.96.8.

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class women to marry beneath themselves in order to find Christian husbands. Both situations reflect what we know from other sources. Christian communities, like Judean synagogues and some of the other unofficial cults, were very appealing to women, who often joined such groups independently of their husbands and families. Moreover, the Christian inversion of the social values of honor and status also led at least some Christian theorists to encourage such flaunting of custom, presumably for the sake of women's finding good marriage partners among believers.

Fully legal marriages in Roman law (*conubium, matrimonium iustum*) existed only between Roman citizens or Junian Latins (a category of former slaves freed informally or under the age of thirty, except a female for marriage). All other unions were concubinage (*contubernium, concubinatus*). It is important, however, to realize that the unfavorable connotations attached to terms like "concubinage" today did not apply. Concubinage was simply a marital union not fully recognized under the restrictive marriage legislation of Rome.<sup>17</sup> While perhaps a good number of believers in Jesus in colony cities like Philippi or Corinth may have been Roman citizens, probably the majority overall were not.<sup>18</sup> While the marriages of those who were not Roman citizens (certainly the vast majority in the early Empire) were recognized by local law and by community custom, they were not recognized in Roman law. By the early third century, Roman citizenship seems to have increased exponentially, so that by the time of Caracalla's declaration of universal citizenship in 212, the legal situation with regard to marriages would have changed.

### **5.3 Women**

All cultures and subcultures of the ancient Mediterranean world were publicly androcentric and patriarchal. At every level of society, men were publicly more powerful and considered superior to women. Yet this male dominance must be qualified in a number of ways. While women could not serve in elective office, there is intriguing evidence, especially from Asia Minor, of elite women holding certain civic offices. In the Roman world, status was always more important than gender; that is, higher social status always took preeminence over the sex of the persons involved. Thus in the highly developed system of patronage and benefaction, women were actively engaged at every level. They not only held property but ran businesses and exercised personal,

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<sup>17</sup> Beryl Rawson (1974), "Roman concubinage and other *de facto* marriages".

<sup>18</sup> A general consensus has been that, because Philippi was a Roman military colony, thus with a large number of Roman citizen inhabitants, most members of the Christian community there would have been Roman citizens. This consensus has recently been challenged by Peter S Oakes (2001), *Philippians: From people to Letter*, who argues that only the elites of the city were Roman citizens, and both the letter and the general pattern of first-generation members give no evidence of elite membership.