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Monogamy and polygyny

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Abstract: This paper discusses Greco-Roman practices of monogamy and polygyny for a forthcoming handbook on the ancient family.

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## 1. Why Greco-Roman Monogamy Matters

To a modern western audience, the fact that ancient Greeks and Romans were not supposed to be married to more than one person at any given time, nor even to cohabit with others alongside legal spouses, must seem perfectly ‘normal’. This may explain why this practice has received hardly any attention from historians of the classical world. Yet from a global, cross-cultural perspective, there is nothing ‘normal’ or unremarkable about this. Instead, until very recently, polygynous arrangements of marriage or cohabitation were the norm in world history, and strict monogamy remained an exception. Barely one in six of the 1,195 societies surveyed in the largest anthropological dataset have been classified as ‘monogamous’, while polygyny was frequently considered the preferred choice even if it failed to be common in practice (Gray (1998) 89-90, with Clark (1998)). Smaller samples of better documented societies convey a similar picture, and while ‘monogamy’ is observed in a small proportion of all cases (16-20% in samples of 348 and 862 systems: Murdock (1967); Burton et al. (1996)), due to their failure to distinguish between rare instances of polygamy and its formal prohibition these surveys tend to overestimate the actual incidence of strictly monogamous rules. In fact, although the nature of the evidence does not allow us to rule out the existence of strictly monogamous systems prior to the first millennium BCE, the earliest unequivocal documentation originates from the archaic Greek and early Roman periods. Thus, even though Greeks and Romans need not have been the first cultures to prescribe monogamy, these are the earliest securely attested cases and, moreover, established a paradigm for subsequent periods that eventually attained global dominance. In this sense, Greco-Roman monogamy may well be the single most important phenomenon of ancient history that has remained widely unrecognized. What is more, the global positive correlation between patricentric kinship systems and polygyny (Burton et al. (1996) 93-4) renders the emergence of prescriptive monogamy in the patricentric societies of Greece and Rome even more remarkable.

## 2. What Is Monogamy?

The term ‘monogamy’ is used in different ways, and it is important to define its meaning here. The most basic distinction is between formal – that is, legal – monogamy, in the sense of marriage to one spouse; social monogamy, in the sense of exclusive living arrangements; and genetic monogamy, in the sense of exclusive mating and reproductive commitments. This chapter is concerned with the first category, formal monogamy, and the ways in which it could be reconciled with effectively polygynous relationships in the social and sexual spheres. (I use ‘polygyny’ in a more general sense than ‘polygamy’, with the former denoting any kind of non-monogamous marital, social, or sexual arrangements and the latter limited to plural marriage.) Exclusive marital unions arise from either ecologically or socially imposed (or prescriptive) monogamy (Alexander *et al.* (1979) 418-9). Under ecologically imposed monogamy, polygamous arrangements may be acceptable in principle but are not feasible due to resource constraints that prevent potential polygamists from claiming or providing for multiple spouses. This scenario is common and indeed often the norm in many formally polygamous systems, to the extent that only a few privileged individuals (usually men) can afford to enter multiple marriages. Socially imposed monogamy, by contrast, prohibits multiple marital relationships even for the wealthy and powerful, including rulers.

In practice, prescriptive monogamy can take many forms: they range along a continuum from arrangements that continue to allow informal extra-marital cohabitation, sexual relations, and reproduction to stricter variants that seek to ban or penalize any concurrent extra-marital

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Forthcoming in Beryl Rawson, ed., *A Companion to Families in the Greek and Roman Worlds*.

relationships. Needless to say, monogamy never exists in pure form. What we can observe over millennia of world history is a trajectory from polygamous to formally monogamous but effectively often polygynous arrangements and on to more substantively and comprehensively monogynous conventions. As I have argued elsewhere and will again outline below, Greek and Roman societies occupy an intermediate and – retrospectively speaking – transitional position on this spectrum, one that might be labeled ‘polygynous monogamy’ (Scheidel (2009), (forthcoming)). Shunning multiple marriage and discouraging informal parallel cohabitation such as concubinage within marriage, their system readily accommodated multiple sexual relations for married men (though not for women), most notably through sexual access to slaves (of either sex).

### 3. Contexts

The rise of agrarian societies had varied consequences for mating and marriage practices. On the one hand, the global record shows that polygamy was particularly common in advanced horticultural systems in which women’s labor generated most resources whereas it occurred less frequently in more advanced, agrarian, societies (Nielsen (2004) 306). On the other hand, the increasing complexity and socio-economic stratification associated with agrarianism could at times push polygamy and more generally polygyny to unprecedented levels, especially at the top of the social pyramid. Early agrarian empires in particular were characterized by sometimes staggering levels of resource polygyny, featuring large harems attached to royal and aristocratic households (Betzig (1986), (1993)). Relevant cases are known from the ancient Near East (Pharaonic Egypt, Mesopotamia, Iran, and the Old Testament tradition), from India, South-East Asia, and China, from the Pre-Columbian Americas, and more recently from African kingdoms (Betzig (1986), (2005); Scheidel (2009)). While it is true that the most extravagant manifestations were confined to state rulers and ruling elites, in many cases polygamous arrangements were likewise feasible among commoners, albeit on a much reduced scale. Early examples from western Eurasia include second wives in the Old Babylonian, Middle Assyrian, and Sasanid Persian traditions (Scheidel (2009) 274-5, 278). The existence of polygamy among commoners in Egypt remains controversial but plausible (Simpson (1974) 104).

Early conditions in the heartlands of Greek and Roman culture are obscure. Owing to the lack of data, it is impossible to tell whether the Minoan and Mycenaean palaces were inhabited by polygamous or otherwise effectively polygynous elites. However, if analogies to the adjacent Near Eastern palace cultures are anything to go by, this may very well have been the case. What we do know is that polygynous arrangements were standard practice for Homeric heroes (Wickert-Micknat (1983); Gottschall (2008)). As Thersites complained, the Greek war leaders were allocated female captives for private enjoyment (e.g. Homer, *Iliad* 1.184-7, 9.128-9, 9.139-40, 9.664-8): ‘many women are in your huts, chosen spoils that we Achaeans give you first of all, whenever we take a citadel’ (*Iliad* 2.227-8). Polygyny, however, was not tantamount to formal polygamy: it was the enemy ruler, king Priam of Troy, who was endowed with three wives, while the Greek leaders merely kept consorts who would only yield illegitimate offspring. Later Greek preference for prescriptive monogamy may therefore already be foreshadowed in the epic tradition.

### 4. Greek Monogamy and Polygyny

In the historical period, Greeks were expected to marry monogamously. Only ‘barbarians’ did otherwise: as Euripides put it, ‘we count it as shame that over two wives one man hold wedlock’s

reins' (*Andromache* 215). Exclusive legitimate reproduction and physical co-residence were the defining characteristics of Greek monogamy. In classical Athens, in any case, only wives could bear legitimate children. This was the outcome of an earlier process of tightening rules that had enabled male citizens to have extra-marital children recognized as legitimate offspring (Lape (2002/3)). Once firmly in place, monogamous norms were only relaxed in times of serious crisis: near the end of the Peloponnesian War, massive male casualties justified a temporary exception that allowed men to father legitimate offspring with one woman other than their own wife (Ogden (1996) 72-5)). However, less democratic systems may have been more permissive: Aristotle's references to the enfranchisement of citizen-slave offspring in other *poleis* may be relevant here (*Politics* 3.1278a25-34, 6.1319b6-11).

Co-residence was the second critical variable. While congress with concubines (*pallakes*) was not illegal for married men, they were meant to keep such women physically separate from their main residences and hence their wives: to name just one counterexample, the contrast to the Chinese custom of incorporating lesser wives and concubines into the household is striking. Greater license was given outside the marital residence, a concession that must have favored the wealthy who could afford to support concubines in separate homes. At the same time, however, polygyny also intruded upon the monogamous household in the form of (male) sexual relations with domestic slaves. While considered vexing for wives, this habit, alluded to on the stage and in oratory (Scheidel (2009) 289), did not seem to carry particular stigma and was never formally penalized. Greek evidence of sexual relations with slave women extends into the Roman period with Plutarch's infamous advice to wives to accept their husbands' affairs with slave women because that way they were spared direct involvement in their husbands' 'debauchery' (*Moralia* 140b). Slave-like status invited similar behavior: for instance, scholars suspect that the numerous *nothoi* of Sparta were the illegitimate offspring of Spartan men with Helot women, and that they may even have been identical with the *mothakes* who were reared alongside legitimate Spartan sons (Ogden (1996) 217-24). As I argue below (Section 7), these practices may well have been a crucial factor that sustained formal monogamy and marks the transitional character of this institution.

Greek monogamy was geographically narrowly circumscribed. Not only were bigamy attributed to the Thracians and polygamy common in the ruling class of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, even the Hellenized Macedonian rulers and their associates took multiple wives (Ogden (1999), and above, Chapter 5). Greeks abroad, however, did not necessarily adopt more relaxed customs: marriage contracts from Ptolemaic Egypt prohibit concubinage for Greek husbands, not to mention polygamy. Prescriptive monogamy remained a defining feature of 'being Greek'.

## 5. Roman Monogamy and Polygyny

In the historical period, Roman rules envisioned monogamy in comparable terms. From a legal perspective, formal polygamy was impossible given that a new marriage would have voided an existing one. Modern scholars are divided over the question whether concubinage was feasible within (rather than as an alternative to) Roman marriage (Friedl (1996) 214-5). Our sources do not permit certainty until Justinian affirmed the illegal nature of concurrent concubinage in the sixth century CE, albeit as a putatively 'ancient law' (*Justinian Code* 7.15.3.2). The conventional expectation was certainly that concubinage would serve as an alternative rather than a supplement to marriage, and occasional allegations to contrary behavior need not have been more than slander (Friedl (1996) 218-20). The presence of parallel relationships among soldiers remains a possibility but the evidence is ambiguous (Friedl (1996) 256-7; Phang (2001) 412-3).

Just as in Greece, however, effectively polygynous relationships with (a man's own) slaves were not prohibited. Married men's sexual relations with slaves did not legally count as adultery. The Roman literary tradition is rife with allusions to sex with slaves (e.g., Garrido-Hory (1981); Kolendo (1981)), a notion that is well illustrated by the Stoic philosopher Musonius Rufus's criticism of a 'man who has relations with his own slave girl, a thing that some people consider quite without blame' (fragment 12). Several centuries later the Christian writer Salvian made the same point when he claimed that the wealthy universally behaved 'like the husbands of their slave girls' (*Government of God* 7.4). More mundanely, slaves who were the illegitimate children of their owners (*filiii naturales*) could be manumitted before they reached the standard legal age threshold of 30 years (Gaius, *Institutes* 1.19), and blood ties between owners and slaves are repeatedly referenced in legal cases (Rawson (1989) 23-9). Adoption of such offspring was legally feasible upon manumission but entirely optional, and eventually subject to restrictions (Gardner (1998) 182-3). Also as in Greece, sex with domestic slaves was supplemented by unsanctioned access to (often servile) prostitutes.

Although Roman emperors were technically subject to the same marriage rules as the general citizenry, their alleged habits of sexual predation exercised the imagination of contemporaneous historians and biographers (Betzig (1992a); Scheidel (2009) 299-301). Notwithstanding the possibility of very considerable exaggeration, such behavior would be fully in line with royal polygyny in other early empires, and it is perhaps not a coincidence that critics emphasized this aspect of imperial (mis)conduct.

Roman marriage rules were coterminous with the sway of Roman law. Divergent customs prevailed in more peripheral parts of the Roman Empire. The Jewish polygamous tradition can be traced back to the Old Testament. Josephus refers to 'our ancestral custom that a man may have several wives at the same time' (*Jewish Antiquities* 17.14). While the overall scale of this practice in the Roman period cannot be ascertained, actual cases of bigamy were reported and the Rabbinic texts repeatedly mention plural unions and do not normally disapprove of them as long as they were undertaken for honorable reasons (Schremer (1997/2001); Satlow (2001) 189-92). The fact that as late as in 393 CE, the Roman state had to forbid Jews to 'enter into several matrimonies at the same time' (*Justinian Code* 1.9.7) underscores the persistence of this custom (cf. also *Novel* 139 from 537 CE).

## 6. Theories of Causation

Thanks to the pervasive neglect of this subject among historians, debates about the causes of monogamy and polygamy have traditionally been the domain of sociologists, economists, and anthropologists. In economic terms, polygyny has been recognized as capable of delivering benefits to women as long as substantial resource inequality prevails among men and women rely on male resources for reproductive success. If male inequality is sufficiently pronounced, a woman may be better off sharing a high-status male with other women than monopolizing access to a low-status partner in a monogamous relationship. In the former case, all women but only high-status men benefit whereas – assuming a balanced sex ratio – low-status men lose out on marriage and mating opportunities (Grossbard (1980) 324; Becker (1991) 87-9). In this scenario polygyny tends to reinforce male inequality. Cross-cultural analysis confirms that the incidence of polygyny is positively correlated with male inequality as well as female mate choice (Kanazawa and Still (1999) 32-41), a finding that is consistent with the logic of the economic rational-choice argument outlined here. In a further refinement of this model, it has been observed that resource inequality determined by non-labor income (that is, control of assets) favors polygyny (Gould, Moav and Simon (2004)). This means that economic development is not

conducive to polygyny, which helps explain why the latter is more prevalent in underdeveloped economies, including those of premodern societies.

However, while this model successfully accounts for variation in the incidence of polygyny, it cannot explain its suppression in the form of socially imposed monogamy: because male inequality never disappears, some women and some powerful men would always benefit from stable polygyny. This means that strict prescriptive monogamy calls for an auxiliary hypothesis, which is provided by the observation that since polygyny exacerbates male inequality, socially imposed monogamy may have arisen as a means of reducing tension among males and fostering cooperation (Alexander (1987) 71; MacDonald (1990); Scheidel (forthcoming)).

Yet there can be no doubt that cooperation can likewise reach high levels in the context of polygyny, especially in as much as its intrinsic inequality fuels aggression that can be directed toward warfare, plunder, and the forcible acquisition of women (White and Burton (1988); Bretschneider (1995)). As the existence of polygynous empires demonstrates (Section 3), monogamy is by no means necessary to sustain successful collective action. At the same time, the history of Greece and Rome shows that monogamy does not necessarily reduce aggressiveness. Monogamy is therefore only one possible strategy for fostering cohesion. It was arguably only with modern economic development that it became the best strategy overall (Betzig (1986) 103-6; Price (1999)). If true, this would highlight the inherent fragility of prescriptive monogamy in any premodern setting.

From the perspective of these theoretical models, we would expect socially imposed monogamy to arise in systems in which relatively low resource inequality among men coincided with growing group cohesion. In the ancient Greek case, this scenario fits the post-Mycenaean loss of complexity and the subsequent development of the citizen polis. Yet even in this environment monogamy remained a work in progress. In Athens, for example, effective elite privilege was not reined in until the sixth century BCE (Lape (2002/3)). It is worth noting that the evolution of Greek monogamy coincided with the expansion of chattel slavery, which provided a socially acceptable arena for extra-marital sexual activity and male reproductive inequality (Section 7).

## 7. The Accommodation of Polygyny within Monogamous Marriage

Sex with slaves had a long pedigree in the Ancient Near East (Scheidel (2009) 281) but arguably assumed especial significance under the formal constraints of socially imposed monogamy. Extramarital sex with marginalized subordinates may have been a pivotal mechanism for reconciling formal marital egalitarianism ('one man, one wife') with effective reproductive inequality that mirrored abiding resource inequality. This invites comparison to the frequently noted relationship between the growth of both personal freedom and civic rights on the one hand and chattel slavery on the other in Greek poleis: these two trends not merely coincided but reinforced each other (Finley (1981), (1998); Patterson (1991)). Effective sexual and reproductive inequality sustained by chattel slavery would have alleviated the tensions arising from the persistence of resource inequality alongside symbolic egalitarianism. While sexual access to chattel slaves enabled high-status males to translate their resources to extra-marital relations and enhanced reproductive success, the institution of prescriptive monogamy prevented negative consequences of unrestrained resource polygyny such as the creation of a wifeless and consequently disaffected male underclass.

This suggests that the concurrent development of socially imposed monogamy, chattel slavery, and political rights in post-Early Iron Age Greece may not have been a coincidence. With a

sudden decline in overall inequality after 1200 BCE providing an initial impulse, centuries of growing male egalitarianism and slaveownership would have favored the establishment and gradual reinforcement of prescriptive monogamy. In ideal-typical terms, this resulted in a model of exclusive marital monogamy (in terms of both cohabitation and legitimate reproduction) that co-existed with socially marginalized sexual predation, a model that became normative in both Greek and Roman culture. This, in turn, created an unusually unfavorable environment for women. They came to be denied both the potential benefits of polygamy (in the form of access to resource-rich men) as well as the enjoyment of effective monogyny, given that they had no recourse against their husbands' relations with female slaves. At the same time, men benefited both as groups – the rich being free to indulge in polygynous behavior and the poor being less handicapped in their marriage prospects – as well as collectively, through the cohesion fostered by the conjuncture of these two group benefits.

## 8. The Afterlife of Greco-Roman Monogamy

As both the notion of civic rights and the institution of chattel slavery declined in the Greco-Roman world of the later Roman Empire, Christianity maintained and reinforced monogamous norms. The canonical New Testament tradition has Jesus take sides in Jewish debates about the propriety of divorce in a way that implies rejection of any non-monogamous practices (Matthew 19.3-12; Mark 10.2-12; Brewer (2000) 89-100). The roughly contemporaneous Qumran movement likewise opposed polygamy (Brewer (2000) 80-2). Pauline doctrine, however, fails explicitly to address this issue (Brewer (2000) 104). Later Church Fathers saw fit to explain away Old Testament polygamy as motivated by God's command to populate the world, an expansion that was no longer necessary or desirable (e.g., Clark (1986) 147). However, monogamy *per se* does not play a central role in early Christian writings, and the fact that Augustine labeled it a 'Roman custom' (*On the Good of Marriage* 7) indicates that Christianity may simply have appropriated it as an element of mainstream Greco-Roman culture.

Prescriptive monogamy came under pressure as the Roman Empire unraveled: powerful neighbors and conquerors, from Zoroastrian Iranians and Islamic Arabs to nominally or not at all Christian Germans and later Slavs, Norse, and steppe populations, did not subscribe to comparable marital norms. In the East, the Sasanid Empire with its polygamous elite (Hjerrild (2003)) was replaced by Islamic polities. The Qu'ran prefers monogamy and tolerates plural marriage only if it is feasible and serves the interests of individuals who would not otherwise be provided for: 'If you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two or three or four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with them [i.e., as wives], then only one' (Qur'an 4.3). Post-Roman Germanic practices are less well documented but polygamy and parallel concubinage did occur; only one of the several Germanic Roman-style law codes outlawed polygamy (Brundage (1987) 128-33). Thus, Germanic arrangements do not appear to have differed greatly from the polygynous dealings recorded in the early medieval Irish tradition (Bitel (2002) 180-1, 184; cf. Ross (1985)).

Under these circumstances, Greco-Roman-style prescriptive monogamy found itself in a precarious position, and its eventual expansion as a Christian institution was by no means a foregone conclusion. The unfolding of this drawn-out process is well beyond the remit of this chapter. Suffice it to say that the very considerable normative power of monogamy within Christianity is highlighted by the fact that sectarian polygamy – among the Anabaptists of Münster in the early sixteenth century and the first generations of the Mormons – remained a sporadic fringe phenomenon. In recent centuries, western-style prescriptive monogamy achieved global reach through demic diffusion and acculturation, with the areas least affected by European

influence (the Middle East and tropical Africa) showing the greatest resilience of polygamous preference. These developments can ultimately be traced back to Greek and Roman conventions and form an element of our Greco-Roman heritage that deserves a far more prominent status in our historical consciousness than it has so far achieved.

### Guide to Further Reading

This subject has received very little attention. The main technical discussions are in German, namely Erdmann (1934) 87-103 and Friedl (1996) 25-39, 214-28, 380-94. Ogden (1999) focuses on Hellenistic royal polygamy. The most wide-ranging study of reproductive inequality is Betzig (1986), while Betzig (1993) and Scheidel (2009) deal more specifically with elite polygyny in ancient civilizations. For attempts to address the nature and possible causes of Greco-Roman monogamy, see MacDonald (1990), Betzig (1992), and Scheidel (forthcoming). Brewer (2000) is a good survey of the origins of Christian thinking on this issue. Brundage (1987), Betzig (1995), Herlihy (1995), and MacDonald (1995) track developments beyond antiquity.

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