

Roman women much more independent than previously thought

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Bust of Livia, wife of Emperor Augustus, paragon of a powerful, confident woman in Roman times.

The classic misunderstanding about ancient Rome is that only the men were considered citizens and the women were seen as an extension of their husband or father. Historian Coen van Galen dispels that notion. He will be defending his doctoral thesis on 30 May at Radboud University.

Although ancient Roman society was rather macho and often misogynistic, many [women](#) living in the Roman Empire had more

personal freedom than women in western countries in the twentieth century. Historian Coen van Galen researched why this was the case and uses his [doctoral thesis](#) to show that Roman women played a social role as citizens and could even become the head of the family. This is a radically different perspective of the power balances in Roman society from what has been previously held by modern-day historians.

The familia

The basis of female independence lies within the peculiar Roman family structure, the familia. This was a structure in which legal adulthood didn't exist and which often did not account for [traditional gender roles](#).

"The head of the familia owned all the property and had the authority to make decisions," Van Galen explains. "This head was the oldest relative of the male line, who would make decisions on behalf of the entire family."

This oldest relative of the male line could be a woman, if she was the eldest child. For a long time, this made no difference for women in the legal sense. Van Galen continues: "When they married, Roman women usually became part of the husband's familia, which in a legal sense put them in the role of their husband's daughter and meant they were subordinate to them as long as he lived."

New prenuptial agreements

However, something remarkable started happening in the first century BC: more and more, marriages were held with new prenuptial agreements. These new agreements meant that the wife stayed part of her father's familia.

If her father were to pass away, she would become an independent head of the family, separate from her husband. The result was that a Roman woman would become head of the family, while her husband did not have any decision-making rights and did not own any property because his father was still alive. It was a reversal of the gender roles, with big consequences. Van Galen's research shows that women started claiming more and more space for themselves.

"It caused tension in Roman society," Van Galen explains. "There are stories of women pursuing their own careers and managing their own property." This did not fit into the traditional gender roles of Roman men and women. Some Roman men considered such an independent woman to be unacceptable: they chose not to marry and took a female slave as their partner, so they wouldn't have to share their power.

Mandatory marriage

To fight the declining number of marriages, and most importantly, to ensure that women upheld their most important duty to the Roman state, which was giving birth to children, Emperor Augustus enacted new laws. Everyone was legally obliged to marry, and the emperor rewarded women who had given birth to at least three children within the confines of a legal marriage with extra independence. Van Galen says that this measure did little to put a stop to the changes in society; it merely shows how Roman society was struggling against female independence.

Roman women themselves also struggled with their independence: legally, they had the freedom to act in their own interest, but they had to be subtle about doing so because they also had to fit the ideal of the modest and obedient woman. This is reflected in the marriage of that very same Augustus, who married the prototype of the independent woman: Livia. "Livia nicely showcases the ambivalence. She seemed to be the perfect housewife, but she actually played a central role in the

Roman Empire."

Provided by Radboud University

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