



The father in the Roman family (paterfamilias) exercised absolute and lifelong power over all other family members (patria potestas): his wife, children, and slaves. If the father's father was alive – then he was the supreme authority in the household. Fathers were even allowed to execute their grown sons for serious offenses like treason.

Each house maintained a cult of ancestors and hearth gods and the paterfamilias was its priest. The family was thought to possess a “genius” (gens) – an inner spirit – passed down the generations. The living and the dead members of the family shared the gens and were bound by it.

Legitimate offspring belonged to the father's family. The father retained custody if the couple (rarely) divorced exclusively at the husband's initiative. The father had the right to disown a newborn – [Sextoy](#) usually deformed boys or girls. This led to a severe shortage of women in Rome.

The father of the bride had to pay a sizable dowry to the family of the groom, thus impoverishing the other members of the family. Moreover, daughters shared equally in the estate of a father who died without a will – thus transferring assets from their family of origin to their husband's family. No wonder females were decried as an economic liability.

At the beginning, slaves were considered to be part of the family and were well-treated. They were allowed to save money (peculium) and to purchase their freedom. Freed slaves became full-fledged Roman citizens and usually stayed on with the family as hired help or paid laborers. Only much later, in the vast plantations amassed by wealthy Romans, were slaves abused and regarded as inanimate property.