

# Marriage and Family in Different Cultures Throughout History – A Historical Overview

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**ABSTRACT:** The essay provided an introductory overview on the role of marriage and family in different cultures throughout history. The cultures chosen are the Babylonian culture in the second millennium BC, the Egyptian culture during the first millennium BC, the culture of the Greek city states during the sixth and fifth century BC, Jewish culture during the Hebrew Testament times and early Judaism, the culture of the Roman Empire, the culture of Western Europe in medieval times and in modern times. It thus provided an overview of the diversity and complexity of the understanding and practice of the roles of marriage and family in different cultures at different times.

**KEY WORDS:** marriage, family, history, gender, men, woman

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## Introduction

To offer a well-informed overview of an understanding of marriage and family over the course of several millennia while at the same time researching different cultural contexts is almost an impossibility, especially if this has to be done on only a few pages. Such a task is further complicated by the fact that even within single cultures, changes in the understanding of marriage and family can often be observed over the course of time. Therefore, this essay can only provide a broad overview with a focus on a few aspects. As some cultural areas and epochs had to be selected, I intentionally limited myself mainly to Near Eastern and Western European cultural regions.

Each chapter will provide an overview of the understanding of marriage as well as the understanding of the family in these cultures. We'll focus on the Babylonians, Egyptians and Greeks, and then go on to present the views of the Old Testament and early Judaism, as well as those of the Roman Empire, before providing an overview of the understanding of marriage and family in Western Europe since the Western Middle Ages. However, we should by no means lose sight of the fact that we are thereby completely disregarding not only Africa, but above all Asia (with the exception of the Orient). Especially in a more and more globalized world, we should definitely include these cultural contexts in our thinking and research.

## **Marriage and Family among the Babylonians**

It was the image of sexual debauchery that shaped our Western understanding of Mesopotamian culture for centuries. We do not need to go into the reasons here, but recent research shows a completely different picture. I would like to single out in this essay the understanding of marriage and family in Mesopotamia of the second millennium BC, because we have the most sources for this time – let me just mention the codex of Hammurabi here.

The classical Babylonian family was patriarchally structured and “based on paternal authority and agnatic kinship” (Glassner 1996, 131). The term “agnatic kinship” goes back to Roman law and means a male blood relationship going back to a common ancestor, legitimized by marriage. Family was understood in Babylonia thereby as nuclear family, which consisted of the parents and the unmarried children. The marriage was arranged by the family of the future husband at a very early age. French historian Jean-Jacques Glassner wrote:

“It [marriage] thus began long before it was actually consummated and lived together, since the wife did not leave the parental home until she was capable of marriage (the only known fact is that boys were capable of marriage at about the age of ten). The Mesopotamians thus knew inchoative marriage, in which the wife was already subject to the authority of her in-laws while still being brought up in the parental home.” (Glassner 1996, 131)

An oral or written marriage contract was the prerequisite for a valid marriage, which was established by the payment of a bride price on the part of the groom's family. As long as the fiancée lived in her parents' house, any sexual contact was forbidden and considered rape, for which the man received the death penalty.

In general, adultery was punishable by death. It is remarkable that neither Sumerian nor Akkadian knew a name for marriage. Marriage was paraphrased as "the property of wife and husband" or that a man "takes a wife." "Marriage consisted, in effect, of the man taking possession of the woman" (Glassner 1996,133). The man initially moved in with her for a few months before returning with his wife to his family. Around the wedding, there were larger and more pronounced rites and festivities, which also extended in time. In the current research, one speaks regarding Mesopotamia of a "moderate monogamy" (Glassner 1996, 139), since the plural marriage (a man, several women) formed a quite usual practice. However, incest was forbidden.

If we look at the understanding of the roles of husband and wife, we see that the husband, as lord and "master of the wife," had the power of disposal over his wife and children and all those who were economically dependent on him.

Glassner noted:

"His prerogatives were balanced by certain duties, which were at times an expensive burden, especially in marrying off his daughters and sons. However, certain restrictions were also imposed on him by Babylonian society. A man was by no means master of the life and death of his wife, and he was equally forbidden to disown her as a seriously ill person; moreover, a father was forbidden to disinherit a child without just cause, and was compelled by the 'lawgiver' to be lenient." (Glassner 1996, 143)

In the second half of the second millennium BC, the privileges of men, however, were extended:

"There he received a right of chastisement of rare brutality towards his wife and was allowed to beat her at will, to whip her, to pull her hair, in short to 'blister' and 'maim' her to his liking. Cane blows on the soles of the feet, however, required the presence of a judge, and

mutilations such as cutting off the nose and ears that of a priest with basic medical knowledge.” (Glassner 1996, 142)

Accordingly, the woman’s situation looked bleak: Throughout her life, she was entirely subject to the will of another person: first her father, then her father-in-law, and finally her husband. Only as a householder in her husband’s household was she given a certain amount of freedom of movement.

“She had access to household goods, could buy and sell, lend or incur debts for which her husband was liable; she could rent and lease, make gifts, adopt, appear in court and swear oaths, complain and sue. As a person, she was fully recognized socially, legally, and morally.” (Glassner 1996, 144)

It is noteworthy that she could even own her own property, even if her parents or later her husband managed it for her until their death. After the woman’s death, the property also did not fall to her husband who survived her, but to her children. At the same time, the woman also could not become the head of a family upon the death of her husband, but this role fell to the eldest son or otherwise to the father-in-law.

The woman’s task was to give birth to children and to raise them. Once she had become a mother, her husband was no longer allowed to disown her, nor did she have to tolerate a concubine. Divorce was possible, but as a rule it had to be initiated by the husband and could cost him dearly if there were no valid reasons (childlessness, marital misconduct). However, there were also cases in which the divorce was initiated by the wife, e.g., when a wife was able to convict her husband of homosexual practices.

## **Marriage and Family Among the Egyptians**

The first legal marriage contracts that are preserved date back to the first millennium BC, even though there are some indications that such contracts existed even earlier.

In Egyptian, too, there was no name for the institution of marriage. This is probably due to the fact that a wedding was perceived as a purely private matter and had neither a political nor a religious dimension, at least as far as the normal population was concerned. Marriage thus established a *de facto* status that resulted from living together. “Residential companion”

became a term for the wife, and the conjugal union was usually made visible by a common and separate residence of the couple.

In an example of a preserved contract, the contract was concluded between the husband and the father-in-law (bride's father), who "gives him his daughter to wife" – such a formula from such contracts. Forgeau wrote:

"From the 6th century onwards, marriage contracts reveal a certain emancipation of the woman from her father's power of disposal. [...] The divorced woman becomes an independent person and is proud to have acted as such. The Egyptian marriage is based on duty and consensus, withdrawing from the interference of the community and thus demonstrating a great adaptability to the particular situation of the individual." (Forgeau 1996, 168)

Remarkable is the predominant motive for choosing a partner in Egypt, namely a mutual affection. This is attested by numerous love songs – an aspect we do not find in many other early cultures. Sibling marriages seemed to have been possible in Egypt, at least at times, though not necessarily common. Polygamy was especially common in higher social circles, since repudiation or divorce from the first wife was not a precondition for further marriage.

Family life took place primarily within the framework of the nuclear family. A typical Egyptian household included parents and children, and possibly a single relative, such as a widowed mother. The young man usually married at the age of 15, and the girl was between 12- and 14-years young. The average life expectancy during the Greco-Roman period is estimated to be about 30 years for women and about 34 years for men. The success of a marriage was reflected, among other things, in the number of children one had as well as in the prosperity gained.

What was the situation regarding the understanding of roles in Egyptian culture? Annie Forgeau, a historian specializing in Egyptian history, wrote:

"The authority of the head of the family derives from the social order as a whole, in which men dominate politically, economically, and culturally to such an extent that recognition of a natural equality of the sexes could not redress the imbalance of status." (Forgeau 1996, 190)

Nevertheless, the term “mistress of the house” is apt for the role of women since the Middle Kingdom. She was responsible for the housekeeping and the upbringing of the small children, but also her advice was heard in all matters and men – so it is documented – revoked already made decisions due to the intervention of their wife. If the husband died before his wife, the latter assumed responsibility. Forgeau noted:

“The widow assumes the head of the household. She has unlimited disposal of the property she has contributed and that acquired jointly during the marriage, may be head of the family, and may even hold office until the eldest son comes of age.” (Forgeau 1996, 1991)

In Egypt, too, the child was the focus of moral considerations as the very meaning and purpose of the family. The child had both rights and responsibilities, and married couples who could not have children were expected to adopt orphans. Although a son was considered important for succession, and the eldest son always took the main focus, nevertheless there was no gender discrimination. After the infant stage, the father was responsible for the moral education of the children. He was to pass on of his treasure of wisdom to his children. Forgeau pointedly comments, “The Egyptians believed more in the virtue of acquired knowledge than in the right of noble birth.” (Forgeau 1996, 193) It is noteworthy that girls were also encouraged in their education.

## **Marriage and Family Among the Greeks**

In examining the perception of marriage and family in ancient Greece, I would like to focus on the Greek city-state during the sixth and fifth centuries BC. The reasons for this lie, on the one hand, in the complexity of the subject matter and, on the other hand, again in the limited scope of this essay.

We find a starting point for an understanding of marriage and family in Aristotle, who offered a structured overview in the first book of his “*Politeia*” (Politics). For Aristotle, the *oikia*, the family or household, is an integral part of the polis, the city-state. Thus, it is not individuals that make up the polis, but solid family groups. An expert on ancient history, Maria Dettenhofer concluded:

“Human dimensions played no role in classical Athens in the question of the meaning and purpose of marriage. Rather, what was decisive was the function it had for Athenian citizenship: marriage became virtually the instrument of the new form of government, democracy.” (Dettenhofer 1998, 1)

At this point, I am deliberately skipping the very important and central political dimension of marriage and family in the classical city-state, since it is not really relevant to our topic. Only this: The law specified, at least for a time, who could marry whom at what age and at what age a couple could father children. Despite enormous political changes in the Greek polis – the catchword being “democratization” – the tasks and position of the wife changed only very little.

At the time of marriage, a man was around 15 years older than the woman. Girls married between the ages of 13 and 15, while the man was around 30. The background to this rather high age difference was the rather educational relationship between the spouses.

“The conscious aim was that the husband should shape the wife. The role of the mistress did [...] not necessarily belong to the sphere of responsibility of the wife. Since marriage did not claim a sexual monopoly [...], it did not primarily serve the satisfaction of the man’s sexual desires. For this purpose, as in his relatively long bachelorhood, he had at his disposal a rich supply of both sexes from the prostitution trade.” (Dettenhofer 1998, 4)

A woman remained a minor throughout her life, was legally incapable of acting and, as a ward, was subject first to her father and later to her husband. She could not acquire citizenship either. The *engye* (betrothal) was the legal act that established the man’s legal power over his future wife. The bride price, the so-called *hedna*, which the groom had to pay to the bride’s family, also played an important role.

“The *hedna* reverted to the bridegroom if the marriage broke down through the fault of the woman, for example by leaving the marital community or by adultery. If, however, the husband was to blame for the dissolution of the marriage, the bride-price remained in the possession of her family as compensation and security for the wife. Losing the *hedna* therefore meant a considerable economic loss for the guilty party.” (Dettenhofer 1998, 1)

Divorce was therefore possible and could be brought by both the wife and the husband. Adultery, however, led to divorce only if it was committed by the woman, since the husband was allowed sexual relations with other women.

## **Marriage and Family in the Hebrew Testament and Early Judaism**

A biblical understanding of marriage and family begins with Genesis 2: Man was created in the image of God as male and female, with the purpose of multiplying and subduing the earth. The linguist and ethnologist Franck Alvarez-Péreyre and the anthropologist Florence Heymann, both proven experts on Judaism, note:

“No sooner were they created, named, and inserted into a complementarity far beyond the physical and physiological sphere, than the spouses, by union, made manifest the paradox of kinship: ‘Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.’ (Gen 2:24). A family can only come into being if another one breaks up first. The word *laasow* (to leave, forsake) finds an equally powerful correlative in the term *ledabek* (to bind), which establishes that there is an affective bond between spouses. [...]

Procreation in the spirit of faithfulness is not copulation between strangers. When it says in the Bible ‘Adam knew Eve, his wife’ (Gen. 4:1), it is to be understood [...] that love becomes all the more intimate the better the partner recognizes the other in soul. Marital love has shed all animal-like qualities. It is based on something other than the procreation of children.” (Alvarez-Péreyre/Heyman 1996, 200)

If one looks at the Hebrew Testament legislation, you will see that many things were forbidden that were permitted in other cultures: incest, homosexuality, rape and adultery. All these things were punishable by death. At the same time, the Hebrew Testament advocates monogamy. The man binds himself to “his wife”, not to “his wives” – even if the practice looked quite different at times.

According to both biblical and Talmudic law, a marriage was initiated in two ways. A marriage was contracted and, as a rule, a bride price was fixed,



which the groom or his family had to pay. The signing of the contract marked the beginning of the marriage, even if the actual wedding, the “taking into the house”, took place later. Thus, a dissolution of an engagement corresponded to a divorce. However, the woman remained an independent person and never became the property of her husband. She could not be sold or mortgaged. She could also own property and inherited a compulsory share from her parents, the dowry.

Divorce was possible but could only be initiated by the man. However, there were also restrictions on divorce and such a divorce was basically subject to “moral disapproval” (Alvarez-Péreyre/Heyman 1996, 220). After the divorce was finalized, it was open to both man and woman to remarry, but not to the divorced partner.

Both concubinage and polygamy occurred and were found primarily in the upper social classes. Nevertheless, they were not widespread, probably also for the theological reason that monogamous marriage was understood as a reflection of the relationship between Israel as a covenant people and its God.

“In both the biblical and Talmudic eras, plural marriages were viewed negatively, and numerous passages in the prophets presuppose a monotheistic and monogamous society (Ezra 24:16-18; Hos 2:18-19). [...] From the first temple period to the first post-Christian centuries, the wealthy and common people distinguish themselves according to plural marriage and monogamy. In 14th century Spain, on the other hand, double marriage is a reality and apparently reaches into all strata of society. Jewish forms of behavior undeniably also developed as a result of outside influences. Babylonian Judaism, shaped by a classical environment, was much more inclined to polygamy. At the same time, Palestinian Jewry lived, if not in principle, predominantly monogamous.” (Alvarez-Péreyre and Heyman 1996, 224)

In early Judaism, however, a fundamental change in the attitude toward women and their position took place:

“The overall slope of Jewish thought in post-testamental times, however, shows a consistent disparagement and disrespect for women, even in contrast to their position in ancient Israel.” (Grundmann 1990, 173)

This was expressed not only in their increasingly restricted cultic role, but also in statements such as those of Rabbi Judah ben Elai: “Three praises must be spoken every day: Blessed be He who did not make me a Gentile! Blessed be He who did not make me a woman! Blessed be He who did not make me ignorant” (Grundmann 1990, 174). However, there seems to have been little change in the practice of betrothal and marriage.

Let us briefly consider the understanding of family life. Family was understood as the extended family (parents, grandparents, unmarried relatives, and children), including wage laborers and slaves, so that a family could well include up to 30 people. The head of the family was the father. In Judaism, the family is also the main place of worship, religious events, and it is the father who is responsible for the upbringing of the children.

## Marriage and Family in the Roman Empire

“If a contemporary of Cicero or Seneca enumerated what was most important to him in the world, he would, according to tradition, first name his sons, then the honors he had earned in the city of Rome [...], and at the same time his fortune, the paternal house with its throng of clients and friends as a sign of a sonorous name. At the end of this enumeration was the wife.” (Thomas 1996, 277)

Even in the Roman Empire, the understanding of marriage and family changed several times over the centuries. What remained was: A Roman citizen married a woman “to have sons” – that was the legal formula. Marriage was understood as a private matter.

A key concept here is the Latin word *familia*, a community of life, to which belonged not only husband, wife, children, but also all the freemen living in the household, as well as slaves, but also the living cattle, as well as all the property as well as all the assets of the deceased ancestors.

“According to a conception developed many times in classical times, the family comprises as many generations as can stand together under the power of one. Only the descendants of the male line belong to it. With the death of the eldest ancestor, those of the succeeding generation become heads of the family and stand at the head of their own respective families.” (Thomas 1996, 288)

Marriage was preceded by an engagement, to which both bride and groom had to give their consent. A girl could not marry until she was 12 years old, and an engagement could last no longer than two years. As a rule, however, the young woman was probably 15 years old. "What was important for the marriage to come into being was the will of the bride and groom to marry, not coitus [...] or a certain ritual. [...] The woman's will to marry was evident when she moved into the man's house." (Imperium Romanum, n.d., n.p.) Therefore, marriage was considered a private matter, which was neither a legal act nor regulated by contract. If at all, there was only a contract about the dowry.

Remarkably, the Roman Empire emphasized a duty to marry, including a punishment for celibacy, especially up to the turn of the first century. Marriage was therefore generally motivated neither by love nor by eroticism but was understood as a civic duty. One married in order to

"to secure a dowry (this was one of the respectable methods of getting rich) and to produce offspring in lawful wedlock who would inherit as legitimate children and who would ensure the continuity of the state by replenishing the ranks of its citizens." (Veyne 1999, 47)

While in the early centuries of the empire, the so-called *manus marriage* was rather common – the woman was subject to the domestic authority of her husband from the moment of marriage – this changed especially in the course of the late republic and the *manus-free marriage* became the rule. Nevertheless, "A man is master of his wife as he is master of his daughters and domestics." (Veyne 1999, 51)

A divorce could be executed without giving reasons by abandoning the actual cohabitation by both the husband and the wife, and the husband and the wife had to pronounce different divorce formulas. The dowry had to be returned to the wife, at least if she was divorced without fault. The dowry was intended to provide for the wife's post-marital needs, especially in later times. The children, however, remained part of the father's family. Divorce was common, as were multiple remarriages. In the case of a marriage *cum manu*, the property became the property of the husband or the head of the family. In the case of a marriage *sine manu* there was a strict separation of property and even a prohibition of donation between the spouses.

The educational ideal of Rome – especially as far as boys were concerned – was embodied in the attitude of being honorable and heroic and not complaining. This education was enforced with all rigors; self-control was highly valued and a boy accompanied his father to every public place from an early age. The historian Aline Rousselle summarizes:

“Thus, through hard physical education according to ethical principles, the sons of the great families and their daughters prepare themselves to have the moral stamina for necessary deeds on the decisive day.” (Rousselle 1996, 323-333)

However, it should not be overlooked that it was up to the head of the family to abandon any child he disliked before the age of three. Either it was found by someone who took it in and adopted it, or it died in this Roman form of birth control.

In view of all this, it is important to remember that only persons with Roman citizenship and freemen had the opportunity to marry. Slaves were denied the possibility of marriage at least until the year 200 AD. This affected one to two million people in Roman Italy in the first century BC and the first century AD, compared to five to six million freemen and citizens, i.e., up to 20 percent of the population.

The question of which marriage model the first Gentile Christian communities adopted in the first two post-Christian centuries is an interesting question. Was it the Jewish understanding or that of their respective cultural context? Unfortunately, the sources that have been preserved are silent here; only adultery is clearly rejected. Probably the New Testament scholar Bo Reicke is right with his conclusion:

“Among the Christians of the Hellenistic environment certain Greek or Roman forms of marriage were common [...]: among the Greeks surrender [...] of the bride by her father in the presence of witnesses, among the Romans the taking home (deductio) of the bride or, in the case of slaves, simply living together (contubernium).” (Reicke 1982, 320)

## **Marriage and Family in the Western European Middle Ages**

We now make a leap in time by several centuries. While the Middle Ages are usually dated from about 400 AD, I skip the Migration Period and start in

the age of the Carolingians from the eighth century. One of the reasons for this is motivated by source situation, which presents itself from the middle of the eighth century as a much better one than for the preceding centuries. Furthermore, I only deal with the situation of the majority population and not of the nobility.

Whereas in the early Middle Ages, in particular, the term family was used primarily for the household and hearth community, the understanding of the family changed in the further course of the Middle Ages. A typical family consisted – as research in France, Italy and Germany shows us – of father, mother and the usually unmarried children, so that a family usually consisted of an average of five to six people. Pierre Toubert, award-winning former professor of medieval history, noted:

“In rural society, everything revolved around the married couple. Marriage ensured the legitimacy of the descendants and the family’s customary right to the farmstead. On marriage was based the authority of the spouse, limited from the 9th century, however, by some very concrete guarantees given to the woman by law or by custom on the domain.”  
(Toubert 1996, 112)

In the urban context, especially among craftsmen, the household included servants, apprentices and sometimes journeymen. However, it was also quite common for work to be done outside the home and for even women to pursue a professional activity.

During this period, a Christian image of marriage became more and more prevalent, even in legislation, although it must be remembered that it was not marriage but the family that formed the primary institution. There were three aspects that increasingly came to the fore: Prohibitions on marriage based on kinship, the understanding of the indissolubility of a marriage, and comprehensive marriage legislation. Thus, as part of a rigorous list of marriage prohibitions, marriage was prohibited up to the seventh degree of kinship (and later reduced again to the fourth degree). The very issue of the indissolubility of marriage, which was unequivocally taught by Rome from the middle of the eighth century, led to practical problems in its enforcement, which were related to the given social structure:

“The marriage of clergymen, the numerous successive remarriages of widows, the value of vows of chastity of consecrated virgins, marriages between socially unequal partners, the descent of a husband into slavery or his infection with leprosy, a husband’s expressed desire to enter a monastery, long absences from the domestic hearth when the husband had gone to war, been taken prisoner, or held an office or fief in a distant marrow of the realm, ‘malicious desertion,’ etc.” (Toubert 1996, 118)

Subsequently, another aspect is worth noting:

“The model of marriage that the spiritual elite wanted to impose as a regulating authority against the social violence in society, furthermore, included a recognition of the woman as a person, as consors with all the rights in the family unit. [...] The perfect equality between the spouses was a regularly recurring theme in the literature on marriage, and was in complete agreement with the legislation which, since the middle of the 8th century, had repeatedly postulated: ‘Marriage law is one and the same, for the man as well as for the woman.’ This ethic of reciprocity gave meaning to a mature concept of marital communion.” (Toubert 1996, 122)

In the twelfth century we observe another change. The so-called “munte marriage” (the woman was first under the guardianship of her father and later under that of her husband) was more and more pushed back. From then on, mutual consent, based on mutual attraction, formed the basis of a marital relationship.

In this regard, historians at the University of Ghent, Belgium, Walter Prevenier and Thérèse de Hemptinne noted:

“Parents often met the freedom proclaimed by the Church in choosing a spouse with persistent resistance. In the M[ittel]A[lter], marriage was one of the few possibilities for emancipation. This often led parents to make desperate attempts to prevent planned marriages against their will. Since this was impossible under canon. Since this was impossible under canon law, parents resorted to denying dowries or to disinheritance.” (Prevenier/de Hemptinne 2009, 1636).

At the same time, however, especially from the thirteenth century onward, there is an increasing “moral and psychological degradation” (Toubert 1996, 152) of women - despite all their legal equality, above all under reference to Eve as the alleged guilty one at the Fall.

Let us look briefly of the age at marriage. Young women often married at the age of 15 and their partner was usually quite a bit older, although the available sources are not consistent. As a rule, the man was between seven and 15 years older than his wife. Children were desirable, though boys were often preferred. It is also important to keep in mind that, for children as a whole, infant mortality can be assumed to have exceeded 30 percent in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. At the same time, we must be aware that not everyone had the opportunity to officially enter into marriage. Thus, often only those who could maintain a family were allowed to marry, and permission had to be obtained from the landlord. Otherwise, the public authorities had no legal authority over marriages.

## **Marriage and Family in the Western European Modern Era**

“The house, not the family, formed the central order of life in the early modern period. The house not only offered protection from cold, wet and external violence, but was also a place of work, joy, sorrow, where birth and death took place. The house formed a community of life that included not only the homeowner with his wife and children, but also relatives, servants (farmhands and maids), and guests who happened to be staying in the house.” (Faix 1997, 8)

The German theologian Wilhelm Faix aptly described the initial situation at the beginning of the modern era, which, however, was to change rapidly and radically.

In Austria, the model of the nuclear family was especially widespread, where only the heir was allowed to stay in the parental home after his marriage. And we encounter another innovation: It became fashionable for the growing children to go “into employment”. Even as children, they hired themselves out as maids and servants in the household or in practical work. What in its positive form could be understood as an apprenticeship and occurred in all social classes was often a brutal exploitation of children’s labor, which did not even stop at abuse and in some countries affected between 20 and 40 percent of all children of certain population groups (especially in northern Europe). The Tyrolean Swabian children may be cited as an example. The French social and modern historian André Burguière concludes with regard to the often associated use of violence against children:

“It can be stated, however, that from the 16th century on, the deliberately administered or rather the pedagogical violence increased in scope. [...] This violence, conceived as ‘character-building’, was applied, and in a cruder and more immoderate way, also on the farm and in the workshop: exaggerated punishments, injuries, arm fractures that sometimes crippled the child for life.” (Burguière 1996, 49)

He continued:

“For the child, the experience that he was now a servant or a maid was all the more decisive for his personality development and the formation of his conception of society, the earlier it was made. [...] This experience meant for the child an emotional impoverishment and at the same time a spiritual expansion. On the one hand, it lost the special bond with its family of origin [...]. On the other hand, the special feeling of belonging to the circle of his close relatives who had accompanied his childhood, aiming at closeness, was replaced by the pronounced awareness – and soon also the demand – of autonomy.” (Burguière 1996, 52)

Burguière speaks in this context of a “school of individualism” (Burguière 1996, 52).

But let us turn to the understanding of marriage: it is only in the 18th century that the idea of a love marriage emerges. Burguière elaborates:

“The talk of love marriage as a ruling model of marriage mixes two separate aspects which only later became joined: 1. the idea that young people themselves should determine their marriage, and 2. the idea that the bond of love and the bond of marriage should form one, that love is the better reason, if not the reason for the existence of marriage at all.” (Burguière 1996, 145)

And Monika Wienfort, a German historian of modern times, noted:

“Free choice of spouse, erotic attraction, and the unity of body and mind were to shape a modern conception of marriage that emancipated itself, at least in theory, from the sacred as well as the rational marriage doctrines of the past.” (Wienfort 2014, 20)

It is worth considering that with the emergence of the notion of “eternal love”, regulations on the dissolution of marriage were also regulated at the same time, and this already in Austria as early as in 1811 (cf. Goldberg 1998, 243).



However, the reality was quite different in many regions. After all, there were numerous marriage bans, or to put it another way, laws were passed that tied marriage to economic conditions. Let's take Tyrol as one example among many. Monika Wienfort:

“In Tyrol, the marriage consensus, i.e., permission to marry by the municipality, was introduced in 1818/20, modified in the 1870s, and abolished only in 1921. The Tyrolean local authorities in the Habsburg Empire applied the laws restrictively to prevent the marriage of members of the lower classes for fear that these landless people, together with their children, would become a burden on the local poor fund.” (Wienfort 2014, 27)

This naturally had an impact on the number of marriages, wild marriages and non-marital unions. While non-marital cohabitation remained extremely rare among the aristocracy and bourgeoisie and, where it did occur, represented a “veritable scandal” (Wienfort 2014, 30), the situation was different among the lower social classes. Here, wild marriage was widespread. Marriage was also made difficult for “foreigners”.

Exact figures are difficult to ascertain, but in some regions it could have been around ten percent of the population who were denied marriage. Conclusions can be drawn from the number of out-of-wedlock births. In 1880, 706,823 children were born in wedlock and 121,157 out of wedlock in Austria, which means that almost 15 percent of all children were born out of wedlock. (Zweig 2017, 495) At the same time, an extremely high unmarried rate of up to 50 percent can be assumed for Austria in the 19th century (Wienfort 2014, 52). Moreover, since Austria knew only one ecclesiastical matriculation system until 1918 – and this was in the hands of the Roman Catholic Church alone until the middle of the 19th century – this made official marriages even more difficult.

Finally, in this section we will briefly turn to the position of women. The professional world was only open to an unmarried woman. However, a woman was supposed to give up her professional activity at the latest with the birth of the first child and became responsible for the family sphere, while the man usually pursued a professional activity outside the home. This clearly shows the consequences of industrialization for the understanding of the roles of men and women. At the same time, the man alone was entitled to custody.

“Most fathers saw themselves primarily as having moral responsibility and claimed spiritual leadership in comparison to the physical, caring role of the mother.” (Wienfort 2014, 206) The husband could both decide on the family’s residence and prohibit his wife from working.

## Marriage and Family in the Twentieth Century

Anyone who takes a closer look at the developments surrounding the image of marriage and the family in the twentieth century cannot help but speak of serious upheavals. Industrialization and the departure from a predominantly agrarian society had led to a spatial separation of the man’s gainful employment from private family life. Christine Goldberg aptly summarizes the ideal of the modern family:

“The ideal of the modern family contains essentially all the aspects that continue to characterize the nuclear family today.

- The wife’s responsibility for privacy and the husband’s for employment.
- Love as a marriage-establishing and -preserving motive.
- The centrality of children and education.” (Goldberg 1998, 241)

This had further consequences, as historian Reinhold Sieder explains:

“Since husband and wife no longer performed joint work in the home, the couple was relegated to intensified communication after work; this favored mutual perception of personal idiosyncrasy and individualized the partners, giving their increasingly private and intimate relationship more intrinsic value, but also making it more susceptible to competition and disruption from ‘without.’ The bourgeois family model envisioned the omnipresence of the man as head, breadwinner, educator, and supreme moral authority of the home. But the bourgeois mode of economy, capitalism, separated and distanced men’s diverse businesses and privatized family life as women’s domain.” (Sieder 1996, 215)

In the further development of the understanding of marriage and family, the world wars and their effects must not be underestimated. Not only did millions of men go off to war, countless died or returned as physical or mental cripples, but women and mothers were suddenly forced to take on the work in war-related businesses that men had previously performed, not to mention the additional task of caring for and raising children alone.

After the collapse of the Third Reich and the lost world war, men and women devoted all their energies to reconstruction and to securing at least a modest level of prosperity. At the same time, men found that the women who had held down the fort at home during the war years did not simply return to their household duties, since they had also “stood their ground” professionally outside the home during the war. Conflicts were therefore inevitable when the men returned in the late 1940s and early 1950s to a world that was so very different from the one they had left at the beginning of the war.

The protests of the student movement of the 1960s accelerated the erosion of previous values and norms. The sexual revolution, free love and the birth control pill are just a few examples. At the same time, there were also serious reforms in legislation, here in Austria especially in the course of the 1970s. Adultery and homosexuality were decriminalized, the abortion deadline solution was introduced, divorce law was amended, and equality for women was enshrined in law (cf. Sandgruber 2003, 160). “Marriage in its function as a provider for women” (Goldberg 1998, 242) no longer existed. I quote from a Ministry document on women’s rights:

“The patriarchal model of a marriage of provision is being replaced by a family model based on partnership. Both spouses are now obliged to contribute to the maintenance (whether by working or by running the household). The husband is no longer ‘head of the family’. He can no longer forbid his wife to be employed. [...] The legal representative of legitimate children is no longer automatically the father. Since the reform of family law, fathers and mothers have equal rights and duties towards their children. Since then, the mother can also sign the passport application or the apprenticeship contract for her child. Until then, only the father was authorized to do so.” (Feigl 2016)

Although Austria had known universal suffrage for women since November 1918, it is only since the mid-1970s that a woman in Austria has been able to work or open a bank account without her husband’s permission.

However, the downside of some twentieth-century developments should not be overlooked either. It is true that the pursuit of private and personal happiness is becoming the maxim of life for individuals and couples. But the physician and psychotherapist Arnold Retzer wrote pointedly about this in “Lob der Vernunftete” (“In Praise of Marriage of Reason”):

“With the Enlightenment and the political and cultural changes that accompanied it, happiness became a significant, even central phenomenon of life and a goal of life. If the people of the Middle Ages expected happiness, then at best in the hereafter, from now on the focus was on this world, also in the case of happiness. We are therefore dealing with a change that runs parallel to that of the ideas of equality and justice. [...] Very quickly, then – almost unnoticed, but all the more lasting – happiness has gone from being a right to being an imperative and thus a duty.” (Retzer 2013, 142)

At the same time, Sieder noted:

“But with the increased expectation of happiness, the threshold for entry was also raised: Many delayed marriage in the hope of finding the right partner first or with the intention of putting the current partnership to the test. They no longer stumbled into their own marriage, so to speak, as a matter of course at a young age, fleeing from their parents. Premarital cohabitation and diverse new combinations of family remnants after separation and divorce increased the variety of forms in cohabitation.” (Sieder 1996, 231)

Finally, let’s look at some statistics from Austria (the following statistics are provided by the Austrian governmental statistic agency “Statistik Austria” - <https://statistik.at/>).

In 1950, for example, a total of 64,621 marriages were performed in Austria (9.3 per 1,000 inhabitants), in 1970 there were 52,773 (7.1 per 1,000), and by 2010 the number of marriages had fallen to 37,545 per year (4.5 per 1,000). The low point was reached in 2007, and since then the number of marriages has been rising again.

At the same time, more and more marriages are breaking up. While the annual divorce rate was only around 10 percent in 1975, it rose to just under 50 percent by 2007 and has since fallen again to just over 40 percent. Austrian historian Ernst Hanisch originally summed it up in 1994:

“Marriage as an institution has lost social significance. At the same time, the demands on a marriage, in terms of happiness fulfillment, emotional and sexual harmony, have risen sharply. Because marriage as an institution is arguably overburdened by this, divorce occurs in every third marriage.” (Hanisch 2005, 488).

Changes are also evident in the image of the family. For example, the percentage of so-called patchwork families has remained constant at around nine percent for years. And a final example: In 2018, 65.5 percent of children under three lived in married couple households, 27.3 percent in cohabiting households and 7.1 percent in single parent households. While the number of single-person households was 386,000 in 1951, it rose to about 780,000 in 1981 and as high as 1,480,000 in 2019.

Today's reality is therefore a plurality of different ways of life with simultaneous deinstitutionalization (Rosenmayr 1986, 60), in which the classic marriage between a man and a woman and the nuclear family of father, mother and their children is only understood as one among numerous other options. (cf. Wilk/Mair 1987, 81-108).

## Conclusions

The aim of this essay was to provide the reader with an introductory overview of the variety of models and understandings of marriage and family in different epochs and cultures. Much could have been mentioned or discussed in more detail, other cultures could still have been included. Nevertheless, the author hopes that he has succeeded in taking the reader on a journey through history, during which the reader has made new discoveries and acquired new knowledge, and perhaps even reawakened his or her interest in studying the subject in greater depth.

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