Marriage in Greek and Roman Societies

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In analyzing the cultural institution of marriage between the Greeks and the Romans, it has shown many similarities between the two. They had similar rules and customs, however, the way they implemented them and was a little different. The Greeks and Romans had a different legal process of marriage, different ages to be married and rules as to who one could marry but were similar in that they both required a dowry to be given to the groom.

Greece and Rome were similar is the process of marriage, however, Greece was more formal and stricter about the legalities. In Rome, a formal marriage ceremony was not required for the marriage to be considered legal. The government did not keep any records of divorces or marriages so there was no legal way to prove two people were legally married.[[1]](#footnote-1) The patres familias, the guardian of the girl which was usually the father, gave consent for the girl to marry the groom. The guardian could only deny consent if they gave a valid reason for doing so.[[2]](#footnote-2) At that time, marriages between lower class people were not usually arranged. This was because political and family connections were not as important to them. However, upper class marriages were almost always arranged because of the political alliances they wanted to form.[[3]](#footnote-3) On the other hand, Greece had more law requirements regarding marriage. The law required that before marriage there had to be either a betrothal agreement or a court judgement. An agreement had to be made between the girl’s kyrios, usually her father, and the groom’s father.[[4]](#footnote-4) This was similar to Rome in that the girl’s father, or guardian, was in control of her marriage, however, the groom’s father was also an important piece in the agreement. This was very formal and included witnesses. This was also called the engagement and was considered a legal act where all the contract between the two fathers was settled. Unlike Rome, basically all of the marriages were arranged. It did not differ by class. The women never got to choose the man or gave consent to marry him. Since marriages were so formal and arranged between the fathers, the bride and groom usually had no attachment to each other until after marriage.[[5]](#footnote-5) Overall, Greece was more formal with the marriage process than Rome since Greece required a legal engagement and contract and Rome did not even need a formal marriage ceremony to be considered legal.

The age of marriage and rules of who one could marry differed in Greece and Rome. In Rome, the overall rule was that the girl and the guy had to have reached puberty.[[6]](#footnote-6) Puberty for males was approximately fourteen and puberty for females was approximately twelve.[[7]](#footnote-7) That was basically the golden standard, however, that was not usually what occurred. The norm was for males to marry in their mid-twenties and females marry shortly after puberty. Once she was considered old enough, she was ready to be married, however, men waited longer and married younger girls. The average age gap was about ten years.[[8]](#footnote-8) Greece had different norms for the age of marriage. Instead of girls being ready right after puberty, they were considered eligible for marriage around eighteen or nineteen years old. The men would wait until around thirty to marry. The rules of who could marry who differed as well. In Greece, it was common for people to marry their extended family including half brothers and sisters and uncles and nieces.[[9]](#footnote-9) In Rome, this was considered illegal as well as marrying a direct family member. “For example, people may not marry a direct family ascendant or descendent: father or daughter, grandfather and granddaughter, mother and son, grandmother and grandson, and so on.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Romans could not even marry adopted family members even if the adoption was dissolved.[[11]](#footnote-11) Greece was more lenient on the rules of who people could marry allowing certain family member to marry each other.

Both Greece and Rome required the bride to give the man a dowry. This would be either money, real estate or goods that would be given. In the case of the Romans, the bride’s patres familias would arrange the gift and if he was not able to provide a sufficient dowry then he would have to ask relatives to assist.[[12]](#footnote-12) On the other hand, the Greeks set the dowry during the contract made between the fathers or guardians of the bride and groom. If the bride’s kyrios could not provide a sufficient dowry, he would have to ask relatives and friends like the Romans. The Greeks sometimes took it one step further and would get the state involved to assist with providing the dowry for the bride to give. In the instance of divorce, Greeks would return the dowry to the bride and her family.[[13]](#footnote-13) The Romans would not necessarily give the dowry back, however, in later times when divorce was more frequent, a part of the woman’s possessions coming into the marriage would continue to be hers after the marriage and could include the dowry.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Overall, the Greeks portray to have had more legal processes than the Romans but were less strict about who was able to marry each other. The dowry was more or less the same except the way the dowry was chosen and returned in the event of a divorce. The Greeks and the Romans implemented marriage laws and customs that were very similar to each other but had their own cultural twist on them that made them unique.

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1. Pliny the Younger, “Looking for a Suitable Husband,” In Daily Life in Ancient Rome: A Sourcebook, ed. Brian K. Harvey. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2016), 46-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Harold Johnston, *The Private Life of the Romans* (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1903), 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Pliny the Younger, “Looking for a Suitable Husband,” 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. W. K. Lacey, *The Family in Classical Greece*. (New York: Cornell University Press, 1968), 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Zimmern, Alice. *The Home Life of the Ancient Greeks*. (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1966), 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Justinian, “Laws Governing Marriage,” In Daily Life in Ancient Rome: A Sourcebook, ed. Brian K. Harvey. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2016), 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Johnston, *The Private Life of the Romans,* 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Anonymous, “Age Difference between Husband and Wife,” In Daily Life in Ancient Rome: A Sourcebook, ed. Brian K. Harvey. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2016), 48-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Lacey, *The Family in Classical Greece,* 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Justinian, “Laws Governing Marriage,” 46 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Justinian, “Laws Governing Marriage,” 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Johnston, *The Private Life of the Romans,* 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Zimmern, *The Home Life of the Ancient Greeks,* 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Johnston, *The Private Life of the Romans,* 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)