

UNIVIRA: THE IDEAL ROMAN MATRONA

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INTRODUCTION

The social structure of the Roman Empire has been described as a pyramid, with the very narrow tip being the wealthiest aristocracy, the middle part being the more prosperous upper class of the cities of the Empire, and the broadest part being the vast majority of inhabitants of the Empire who existed at subsistence level¹. The basic unit of the

Roman society was the familia or household, which consisted not only of the members of an immediate family but also relatives living in the house, slaves and freedslaves. This stratification of the society affected her in all areas. Women of the imperial household were restricted to certain duties which were closed to lower class women, such as worship of certain gods or goddesses, membership of certain cults, and the privilege to be vestal virgins. As materfamilias, a woman was concerned with internal affairs, overseeing the social life and directing the education of children of both sexes.

In Rome and her colonies, inscriptional evidence and epitaphs are the major sources through which one can glean the life of Roman women, whether members of the upper or lower class. However, most of these inscriptions were put up by men. Hence, we can only read the expectations and fulfillment of the desires of the husbands or the

absence of such, the marital happiness or lack of it, from the husbands' point of view. In short, the virtues idealized were the expectations of the husbands.

The state of widowhood is brought about by the demise of a husband in a marital relationship. Literary and epigraphic evidence shows that, as a pagan epithet, *univira* had two aspects: the prescriptive, which related to institutional and ritual activities and the descriptive, which was a form of social approbation. In its prescriptive form, *univira* applied to living women who had living husbands; in its descriptive form, it applied to women who predeceased their husbands. In contrast with the prescriptive usage, which remained restricted to women of the social élite, the descriptive usage spread during the Principate to virtually all levels of society². This ideal was possible because most of the women died young, and inscriptions were written by husbands celebrating their unparalleled happiness and marital contentment with the deceased. The *univira* was previously known as the woman with one husband who came to him as a young virgin, *filiafamilias*, and died as his *materfamilias*. By the late Republic, the term was extended to the widow who declined re-marriage out of loyalty to her husband's memory and her children's interest³. Such was Cornelia (180-105 B.C.), mother of the Gracchi, who declined the proposal of marriage from Ptolemy VII Physcon Euergetes and continued to take an avid interest in the political career of her sons, Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, until their demise.

Widows too put up memorials to their husbands, but these were usually trite and commonplace. Julius Classicianus, financial controller (procurator) in Britain, who was very disloyal to the Governor, Suetonius Paulinus, after the suppression of Boudicca's revolt, died in Britain. In London is an inscription erected in his memory by his wife,

Julia Pacta- 'Infelix Uxor', his unfortunate widow, she called herself⁴. In this and virtually all the epitaphs, the dead are extolled.

In a society where life expectancy was short, where the age difference between aristocratic spouses in a first marriage was likely to be eight to ten years, where some young women were likely to die in childbirth, and where periods of civil war or imperial tyranny could also prematurely cut down some of the young men, one would expect that re-marriage after widowhood would be more common than divorce, but divorce was widespread⁵. Re-marriage was in opposition to the age-long ideal of the *univira*, in ancient Rome, but long mourning or widowhood and divorce were discouraged by Augustus, while re-marriage was given total imperial support. Numa, the second King of Rome, was said to have ruled that widows who re-married before the end of a ten-month mourning period for their husbands were to sacrifice a pregnant cow⁶. The Roman one-year-calendar under their leader, Romulus, was formerly of ten months' duration. This became the accepted *legitimum tempus*, period of mourning, for which widows should mourn their husbands. The praetor's edict decreed a penalty of legal infamy against a woman who re-married within ten months of her husband's death⁷.

In historic times, the re-marriage of Octavia to Antony within ten months of the death of her previous husband made a senatorial decree necessary to allow her to cut short her mourning⁸. The motive behind the mourning period was at first religious. The widow was meant to honour her late husband by not re-marrying promptly so that the *manes*, or spirit of her husband would not be offended. Morally, it was considered improper to re-marry within the mourning period, so as not to incur infamy, although the marriage would be considered legal. Similarly, among the Yoruba of Southwestern

Nigeria, respect for the dead would not allow a widow to remarry within a short period of her husband's death. She would be required to observe the customary one year mourning period.

Another reason was to avoid *turbatio sanguinis*, confusion of blood, and uncertainty about the paternity of any child conceived in a second marriage. For instance:

A woman pregnant at her husband's death must be guarded and inspected to ensure that no suppositious child is foisted on the lineage, but, under those safeguards, the mother will be able to claim *missio in possessionem* on behalf of the child to come⁹.

Mourning in the Archaic period was concerned with religious purity, while, in the Classical period, the emphasis was on the moral and biological aspects.

Widows enjoyed a grace period of two years under the Augustan legislation before they were compelled to remarry. From the biological viewpoint, men were not restricted from immediate re-marriage, since it was not their natural role to carry pregnancy. Therefore, there would be no issue of mixture of blood. However, Emperor Caligula did not reduce the mourning period for pregnant widows, although it was considered fit that an undeserving husband should be mourned in order to avoid *turbatio sanguinis*. Similarly, the jurist Labeo was of the opinion that mourning should be reckoned not from the receipt of the news of the husband's death, but from the actual date of death, even in the case where this might mean that the widow donned and abandoned mourning on the same day¹⁰.

In ancient Rome and traditional Yorubaland, a widow in mourning abstained from religious and social activities and continued to put on dark apparels suitable for her bereaved status. And there were widows far too young in their widowhood, probably

because they married too early, which was the standard practice in ancient Rome. The younger widows embraced re-marriage, especially in Pre-colonial Yorubaland where wife inheritance was practiced, while the older ones (those in their 30's) chose not to re-marry. There were widowers who married twice or more. Pliny married thrice, while Pompey married five times. Aemilia and Julia were two of Pompey's wives whom he lost to death through childbirth.

Seneca, in a lost fragment on marriage, discussed the reactions of some *univirae* to remarriage. These were women who were contented with their single marriage and never wanted to change that condition. They were the faithful and loyal widows who did not want to tarnish the memories they had of their late husbands, among whom was Paullina, who was praised for keeping the memory of Seneca fresh. Anstistia Pollita, the widow of Rubellius Plautus, the Stoic who was executed by Nero's agents in 62 AD, displayed her mourning openly. She carried her husband's lifeless body in her arms. She saved his blood and kept his bloody clothes. She wore black and kept her hair long. She later committed suicide with her father and grandmother. Antonia (daughter of Mark Antony and wife of Drusus) was 27 years old when she became a widow, and she refused to be coerced into re-marrying by Emperor Augustus. She was, however, very close to Emperor Tiberius, but they never had a sexual relationship. The women mentioned in the excerpt below were also *univirae*:

When Cato's younger daughter **Marcia** was in mourning for her husband and women asked her when her mourning would end, she said "At the same time as my life". When a relative advised **Annia** to marry again, since she was still young and handsome, she said, "I never will. Suppose I find a good husband; I do not want to live in constant dread of losing him. If I pick a bad one, why, after the best of husbands, must I put up with the worst? When somebody was praising

a nice woman who had married for the second time, the younger **Porcia** said, “A woman who is really happy and chaste never marries more than once”. When her mother asked the elder **Marcella** if she was glad that she had married, she answered, “Blissfully. That is why I should never marry again”. **Valeria**, sister of the Messalae, when asked why she would never marry again after the death of her husband Servius, said, “As far as I am concerned, he is alive still, and always will be”¹¹.

There were widows who were prevented from re-marrying. Agrippina the elder, widow of Germanicus in A.D. 19, and Livilla, widow of the younger Drusus in A.D. 23, who had given birth to nine and three children, respectively, would have been expected, quite naturally, to carry on with their lives by choosing new partners but were forbidden to do so by their joint father-in-law, Emperor Tiberius. He refused to grant them the right of re-marriage because he felt that dangerous political rivals could infiltrate the heart of the *domus Caesarum*. It was certainly this *adfinitas*, imperial alliance, to which Sejanus, the prefect of the Praetorian Guard, was aspiring, through his affair with Livilla. As for the elder Agrippina, she was hoping, perhaps, to marry Asinus Gallus, widower of her half-sister, Vipsania, who was the ex-wife of Tiberius¹².

Augustus' 18 B.C legislation on marriage centered on morals and the production of citizen children to replenish the almost depleted Roman army and senatorial class. The Augustan legislation encouraged widows to re-marry and prohibited free sex with widowed upper class women. Marriage was strongly recommended. Hence the Romans practised successive polygamy or multiple marriages. A man could decide not to re-marry if he had enough heirs from his previous marriage. But he could take on a concubine out of loneliness, thereby staying faithful to the memory of his late wife. In any case, because of physical nourishment, he needed to have a bedmate, companion and

chatelaine. Conversely, there were also men who married once, for instance, Laelius, Germanicus and Staius' father.

Augustus presented himself as reviving traditional morals, but his attempts to compel widows to re-marry were themselves at odds with the long-standing Roman ideal of the *univira*. The origin of this tradition was probably sacral and, to some extent, moral, rather than sentimental, but it came to be associated with the love and loyalty of a widow for her husband. By the late Republic, it was very common for divorcees and widows to re-marry, but the ideal persisted¹³.

A woman in the 1st Century B.C., popularly called Turia, was celebrated as a *univira* by her husband. Also, Livia, Augustus' widow, was celebrated as a *univira* because of her cordial and long marriage to Augustus, but Livia had been previously married. In traditional terms, she did not qualify for this title. She was later declared sacrosanct in 35 B.C. Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi and daughter of Scipio Africanus; Cornelia, wife of Lucius Aemilius Paullus; Lucretia, wife of Tarquin Collatinus; and Matidia, Hadrian's mother-in-law, were some of the upper class *univirae*. But there were women who married twice and were still celebrated as 'honorary *univirae*'. Such included Livia Augusta, whom Ovid felt did not deserve to be so called and Marcia, Cato's wife. Cato was formerly married to Atilia, whom he divorced on grounds of moral misconduct. There was a twist to a version of Cato's second marriage, which stated that Cato divorced his wife, and she married Hortensius. Another version said that Cato lent his wife to Hortensius in order to have children by her, since he (Cato) was satisfied with the number of children he had.

In both versions, Marcia obeyed her husband, and at the death of Hortensius, she went back to Cato. By that time, she was a wealthy woman, because of the enormous inheritance bequeathed to her by Hortensius. She demonstrated one of the Roman virtues which matrons were admired for: wifely obedience. She pleased her husband at every turn.

Epitaphs on the Idealized Virtues of the *Univira*

Sepulchral inscriptions were meant for passers-by to see and accept, as admirable, the strong family ties or otherwise between couples in a valid Roman marriage. Epitaphs cut across all classes of the highly stratified Roman society. They preserve moral ideals in women, not as historical facts as such, but as models, public and private, expected in their lives. Every woman's life was surrounded by a thick silence imposed upon her by the outer world and by the woman herself. It was considered unseemly for outsiders to praise a woman's virtues, for her talents and abilities could find expression only within her home. No one but her closest relatives could know anything of her merits. The members of her family were the only persons permitted to speak of her to others, hence the copious inscriptions put up by the menfolk at the death of these women¹⁴. The epitaphs below are illustrative:

Hospes, quod deico, Paullum est, asta ac pellege
 Hic est sepulcrum hau pulcrum pulcrae feminae
 Nomen parentes nominarunt claudiam
 Suom mareitum corde deilexit socio
 Gnatos duos creavit, horunc alterum
 in terra linquit, alium sub terra locat
 Sermone lepido, tum autem incessu commodo Domum
 servavit, lanam fecit. Dixi. Abei.

CIL VI, 15346

Friend, I have not much to say; stop and read it. This tomb, which is not fair, is for a fair woman. Her parents gave her the name Claudia. She loved her husband in her heart. She bore two sons, one of whom she left on earth, the other beneath it. She was pleasant to talk with, and she walked with grace. She kept the house and worked in wool. That is all. You may go.

Hic sita est Amymone Marci optima et pulcherrima,
lanifica, pia, pudica, frugi, casta, domiseda.
CIL VI, 11602.

Here lies Marcus' (wife) Amymone, the best and most beautiful, busy at her wool working, devoted, modest, thrifty, chaste, happy to stay at home.

The Romans appreciated values, such as austerity, submissiveness to the head of the household, and respectful observance of the state and family religion. The foregoing epitaphs extolled such virtues. Roman men praised their deceased wives to high heavens for displaying dexterity in *lanificium*, wool-working and *domiseda*, staying at home. Every Roman girl, whether freeborn or freed, was taught spinning and woolworking at a very early age. She was required to be able to work in wool in order to clothe her entire household. Wool-working also had a moral function; it was a symbol of honesty. Hence, hands which would otherwise have been idle were gainfully employed. A woman's role in the home was to complement her husband's activity in the forum. 'Happy to stay at home' signified a woman's lack of interest in social life outside the house. She was compliant and contented with her natural matronly role. Amymone, in the second epitaph, portrays these sterling qualities.

Et nihil extremos perdidit ante rogos:
Quinque dedit pueros, totidem mihi Iuno paellas;

Cluserunt omnes lumina nostra manus.contigit et thalami
mihi Gloria rara fuitque una pudicitiae mentula nota meae.

And up to the time my funeral pyre at last was lit, my virtue
knew no loss. Five sons and as many daughters Juno gave
me; the hands of all of them closed my eyes. And rare
honour fell to my wedded lot: my chastity knew only one
penis. (Martial, *Epigram X.63*)

The woman described above knew only one man in her entire life. She was even
more fortunate that all her children survived her.

Wives were praised for self-sacrifice and lack of pretentiousness in marriage.

d.m.s. Urbanae Coniugi dulcissimae et castissimae ac
rarissimae, cuius praeclarius nihil fuisse certus, hoc etiam
Titulo honorari meruit, quae ita mecum cum Summa
iucunditate adque simplicitate in diem Vitae suae egit quam
adfectioni coniugali tam industria morum suorum. Haec
ideo adieci, ut legentes intellegant, quantum nos
dilexerimus. Paternus b.m.f.

CIL VI, 29580

Sacred to the spirits of the Deceased.

To Urbana, the sweetest, most chaste and exceptional wife.
I am sure that nothing has been more wonderful than her.
She deserves to be honored by this inscription, since she
spent her whole life with me utterly joyfully and without
complication, with both married affection and with
characteristic hardwork. I have added these words so that
those who read them may understand how deeply we loved
one another. Paternus set this up to her who deserved it.

Urbana was a *univira* who was blissfully happy with her husband. She was also hard-
working and chaste. *Castitas*, chastity, was foremost on most epitaphs, because it denoted
sexual purity. Most of the women who had chastity on their epitaphs were also *univirae*.
Such women were dedicated to their families, and their husbands occupied a paramount
position in their lives, as shown in the following epitaphs:

d.m.s. Postumia Matronilla incomparabilis coniux, mater bona, avia piissima, pudica religiosa laboriosa frugi efficax vigilans sollicita univira unicuba (t) otius industriae et fidei matrona, vixit annis. n. LIII mensibus n.v. diebus tribus.

CIL VIII, 11294

Sacred to the spirits of the Deceased, Postumia Matronilla was a wife without peer, a good mother, a dutiful grandmother, modest, pious, hard-working, thrifty, active, wakeful, caring, she married one man and slept with one man; she was a matron who worked hard and could be relied upon. She lived for 53 years, 5 months and 3 days.

Coniugi Sanctissimae ac benignissimae cuius vita morum studiorumq. laudibus et universis virtutum animi tam clara exstitit ut admirabilia veteris probitatis exempla superavit quo merito omniumque iudicio singulari praeconio Inlustrium matronarum decus ornamentumq. Est abita.

CIL XI, 831.

To a most reverend and loving wife, whose life was so outstanding for her praiseworthy habits and all the virtues of her character that she surpassed the exemplars of ancient probity. By the judgement of all and their unparalleled commendation, she deservedly was held to be the glory and ornament of all famous women.

The above inscriptions showed the significance and emphasis which the average Roman male placed on duty and deserving behavior, especially the ideal of *univira*. *Fides* and affection between couples, the love, which the dead partner inspired or the sweetness of her nature while the marriage lasted, were the attributes which men praised in women who had only one husband.

Literary Evidence on the Ideal of *Univira*

In the lower class of the Roman society, re-marriage must have been the common destiny of women and, thus, was not especially praiseworthy. This practice was common among the upper echelon, where wives seem to have been circulated. This was the case of Cato, Hortensius, and Marcia. However, the decision of a woman like Cornelia to remain *univira* signified that she had dedicated herself to the memory of her only husband, devoting herself to bringing up her children in a life of renunciation that would serve as a model for all future *univirae*. This is succinctly captured below:

A woman who never had women's defects. Daughter of a hero, wife of an aristocrat and mother of champions of the Roman people, Cornelia was admired for her fecundity, virtue, fidelity, and traditional modesty, not least, her intelligence. She was the standard by which Roman matrons were measured and has been remembered as the ideal of Roman womanhood for two millennia¹⁵.

Cornelia had a strong influence on her children's education and political career because she herself was well-versed in the arts of literature, rhetoric and philosophy. She personally chose her sons' tutors. Blossius of Cumae and Diophanes of Mytilene were Tiberius' tutors, who also played important roles in his political career¹⁶. Cornelia was said to have borne all her misfortunes nobly and magnanimously and to have said about the shrines where her sons were buried that their bodies had received worthy tombs. She was most admirable because she did not grieve for her sons. She talked to her audience about their sufferings and their accomplishments without weeping, as if she were telling stories to them about the ancient heroes of Rome. She referred to her children as her jewels, and this won her more admiration at a time other upper class women were acquiring jewels as ornaments. Cornelia enjoyed a fame that was unusual for women of

her time, among whom we may reasonably conclude that she distinguished herself. This fame depended not only on her noble descent and virtuous behavior, but also and, more importantly, on her cultural and intellectual abilities¹⁷. She was remembered for chastity, modesty, univirate and maternal love for the edification of posterity.

In ancient Rome, tombstones were erected in order to memorialize the dead and particularly to show the world the strong family ties and deep affection between husband and wife. On epitaphs, wives were praised for their lack of guile, for dedication to their families and for adoring their husbands. They lived in harmony, *concordia*, which may also be described as agreement between husband and wife, resulting from trust and sympathy. This was a feature of long marriages, and some marriages lasted as long as 35, 48 and 50 years. The funeral oration and epitaphs below aptly capture the foregoing assertion:

Murdia. Rome, 1st cen b.c

She made all her sons equal heirs, after she gave a bequest to her daughter.

A mother's love is composed of her affection for her children and equal distribution to each child.

She willed her husband (the speaker's stepfather) a fixed sum, so that his dower would be increased by the honour of her deliberate choice.

Recalling my father's memory and taking account of it and of the trust she owed him, she bequeathed certain property to me. She did so not in order to wound my brothers by preferring me to them, but remembering my father's generosity, she decided that I should have returned to me the part of my inheritance which she had received by the decision of her husband, so that what had been taken care of by his orders should be restored to my ownership.

Still my dearest mother deserved greater praise than all others, since in modesty, propriety, chastity, obedience, wool-working, industry, and loyalty she was on equal level with other good women, nor did she take second place to any woman in virtue, work and wisdom in times of danger¹⁸.

Dutifulness, which included house-keeping, wool-working, piety, righteousness, thrift, industry and spinning showed the high moral standards displayed by Roman women and these functions kept them busy and enabled them focus on their families. A busy woman would not have time for riotous living and adultery. This would guarantee her as a “stay at home” (wife). *Pudicitia* would be the conscience preventing the woman from shameful actions. Her sexual integrity and scrupulousness would be beyond reproach. Her kindness and courtesy brought out her inner beauty and loveliness.

Fides, reciprocal and unalloyed loyalty, encouraged and promoted respect and co-operation between spouses, while *obsequium*, that is obedience, compliance and complaisance, brought about good fortune and compatibility. Wives were often thought of as partners, *sociae*, which might, but needed not, imply equality. Yet there was equality, at least of love or effort. In the words of Richmond Lattimore:

It is impossible to determine just what proportion of these decorous sayings express conviction, but at least we can conclude that they outline an ideal, and that this ideal concedes considerable importance to the position of women in the household. They are thought of, not as subject or dependent, but as free partners, and the success of the family is thought dependent in large measure on their qualities. Were these not generally the case, no Roman widower would have taken the trouble to write even a false encomium on the gravestones¹⁹.

Conclusion

This paper has established that some Roman women stayed univirae in spite of societal pressure. They played an important role in the society, not only as breeders of children, but also as transmitters of cultural values. By nursing their children at their own breasts, they were bound to them and had interest in their education. As a result, Roman women performed a task useful not only to the family but also to the society, for they helped transmit the fathers' cultural heritage and were instrumental in the development of great men. However, this is a virtue which should be emulated by contemporary women in order to bring decency to the institution of family which Westernisation is fast eroding.

As a way of appreciating the contributions and virtues of Roman women, their husbands and male relatives immortalized them in the emotions expressed on epitaphs and in orations. It appears that these virtues were innate in Roman women and, therefore, societal pressure was incapable of repressing them.

ENDNOTES

¹Evans Grubbs (2002) *Women and the Law in the Roman Empire* New York, Routledge, p.6.

²Lightman, M. and Zeisel, W. (1977) 'Univira: An Example of Continuity and Change in Roman Society', *American Society of Church History* 46 (1), p.24

³Dixon, S. (1992) *The Roman Family*, Johns Hopkins: Baltimore, p.89

⁴Balsdon, J. P. V. D. (1962) *Roman Women: Their History and Habits* London: Bodley Head, p.208

⁵Rawson, B (1996) *Marriage, Divorce and Children in Ancient Rome*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p.55

⁶Ibid.

⁷Plutarch: Numa 12 in *Women's Lives in Greece and Rome* (1992)

⁸Treggiari, S.M. (1991) *Marriage: Iusti coniuges from the Time of Cicero to the time of Ulpian*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p.494.

⁹Gardner J, 1986: 31

¹⁰Gardner, J. F. (1986) *Women in Roman law and society*, London: Croom Helm, pp.53-54

¹¹Balsdon, J. P. V. D. (1962) *Roman Women: Their History and Habits* London: Bodley Head, p.208.

¹²Syme R. (1986)“Marriage ages for Roman Senators”, *History* 36, pp.318-320

¹³Dixon, S. (1988) *The Roman Mother*, London and Norman, Oklahoma, p.22

¹⁴Fraschetti, A. (Ed.) (2001) *Roman Women*: University of Chicago Press, p.8

¹⁵Lefkowitz, M. R. and Fant, M. B. (1992) *Women's life in Greece and Rome*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University press, p.21 cf. Plutarch, *Life of Gaius Gracchus* 4.3, 19.1-3.

¹⁶Ibid

¹⁷Fraschetti, A. (Ed.) (2001) *Roman Women*: University of Chicago Press, p.35

¹⁸Lefkowitz, M. R. and Fant, M. B. (1992) *Women's life in Greece and Rome*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University press, p.18.

¹⁹Lattimore, R. (1962) *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, p.280

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