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# Agrarian economy and the marriage cycle of Roman women

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On 27 September, 1918, Sir James Frazer wrote a letter to W. H. D. Rouse who was then co-editor of the Loeb Classical Library with the purpose of rejoining the great translation project.<sup>1</sup> After some negotiation, Frazer settled on the *Bibliotheca* of Apollodoros, a work that he hurried to completion by the end of 1919. The next work that he proposed to translate was Ovid's *Fasti*, but in this case Frazer contemplated, as it were, a double coup. He planned to exploit the research that he would do for the Loeb translation by issuing a concurrent 5-volume commentary to be published by MacMillan. A series of letters dating to 1923 reveal the intricacies of the negotiations between Heinemann's, the publishers of the Loeb Classical Library, and MacMillan's — arrangements that had to be undertaken to avoid the obvious conflicts entailed in publishing two similar works almost simultaneously.<sup>2</sup> The circumstances and the man are worth remembering, since it was Sir James Frazer who canonized the answer to my question: At what time of the year did Roman women tend to marry? He provided the answer within the context of his translation of Ovid's *Fasti* for the Loeb Library and the research enshrined in his 5-volume commentary. His answer was the month of June. He was wrong.

## The problem

The problem of nuptiality in the Roman world has occasioned much discussion, and some speculation, about the ages at which Roman girls and women tended to enter into their first marriage.<sup>3</sup> This debate has been joined by one concerning the same problem for men, although the latter investigation has not yet been conducted with the same intensity.<sup>4</sup> As far as a general history of population is concerned, age-at-first-marriage is indeed an issue of considerable importance. But the energy lavished on it has perhaps tended to divert attention from another deeper structure of social rhythm that is as typical of a marrying population as is the age at first marriage, namely the seasonal oscillations in the frequency of marrying. As with other patterns that mark critical turning-points in human life-cycles, seasonal cycles of marriage tend to remain relatively fixed over long periods of time. Like seasonal patterns in birthing, the seasonal cycles of marriage tend to remain typical of any given cultural group when its population profiles are compared with those of any other.<sup>5</sup> To be able to discover this seasonal oscillation is therefore to reveal something fundamental about the population concerned, and it contributes to a more precise fixing of that population's demographic type. Seasonal patterns of human behaviour, such as those for marriage and birthing, are much like a 'fingerprint' that serves to identify the population type with the principal factors that have contributed to its peculiar configuration.<sup>6</sup> Thus a simple question of fact emerges as an important query. Just when

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1 R. Ackerman, "Return to the classics," ch. 16 in *J. G. Frazer, his life and work* (Cambridge 1987, repr. 1990) 278-300, at 278. This was not Frazer's first involvement with the series. As early as 1910, its founder James Loeb had asked Frazer to be the general editor of the Classical Library for its prospective British publisher MacMillan. Frazer had withdrawn from the offer when MacMillan refused to publish the series (calculating that it was too risky a commercial venture).

2 Ackerman, *ibid.* 292-94.

3 B. D. Shaw, "The age of Roman girls at marriage: some reconsiderations," *JRS* 77 (1987) 30-46; and "The age of Roman women at first marriage: a revision of the Christian evidence," forthcoming, where the earlier studies are cited, especially those by K. Hopkins, "The age of Roman girls at marriage," *Population Studies* 18 (1964-65) 309-27, and by C. Carletti, "Aspetti biometrici del matrimonio nelle iscrizioni cristiane di Roma," *Augustinianum* 17 (1977) 39-51.

4 R. Saller, "Men's age at marriage and its consequences in the Roman family," *CPh* 82 (1987) 21-34, who cites the earlier literature.

5 For an explication of these regularities, with specific reference to the Roman case, see B. D. Shaw, "The seasonal birthing cycle of Roman women," forthcoming.

6 Referees for *JRA* objected that the question of the seasonality of marriage patterns is 'not as important' as girls' / women's age-at-first-marriage. If one is fixed on the problem of understanding the quantitative