

## **Representations of Elite Roman Marriage**

**Rachel Meyers**

The following is a synopsis of my presentation “Representations of Elite Roman Marriage,” delivered in the session *Perspectives on Roman Marriage* at the American Classical League Institute on July 26, 2011. I began my research by looking at the *dextrarum iunctio* on Roman sarcophagi, but this has now evolved into a greater project on funerary commemoration. For that reason, I wish to refrain from publishing my entire paper at this time.

The *dextrarum iunctio*, shown on a number of sarcophagi from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, has been interpreted by many scholars as symbolizing the wedding ceremony.<sup>1</sup> But the “joining of right hands” is not part of what makes marriage legal, nor does it seem to have been part of the ceremony itself. The term *dextrarum iunctio* was introduced only in the 4<sup>th</sup> century by Claudian<sup>2</sup>, yet the handclasp has a long history in Greek, Etruscan, and Roman art, as Glenys Davies (1985) has shown. So why, then, have scholars assumed that the gesture, especially on sarcophagi, stands in for the wedding ceremony itself? In this presentation I briefly explain the legal definition of marriage, show images of *dextrarum iunctio* in Roman art, and explain the significance of the gesture.

A number of so-called biographical sarcophagi produced during the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries portray a man and woman clasping right hands among other scenes. For example, one sarcophagus now in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art portrays, from left to right, a battle scene, figure facing disheveled individuals, pleading with him; a scene of sacrifice; and a man and woman clasping right hands in the presence of other figures. Rodenwaldt (1935) first came up with the notion that these scenes do not refer to specific events but rather to types of events or milestones in the deceased’s life. Furthermore these biographical scenes were selected because they refer to the most important virtues for an aristocratic man. According to this idea, which is supported by several other scholars, including Natalie Kampen and Glenys Davies, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Rossbach 1853 was the first scholar to emphasize the *dextrarum iunctio* in the marriage ceremony. Cf. Hersch 2010, 199.

<sup>2</sup> Claudian 25,128-9.

*dextrarum iunctio* does not refer specifically to the wedding ceremony itself but rather to an experience that was marked by *concordia*, the feeling of marital harmony.

Scenes of figures joining hands in Greek, Etruscan, and early Roman funerary art have often been interpreted as moments of greeting or parting. During the Antonine age in the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, the hand-clasp gesture came to symbolize the marital harmony between the imperial couple. On numerous coins produced under Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius, and Lucius Verus we can see the message Concordia and various forms of *dextrarum iunctio* stamped on the reverses. The notion that the clasping of hands should symbolize the virtue of *concordia* in marriage gains support from a study of funerary epitaphs from Rome and other areas. With the available evidence we can construe that the gesture of *dextrarum iunctio* does not necessarily refer to a wedding ceremony but to the feeling of harmony between the deceased and his or her spouse. Because concord was an esteemed value to the Romans, many chose to record it on their funerary monuments, along with the representations of other virtues.

### **Texts Significant to Roman Marriage**

Digest 23.2.2

Ulpian 5.2-10

Claudian 25.128-129.

### **Selection of Roman Monuments that include *dextrarum iunctio***

1. Funerary Relief of Sextus Maelius Stabilio, Vesinia Iucunda, and Sextus Maelius Faustus.  
Raleigh Museum of Art.
2. Portonaccio Sarcophagus. Rome, Museo Nazionale inv. 112327. ca. 190-200
3. Medici-Riccardi sarcophagus. Florence, Opera del Duomo
4. Pisa Camposanto sarcophagus
5. Sarcophagus of striated marble. Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, ca. 270-280.
6. Senatorial sarcophagus ("The Brothers Sarcophagus"). Naples National Archaeological Museum, ca. 260.
7. Biographical sarcophagus of Roman general. LA County Museum of Art 47.8.9. ca. 160-180.
8. Wedding sarcophagus. Vatican Museum. (*dextrarum iunctio* omitted but marriage alluded to)
9. Sarcophagus with married couple. State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. ca. 180
10. San Lorenzo fuori le Mura (Rome) ca. 210-220 [see Reekmans fig. 10]
12. Florence, Uffizi no. 253

13. Now in the Louvre from Frascati (Villa Taverna)
14. Palazzo Ducale in Mantua
15. Sarcophagus with two representations of *dextrarum iunctio* and Dioscuri. Musée de Arles Antique. ca. 380-390.
16. Fragment from front of sarcophagus, *dextrarum iunctio* with attendant. British Museum GR1805.7-3.143. Mid- to late- 2<sup>nd</sup> cent.
17. Panel from lid of sarcophagus, *dextrarum iunctio* with attendant deities. British Museum GR1911.4-17.1. Antonine period.

*\*images of most monuments can be found in the works in the bibliography*

### **Selected Bibliography**

Davies, G. "The Significance of the Handshake Motif in Classical Funerary Art," *American Journal of Archaeology* 89 (1985): 627-640.

Hersch, K. *The Roman Wedding. Ritual and Meaning in Antiquity*. (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Kampen, N. "Biographical Narration and Roman Funerary Art," *American Journal of Archaeology* 85 (1981): 47-58.

Reekmans, L. "La 'dextrarum iunctio' dans l'iconographie romaine et paleochretienne," *Bulletin de Institut historique belge de Rome* 31 (1959): 23-95.

Rodenwaldt, G. "Über den Stilwandel in der antoninischen Kunst," *Abhandlungen der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse* 3 (1935): 1-27.

Treggiari, S. *Roman Marriage. Iusti Coniuges from the Time of Cicero to the Time of Ulpian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).