

## The Roman *gens* as House: Understanding the Development of the *gens* through a House Society Model

Scholarly study of the Roman *gens* (pl. *gentes*) has a long and contentious history. Major areas of dispute include the relationship between the plebeian/patrician class structure and the *gens*, the interconnection (or lack thereof) between the *gens* and the state, comparison between the *gens* and other kinship group types, the supposed egalitarianism of the early *gens*, and the changing function of the *gens* over the course of the Republic. Importantly, an overview of the traditional evidence and modern interpretations reveal that the *gens* was not a static social system but rather one that evolved as the Roman state itself evolved and one that changed as the relationship between the *gens* and other forms of connectedness developed over time (Smith 2006).

A review of recent scholarship reveals a great interest in understanding the details of the development and origin of this social system. However, such a goal necessarily requires more data than the primary textual evidence, the normal resource for studies of the *gens*, can offer. Endeavors to advance beyond these texts have been mostly restricted to the classical world and comparisons with the Greek *genos*. For discussions of this topic to continue to progress, different heuristic models must be utilized to take advantage of all available data, whether it be textual, archaeological, or via ethnographic comparison. We propose as a beneficial model to utilize the concept of a “house society” as developed by Lévi-Strauss and taken up by numerous scholars since. This model allows for the expansion of the concept of Roman kinship beyond the traditional genealogical focus on patrilineal relationships to other types of relatedness within the system. It also reinforces the dynamic nature of the *gens* as it evolves within a larger socio-political framework.

Lévi-Strauss defined a house as “a moral person, keeper of a domain composed altogether of material and immaterial property, which perpetuates itself by the transmission of its name, of its fortune, and of its titles in a real or fictive line held as legitimate on the sole condition that this continuity can express itself in the language of kinship or of alliance, and, most often, of both together” (Levi-Strauss 1979, 47; as translated by Gillisepie 2007, 33). This paper will explore how our evidence for the Roman *gens* fits within this model, and how the model may be used to shed light on the development of the *gens*, although leaving behind Levi-Strauss’ evolutionary theories of progress and advancement.

This paper will primarily use literary and epigraphic evidence to shed light on the early *gens*, aiming to complement recent archaeological evidence that points to clan-based development at Rome (Terrenato 2011). This naturally requires an analysis of the literary accounts of early Rome and a critical, but optimistic approach to the sources, especially Livy. We argue that the portrayal of the power of the *gens* in the Twelve Tables, the attitudes towards ancestors and in the tomb of the Scipios, evidence for gentilical property, as well as military action and the *gens* such as Fabii at Cremera and the enigmatic evidence of the *lapis Satricanus* help create an image of the early *gens* which places it within a house society context. Further, this model reconnects the Roman *gens* with the larger world of anthropological kinship studies from which it has been long absent. Ultimately this will allow for more sophisticated cross-cultural comparison and hypothesis formation than currently occurs.

#### Bibliography

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