

Family in Medieval Society

Subjects: [Biology](#) | [Family Studies](#) | [Anthropology](#)

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One of the periods with the greatest social, cultural, and religious changes was, without a doubt, the European medieval period. The concept of “*Family*” was one of the fields that gradually evolved, from individuals who shared the same biological lineage, to members of the same “*House*”. One of the ways to study the concept of “*Family*” in ancient periods is through a bioarchaeological perspective, where both anthropology and genetics have proven to be essential disciplines for studying “*Families*”. Through burial rituals, observing whether the graves were single or multiple, as is carried out in the study of human remains, it discusses the profound contribution of anthropology to the “*Family*” investigation, through mobility studies, the investigation of biological sex, observing certain congenital anomalies or, even, the study of certain ancient infectious diseases. Concerning genetics, the study of bones or teeth allows us to determine whether individuals were from the same close family or if they belonged to the same lineage through the maternal and paternal sides, being one of the only scientific ways of proposing social relationships between individuals, such as that created through adoption.

[family](#)[bioarchaeology](#)[Middle Ages](#)[anthropology](#)[genetics](#)

1. Introduction

One of the periods of greatest cultural and social exchange was the European medieval period (the 5th century A.D. to the 15th century A.D., approximately). Europe, the scene of profound previous transformations, from the Neolithic period to the Bronze Age ([Bloxam 2023](#)), during and after the Roman period in the West ([Maschek 2024](#)), was faced with social transformations brought about by different cultures, such as Jews and Muslims, during the medieval period. One of the reasons for the interest in studying the concept of “family” in medieval Europe is precisely the possibility that it was one of the social areas where human beings experienced the most changes. From the concept and form of “marriage”, through the concepts of “being the son of” and “house of societies” developed by [Lévi-Strauss \(1984, 1987\)](#) and [Lévi-Strauss and Modelski \(1999\)](#), the concept of “family” was shaped in medieval European society, in a context where the word of religion was gaining increasing prominence.

According to Johann Bachofen, in the 19th century, the first humans were organized into matriarchal family groups. Potentially, “*the father figure*” later replaced “*the Mother*” as the leader of society ([Allen 1999](#)), as the “*Man, the hunter*”, and as a central figure leaving “*the family*” and “*maternal*” perception ([Maynes and Waltner 2012](#)), although this perspective may be more of a result of the interpretation of scientists and does not really correspond to the reality of that time ([Anderson et al. 2023](#)). Concerning the Neolithic period in Europe, it is probable that the vision of the “*group*” changed, since now it searches for permanence and prosperity ([Maynes and Waltner 2012](#)). The evidence about the Bronze Age does not demonstrate substantial contrasts between women and men,

indicating possible equality within the “*family group*” already from infancy ([Whitehouse 2006](#)). Two important periods to consider just before Medieval Europe were those of Greek society and the Roman Empire. In both civilizations, the “*family*” was already considered the “*social unit*” ([Moulton 1998](#)).

2. Defining Family in the Middle Ages

The family was a plastic concept, since before the mid-17th century, when “*baptism certificates going back to grandparents*” began to be available, belonging to a lineage depended largely on oral tradition. On the other hand, according to [Casey and Hernández-Franco \(1997\)](#), in the conditions of pre-industrial society, it is crucial to emphasize raising someone in someone else’s home, since King Alfonso the Wise himself indicated that “*raising someone within your home, was a relative or not, it is one of the greatest “blessings” that one person can give to another*”, and that the lucky one “*must honour the one who raised him in all things and has revered him well as if he were his father*” ([Casey and Hernández-Franco 1997](#)). According to [Herlihy \(1983\)](#), what distinguished families in the medieval world were three different ideas, based on “*a particular composition, a particular structure, and a particular set of emotional ties binding the members*”, indicating that households were generally uniform in medieval societies, whether in urban or rural areas, or “*up or down the scale of wealth*”.

3. Religion and the Family “Construction”

The European “medieval world” was multi-cultural, comprising an extensive range of geographical regions, from the Mediterranean to the Baltic Seas, and from the Atlantic coast of North Africa to the Central Asian Mongolian Khanate of the Golden Horn ([Mitchell 2007](#)). Traditionally, four cultures were considered predominant: the Roman–Germanic culture in Western Europe, the Byzantine Empire in the eastern Mediterranean, the Muslim culture of the southern Mediterranean, and that of Jews. Although Jews have always been distinct from other cultures in terms of their customs, they have always been found together with the previously mentioned cultural practices ([Mitchell 2007](#)). Religion is an essential piece in the medieval life puzzle. On the one hand, although Muslims and Jews have their proper customs, in European medieval societies, they lived more or less following the laws of each country or region, especially regarding polygamy, which was prohibited in most medieval European societies.

In practically most medieval European societies, Roman-Christian precepts were followed, especially concerning “family morality”. It was probably not until the 12th century that the Catholic Church proposed a structured *Canon Law* of marriage. Previously, *Secular Law*, Roman legislation, or the “barbarian” codes had guided the conduct of Christians concerning marital and domestic issues. Indeed, the 6th century *Corpus Juris Civilis* of Emperor Justinian permitted divorce, similarly to Roman law. Until the 12th century, the Church limited its interferences in matrimonial concerns due to issues of *sin* and *penitence* ([Herlihy 1987](#)). Marital contracts, dowry, bride wealth, and inheritance were *secular* issues. Indeed, according to [Herlihy \(1987\)](#), the Church “*looked upon the state of matrimony as distinctly inferior to virginity and even to widowhood*” ([McNamara 1983](#)). However, Christian doctrines exerted an intense effect on aptness for marriage ([Ozment 1983](#)), assuming the requirements of Roman

law concerning the age of the subjects of marriage (twelve completed years for girls and fourteen for boys) and sexual maturity ([Herlihy 1987](#)).

One of the fields in which the Church deeply intervened was that of the “*incest question*”, in response to which it increased the prohibitions to the full seven degrees, coinciding with ancient Jewish law ([Goody 1983](#)). On the other hand, the Church’s insistence on monogamy encountered fierce opposition among the European elites, as several scholars have shown ([Wemple 1981](#)). According to [Herlihy \(1987\)](#), incest prevention meant that “*after the death of her husband, the widow cannot marry any male already in her household—not her father-in-law, not a brother-in-law, not a stepfather, or stepbrother*”.

In general, the Church developed some general principles of significant implication in the future. For example, sexual morality had to be the same for both sexes ([McNamara 1983](#)), all nationalities, and all social classes. Furthermore, the union of husband and wife was both “*privileged and permanent*”. Indeed, based on Ephesians 5.21-33, there is an analogy between the conjugal union and the relationship of “*Christ to the Church*”.

In this sense, the history of medieval religion is deeply bonded with the history of the *family*. The monogamy regulation ([Ozment 1983](#)) and the incest prohibition somehow homogenized household units within this medieval society. According to [Herlihy \(1987\)](#), no other motivations so strongly influenced the behaviour of medieval society as “*family interests*” and “*religious commitments*”.

The Marriage

Marriages in early medieval Europe resembled the earlier ‘barbarian’ model, where men and women were roughly the same age at their first marriage, and they married in their middle or late twenties ([Herlihy 1985](#)). The dominant form of marital *transfer* in early medieval Europe, from the barbarian movements until the 12th century, was the inverse dowry ([Herlihy 1983, 1985](#)). In terms of both the age of marriage and the terms of marriage, “barbarian” or late ancient practices, rather than the customs of classical Rome, provided the basic models of marriages in the early medieval West ([Herlihy 1985](#)).

In the 12th century, Pope Alexander III (1159–1189) affirmed that the spoken consent of the eligible partners alone made the marriage valid and binding. The Church asserted that “*no one and no institution can interfere with the right of a man and a woman, otherwise eligible, to marry or not to marry*” ([Herlihy 1985](#)). Feudal lords lost control over the marriages of their serfs, and even the Church saw its authority diminish since it no longer needed the blessing of a priest ([Herlihy 1983](#)). In northern European countries, the bride’s endowment “in the face of the church” was the main proof that a legitimate marriage had taken place ([Herlihy 1985](#)). Perhaps most decisively, the principle challenged the authority of the parents, fathers specifically, who might seek to arrange, or prevent, the marriages of their offspring ([Herlihy 1985, 1987](#)).

Throughout medieval Europe, the terms of marriage were gradually modified to shift the burden of the matter onto the bride and her family. Italy is an example of the clear change, where documents refer to the *dos* in its classical sense of the bride’s dowry ([Herlihy 1985](#)). Outside of Italy, the wealth of local traditions, their uncertainties, and the

restricted number of surviving marriage arrangements make it difficult to trace a firm evolution, but, according to [Herlihy \(1985\)](#), there is much evidence that the treatment of women in marriage agreements was deteriorating from the late 12th century.

On the other hand, the Iberian kingdoms maintained the "older practices" of grooms giving money to brides the longest, until the 13th century. According to [Herlihy \(1985\)](#), some possible factors could respond to this different reality in early medieval Iberia. Women were probably valued members of the household. At the aristocratic level, they performed important administrative functions, from managing estates to making annual rewards to the knights at court. At lower social levels, women played a central role in many production processes, such as the manufacture of cloth, including such skilled operations as dyeing. During the Middle and Late Middle Ages, women lost some of these roles. The growth of administrative firms and departments limited their value as administrators ([Herlihy 1985](#)).

4. Kinship Models in the Middle Ages

How medieval families organised themselves and how they were structured depended significantly on socio-economic factors and, perhaps to a lesser extent, on geography and location ([Mitchell 2007](#)). Wealthy families lived in much more peaceful environments, without being exposed to a lack of food shortages or poor hygiene conditions, which allowed them to grow and prosper. On the other hand, comparing the urban environment with the rural one, rural families lived in constant uncertainty, as they depended directly on the level of harvests and what each season of agriculture provided them. Despite the profound differences between wealthy families and those without resources, between urban and rural families, the family model was generally similar. The family was usually based on "*tradition*" and "*biology*". The society referred to as "Old Europe", of Christian Europe, was to some extent structured around lineages and/or kinship ties ([Casey and Hernández-Franco 1997](#)). From Ireland to Genoa, Tuscany or Naples, from Portugal, Castile, and Aragon to Poland or Lithuania, the family structure adopted both forms of organization. Anthropologists and historians have shown, over the centuries, the relationships of consanguinity and filiation that can be established within the *family* ([Franco 2001](#)). The literature shows that kinship models according to genealogy—*genealogical models*, emerged for the first time in European society, during the medieval period ([Johnson and Paul 2016](#)). For example, as early as the 11th century, Christian scholars were devoted to validating the genealogy of the ancestors and family of Jesus Christ as a tree ([Klapisch-Zuber 1991, 2000](#)), later adopted as the "*family tree*". By the 16th century, the representation of families according to the concept of a family tree was quite popular throughout Europe ([Johnson and Paul 2016](#)).

Alongside this reality of kinship, the researchers also specify the existence of another type of kinship, spiritual or ritual, organized around principles such as loyalty, friendship, recognition, or even patronage ([Casey and Hernández-Franco 1997](#)). The structure of spiritual kinship consisted of biologically artificial fraternities that bound individuals together within the framework of vassalage, but it counted for at least as much as *blood* kinship ([Casey and Hernández-Franco 1997](#)).

While royal authority prevailed until the 10th century, from that century onwards the ties of ritual kinship established around the royal house gave way to ties of blood kinship organised around norms of agnation, maleness, and virility, as well as the veneration of the founder of an aristocratic house ([Casey and Hernández-Franco 1997](#)). It was the family structure of the lineage, and it was much more “secure” for the continuity of the unilineal descent group in a lordly world.

The current idea is that in the society of “*Old Europe*” the idea of descent was the result of a form of kinship organization reduced almost exclusively to members of high society, with a greater hierarchy of power and property. Second, in this society, the idea of lineage was perceived as a symbolic form of a trunk, an ordered line of unilineal descent that originated with a *reputed founder* and through which the honour and status of the initiator of the lineage was transmitted to successive generations of the lineage: “*from good men, others like them will be born.*” Thirdly, lineage was not only a characteristic that conferred rank within the social structure, but also allowed the family name and the *House* to be perpetuated over generations—its name, its property, and its distinctive deeds.

The Catholic Church itself in the West has in some way contributed to the importance of the family in society by implementing norms for the constitution of what could be called “*the true family*” ([Franco 2001](#)). An example of this is the rule that marriage should be exogamous, which made cases of incest difficult and allowed the circulation of wealth between different families ([Franco 2001](#)). Towards the end of the 11th century and the beginning of the 12th century, a ritual between the betrothed, *the wedding*, began to appear more frequently and become obligatory from the 16th century with the Council of Trent. In general, the wife became a member of her husband’s family after marriage ([Franco 2001](#)).

Finally, the concept of “*House societies*” developed by Lévi-Strauss is quite relevant to medieval society, where kinship may not be biological but based on the social relationships of those who live in the same home ([Lévi-Strauss 1984, 1987](#); Lévi-Strauss and Modelski 1999). The “*House*” is seen as a significant space that would serve as a link for social formation between individuals. On the other hand, this type of relationship between individuals could be studied throughout the generations, since a record (symbols, brands, designs) was left in the different objects that belonged to the individuals (clothing, war material, objects of the house, etc.) ([Johnson and Paul 2016](#)) and later those belonging to the same family, or “*House*”, are included in the family trees.

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