

The next birth rite, a naming ceremony called the *Nominalia*, occurred on the eighth day after the birth of a girl and on the ninth day after the birth of a boy. This ceremony took place in the presence of the immediate family, relatives, friends, and household slaves. A female child received one name, the feminine form of her father's family name. An upper class male child usually received a first name (*praenomen*), followed by his family name (*nomen*), and sometimes a third name, indicating the branch of the family into which he was born (*cognomen*). The child was now a full and legitimate member of the family.

Children were often given a necklace of rattles and ornaments called a *crepundia*. The noise of the *crepundia* was thought to protect children by scaring away evil spirits and might also prove useful in helping to locate wandering toddlers.



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Fig. 8.  
This marble sculpture depicts a sleeping child wearing a traveler's hood and holding a lantern.

## rites of Puberty

Puberty, the transition from childhood to adulthood, is a gradual process, marked by a series of physical and emotional changes. For girls, the process is complete whenever they are physically able to bear children. Since childbearing was the primary goal of marriage, the Roman marriage ceremony also served as a rite of puberty for a Roman female. Because the moment of a boy's maturation is more difficult to determine, Romans chose an appropriate day to celebrate a boy's coming of age, usually when he was between the ages of 14 and 17.

A boy's coming-of-age ceremony could take place at any time of the year, but the most popular day for celebrating the event was on the festival of the *Liberalia*, a feast associated with the god Bacchus, on March 17. In the house and in the presence of his whole family, the young man shed the symbols of his childhood: his bordered toga and his *bulla*. He removed his *bulla* and placed it on the family altar along with the first scrapings of his beard as an offering to the household gods. He then put on the plain white toga of an adult male citizen. Then, dressed in his new white toga, he set out for the Forum with his family members, their slaves, and their freedmen and clients. In the Forum he was officially enrolled as an adult citizen eligible to vote.

## Three Types of Marriage Rites

There were three different types of marriage, each bearing its own set of rules and requirements. The strictest type was called *confarreatio*. Under the terms of *confarreatio*, a husband obtained absolute control over his wife. Divorce was not permitted, except in extraordinary circumstances.

During the Republic, *confarreatio* fell out of favor and eventually gave way to another type of marriage called *coemptio*. The Latin word *coemptio* means "a purchase." During this type of ceremony, the groom, placing a coin on a scale, symbolically bought his wife. Although she was expected to obey him, she had more legal rights than someone married under *confarreatio*.

*Usus*, the third type of marriage and the simplest of the three, was most common among the plebeians. The bride and groom merely joined hands in front of witnesses and declared that they were now husband and wife. As in marriage by *coemptio*, a woman married under the terms of *usus* maintained some personal rights and could obtain a divorce more easily.

No matter which type of marriage rite a couple chose, there were certain requirements for any marriage to be legal. Both the bride and the groom had to have attained puberty, both families had to give consent, and neither could be currently married or too closely related by blood.

## THE BETROTHAL

Normally, marriages began with a betrothal. Betrothal was a legal contract between the *paterfamilias*, parents, or guardians of the couple. A handshake in front of witnesses was all that was needed to make a betrothal legal, but written contracts were often drawn up. Sometimes the bride and groom to be were just infants when their betrothal was formalized by their families. Sometimes the bride and groom met each other for the first time on their wedding day.

## WEDDING TRADITIONS

Most of the traditions associated with Roman marriage rites trace their origins to the more formal *confarreatio* ceremony. Roman weddings were lengthy and formal events, although few Roman ceremonies included all of the traditions described below.

The wedding day was chosen carefully. Nearly a third of the days in the Roman calendar were considered unlucky, and these days, of course, were avoided. June, the month of Juno, the patron of marriage and childbirth, was the preferred month for the ceremony. On the eve of her wedding day, the bride dedicated her *bulla*, toys, and childhood clothing to the household gods on the family altar. This served as her rite-of-puberty ceremony. That night she slept in a special tunic made of wool and woven in one piece, which she also wore during her wedding ceremony. On the morning of the wedding, the bride's mother helped her dress and fastened a woolen belt around her tunic in a special knot called the knot of Hercules. Only her husband was permitted to untie it.

The bride's hairdo was special and distinctive. Her hair was divided into six sections by the tip of a spear. Each section was then braided and tied with ribbons. She adorned her head with a wreath of flowers that she had gathered. Next, her head was covered with a yellow-orange veil called the *flammeum*. The groom, far more simply clad, wore a toga.

The ceremony itself took place in the house of the bride's father. Before the ceremony began, an animal, usually a sheep, was sacrificed. The meat was then cooked and was often served at the wedding feast.

In the *usus* ceremony, the couple joined hands in the presence of witnesses. In the *coemptio* ceremony, as we have mentioned, the bridegroom placed a coin on a scale in the presence of five witnesses and asked the bride whether she wished to become his *materfamilias*. After she assented, she asked her spouse if he wished to become her *paterfamilias*. Once the groom agreed, they were officially married.

The *confarreatio* was a far more elaborate affair. The bride was accompanied by two ceremonial figures, a matron, called a *pronuba*, and a young boy called a *camillus*. The matron, who had to be still married to her first and only husband, served as the bride's friend and helper. The *camillus*, both of whose parents had to be alive, carried the sacrificial objects and assisted in the sacrifice of the sheep.

The couple was then seated on stools covered with the pelt of the sacrificed sheep. In front of ten witnesses from the patrician order, the bride repeated the formula that served as their wedding vow, “*Ubi tu Gaius, ego Gaia*” (Where you are Gaius, I am Gaia). A cake made of grain, was offered to the gods, and the guests congratulated the couple with the greeting “*feliciter!*”

Often a wedding feast took place at the house where the couple was married. Guests were served a special cake made of fresh grape juice, known as *mustaceum*. As evening approached, the groom pretended to take the bride by force from her mother’s embrace. This action was performed so the household gods would not think that the bride was deserting them willingly. The singing of a wedding song and an elaborate torchlight procession to the groom’s house followed.

During the procession, the bride continued to wear her *flammeum* for protection, since she had no family gods of her own until she arrived at her husband’s house. As further protection, three boys, carrying torches in front of the bride, escorted her. Behind her were other attendants carrying

symbols of married life, the spindle and the distaff—objects used to spin and weave wool. The guests followed, singing songs designed to tease and embarrass the couple in a friendly way. The bride carried with her three coins, one for the gods of the crossroads, one for the household gods of her new family, and one for her husband. The groom threw gifts, usually nuts, to the crowds that gathered along the way.



American Academy in Rome, Photographic Archive

Fig. 9.  
This man and woman clasp hands in a gesture of affection.

When the procession arrived at the groom’s house, he entered first. The bride, after smearing the doorway with wool soaked in oil and fat, was lifted over the threshold. Her husband greeted her inside the house and presented her with fire and water. She lit and then extinguished the family hearth and threw the wood from the hearth to the guests. Next, the *pronuba* removed the bride’s *flammeum* and led her to the wedding bed, which had been set up in the entryway of the house. The guests departed. On the next day, there was sometimes a second feast at the house of the groom.

Although the scale was used only in the *coemptio* ceremony, and the grain cake only in the *confarreatio* ceremony, the other customs were freely used in all three ceremonies.