Unit 13
Family and Household

Introduction to Unit
This unit explores how families and households—the most intimate and basic social organizations—intersected and interacted with ideas, institutions, and communities from ancient times to about 1750 CE. Too often, historians have ignored the private, daily realm of human activity in favor of large-scale political affairs and the actions of “great men.” Recently, however, world historians have approached family differently as evidence for the variety and commonality of world history, as models for ordering the world, as evidence of the dynamic nature of the past, and as a way to bring the ordinary and familiar into global perspective.

Learning Objectives
- Discuss the kinds of evidence historians use to recover family and household histories.
- Analyze the ways in which family and household structures varied across cultures and changed over time.
- Compare and contrast the relationship between family/household and political order with the relationship between family/household and religion.

Preparing for This Session
Read Unit 13 in the Bridging World History online text. You may also want to refer to some of the Suggested Readings and Materials. If you feel you need more background knowledge, refer to a college-level world history textbook on this subject (look under the index for Family, Marriage, Children, Patriarchy).
Before You Begin—40 minutes

Read the following discussion of the terms “family” and “household.” Why do you think historians find it necessary to distinguish between the two terms?

Historians use the word “family” to mean shared kinship, whether by blood or adoption. They define the term “household” to mean shared residence, which is often an economic unit as well. These two definitions can overlap, depending on culture and language, but in general, “family” refers to relationship, and “household” refers to residence.

In the video you will see a number of different types of evidence to show the ways family and household structures varied across cultures and changed over time. Read the following discussion of the challenges historians face in reconstructing and analyzing the history of the family over time. What kinds of evidence do you predict you will see used in this unit?

To get an accurate picture of these arrangements across cultures and over time, historians face a unique challenge. The view of families and households from inside these units, and the view of them from outside—say from a political perspective—often don’t agree. So researchers must gather evidence from a wide range of sources. Standard public documents may not offer much detail about family life. Although reconstructing the history of families can be difficult, historians have learned to mine certain sources that richly document the ways families and households functioned in the past: These include oral testimonies, mythologies, genealogies, life histories, legal codes, archaeological excavations, languages, and literature. Historians have found that families and households are universal in world history, but that their specific forms are products of culture and historical change. Moreover, the historical record as represented by official documents such as codes of law merely reports the prescribed and/or dictated ideal behaviors. Frequently, actual historical practices differed greatly from ideals.

Today's historians also draw on more personal, firsthand accounts. They look at artifacts, genealogies, literature, and letters. They have found that this type of evidence often paints a very different picture of life inside the family than the “official” versions put forth by church or state. And in recent years, historians have been able to use large-scale statistical databases and computer programs that compile information on families and households to gain yet another perspective.

Watch the Video for “Unit 13: Family and Household”—30 minutes

Activity 1: Relationship Between Family and Religion—110 minutes

In small groups, analyze the types of evidence used in the following case studies to explain the relationships between families/households and religions. What kind of evidence could a historian use to explain how religion or the state affected your family? How reliable are portraits or photographs in showing the roles in a family or household?

Case Study 1: Confucianism and family life in Imperial China, from the second century BCE into the sixteenth century.

For Confucius, the rituals that ordered society were also part of family life because family was the core of society. The principal way that social order was attained was through creating order in the family. Rituals were used to create such order, primarily rituals to venerate ancestors.
Pan Chao, sister of a court historian during the Han Dynasty, took over her brother’s job after he died. She wrote a book called *Admonitions for Women* that prescribed how Confucian women should act. Her ideal did not reflect reality, as she herself never married.

If a husband does not control his wife, then the rules of conduct manifesting his authority are abandoned and broken. If a wife does not serve her husband, then the proper relationship between men and women and the natural order of things are neglected and destroyed. (Pan Chao, *Pan Chao: Foremost Woman Scholar of China*, trans. Nancy Lee Swann, [New York: Century Co., 1932] 82–90.)

Li Qingzhao, Sung Dynasty poet writes,

> Every evening after we finished eating, we would sit in the hall called ‘Return Home’ and make tea. Pointing to the heaps of books and histories, we would guess on which line of which page in which chapter of which book a certain passage could be found. Success in guessing determined who got to drink his or her tea first. (Kevin Reilly, *Worlds of History: A Comparative Reader*, vol.1 [Boston and NY: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2000], 278.)

By the sixteenth century, what historians might describe as a more realistic picture could be seen in the life of Gu Ruopu, a widow who maintained her family after her husband’s death. In a letter to her two sons, she writes,

> Little did you know that your mother had to battle poverty, illness, and fatigue to keep the family from going adrift. Every fiber and every grain that this family owns are the fruits of my industry and hardship over several decades. Preserve and magnify them. (Susan Mann and Yu-yin Cheng, eds., *Under Confucian Eyes: Writings on Gender in Chinese History* [Berkeley and LA: Univ. of California Press, 2001], 1551–2.)
Case Study 2: Muslim families in the Middle East beginning in the seventh century CE.

Studying the history of families during the early Islamic period presents a complex challenge. For one thing, source material is limited. Writings by women about women barely exist from this era, so the role of women can only be gauged from the writings of men. A second issue lies in the dynamic nature of history. With Islam, as with all major religions, it was how these new teachings were interpreted and reinterpreted over time—and how they blended with existing cultures—that ultimately determined their impact on day-to-day family life.

Some of what historians know about Muslim family life comes from the work of Islamic scholars, or “ulama.” The fifteenth-century scholar Sakhawi was among a number of those who wrote biographical dictionaries recording contributions (of both men and women) to the building of Muslim society. Sakhawi detailed the life of a fourteenth-century Cairo woman named Umm Hani, whose education was carefully supervised from age seven by her grandfather, an Islamic judge. Umm Hani studied with many other masters as well. Her work as a teacher became an important link in the transmission of Islamic learning, according to Sakhawi’s account.

She taught hadith for a long time, and many scholars heard it from her. Personally, everything I have learned from her teachers, I learned through her. She performed the pilgrimage 13 times, often staying for months to study and teach in Mecca and Medina. “Sakhawi’s Life of Umm Hani” in The Cambridge Illustrated History of the Islamic World, ed. Francis Robinson [Cambridge University Press, 1996], 190.)

The record of Umm Hani’s life also offers a window into her family’s finances. When her grandfather died, her husband claimed the inheritance and used it freely. But after her husband died, she inherited it all. With the money, she bought a great workshop, famous for its enormous size and many spinning wheels. Understanding Umm Hani’s involvement in the marketplace, her mobility, and her contribution to Islamic scholarship give historians a vivid picture of the inner workings of an upper-class family in medieval Cairo. Her life story also provides evidence of how close family ties could offer security to the aging in Islamic communities of the time: “As she grew older she lost her eyesight, but was patient. Then when she lost the use of her legs and became housebound, her Hanafi son looked after her until she died.” (Ibid.)

Case Study 3: European households from ancient Rome through early modern times.

As historians trace Roman laws over time, they discover changing attitudes towards marriage and the family. By the second century CE, new laws had placed limits on male power in marriage. These laws recognized the maturity of both parties, along with their respective property rights.

Previously, it had been customary for the bride to bring a dowry to the marriage, but by this time, the groom was expected to bring a wedding gift of his own called a “bridewealth.” If the couple divorced, the wife could reclaim all of the property she brought into the marriage, including the bridewealth. With the rise of Christianity in the late Roman Empire, religion reinforced the patriarchal traditions of the past by giving these cultural traditions religious authority. Church teachings began to re-shape the family in European societies, as Church laws replaced Greek and Roman laws as the most influential force on family life.

By the time of Europe’s medieval era, the Roman Catholic Church’s role in defining family life had further evolved. It now extended well beyond its control of marriage, which had officially become a sacrament in 1215. The Church began to assume responsibility for standards and expectations in the most personal aspects of family life. Just as
the early Christian church influenced family life in the medieval period, the Protestant Reformation had a profound impact on family life in sixteenth-century Europe. Martin Luther and other reformers promoted the idea of the home as the cradle of citizenship. A man was to provide for his wife and children, and to rule over his family with “a firm but just hand.” A wife was the “mother of the house,” a position of high authority and equal respect. But reformers valued children above all, and their teachings helped elevate the conditions of children throughout Europe in ways that are still felt today.

**Reading Questions**

- What kind of evidence is used about families and households in North America, South America, and West Africa before 1500? How does the evidence show the wide variety of family and household structures that existed around the world? How does it show the differing ways in which gender, power, and lineage could be understood?
- How did religious beliefs shape the possibilities for matrilineal and patrilineal descents? How is kinship defined in these three regions?
- How do the authors link economics and ideology with families and households? In which societies were women and children considered property? What do historians argue accounts for the differences in views of property rights among these three regions?
- What did you learn about the perceptions of gender roles in North America, South America, and West Africa before 1500?

**Optional: Visit the Web Site**

Explore this topic further on the Bridging World History Web site. Browse the Archive, look up terms in the Audio Glossary, review related units, or use the World History Traveler to examine different thematic perspectives.