When the Family Went Nuclear

Why, it seems like only yesterday that large extended families lived together and shared their lives from cradle to grave, men ruled their households with an iron fist and everyone got married young to spouses selected by their parents.

Dream on, says Arland D. Thornton, a University of Michigan sociology professor. In Western Europe, those family structures were as dead as the dodo centuries before the last dodo died, Thornton claims in his new book, "Reading History Sideways: The Fallacy and Enduring Impact of the Developmental Paradigm on Family Life" (University of Chicago Press).

Many key characteristics of the "modern" family make their appearance as early as the 1300s -- during the Middle Ages, a time more closely associated with intrigues in Europe's royal courts than with the emergence of the nuclear family. He says this era saw the appearance in northwest Europe of small parent-child families, weakened family ties, independent teenagers and marriages between men and women who had chosen each other.

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