Ephemeral Creatures: Infant Death and Burial in Ancient Rome

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Since the publication of Mark Golden's essay, "Did the Ancients Care when their Children Died," contention over the degree to which Roman parents distanced themselves from the deaths of their infant children has become a center of debate. Although many scholars have refuted the notion that the majority of Romans met the unfortunate death of a young child with ambivalence, few have addressed the practice of child abandonment and exposure in Roman society. This study provides a synthesis of recent works on the archaeological, literary, and epigraphic evidence for Roman practices regarding infant death and burial in the Italian peninsula from the first century B.C.E. to the fourth century C.E. In placing the Roman practice of child exposure and abandonment into conversation with these recent findings, this study underscores the liminal place of the infant in Roman society while demonstrating the emotional turmoil that Roman parents faced when confronted with the death of an infant.

Introduction

"The omnipresence of death coloured affective relations at all levels of society, by reducing the amount of emotional capital available for prudent investment in any single individual, especially in such ephemeral creatures as infants."¹

In the spring of 2013, the British Museum, in conjunction with the Archaeological Superintendency of Naples and Pompeii, opened its Life and Death in Pompeii and Herulaneum exhibit. The collection featured several artifacts related to everyday life in the cities, including the only surviving example of an ancient Roman cradle.² Originally discovered containing the corpse of a small child and the remains of its bedding, the cradle is a touching reminder of the now invisible dramatic lives of ancient Roman mothers and their infants.3 Estimates for the infant mortality rate in ancient Rome are grim; nearly half of all children did not survive to their tenth birthday and approximately 20-40% of babies died within their first vear.⁴ Some early modern historians have correlated high infant mortality rates with a decrease in parental emotional investment in their newborn children. Edward Shorter, in his text, The Making of the Early Modern Family argues that early modern mothers held a "traditional" view of indifference toward their infant's fate as a result of "material circumstances and community attitudes."5 Further developing this point, Lawrence Stone, in his monograph The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England: 1500-1800 concludes that high infant mortality rates among early modern families encouraged a limited investment in children, which solidified a view of the family as "a group of replaceable surrogates."6

Influenced by these arguments, some ancient historians have used evidence of high infant mortality rates to suggest that parents in ancient Rome similarly held a sense of indifference toward the death of their infants.⁷ Keith Bradley suggests that while parental attitudes certainly varied, the use of wet nurses indicates "parental indifference" and "emotional distancing."⁸ Peter Garnsey best articulates the idea, writing: "One would expect parents to be more deeply affected by the deaths of older children than those of the very young."⁹ This "demographic determinism" theory – which argues that Roman families were generally indifferent to the death of their children as a result of the high likelihood that they would die young – has been at the heart of several debates over how ancient Romans mourned and buried their dead infants.¹⁰

Recent works by authors such as John Pearce, Margaret King, and Valerie Hope¹¹ have begun to push back on the idea that the Romans were indifferent toward the deaths of their infant children. While these treatments have made remarkable headway in examining the grieving process of Roman parents, they tend to focus on either the literary or archeological realms, but neither both. In an attempt to provide a much-needed synthesis on the issue, this paper seeks to corroborate the literary, archaeological, and epigraphic evidence on the subject within the geographical boundaries of the Italian peninsula from approximately the first century B.C.E. to the fourth century C.E. It attempts to put these findings into conversation with the often-ignored practice of child exposure in Rome. A review of grieving practices and social expectations for bereaved parents found in ancient literature will be presented first, followed by a discussion on the archaeological and epigraphic evidence concerning infant burials. The last section will seek to put these findings into conversation with the often-ignored practice of child exposure in ancient Rome. Analysis of this information reveals that prior to being accepted into the family, infants - especially newborns held a marginal role in society and therefore received limited funerary treatment. Those who were accepted into the family, however, were dearly loved and mourned for upon their death. Moreover, evidence suggests that the Romans did care when their children died

young, even in the face of practices such as child-exposure.¹²

Born to Die: Infant Burials and Mourning in Classical Literature

The literary sources available to us manifest themselves in the form of legal and philosophical texts. These documents represent the cultural expectations of how a proper Roman family was expected to act publicly after the death of a young child. Hope notes in her book Roman Death, in the elite imagination "an infant should not be mourned for ... and the death should be accepted as Nature's choice."13 Influenced by Stoic and Epicurean schools of philosophy, some ancient writers used the marginal status of babies within Roman society as evidence for the need to limit one's public mourning following their death.14 While these sources appear to support the "demographic determinism" argument of parental detachment presented above, it is important to remember that average Roman citizens did not always live up to elite cultural expectations.15

A brief overview of the legal and ritual practices concerning childbirth provides telling insight into how infants were viewed in Roman society. According to Mireille Corbier, the first sign that a child was accepted into the family after birth was the command for it to be "put to the breast."¹⁶ According to Soranus of Ephesus (Gyn. 2.5) the child was placed directly onto the floor after it was born in order for it to be thoroughly examined for defects before the *paterfamilias* decided whether to "raise up" the infant and accept it into the family.¹⁷ While Corbier doubts whether the ceremonial "raising up" of the child at birth actually occurred, scholars have noted the parallels between this ritual and mortuary rites preformed after death.¹⁸ As will be discussed below, this ritual also played a key role in the practice of child exposure. Full acceptance of the young child into its family and into society as a whole was recognized more formally on its name day (*dies lustricus*), which occurred eight days after the day of birth (*dies natalis*) for boys and nine days after for girls.¹⁹ The need for a transitional period during this first week could potentially be related to the high rate of infant mortality in following the premise put forth by Bradley and Garnsey.²⁰ This liminal period, however, does not indicate that the child was in any way less loved or considered taboo. Instead, the infant was relegated as holding limited human status. Commenting on this trivial status of the infant before its first week of life, Plutarch explains (*Quaest. Rom.* 102) that, at this time, "the child is more like a plant than a human being."

The liminal state of the newborn in Roman society is further illustrated by the legal and cultural practices of child burial and mourning handed down to us from the literary sources. Plutarch, writing about a discussion with his wife concerning the death of their daughter Timoxena, delineates the different burial practices reserved for dead infants in the first century C.E.:

For our people do not bring offerings to those of their children who die in infancy, nor do they observe in their case any of the other rites that the living are expected to perform for the dead, as such children have no part in earth or earthly things; nor yet do they tarry where the burial is celebrated, at the graves, or at the laying out of the dead, and sit by the bodies. For the laws forbid us to mourn for infants, holding it impiety to mourn for those who have departed to a dispensation and a region too that is better and more divine (Plut. *Consolation to His* Wife, 11).

Plutarch's description of the lack of formal burial practices for infants is further elaborated by Pliny the Elder (*HN*. 7.15.72) who writes, "it is the universal custom of mankind not to cremate a person who dies before cutting his teeth."²¹ Juvenal, too, comments (*Satire* 15, 138-40) on the remorse felt for "children who are too young for the pyre."

The limited burial practices for infants were matched by a cultural and legal prohibition on public mourning. In his letter above, Plutarch references the laws of Rome's second legendary king, Numa (715-673 B.C.E.), who set limitations on the timeframe for parental morning based on the age of the lost child.22 While Plutarch, writing in the second century C.E., dates Numa's rule to the seventh century B.C.E., Hope has shown that concepts of designated periods for mourning persisted into the second and third centuries C.E.²³ In his *Opinions*, the Roman lawyer Julius Paulus re-codified Numa's laws for his third-century audience. Paulus writes that children under the age of six could only be mourned for one month (Sent. 1.21.2-5). According to Hope, it is unclear whether the Romans enforced or even intended to enforce these laws, suggesting instead that they more likely represented public "guidelines."²⁴ As author Beryl Rowan makes clear, however, Numa's laws regarding mourning reflect that in Rome, "the young child... did not qualify for full recognition of its existence and individuality until the age of 10."25

Elite views concerning mourning and the loss of a young child are perhaps best embodied by the philosophical writings of the time. Ancient philosophers gave those who were grieving guidance for facing the loss of a loved one. The Epicurean and Stoic schools of philosophy, founded in Athens by Epicurus (341-271 B.C.E.) and Zeno of Citium (334-362 B.C.E.) respectively, were particularly popular fields of thought that sought to demystify death.²⁶ Advocating for the bereaved to accept and to move past the death of a loved one, philosophers often pointed to an infant's marginal place within society in order to argue that the loss should be less emotionally upsetting than that of an older child or adult. Cicero, writing in 45 B.C.E., notoriously explained the elite philosophical view, writing: "The same people think that if a small child dies, the loss must be taken calmly; if a baby is in the cradle, there must not even be lament. And yet it is from the latter (the elite) that nature has more cruelly

demanded back the gift she has given" (*Tusc*. 1.39). Cicero makes clear that for the elite, the emotional loss over the death of an infant was something that proper Romans would not allow themselves to display publicly.

Certainly, many parents failed to live up to this cultural expectation. A famous example can be seen in the emperor Nero, who deified his four-month-old daughter after her death in 63 C.E.²⁷ Contemporaries, including the historian Tacitus, mocked Nero for his lack of emotional self-control (Ann., 15.23). The grief of parents like Nero and the chastisement they received presents another insight into elite views of infant deaths. Seneca the Younger (4 B.C.E.-65 C.E.), writing to console his friend Marullus over the death of his infant son, best summarizes the cold idealism of the Roman elite: "Is it Solace that you expect? Accept reproach instead. You are like a woman in the way that you take your son's death; what would you do if you had lost a close friend? A son, a little child of uncertain promise, is dead; a fragment of time has perished" (EP. 99.2-3). Seneca's chastisement of his friend demonstrates not only the philosophical ideal of meeting the death of a child with acceptance, dignity, and self-control, but also depicts a clear example of a grieving father.

As the case of Nero as well as other examples in the writings of Cicero and Seneca illustrate, the elite philosophical view that formal mourning for the death of newborns should be repressed was often at odds with the grief of bereaved parents. Already it is possible to see that even though the Romans may not have considered infants as fullstatus human beings, they cared deeply for them and reacted strongly to their passing. Moreover, the ways in which grieving parents buried and commemorated their dead children further illustrates the divide between elite public expectations and private realities.

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Infant Burial, Epigraphy, and Images in Archaeology

Archaeological excavations in the Italian peninsula refute the modern notion that Roman parents were indifferent to the deaths of their young children. Recent finds demonstrate that infant burials are present among larger Roman necropoleis and that a high level of care for the treatment of their bodies is evident.²⁸ In her excellent synthesis of recent excavations on the Italian peninsula, Maureen Carroll notes that while young children under the age of 12 months were regularly buried in Roman cemeteries, they are vastly underrepresented in comparison to the projected infant mortality rate.^{29 A}ccording to her estimates, the graves of infants typically constitute less than 10% of the total burials in excavated Italian cemeteries.30 Outside of the Italian peninsula, the findings of John Pearce, working in Roman Gaul and Britain, are similar with some occasional exceptions. Addressing this gap, Pearce warns, "in the cemeteries where few infants burials are attested, the arguments that infants were deliberately excluded may be difficult to prove."31 Indeed, Pearce acknowledges several issues associated with infant graves including the fragility of infant bones and potential burial in remote locations, which pose a challenge to excavation.³²

Recent archaeological evidence concerning the treatment of infant bodies contradicts the elite assertion that very young children were not cremated. A tomb containing multiple burials examined by Sébastien Lepetz and William Van Andringa at the Porta Nocera cemetery at Pompeii provides a poignant example.³³ According to Lepetz and Van Andrigna, the original burial contained the inhumed remains of a two-year-old, who received a full funeral, as well as a cremated adolescent.34 The tomb was then subsequently reopened and closed two more times during which time the cremated remains of two more adolescents were added to the burial.³⁵ The authors note that this tomb poses significant differences compared to what is found in the literary record. A child clearly past the point of teething was inhumed while an infant of only six months was cremated.³⁶ In her own analysis of the graves, Carroll notes that the way in which the six to nine month old child is positioned (Fig. 1) "suggests that the child's head might have been supported on a small cushion."³⁷ While this claim is uncertain, the pit grave did contain grave goods in the form



Fig. 1. 6-9 month old Infant buried in amphora, mid first century outside the Porta Nocera cemetery, A. Gailliot/École française de Rome; courtesy of W. Andringa.

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of a *balsamaria* (a ceramic container for oil) placed around the two-year-old's head as well as an oil lamp and libation pipe.³⁸ These infant graves at the Porta Nocera necropolis complicate our understanding of infant mortuary practices as they contradict what was indicated in the literary sources. They also demonstrate the extent to which some parents went in order to ensure a careful burial for their children.

In her study of 29,250 Roman tombstones across the Roman Empire, author Margaret King argues that funeral monuments, while subject to some demographic and statistical challenges, are an invaluable tool for understanding often ignored groups such as female children and mothers.39 King's findings reveal that of the 29,250 sampled tombstones, only 1,357 commemorate children ages 0-4.40 In a more recent synthesis of Italian tombstones, Carroll reveals that infants under the age of one year represent 1.3% of a sample of 31,000 funerary monuments.⁴¹ These surveys demonstrate that, in the Italian peninsula, infants are vastly underrepresented in the existing epigraphic evidence, especially those under the age of one.42 As King notes, however, this vast underrepresentation should not be seen as evidence that parents did not grieve for their dead. It is more likely, as King asserts, that this underrepresentation is the result of the financial challenges in erecting a funerary monument for a potentially frequent event.43 The few extant funerary monuments for infant graves provide us with a wealth of evidence that parents loved and were emotionally affected by the loss of their young children.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence for the claim that Roman parents reacted deeply to the death of their infant children can be found in the epitaphs.⁴⁴ King reports that infants age 0-1 were the most likely to receive unique epitaphs on their grave stelai (13.2%).⁴⁵ King also found that female infants (48.1%) were about equally as likely to receive an epitaph as male infants (45.9%).⁴⁶ King recounts an interesting example of a gravestone from

Rome indicating that a "Martials" lived for "one year, five months, and two and a half hours."⁴⁷ This meticulous desire to indicate the number of hours and even minutes spent with the child reflects a clear emotional loss on the part of the parents who raised it. Some exceptional verse epitaphs have been studied that more visibly display the grief parents endured over the loss of an infant. One well-known inscription put up by the parents of a young girl named Telesphoris, who died before her first birthday, provides an illuminating glimpse into the everyday world of Roman grief and bereavement:

To the Spirits of the Departed. Telesphoris and her husband, parents, (did this) for their sweetest daughter. It is necessary to lament about this sweet girl. Better that you had not been at all than, become so beloved, so soon to return from whence you were born to us. Because of your birth, grief has been caused for your parents. Half a year and eight days she lived; like a rose she blossomed, and

like a rose she immediately withered.48

The underrepresentation of infant memorials and graves gives credence to the literary sources' assertion that small children held a marginal status in both life and death.⁴⁹ Yet the surviving testaments to their memory, such as Telesphoris's above, make the assertion that these children were not loved or cared for untenable.

The physical images of infant children on funerary monuments, while exceptionally rare, reflect another strategy for the bereaved to preserve the memory of those lost.⁵⁰ Mander argues that there was a strong preference for picturing children as older than they actually were at the time of death.⁵¹ The grave stele of Sextus Rufius Achilleus, who died before his first year and yet is depicted as much older boy, is a prime example of this trend.⁵² The desire to depict an infant as an older child or little adult on a gravestone, according to Mander, highlights the lost hopes and aspirations that parents held for their child's lost potential.⁵³

The Unwanted: Infant Exposure

Robert Knapp expresses a common sentiment in his text Invisible Romans, writing, "the exposure of children is one of the most difficult things for moderns to come to terms with in the ancient world."54 The issue of child exposure proves pertinent to the discussion of how Roman parents dealt with the death of their young children, and yet it is often given little attention in the historiography on the subject. Built on the foundation myth of the child exposure of Romulus and Remus, the practice of exposure was codified into the law of the Twelve Tables, which mandated that "a dreadfully deformed child shall be killed."55 While it is hard to estimate the rates of child exposure in ancient Rome, Corbier notes, "the exposure of newborn babies in Rome was perfectly legal and socially expectable."56 Examples of child exposure abound in the higher echelons of Roman society.⁵⁷According to Suetonius, the emperor Claudius is said to have exposed his wife's child with an ex-slave (Cl. 27) and Augustus rejected the child of his granddaughter Julia (Aug. 65).58

Researchers agree that Roman parents used child exposure as a form of contraception, and while many issues played a role in the decision to abandon a child, economic considerations were most often the determining factor.59 Although John Riddle suggests that the Romans may have been well versed in herbal techniques for limiting pregnancies, W.V. Harris notes that abortions were still "notoriously risky" and that many Romans would most likely have favored the use of traditional techniques such as exposure.⁶⁰ Economic factors leading to the decision to abandon a child seem to have been present in both rich and poor families. Many children were certainly born into poor Roman families, who could not support them.⁶¹ Plutarch (*De Amore*, 5) expressed this sentiment stating, "the poor do not bring up their children...."⁶² Mark Golden and Harris both suggest that the rich may also have had an economic incentive to expose some of their children.⁶³ By limiting their descendants, wealthy Romans could ensure that their desired heirs would receive the full benefits of their wills. The Roman Stoic philosopher Musonius Rufus illustrates this point through his harsh criticism of the practice:

But what seems to me very terrible is that some who do not even have poverty as an excuse but are prosperous and even wealthy none the less have the effrontery not to rear later-born offspring in order that those born

earlier may inherit greater wealth... So that their children may have a greater share

of their father's goods, they destroy their

children's brothers (Musonius Rufus, *Frag.* 15).⁶⁴

What then are we to make of the practice of child exposure in the context of infant commemoration and burial? While some scholars have pointed to the practice of infant exposure as a sign of parental ambivalence toward their young, the economic factors behind the decision reveal a unique characteristic of the relationship between parents and their infants. We must not lose sight of Corbier's emphasis that "the rejection of the child by exposure takes place before it is regarded as having attained full human status and integration in the family."65 The *paterfamilias's* decision to expose the child (as noted above) was made during the initial rituals surrounding its birth or before its assimilation into the family on its name day. Because human status was limited to a child's adoption into the family, the decision to expose the newborn was made based on the concerns of the living family, including the ability to provide for any existing young children, as well as themselves. Mark Golden's cultural comparison of abortion in the United States and Roman childexposure, while certainly provocative, hints at some of the difficult questions regarding this practice.⁶⁶ Golden theorizes that women in the United States often do not seek to terminate their pregnancies out of disdain or resentment for their potential children. Instead, Golden posits, "it is arguable that many of these women choose to abort when they do largely in order to provide a better environment for other children they have or will have in the future."⁶⁷ This reasoning seems to have some credibility in the realm of child-exposure in ancient Rome based on the evidence indicating that economic incentives played a major role in the decision to exposure infants.

Conclusion

A synthesis of literary, archaeological, and epigraphic evidence indicates that infants, especially newborns, held a marginal status in society and received limited funerary treatment during the Late Republic and Imperial periods. Literary sources reveal that the Roman elite attempted to regulate the public mourning of young children through codified laws and cultural norms. Private letters and written histories, however, depict the struggle between these cultural expectations and lived private realities. Although the Romans may not have considered very young children to be fully human, epigraphic and archaeological evidence overwhelmingly supports the claim that Roman parents cared for and were heavily grieved by the loss of their infant children. Burials revealing the protective treatment of young bodies as well as the cremation of very young children demonstrate the willingness of some parents to break from tradition in order to commemorate their dead. In answering Golden's blunt question then, the evidence confirms that the Romans did care when their children died young even in the face of practices such as child-exposure.

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Endnotes:

1 Stone 1977, 651-2. 2 Information on the British Museum's old exhibit can be found at (2017, http://www.britishmuseum.org/ whats_on/exhibitions/pompeii_and_herculaneum.aspx) 3 Mols 2007-2008, 149; MacGregor 2012. 4 For a review of infant mortality estimates see Carroll 2014, 160. 5 Shorter 1975, 169. 6 Stone 1977, 651-652. 7 See Bradley 1991, 29; Bradley 1986, 220; Garnsey 1991, 52; Golden 1988, 154-155. 8 Carroll (2011, 115) has rejected the notion that common Roman citizens would have been able to afford the use of wet nurses; see also Bradlev 1986. 220. 9 Garnsey 1991, 52. 10 Pearce 2001, 125. 11 Hope 2009, 138-139; King 2000, 117-118. 12 Although this work is principally a literature review, my argumentation is greatly indebted to the many scholars who have made major contributions to the field, namely Maureen Carroll and Margaret King. 13 Hope 2009, 137. 14 For ancient literature on limiting mourning of infants see Tac. Ann., 15.23; Sen. EP. 99.2-3; Cic. Tusc. 1.39; Hope (2009, 20, 122-132) provides an excellent discussion on Roman legislation that limited public mourning for adults and small children. 15 Pearce 2001, 125; Hope 2009, 137. 16 Corbier 2001, 60. 17 Corbier 2001, 58. 18 Corbier (2001, 58) elaborates on the concept of rising up the child; for connections between rituals at birth and death see Hope 2009, 71. 19 Corbier 2001, 55. 20 Bradley 1991; Bradley 1986; Garnsey 1991. 21 While both inhumation and cremation were widely practiced in Rome, Hope (2009, 81) notes that cremation had become the dominant rite by the first century B.C.E. 22 Rawson 2003, 346. 23 Hope 2007, 123. 24 Hope 2007, 123. 25 Rawson 2003, 104. 26 Hope 2009, 19. 27 Hope 2007, 182. 28 See Carroll, 2011; Lepetz and Van Andringa 2011. 29 Carroll 2014, 160; Carroll 2011, 103. 30 Carroll 2014, 160. 31 Pearce 2001, 137. 32 Pearce 2001, 137. 33 Lepetz and Van Andringa 2011, 122-123. 34 Lepetz and Van Andringa 2011, 122-123. 35 Lepetz and Van Andringa 2011, 122-123. 36 Lepetz and Van Andringa 2011, 122-123. 37 Carroll 2001, 106. 38 Lepetz and Van Andringa 2001, 122.

39 King 2000, 150.
40 King 2000, 137.
41 King (200, 124) notes that in an older study conducted in 1983 of 16,10 tombstones, Hopkins found that children ages 1-4 constituted 13% of all inscriptions, see also Carroll 2011, 111.
42 Carroll 2011, 111
43 King 2000, 137.

44 King 2000, 147.

45 King 2000, 144.

46 King 2000, 144.

47 Martials is the only name provided on the tombstone, see King 2000, 139; for a full reading of the tombstone see S.D. Ehrlich 2012, 194. 48 Mander 2013, 29.

49 Our understanding of whether infant grave markers were erected mainly by elite or non-elite Romans is obscured by shifting trends in grave commemoration, see Hope 2009, 162-163; While the cost of erecting a monument certainly plays a role in this discussion, King (2000, 113) notes that scholars are still divided as to whether the cost of the typical tombstone would or would not have been accessible to a wide majority of the public.

50 For further discussion on realistic images of funeral materials from the Roman Empire see Dasen's (2011, 130) work on wax masks discovered in France. 51 Mander 2013, 28.

52 This stele was discovered in the Italian peninsula, see Mander 2013, 28; Bodel 2017, 88; Infants were not always depicted as older children or little adults. Carroll (2011, 112) provides the example of the grave stele of Aeliola who is depicted as an infant wrapped in swaddling.

53 Mander 2013, 27-28.

54 Knapp 2011, 70.

55 "The Twelve Tables," IV 1; Harris 1994, 2-5.

56 Corbier 2001, 66.

57 For a famous example of the practice of child exposure in Roman Egypt see Rowlandson 1998, 295. 58 For more on exposure in Suetonius see Harris 1998, 13; Corbier 2001, 60.

59 Riddle 1992; Harris 1998; Golden 1988; Corbier 2001.

60 Riddle 1992, 15; Harris 1998, 14-15.

61 Harris 1998, 6.

62 Harris 1998, 6.

63 Harris 1998, 7; Golden 1988, 159.

64 Musonius Rufus, Frag. 15 quoted in Harris 1998, 7.

65 Corbier 2001, 71.

66 Golden 1988, 158.

67 Golden 1988, 158.

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