Tereza Antošovská

A dark side
of childhood in
Roman society

Maltreatment and death
in children's lives

A dark side of childhood in Roman society

Maltreatment and death in children's lives

Tereza Antošovská

Department of Classical Studies
Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University

Reviewed by
Radek Černoch (Masaryk University)
Markéta Melounová (Masaryk University)
Lubor Kysučan (University of Ostrava)

Translated by Irma Charvátová

Table of contents

Chapter 1
Introduction

Children are an essential part of human life necessary for the continuity of mankind without which it would have no future and without which its history would not be possible. Yet in the historiographic tradition, children as such, their status, role in society, activities and possibilities or fates (unless they were child saints or rulers) had been neglected for a relatively long period of time. Although children represent an important part of human society, their voices are rarely heard from the ancient past. History is written from the perspective of adults. But the world of children represents a socially relevant subject, and the examination of its forms in the past provides the reader with knowledge about the behaviour and life of people in ancient civilizations and cultures, as well as socio-cultural overlaps into the present. It offers a unique historical parallel to modern social phenomena, such as the various pitfalls of family life in which ideals clash with reality. Within these pitfalls, this book focuses primarily on the issue of children in extreme and risky situations, such as encounters with violence and death, which is a subject currently receiving considerable attention with regard to the interest in the psychological and physical health of children. The monograph also charts the efforts of ancient Romans to deal with the glaring gap between ideal and reality.

Chapter 2
The world of Roman children

2.1   The objectives and the structure of the book

Given the scope of this publication, it is not possible to provide a detailed overview of the historiography of the subject[1], but let us at least mention the latest trend in the field of historical research into childhood which this publication seeks to follow. It centres on the idea of studying children as such, in themselves, instead of the hitherto dominant direction of study focused on the perception of children and childhood from the perspective of adults.[2] The intention is to view a child as an active agent and driving force in his or her life, not just a mere object in the world of adults who shape this life through the formation of the education system, legal norms, etc. This is an idea that pushes the research into the world of childhood in antiquity to the limits of current methodological possibilities. This ultimate limit is also manifested in the inspiration and use of the so-called "faction"[3], a researcher's careful balancing act between history and fiction based on available facts, with which he or she strives, for example, to depict the historical background and reality as they might have been perceived by minors, in a story of a fictional child.[4]

This innovative approach, using new questions and a novel viewing angle benefiting from the potential of interdisciplinary study, has been presented for the Roman period in a collective monograph edited by Laes & Vuolanto (2017). The researchers attempted to gain insight into the experience of life, or at least, given the possibilities and nature of sources, to define a framework for the child's experience of the world in late antiquity, and to create from theme probes (within the limits of what is possible) a comprehensive picture portraying children's life chances, childhood and child culture. The result chiefly involves subtle ventures into the selected topics, close to microhistory, the history of everyday life and the history of mentality.

The aim of this work is therefore to try to look at the world of Roman children and especially its dark side (the presence of violence and death) not only through the eyes of adults but also to focus on the child's perspective, to get closer to the child's

---

1   For a brief overview of Czech and international historiography, see Antošovská (2023: pp. 8–12); for a more detailed analysis of international historiography, see Aasgaard (2006).
2   Laes, Mustakallio & Vuolanto (2015: p. 3).
3   For further definitional clarification, see Laes & Vuolanto (2017: pp. 2, 8).
4   See, for example, Laurence (2017) or Cojocaru (2017).

experience and to mediate it as accurately as possible. This is manifested in an attempt to get, at least partly, beyond the source framework, where the child is only an object of the external world that shapes him or her (through laws, the approach of adults and the system of education, etc.), and by focusing on the examination of the child's active approach: what were his/her possibilities of moving within this framework in which he/she had the choice to act according to the conventions, or how adults imagined that he/she should act or wanted them to act (e.g. the decision not to/to obey a teacher or parent, etc.). In doing so, the book also offers a link between this new trend and a previous one. The difference between the two can be simplistically demonstrated, for example, by two basic questions: How important was the family for a child? and How important was a child for the family?

This book centres on the children of free Roman citizens. Children of slaves or inhabitants without Roman citizenship are not the focus of this work, although the situation of especially non-free children is reflected in places. It covers the period of the Roman Empire cross-sectionally in an attempt to capture the changes in its development over centuries. To this end, it works with sources across centuries: from literature from the turn of the republic and the beginning of the empire in the second half of the 1st century BCE to the codification activities of Emperor Justinian in the first half of the 6th century CE. The interpretation also takes into account the findings of modern archaeology, psychology, evolutionary biology, etc., which help to bring further insight into some aspects of human life as such (in the context of cultural determinism and beyond).

The book is structured in three chapters which follow a brief introduction and are summarised by a short conclusion. The first chapter presents a concise definition and anchoring of the work, followed by a brief introduction to the basic principles of family life and the status of children, their role and importance in Roman society, including the definition of the term "child" as such, i.e. who was considered a child in Roman society?

The second chapter seeks to provide a comprehensive view of the issue of the presence of violence in the lives of underage Romans. The first part analyses the different forms of violence that a child might have faced from the position of a victim against the background of the question of the non-/legitimacy of that form of violence in society. However, children could also feature as perpetrators of socially, morally or legally undesirable activities, ranging from common mischief to criminal activity. The central question of the next section of this chapter is thus the issue of children's criminal activity in Roman society.

The last chapter is devoted to the end of human life. Reflecting on the demographic situation of Roman society, it touches on the issues of illness and dying of children, along with forms of prevention and protection of children from death (What could parents do for their child? How could a child act?) and also the experience of death (the death of a child and forms of coping with loss; on the other hand, the death of the parent and the possibilities of orphaned children deprived of natural protectors).

Unfortunately, a historian of antiquity does not have at his or her disposal for this type of research nearly the same body of sources that researchers studying the more

recent eras of history can draw on (e.g. parish records, registers, children's diaries, etc.). The earlier concept of the child as a passive object is largely due to the nature of the surviving sources. At first glance, children appear as rather marginal objects of interest for adult individuals, while at the same time these sources primarily reflect the adult view of reality, of childhood. This is why it is possible for a historian to piece together from the fragments of preserved sources a (relatively) "complete" picture of the children's world from the perspective of adults and the relationship of adults to children. On the other hand, our possibilities to approach and explore a child's experience are limited. For its reconstruction, a historian of classical history is dependent on "second-hand accounts", since sources that primarily (i.e. through the eyes of children themselves) reflect the reality of Roman society are very scarce – only a few letters written by children have survived.[5] Huntley (2017), using findings from developmental psychology, seeks to identify inscriptions that could be described as "children's graffiti". According to Dolansky (2017), the question is whether toys can be considered primary evidence of children's culture and perspective, as these artefacts may have served children but were produced by adults, based on their demands and ideas of what a child needed.

This does not mean that we do not have a range of material for study: numerous literary works, legal sources, epigraphic and artistic documents and archaeological finds have survived. All these sources contain a wealth of valuable information (some extensive, some rather modest) from which we can try to assemble a mosaic of the ancient past. However, given the surviving sources and the possibilities they offer as sources of information, as well as the limitations that restrain their communication, it is not possible to fill all the gaps or answer all possible questions. Sources may offer more than one possibility of interpretation or justification. They reveal, in particular, the world and life of the inhabitants of cities. As far as the rural population is concerned, although it constituted the majority of the overall population, it left behind virtually no information on which to base our research.

This monograph draws primarily on written literary and legal sources, and reflects the results obtained from the study of epigraphic and archaeological sources; however, the amount of this material is beyond the scope of this book. These texts present a vast amount of information necessary for the understanding of the ancient world, its history, society and culture, but as primary sources they have their own informative potential and limits, and the specific problem of studying literary sources with regard to research into the world of childhood is the marginality of this topic in the works of Roman authors and the absence of anything that can be described as "children's literature." As far as the study of the world of family and childhood is concerned, from the narrative and normative sources of imperial Rome one can generally reconstruct only the framework of this world, that is, the framework of ideologies, ideas, assumptions, expectations, or fears within which people lived their private lives, specific examples from the lives of particular families (mostly prominent personalities), whose experience cannot be generalised. The most information

---

5   See Vuolanto (2017: pp. 19–21; note 26).

and the most complete picture provided by literary works allows us to reconstruct, in particular, the life, ideas and expectations of the world of the Roman elites and aristocracy who participated in the literary works and to whom they were also addressed as an audience, while as regards children, there is more information about boys as heirs of the family, its name, status and property and cult, and at the same time as future citizens. Legal sources can help to get to the basic principles applicable even to less well-off families. In sources of this type, children of different social status feature quite prominently as someone who is unable to defend themselves and who needs protection, help and care; who is entitled to a share of the family property, but who also has obligations, not just rights, towards their family (Rawson, 1997: p. 86). Yet the problem of normative sources lies in the relationship between the legal norm in theory (which reflects a desired social state) and the social reality and enforceability of the norm in practice.[6]

2.2 A child in the Roman family and society

In order to examine the other side of the children's world, it is first necessary to look at childhood itself. Who was considered a child in the Roman Empire? What was his or her legal and social status? What did a child mean to a family[7] and society, and conversely, what was the importance of the family and society to a child? And how was childhood as such perceived?

From a legal point of view, one of the basic specific features and central aspects affecting the life, status, social roles and possibilities of children included origin and legitimacy, i.e. to which social class the child was born and whether he or she was born in or out of wedlock. What was specific to Roman children compared to children of the surrounding cultures was the existence of the so-called *patria potestas* (i.e. the authority of *pater familias*,[8] the head of the family, over children of legitimate marriage) as the legal and cultural-social framework within which the children moved, which had a number of direct and indirect effects on children and their possibilities. It was an integral part of the ideology of Roman family relations and a fundamental principle of the organisation of economic relations.

The peculiar nature of *patria potestas* as something purely Roman was highlighted by the jurist Gaius in the 2nd century CE (Gai *Inst*. 1.55). As a characteristic and still-functional element, this claim was also recorded in Justinian's *Institutions* (Iust. *Inst*. 1.9) from the 6th century CE, although the practical effects of *potestas* did not remain unchanged during the existence of the Roman Empire. According to some scholars (e.g.

---

6   For more on these sources and a brief analysis of their potential and limitations for studying childhood in Roman society, see Antošovská (2023: pp. 14–19).

7   An overview and definition of the Roman family based on sources and the findings of modern scholarship is summarized in Antošovská (2023: p. 21–29); for further literature, see e.g. Saller (1984; 1986; 2000, etc.), Bradley (1991); Dixon (1992; 2004a, etc.); Rawson (2010), Harlow (2010) among others.

8   On the definition of the term *pater familias*, see Saller (1999).