

## BOOK REVIEW

*Infancy and Earliest Childhood in the Roman World: "A Fragment of Time."* By MAUREEN CARROLL. Oxford, UK and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xiii + 317. Hardback, £79.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-968763-3.

The image we have of Roman parents can cast them as unemotional, cold and distant. This is particularly true of fathers, whose responsibility it was to either accept their new-born child or cast them out.<sup>1</sup> One of the reasons put forward for this the lack of emotional connection is the remarkably high rate of infant mortality.<sup>2</sup> There is certainly written evidence that suggests that Roman parents should face the death of their children with resilience and fortitude, moderate their grief, with the physical manifestation of mourning dependent upon the age of the child. This of course plays into the notion of impassive parents, unfeeling towards their children. However, as Carroll's work demonstrates so clearly, the reality was far more complex; and while that image of reticence may have been prescribed for elite Roman parents, the material evidence paints an entirely different picture.<sup>3</sup> Society and cultural expectations may seek to limit grief and mourning, but that does not mean that Roman parents were emotionally unattached to their children. Moreover, these social and cultural bonds were not universal across the Roman dominion.

I should begin by saying that this is the most impressive work written on the subject to date. Carroll has produced a definitive study of children under the age of one in the Roman world. While there are other research directions to take in light of her findings (studies that could tackle religion, emotion or gender), this

<sup>1</sup> On the power of fathers and the myths surrounding their authority, see the classic examination by Brent Shaw: "Raising and Killing Children: Two Roman Myths." *Mnemosyne*, Fourth Series, 54, no. 1 (2001): 31-77.

<sup>2</sup> On infant mortality see the chapter by Parkin in Judith Evans Grubbs and Tim Parkin (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Childhood and Education in the Classical World* (Oxford, 2014). On the emotional reaction in the ancient evidence see, for example, Plaut. *Men.* 34-6; Plin. *Ep.* 3.16; Plut. *Aem.* 22.9 and the exploration by Golden, "Did the ancients care when their children died?," *Greece and Rome* (1988), 35, 152-63.

<sup>3</sup> Carroll's title echoes Seneca, *Ep.* 99.1.

will remain a fundamental study and one that speaks to a wide body of scholars and students. They will find a new perspective, full of insight and erudition, that provides a nuanced exploration of the Roman family, and one that illustrates how physical evidence can enlighten a study of the documentary records. Students will I hope be surprised, and moved, by Carroll's exploration of ancient family life and see not just a model of excellent scholarship, but instead the pervading sense of humanity, both in the past and the present.

Carroll also takes great care to treat her subject with respect. In the opening chapter she mentions how she sought to gain a better understanding of what was facing Roman parents by visiting a Neonatal Ward at the Royal Hallamshire Hospital in Sheffield. Here, she saw those children who would not have survived in the Roman world and it moved her: "I was shocked at how viscerally distressing I found the experience of seeing such tiny bodies and so much vulnerability; no amount of cultural conditioning or cool academic reasoning prepared me for this. It seemed to me a natural reaction and a human experience to be so distraught, and I found it difficult to believe that Roman parents could have reacted less naturally to the illness and death of small, helpless beings" (5).<sup>4</sup> The prospect of parenting in the Roman world, without access to modern health care, would fill me with absolute dread. Anyone who has seen their child ill in hospital will understand the emotive reaction that Carroll experienced, and this must surely be something that not even the cultural expectations of the Roman elite could lessen.

Carroll is an excellent guide to the material and written evidence, and draws upon a huge number of artefacts, burials and sources (see appendix). The opening three chapters present the foundation to the volume (1-14; 15-50; 51-81). In the first, Carroll provides an excellent survey of the field and sets out her rationale and methodological focus (8-12). The material evidence is placed front and center; and the written evidence becomes part of a wider analysis. This is an essential counterstroke to the otherwise stoic focus seen in the *consolationes*. The second chapter ("Infants and Children in Pre-Roman Mediterranean Societies," 15-50) provides a comparative basis against which to measure the Roman evidence. Here Carroll discusses the death and burial of infants, cultural differences, pregnancy and childbirth in pre-Roman art as well as images of family and infants in life and death. Each of these areas are discussed in later chapters, and the reader

<sup>4</sup> Carroll continues: "It made me wonder whether we are hard-wired as humans to react physically and emotionally to new life, the distress of infants, and the loss of young life, now and in the past" (5).

can trace the development of these ideas within the Roman evidence. The discussion of Attic funerary commemoration is particularly useful in this regard (38-50). The final foundation stone is chapter 3 (“Mother and Child: Pregnancy, Birth, and Health,” 51-81). Pregnancy and childbirth remained one of the most dangerous moments in a woman’s life right up until the advent of modern medicine, and this can be seen here through the combination of funerary and written evidence. Carroll discusses a Roman skeleton of a pregnant woman that still shelters the remains of a seven-month old foetus (54: at Costabelle). It looks as though an infection had passed from the placenta to the child (possibly congenital syphilis) and taken the lives of both. There is more burial evidence in Spain, Britain and Germany that contain both mother and new-born child (59-60). This chapter also examines the bioarchaeological evidence, where “[t]he skeletal remains of children can reveal signs of disease episodes which affected the child from birth [...] analysis of adult individuals can also provide evidence of poor health during childhood” (66), before looking at divine protection. These chapters provide a strong underpinning to the study and the arguments made.

The next two chapters are best read together. In chapter 4 (“The Material Culture of Infancy,” 82-117) we see feeding bottles, clothing, a cradle (from Herculaneum), apotropaic jewellery, possible pets and toys (with an image of a textile doll with human hair from Egypt, 115). Chapter 5 (“Picturing Infants and Families in Roman Art,” 118-146) provides a different window into childhood, moving away from their lived physical experience to their presentation in Roman art. This is of course public-facing, and thus speaks to wider concerns and patterns of belief. Carroll begins this by thinking about the Ara Pacis, exploring the link between the *Pax Augusta* and *kourotrophos*.<sup>5</sup> Romulus and Remus, and their image as suckling babies is discussed, as is the numismatic evidence. Of particular interest here is the image found of barbarian children (125-132) and the excellent analysis of Roman funeral reliefs (fig. 5.9, 133; Fig. 5.10, 135).

The next four chapters form the core of the book, and the focus is now placed firmly upon death, something that has hitherto hovered in the shadows of the analysis. Chapter 6 (“*Mors immatura* I: Contextualizing the Death and Burial of Infants,” 147-177) offers a careful examination of burial sites (communal cemeteries, settlements and buildings, and forts). It begins with a stark figure: as many as 50 per cent of children may not have seen their tenth birthday in ancient

<sup>5</sup> Trans: “Augustan Peace” and “child nurturer.”

Rome, and that for those in the first year of life the mortality rate could be between 20 and 30 per cent (147). Excavations at Piano di Castiglione-Quart Cappelle del Prete are an example of a much higher rate, where 60 per cent died before their sixth birthday and 38 percent before their first birthday. Carroll dismisses, rightly, the modern notion that young children were buried at night as part of an exclusionary practice (151). Exposure is also explored here, alongside sacrifice and infanticide: “[a]lthough Roman written sources suggest that infants could be killed at birth under very specific circumstances, a critical examination of the archaeological evidence does not substantiate any of the fantastic claims for the practice of infanticide, nor is there any concrete evidence that dead infants were disposed of in the rubbish” (165-177, at 177). Chapter 7 (“*Mors Immaturo* II: The Treatment of the Infant Body in Death,” 178-207) looks to the treatment of infant bodies, beginning with a cultural comparison of Greek and Roman burials at Marseilles, before looking at different types of mortuary practice (cremation, inhumation, mummification). The evidence here depends on where in the Roman world we are looking, with different cultural practices experienced across the Empire. One aspect that stood out here is the discussion of liquid plaster or gypsum poured upon skeletal remains, which can be seen in Tunisia, Britain and Germany. Fig 7.8 from York shows this quite clearly and indicates the wrapping in textiles of the infant’s remains (197). The discussion of grave goods also demonstrates differences across the Roman world, from amuletic jewellery, coins, ceramic lamps, *balsamaria* (small flasks), food, jugs, feeding bottles, pets, animal teeth and jewellery made of precious metals. Chapter 8 (“Funerary Commemoration of Infants,” 208-237) focuses on epitaphs. Here the discussion turns to grief, funerary imagery and how mothers and children were actively commemorated. As Carroll writes: “Roman funerary monuments contextualise and commemorate both biological and non-biological familial relationships and they reveal frustrated plans for the future of the child and the *familia*” (237). They speak to the lives gone before their time, the importance of family and the profound sense of loss of parents experienced. The final chapter (Chapter 9; “Integrated Perspectives on Roman Infancy,” 238-249) returns to the written evidence and carefully dismantles some of the preconceived notions found within Plutarch, Ulpian, the *Digest of Justinian*, Cicero, Seneca, Pliny and others. This provides a clear summary of the arguments made and a convincing re-examination of the evidence.

This is a nuanced work that reframes the relationship of Roman parents to their children. It is a powerful piece of writing, and one that remains with the

reader long after the book has been placed back upon the shelf. It can be tempting to be led by Seneca, or Stoic *consolationes* and see a sense of aristocratic self-control in the face of such terrible loss. What Carroll achieves here is to rewrite our understanding of this crucial formative stage of Roman life and demonstrate that, while these neonates and babies may be difficult to find in the historical record, they are there, and moreover, their parents certainly care.

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