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The dark side of childhood in Roman society : violence and death in the children's life : summary

In: Antošovská, Tereza. *Odvracená tvář dětství v římské společnosti : násilí a smrt v životě dítěte*. Vydání první Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2023, pp. 169-171

ISBN 978-80-280-0431-6; ISBN 978-80-280-0432-3 (online ; pdf)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.79607>

Access Date: 27. 06. 2024

Version: 20240219

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SUMMARY

The Dark side of childhood in Roman society

Violence and death in the children's life

This monograph focuses on the freeborn children of Roman citizens during the Roman imperial era, from the beginnings of the principate up to Late Antiquity, with the particular interest in studying the dark face of the childhood world: the dangers of violence and death in their lives.

The book focuses on the analysis of the narrative and legal sources preserved from the era of the Roman empire. The approach combines the traditional research attitudes within childhood studies that deal with the child primarily from the perspective of the adults with the new research trend that puts into the centre the question of children's agency and active behaviour within the world. Due to the character of the historical pieces of evidence that survived from the Roman imperial era (from which we unfortunately largely miss evidence created by children themselves, as only two short letters from Roman Egypt so far are known to be written by children), I find the combination of the traditional and new research attitudes to be the best and useful solution how to describe and enlighten the reality of children's lives in the Roman world.

In the thesis, there is also an attempt for an interdisciplinary approach that does not involve only traditional cooperation and reflection of the research results from the fields of archaeological and epigraphical studies, but also from current anthropology and psychology (developmental and evolutionary especially) that can help us a bit in our attempts to understand the human behaviour across time, space, and culture as well.

Summary

After a short introduction, the second chapter deals with the topic of historiography presents the methodology and historical sources.

The third chapter of this book focuses on the description and analysis of Roman forms and attitudes towards family life. It represents a background for further analysis of children's lives, as we can not study them without understanding the patterns, peculiarities, and function of Roman families, together with changes brought by the historical development during the long existence of the Roman empire. The chapter then studies the roles and status of the core figures of the family: *pater familias*, *mater familias*, and in the last part of the chapter, the roles, statuses, and of children themselves.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to the subject of violence and breaching the law from two points of view. The first part introduces various forms of violence that children could have suffered as victims. In the Roman world, certain forms of violence and wrong committed on children were accepted, while others were not. The question is the line between legitimate and illegitimate violent behaviour, e. g. where is the line between generally accepted corporal punishment at school or punishment by *pater familias*, and where the boundary has been crossed so that even Romans would have considered such punishment as excessive and deplorable abuse of power?

The second point of view is the question of children in the roles of perpetrators. This part discusses the possibilities and framework of children disobeying social and legal rules: from mere cheekiness and disobedience to actual problems of child's criminality in antiquity, and the discussion of the legal framework of child's criminal liability.

The fifth chapter deals with the topic of death. After considering the frame of demographical regime of the ancient Roman world, the core question in this part is the possibilities and attempts how to protect children from death (e. g. amulets, prayers, medical care) and children's active behaviour in and attitudes towards illness and dying and understanding of death. The final part of the chapter is exploring the experience of death in childhood: the death of the child itself, with rituals of mourning and dealing with the loss, the death of the important figures in child's life, mainly the death of parents, and the fate and possibilities of orphaned children.

The children's world was a fragile one. Their reality and possibilities of their agency were largely dependent on the attitudes, values, and decisions of the adults in the family, and in the society as such. In the literary and legal historical evidence that this thesis is analysing, the strong association of childhood with fragility and subordination was a result given by traditional *mores*, by the legal framework, and by the general reflection of reality, such as the high children's mortality level and

immature body and brain (mainly the lack of proper reasoning and intellectual capacities typical for the adults). Children were considered fragile and in need of help and protection by the adults, both from biological and social points of view. The child's immature body and mind needed the proper formation, care, and supervision that were necessary to ensure the growth into a healthy, responsible, mature human being. Despite that, many children did not survive into adulthood.

Especially in narrative sources, the mentions of children are quite often largely scattered and anecdotal. The child simply is not in the centre of the interest of ancient literature. This relatively marginal interest in these sources does not mean that freeborn Roman children were marginal beings. Certainly, they were not. They were crucial members of the society and family, although treated differently than the adults. They represented the future of the family and society, as the heirs of the family, as future adult citizens fulfilling their social roles once they grow up. And also because of this, in legal sources, there is proved a strong interest in protecting children and their interests (though from the practical and utilitarian approach of the law we can not rule out the reflection of human sentimental values), as they could be victims of various forms of violence or frauds (especially if the father – the chief protector of the child's interests – was dead).

Though Roman freeborn children are not active in creating our pieces of evidence about their life, as well as they could not influence the legal framework created by the adults, in real life, children were not just passive objects. Though dependent on the help, support, and decision of the adults, they would be active members of family life, having and presenting an influence according to their age, gender, and cognitive development (as there are significant differences in what an infant child or almost a grown-up one can be capable of).

The children's lives would have been far more dangerous and darker than the life of the children today. Not even the birth into the highest social levels, with the best access to the resources and the best possible healthcare, ensured or even enhanced the chances of survival into adulthood. Even minor injuries (such as stabbing by a stylus into a hand) could be fatal. There were forms of violence on children generally tolerated by the law and mores, especially corporal punishment. On the other hand, there is quite a strong sense for protection (or at least attempts of) of children by their parents, who had great disciplinary authority and power over their children (especially the father), to ensure their offspring's survival so they could assume their future roles, despite high probability, that the parents would have seen some of their children dying.